The first theatre production that opened in Sarajevo during the siege was called Grad (City). It premiered in 1993 under Haris Pašović’s direction. The performance script of Grad – a collage of various texts including the poetry of Zbignew Herbert – was performed on the intimate, rink-shaped stage of Kamerni Teatar 55 – a courtyard building in the heart of Sarajevo’s city centre. Kamerni 55, tightly encircled by private apartments, provided a sheltered space for Grad and other performances to carry on during the siege. A recording of the performance shows a bare, candle-lit stage where a group of actors are chanting, singing and uttering the lines of Herbert’s poetry. The audience sits near the stage and the small auditorium is packed. The atmosphere is peaceful, meditative and almost ritualistic. Even the two-dimensional recording of the event manages to document moments of profound togetherness between actors and spectators – ‘a theatre in which the activity of the actor and the activity of the spectator were driven by the same desperate need’ (Brook, The Empty Space, p. 60).

The theatre becomes a physical shelter from the almost constant shelling of the city and a symbolic space ‘where a greater reality could be found’ (Brook, The Empty Space, p. 49). The city appears as the central trope of the performance; the barren, theatrical space emerges as its synecdoche. Yet this minimalism is not about the disappearance of place – a mere illustration of urbicide – nor is it about blind escapism
into theatrical illusions. Rather, the performance emerges as a means of assert ing and affirming the city in the face of its systematic annihilation. Given these particular circumstances, the gathering of actors and audience members surpasses the theatrical event and becomes a congregation of citizens—a direct communication and a collective meditation on the city. The performance of Grad, simple and elegant on the bare stage of Kamerni 55, recalls Peter Brook’s notion of holy theatre where the actors have no other choice but to create out of their deepest need and in response ‘to a hunger’ (p. 49): ‘This theatre is holy, because its purpose is holy; it has a clear defined place in the community and it responds to a need the churches can no longer fill’ (p. 67).

Director Pašović comments about Grad in the following way:

A group of actors and I put the show together very quickly, in only one week and it was actually quite good. This was a collage based on meditations about the city. The city was the focus for all of us, and the world was talking about Sarajevo—the city under siege. What is a city actually?

(in Diklić, Teatar u ratnom Sarajevu, p. 203)

A good deal if not all of the outstanding cultural production in Sarajevo during the siege sought answers to similar questions: What makes a city a city? How does a city under siege, reduced in most parts to rubble and ruin, continue to figure as such? What does it mean to be a citizen in a city under siege?

In less extreme circumstances, Situationists and, more generally, psychogeographers, have claimed that ‘the self cannot be divorced from the urban environment’ and that ‘it had to pertain to more than just the psyche of the individual if it was to be useful in the collective rethinking of the city’ (Simon Sadler, The Situationist City, p. 77). The case of Sarajevo makes this connection painfully and somewhat paradoxically obvious—the individual psyche, the collective self and the city are all intrinsic parts of a fragile ecology that depend on each other for survival. Here the city-as-body is exposed, ravaged, yet resilient. This resilience has its source in the attitude of a collective rethinking that emerges as a reaction to violence. In order to sustain the individual self, the collective and the city, this rethinking quickly morphs into action—it becomes a performance. There is no room for detachment, every bit of the experience is embodied, even phenomena that involve distancing as a core strategy, such as humour and irony. The rethinking and the performance are vital to the point that they