

DUŠKO LJUŠTINA

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SUNJA 2nd

Sound recording of this conversation is under the mark
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This conversation took place in “Kerempuh” theatre, Zagreb.

I have switched on and please introduce yourself at the beginning of the recording.

My name is Duško Ljuština. I have been the manager of the satiric theatre “Kerempuh”, it means one of the Croatian satiric theatres, for 23 full years already. It means since year 1982 until today. Curiously, if we make a short profile, as people from Croatian Zagorje would say:”Who is who in this story?”, I have been engaged in the culture whole my life. I filled different functions and posts in Zagreb. In the ancient regime I was even party’s functionary. I was manager of the programme realization in the Center for cultural activity in Zagreb until year 1982. I was director of the culture at the World University Games in Zagreb in 1987. In the town of Zagreb I was for almost two years deputy minister for the culture of the Zagreb town. And here I have come back again to the satiric theatre “Kerempuh”. Probably it does not hurt to mention it for this story, although my first story or my characteristic is that I am Duško Ljuština. When you say this in Zagreb a lot of people know who it is, but out the borders of our country it does not mean anything, and here I will add to the story – because it is not unimportant to say in this story also this: I was born in Lika, district Otočac, today Brinje, in 1948. I came to Zagreb in 1967 – and something that I thought I would never have to say in a similar conversation, but I simply think that it is necessary to pronounce it – I am Serb. Now what, a curse? How would you...

*****how did we come to this*****

But we came, I think. We have to tell it in this situation. Secondly I am in this entire story one of very rare persons, because probably people who talk to you on this subject or who will appear in our unhappy operation that is called Hague, one of very rare persons who has known Praljak for over 30 years. Consequently Sunja is only one small segment of our common life. Well, I tried not to change in the life. And I am not ashamed of a second of my life. Although due to the law of probabilities I must have done some human, moral and whatsoever possible mistakes in my life. Because nobody is perfect. I tried not to change. The thing that has filled me with enthusiasm for Praljak, it means since the acquaintance in some long-past days, in seventies, is that he remained Praljak until today. The same then – the same today. The same points of view then, the same points of view today. If somebody told me that I would dream it, it never crossed my mind that I would have to talk on a subject that connected Praljak with some ugly things. I am even not able to pronounce a word that could be called crime. That I shall talk about this phrase and that it has some visual, temporal, but not real connection with Praljak, if somebody told me that I would dream it – I would tell him that he was crazy. But unfortunately the life is a rather complicated and complex phenomenon. Some victories, army***were in the background. Departure to Sunja and why in Sunja, why theatre people went most often to Sunja? “Kerempuh” was not the only one who went there neither was I. An enormous group of Croatian actors and Croatian intellectuals went there. Because that was also strange for us in a way, and interesting in a way that one directors-actors team stood together on the defensive of Sunja. If all the wars in the world would be conducted in that way, first of all if there must be a war, then this would be a possibly ideal story. If there is anything positive about the war that we can say. Secondly – both Praljak and Miro Medimorec are directors. That is why the actor Sven Lasta chose to make

war in Sunja according, let's call it, this directors' manuscript. What this team demonstrated there with Praljak at the head is a text-book example of respecting conventions, all that is human and good. Although they, I think, they defended themselves. They did not go to war and: "Now we shall capture 20 km of territory, next 10." They defended themselves and they defended themselves in the most possible dignified way. When we sum up my total stay in Sunja, if it is five, six times, and each time we spent one whole day there, then it is not a little for a short period. In a situation when there does not exist an organized army in which they say: "You gather here now, and attention, and adjust your buttons, and cut your hair and..." I think, the way the army otherwise functions. To maintain such a discipline in such a situation... It cannot be achieved by grades, by command, by threat and force. Such discipline can be maintained by charisma and authority only. I was looking at that young men there who obeyed Praljak unquestioningly, but he was a bit funny to them. They agreed to obey to him but later on they would comment: "Well, it would be better that he had stayed in the theatre. Why does he engage himself here in the war at all?"

You heard that?

Yes. He did not permit that they stole one fork from a Serb house then. He did not permit that they stole a wash-basin, and the question is whether it is the stealing – because the army needs it. They will return it later. He did not permit anything. In shops he made an inventory of goods so that no one could take it or throw away. People who had not left Sunja area and who were not Croats were under daily care of Praljak's soldiers so that nothing could happen to them. On the railway station I met in the basement, and this station was under daily Praljak's control and enemy attacks from the other side, I found there four, five Serbs who were in the Praljak's unit and who defended Sunja and who had a terrific confidence in him. So, looking on this Sunja story, there is one fantastic detail: A man

who defected to the opposite army, and who was officially in the units who were firing on Sunja, called the Headquarters and said that the winter was coming, and that he had an enormous house with central heating, and that the radiators would break, and he requested them to empty the water out of radiators. Of course it raised a general laughter among soldiers.

You were present when this man called Praljak?

Yes.

How did Praljak react in this case?

Praljak reacted: "We shall empty the water and lock the house." Listening Praljak I thought that he had a screw loose – because there was war. But knowing Praljak for a long time it was not at all strange to me.

But, well, tell me one thing. There we have this conversation. You were present. What was Praljak's facial expression? What happened when he put down the phone?

What? Such people are born rarely. I would probably ask men: "Well, please don't demolish it." And I would probably say to men: "Empty these radiators because this house is on the Croatian territory." The house is Croatian, probably built on the Croatian banker's credits. Anyway it turns out even today that Praljak was far away ahead of his time and that he was in the right. Because each one we demolished we had to rebuild with our own money. I terribly agreed with Praljak then, and it is a pity that for this we repair today, Praljak and I have to pay also. And we were against it that it happened to us. He had this facial expression – he did not want to show for a second that he, that it was not his lifestyle: Not to break anything. Not for a minute he did not put himself in the position to request soldiers for something. Not for a second on his face... I burst in laugh and he shouted rudely at me : "What are you laughing at?" For him it

was a serious story. He sent soldiers. These radiators... The water was emptied in a wash-basin, not on the parquet, and thrown out so this house was preserved. We all know it is in the war, I think, war is war. The war is such a dreadful story. A lot of good people lose their bearings. A lot of good people lose touch with reality. A lot of good people commit different evils. **Yes, there are many extenuating circumstances for a man to lose his bearings**

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Somebody loses his bearings because he lost his brother, someone's child was killed, someone's mummy was killed, after the house was demolished... Everybody loses sooner or later. And when people go to war they think it will last forever. No one thinks at the end of the war and so on. But Praljak is Praljak. And for sure Praljak is one unique person as well in peace as in war. But he remained so strong that the storm wind of this story did not catch him for a second. He was terribly calm, terribly reasonable and he absolutely kept the matter under control. Even Sven Lasta, whom he appreciated very much, had also to obey him faultlessly. And we had to behave there in a very disciplined manner and very responsibly. We could only walk where he said that we could. For me today it is very difficult to believe that I can talk about Praljak as connected to something that is not all right, that is not fit for a man, that is not human.

To associate him at all in connection: That he did something because of what any kind of court, even misdemeanor court... could bring him in any kind of connection with this story...

Tell me, when you came to Sunja – was it your first encounter with the battlefield, the place where the war was really going on, where people perished, where happened all this concentration of all these emotions?

Yes. My first encounter. After that we were in Požega, Zvečevo, Bučje, Gospić. But this was my first...

**This railway station was already completely destroyed?
Demolished?**

Yes.

*******which impression left that Sunja always in fog,
always such muddy, and such as it is?**

One day absolutely... One impression that cannot be compared with any other place in which I was. Neither it was organized as Praljak did it. And everything that was demolished was demolished from the opposite side with the shells. I did not see a single demolished house by our handwork, as we called it in the war. And in a way it inspired me with confidence that the war could not be lost in that way.

Tell me, you know Praljak from time before the war. You know him for years. And then you saw him in this surroundings, in this scenography of ruins, distress, sufferings, anguish, attempts to control the chaos. Can you compare Praljak that you knew earlier – with this Praljak that you saw there?

The same... the same...

There was no change?

No. The same. Therefore when that...it means, in the moments... When I met Praljak... I met Praljak when I was in the position of a fashion that was worn. But Praljak, not. Praljak was already then observed with another binoculars. But regardless of that he knew it, he never acknowledged it He always held his head and his forehead up. And often when I

requested him: “Praljak, nobody needs a lot of superfluous words.” No. Praljak was the same. And as he wanted then, long before the war, to knock down some barriers that unnecessary put a fence around people, to be righteous, brave, dignified – he remained like that in the war too. And he is like that today.

Something crossed my mind... Is Praljak's physique, the way he is, in a way his destiny? This that he always sticks out, stands out and is always half or a whole head over the mass?

A man would... Of course that physical appearance is not in a direct connection with human intellect, but fortunately or unfortunately here Praljak is also an exception. His height is in a way, silly phrase, it is difficult to translate it. But his height and his force and his attitude...he cannot but stick out. He cannot but stick out! I think, well, you arrange, fix it, we talk... I think that it doesn't make sense to talk about Praljak and some other people, or I don't know some phenomena, or introduce anything else in an ugly situation. It is necessary to look forward. To live for the future and so on. But if our war commanders had followed a little bit Praljak's example, Praljak surely would not be in this position today. Because here probably it is not the question of Praljak only, but the question of many, many other things. But he is simply absolutely a special man. And in his philosophy of life there is nothing that would correspond with any kind of evil. And he shows it in his private life and he shows it in all his life. He simply had a terrible need of chivalrous outwitting all his life. So when he graduated one faculty, he wanted, to be a bit different from the others, to graduate two faculties. And he wanted to build the house as other people. And of course as a professor he could not afford to build the house – so he was waiter in Germany. People who unfortunately don't know that when passing by Kraljevec today say:”Ha, general! You built a magnificent house.” They don't know that already 30 years ago we drank in this house... It

was this high and big. It was not under the roof, but here the land was bought and here the house was built. And he went to work as waiter in Germany each summer. When he would come back he would lay bricks, throw on... He had a fantastic logic:” I presume, I graduated from two faculties and somebody who is an electrician...I guess I can learn it in seven days. I think that I am not so stupid that I could not learn it.” All his life he has been like that.

Tell me, you mentioned a fork and a water-basin. Is that right? And you say Praljak did not permit to take them out of the abandoned houses. Did you assist to such a situation, in such a conversation when they were solving the question of water-basin, fork or something similar?

Yes.

Can you remember some details? What was that?

It was...I met at that ramp, when you enter the headquarters, a relative of my good friend. I have now forgotten the Christian name of this young man but his family name is Marinac. He graduated from some faculty, but he was a disc jockey around Zagreb, and in the army he pulled up this ramp. Praljak received us. And here we come back to this unfortunate water-basin. People probably had to wash themselves. There is this wooden stand where they put this wash-basin in front of the house and then man in standing position wash himself, he doesn't have to bend down. Two soldiers took it from a neighboring house and they carried it obviously where they slept so that they could wash themselves. Praljak asked them whether their grandfather donated it to them. They remained for a while in the vacuum. They had to return it back. I, as a soldier, for example, would not do it. I would never demolish a house, I would never burn it, but I would take a water-basin to wash myself and I would say: “I will return the wash-basin when the war is over.”

**Was Praljak angry then when...?
And young men? How did they react?**

They were... I was frightened... All these are men there where nothing is systematized. They have bombs around the waist. They have kalashnikovs, they have bullets, everything... I felt a little bit uneasy. But they returned it unquestioningly.

When someone went to Sunja , I know, it was on these minivans with wheels, different aid went there, was brought there, people went there and the theatre was played there, is that right? In which premises these performances took place?

The performances, these Kerempuh's performances, when I was there, were played in the center of the place where is a hall, a Center for culture, cinema... I don't know how they call it, we played our performances there and I remember when we played...

**What was this space like? Can you describe it a little bit?
Did the shells hit there then? What was the atmosphere?**

Well, this way. We are... It was like that, a space like a space.

This was a hall?

The hall. And we played there the performance "I write you a letter that we are not together anymore" which had an interesting beginning. Actor Boris Svrtan sang parts of the Šijan's film, I don't know which year...he made this film, from the film "Who is singing there?" There is the sentence: "A bomb fell on Belgrade." And Svrtan started it with the accordion when a shell fell on this hall. From the opposite side. From the position, a grenade...which is full of troops. And of course we

interrupted the performance. We did not play it until the end. Soldiers went to the positions. We went to the headquarters for lunch and we left home.

It means it was one? One attempt...

One attempt of performance. But we came back again and we performed this play. After that we performed the play “Love at the first sight”. Actors Zvonko Torjanac and Marija Kohn performed it. And then, two, three times we came visiting and bringing cabbage, potatoes and other things with some truck. There was vinegar...Actors Branko Vukšić, Mujo Nadarević, Vitez, Anja Šovagović and I went there. There were enough of us.

Tell me you went there on Praljak’s invitation or was it your own initiative?

Our initiative. It was not: “Boys, well I am staying here and come to be my guests for a short while.” We went on invitation because it was some kind of artistic oasis. And actors went to Sunja in a terrific way. Also Torjanac and Marija Kohn and Anja Šovagović and Mustafa Nadarević, Vitez...

How did people... How did actors solve this pure human fear? Well, now you go to a place where people perish. Nobody can guarantee that you will - not perform the play until end - but come back alive.

Nobody thinks about it in that moment.

And how did men react on your arrival in Sunja?

Splendidly. They were awfully pleased that people came and that in a way they sympathized with them being in a way with them.

How did Praljak react?

Splendidly. But each our lack of seriousness... Praljak watched over it. In a way, as one would say, no matter how much he was pleased to tell us one part of the truth about that story there, to see us, to be friendly with us... We were not of great help. He there, except this cabbage, potatoes and this did not have anything else. No matter how much pleased he was that we came, in a way he was not pleased – because however he felt responsible for our lives. We are inattentive. Soldiers are however a longer time there and they organized themselves in a way to take care of themselves and to watch themselves, but Praljak, for any of our moves: You have to go there, you can here, there you cannot...

Tell me, did you have a chance to see Praljak nervous in this environment? And if he was in which situations it happened?

No.

No? He was not nervous? It did not happen that...?

No. He was at times, according to me, too much nonchalant in the sense of the interpretation of some rules. Because he said: “The cease-fire agreement was signed.” What this in a war... I think... Who does it... Somebody gets drunk and shoots... How many soldiers are there to whom this information about signed agreement of cease-fire did not come at all? But he stuck blindly to this human word like cut off by the axe. The agreement is signed and now there is no... Now it is... Of course he behaves in the way that it means for him. But all people are not equal. In the chivalrous way. And secondly he walked like that around Sunja. He was a sitting target. I mean all the way around.

Yes. He stuck out.

Yes.

Did you happen to be somewhere near, well, when you were there, was it the time when our army had losses? Were you near Praljak? Were you able to see his reactions when he lost a man?

I was not in a direct situation when he lost a man, but in conversations... It was a rather specific situation. And his talking reflected a great anxiety. Because this story Praljak also experienced in his own way. He considered himself responsible for these men although there was... It was war. I think that he... They did not come to pick grapes. He felt terribly responsible for these men, responsible towards the parents of these men. And long after the war he remained or today, unfortunately... The rules are so stupid that he for example cannot get into the car and go to Sunja without special permission. But I am literally the witness of these boys who were from Serbia there in the unit, for whom he found the job in Sisak later on, arranged apartments, took care of them like if they were his children. And I see even today when we meet in the evening that this is a terrible problem for him, and of course it gets with difficulty to Praljak's head that somebody imposed restrictions on him, on his freedom of movement, anything... It goes awfully hard with him that he cannot for example get into the car and go to Sunja to drink a coffee this evening.

Do you perhaps know the names of these young men, you say*?**

I don't know their names but they are the boys who were there... Because we entered to them in these basements when the shells were falling around. He is like that... The man makes war... I ask him: "What is your name?" he would say: "Go to hell!"

When I talked with Branko Vukšić and asked him to compare Praljak before with Praljak in Sunja he told me: “Praljak was more silent in Sunja.” Well, let us say, he noticed that Praljak compared with an earlier time of theater companionships, that for him Praljak was quieter in Sunja. That he was less talkative.

I could maybe polemicize here with Branko. I would not say quieter. Praljak is always quiet when he is responsible for somebody else. Praljak is loud when he is responsible for himself. In today's conditions it is rather difficult to explain it to people, and young men do not understand it. Praljak and older people would immediately understand what I wanted to say. During times when Praljak was not just in fashion, in the former regime, he was a loudmouth all the time. But he could get hurt only himself because of it. Nobody else. Only him... And he shouldered this responsibility. Well, I babble. I attack you...

I provoke you?

I provoke you. I provoke you – but I shall be hurt only. A lot of times he used to tell me: “Why do you calm me down? Nothing will happen to you. I will be hurt.” And in Sunja he assumed responsibility for young men. For human lives. And young people also perish in the war. Human lives are lost. And that is something that Praljak could bear very hard. Very hard.

Drawing some parallels among all these talks that I conducted, I come to the conclusion that during 1991, in the time of this chaos, in the time when the legal state did not really function and could not function – one embryo of the legal state functioned precisely in the area of Sunja in Praljak's organization. With all these efforts to overcome – if we take the war as chaos condition – to overcome this chaos, to diminish it to the lowest possible measure: To restore order, to restore obedience, to take care of people,

that they don't pillage, that they don't drink – and that as much as possible of the elements of the normal life including theatrical performances be introduced.

This story is directly related to Praljak's head. Let me say that so roughly. The organization of order, discipline, non-pillage, non-evil functioned faultlessly there in relation to other places. But it can never, a man can never be convincing if he does not have it deep inside him. If this is not his life-style. Because you can simply... If somebody would buy me the most expensive and the most beautiful suit – and I feel bad in it – what do I need it for? I put on a tracksuit and I feel better. That functions in the Praljak's head. I would like that some old grandpa from America let me know that he had donated me the house and I would accept it. In Praljak's head it doesn't work. No, he just wants the house that he built with his own hands. He doesn't want the grandpa's one. That is Praljak.

That is Praljak's story. I was in the situation when somebody offered to Praljak a house at the seaside for little money. Unfortunately a Serbian house. People are somewhere, I don't know where, and they are afraid that somebody will demolish, mine it, somebody will do something... They offered it to Praljak for little money.

Praljak said: "I won't it neither for big money. I shall build mine by myself." That is Praljak.

It was nice to talk to you.

We are, in other words, Praljak is not connected only with this theatre. Praljak is connected with all theatres. Unfortunately there is no time... Or today the rhythm of the live is such that the friendship has become questionable. Friends do not have time one for the other any more. But we had talks to reach the agreement that all Croatian theatres make a co-production of one play now that Praljak would direct. Because no one can forbid him to direct in the theatre.

Have you reached the agreement?

Well, we have not reached the final agreement because one rushes there, one here, the summer comes, back and forth, but we shall see until autumn – maybe we agree to do it.

It would be great.

And Praljak would this of course, he would continue to shout on the actors, he would yell, work, direct, rush, jump but this is Praljak. He this story... I don't know how I would behave if I found myself in his situation because you are not guilty at all but an enormous burden is on the shoulders. This is not the court: You ran through a red light. Well, now if I did not, let them accuse me that I did, it is not a big problem. But Praljak endures it all in a fantastic way. And I think that all this will finish in a fantastic way. I cannot believe that it is possible in another way. Simply in another way. If Praljak had done some, let us call it a war damn shame, Praljak would have reported himself. But also there must have been a profound reason why... Because it would be more a philosophic question than a real dirty thing. Because he simply bears it in himself.

Have we forgotten to mention something? Have we got something more?

I think that we did not. But still we can remember and correct it...