

Performing *Memoria* – a Theatre Performance Giving Voice to Speechless Memories

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ABSTRACT

Odin Teatret's *Memoria* (1990) centres round an actor's conflict with the act of remembering. In this article, however, one strand follows Giorgio Agamben's presentation of "remnants of Auschwitz", which is based on the story of Hasidic children's experience of surviving World War II, and how for some survivors, the guilt of surviving while others perished is too great a burden to bear, so much so that suicide seems their only route to peace. A further strand builds on Rebecca Schneider's ideas about the very act of re-enacting remembrance as a performance, which remains once all living memories of historical facts are gone. On a more specific level, *Memoria* brings together the narrative of the *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (1983) with memories from philosophers such as Primo Levi and Jean Améry, with Else Marie Laukvik and Frans Winther giving voice to these speechless memories. Laukvik, who is the author of the *Memoria* script, also manages to embody the conflict that can arise from remembering in her performance.

The article is based on watching *Memoria*, as well as archive materials, personal interviews, and other performances by Else Marie Laukvik, who is also the author of the *Memoria* script.

KEYWORDS

Holocaust narratives, new documentary, trauma, amnesia, oblivion, performance, artistic memories, legacy of silenced victims, medialization of death-life on stage, Else Marie Laukvik, Odin Teatret.

Performing *Memoria* – a Theatre Performance Giving Voice to Speechless Memories

This article looks at war in art, and in particular when the act of remembering war becomes not only crucial to the individual, but also to the collective memory of the war. Attention is turned towards Odin Teatret's performance *Memoria*, which is based on the memories of witnesses of World War II. Through this performance I investigate documentary material, scenography, music, acting, and the actors' own interpretations of the theme, which together combine to conjure a complex form of memory: One that makes the traumatic and yet disappearing memories present and shared between actors and spectators. It is the aim of this article to question how the intimate scenic expression of the memories, which form the basis of *Memoria*, are strengthened by an intensified bodily presence and muting of the spoken word. This particular memory war clearly places the emphasis on the quality of traces of re-enactment in the performing during the encounter between actors and spectators. For director of the performance, Eugenio Barba, each moment becomes a particular representation in real time. Time is here understood as the time that passes and leaves actions behind, and the time that has been and yet resonates in our memories.

In *Memoria* there is an almost transparent use of stage reality, which appears to be minimalistic. This gives the play a clean and sharp feel. Such an approach might seem like an antithesis of conventional mimetically realistic representation, and some spectators might prefer to view the production as an example of dynamic organicity. The mimetic characteristic, however, can be seen when the performance gets closer to becoming both the *being* and *representing* of memories at one and the same time. This performative modus means that there are two ways in which to experience the performance. On one hand, there is the narrative line, which follows a series of episodes from the children's memories from *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (1983). On the other hand, the performance hints at the subversion of the memories; that forgetting trauma makes it possible to live with difficult memories. This way of approaching remembering becomes apparent through the references to the actor's craft of remembering; at this point the fictive and the real track become one.

With the help of this complex representational form, the performance raises the idea of performative memories being what remains when the performance is over: The afterlife of the performance is the impact on the witnesses of the performance. Using the notion of performative memories, I shall refer to the ephemeral as constituting and co-creating the memories as a presence that remains with the spectators. Volatility and ephemerality of this nature feature in American theatre researcher, Rebecca Schneider's treatment of the notion of re-enactment of scenes of war from the American civil war in her book *Performing Remains* (2011). Re-enactment, in Schneider's view involves the participants preserving a collective memory of war in their bodies. She writes:

The bodily, read through genealogies of impact and ricochet, is arguably always interactive. This body, given to performance, is here engaged with disappearance chiasmically – not only disappearing but resiliently eruptive, remaining through performance like so many ghosts at the door marked “disappeared”. In this sense performance becomes itself through messy and eruptive re-appearance.¹

From this perspective, *Memoria* might be viewed as a living performing archive of the memories referred to in the performance.

Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, took up the theme of disappearing and remaining in his book *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive* (1999), in which he explained the difficulties with witnessing Holocaust. Agamben formulated it in the following way:

[...]it became clear that testimony contained at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to. As a consequence, commenting on survivors' testimony necessarily meant interrogating this lacuna or, more precisely, attempting to listen to it.²

In my view, this lacuna, which Agamben refers to as memories, relates to Rebecca Schneider's point, that there can be a moment of “illusion” when spectators encounter memories. The lacuna appears like a true “space of absence” in *Memoria*, dealing with modality and temporality, here defined in relation to the act of performing memories, based on the ephemerality. Words and voice disappear, if we no longer are capable of remembering. One could say, that *Memoria* as performance is an act of disappearance, where the witnessing becomes the ephemeral in the memories of those voices, which were made silent. Else Marie Laukvik in making her voice disappear makes the spectators think of the voices of those who no longer can speak for themselves.

1 Schneider 2011, 102.

2 Agamben 1999, 13.

THE HISTORY BEHIND *MEMORIA*

The art of war normally refers to *the art of warring*. In *Memoria*, the notion of art about war is transformed into another form of strategy, namely a staging of the warlike condition that can arise between conflicting memories of war in a performative artistic form. The actress, Else Marie Laukvik, born in 1944, wrote the script for *Memoria*, while theatre director Eugenio Barba, born in 1936 was responsible for the production.³ The music is composed by Frans Winther, born in 1947, who accompanies the performance on violin, viola, and accordion. (See Fig. 1). Laukvik plays the different characters in the play, as well as the accordion, while Winther has a few well-defined lines and uses his music to create an emotional ambiance.

The production was first performed at Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Denmark on 13 March 1990. The production then toured for a couple of years, after which it faded from Odin Teatret's repertoire, and was not picked up again until 2012. Since then it has been performed in many countries. It is very unusual for a theatre production to span so many years and be performed by the same cast – who have, themselves, aged over *Memoria*'s long life. In its 2018 form, the enunciation of the performance seems to resonate more than ever, while the performance itself spans the years through the beauty of the aging bodies on the stage.



FIGURE 1. Frans Winther and Else Marie Laukvik with a portrait of Jean Améry in *Memoria* (dir. Eugenio Barba, *Odin Teatret*, 1990). Photo - *Odin Teatret Archives*.

³ *Memoria* is performed in Norwegian and Yiddish and has been shown in Denmark, Norway, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Italy, China, and the USA. The performance is a co-production between Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium and Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo, Italy.

Memoria has two major themes: one related to the narrative level of voices from the past, transformed into actions and the other to the artistic level of the voice as presence in theatre performance. Within the framework of these two strands, *Memoria* sets out to investigate the nature of memory and indirectly, the meaning of collective, cultural memories transformed into a disappearing voice. In this particular case it is the meaning of collectively remembering the Holocaust and the increasing difficulty of giving voice to these memories.

In the presence of the actors the spectators collectively witness trauma through the most minimal representation. Only in the shared moment can this kind of sensorial experience, described by German theatre scholar, Erika Fischer-Lichte, occur. The so called “feedback loop” bonds the actors and spectators, and in *Memoria* it is the shared memories that underpin these bonds.⁴

In order to prevent a too large distance between stage and audience, Else Marie Laukvik and Frans Winther perform *Memoria* in an intimate space with a maximum of forty spectators. The performance space resembles a sparsely furnished, small living room with a round low table, a couple of chairs, and lamps. This simple set, along with a few primary props - a teapot, a cup, a teddy bear ornament attached to one of the lamps - establish a physically identifiable frame around the memories of war time, when people did not have so many things. Else Marie Laukvik and Frans Winther sit at the table; she provides the main narrative, while he interjects a line here and there. Together, the actors sing Yiddish songs associated with the concentration camps so setting the atmosphere for the memories. Behind the actors is a screen, which Laukvik turns around during the performance in order to reveal portraits of the Jewish philosophers, Primo Levi (1919-87) and Jean Améry (1912-78); as if these philosophers are the silent witnesses to the actors’ narratives. At the same time, it seems that these portraits, along with the actors themselves, reflect the gaze of the spectators. It is, in other words, the silence and the almost empty space, which provide the scenery for the performance: The space makes room for the spectator’s own imagery and perception of the memories. This means that the spectator with his/her knowledge becomes a co-creator of this memoir of war, death, and survival.⁵

Memoria is dedicated to Jean Améry and Primo Levi whose portraits, as described above, become the silent witnesses of the on-stage performance.⁶ The dedication of *Memoria* to Primo Levi and Hans Mayer (Jean Améry) also reminds us that the performance we are witnessing is based on documentary material, and that both Levi and Mayer were captured by the Gestapo and sent to (different)

4 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 164.

5 Trauma can exist as physical, as well as psychological injuries, as a result of accidents or catastrophes. According to Peter A. Levine, trauma is a part of life, but does not necessarily need to continue for the whole life. (Levine 2006).

6 Several of Odin Teatret’s productions are dedicated to specific people, some going back in history like the artistic masks, Torcov and Dapertutto (from Stanislavsky’s and Meyerhold’s writings) (*Andersen’s Dream* (2004-11)), whereas others were part of our contemporary political history (i.e. the Russian journalists and human right activists, Anna Politkovskaya (1958-2006) and Natalia Estemirova (1958-2009) to whom *The Chronic Life* (2011) is dedicated.

concentration camps. They survived and, like many others, they had to find a way to live after war.

Hans Mayer decided that the way to move forward was to change his identity, so he took the name Jean Améry, which distanced him from the German cultural milieu. For years, Jean Améry felt that he was silenced, as he was not able to talk or write about his experiences. However, in 1966 he published *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, in which he wrote about the emotions that tormented him as a survivor of the camps. "Nichts ist ja aufgelöst, kein Konflikt ist beigelegt, kein Erinnern zur bloßen Erinnerung geworden" he wrote in the preface, indicating that forgiveness was not a possibility.⁷

Like many other prisoners from the concentration camps, Améry and Levi experienced what would now be called, post-traumatic stress following their internment during World War II. They both wrote about how many people who had survived Holocaust, were unable to express in words their experiences. This theme is taken up by *Memoria*, which sets out to show how it is sometimes not possible to communicate our memories to others. *Memoria* is thus *not* about Nazi extermination camps as such, and contrary to initial indications from the set and the background to the script, both stories do actually have what one may call a happy ending, after all, since the protagonists survive and live happily into old age surrounded by their family.

The real theme behind *Memoria* lies in the manner in which individual and collective memory not only is eroded by time, but under certain circumstances may only leave speechless witnesses behind. This sort of "de-linguaging" of the memory of war is represented in *Memoria* as an act of disappearance – as the performance progresses spoken words become fewer and semantically emptier of conventional meanings. It is as if the memories of war have been victimized and become part of an almost invisible conflict about the unspeakable, the speechless, and the elimination of memory. We see, how the trauma of past events can deprive someone of the ability to talk about their experiences, leaving only their physical presence as a reminder to others.

THREE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF MEMORIES

Memoria operates on three different levels. Firstly, it deals with children's memories of survival. Secondly, it focusses on these children as adults, exemplified by the philosophers' memories and inability to reconcile with their own survival. And finally, as a third level, *Memoria* examines *the creative memory* of the two actors as a central aspect of their profession. On the immediate and concrete narrative level the performance is about the narratives of two children, Stella and Moshe, who survived the concentration camp in Mauthausen. Their memory accounts, seen from a survivor's perspective, include a "happy" ending as both children survived the camp. The children's narratives are taken from Yaffa Eliach's *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*.⁸ This collection of Holocaust narratives consists of witness accounts from adults, who recall how they lived as children in the Nazi extermination camps but managed to escape alive. Such narratives formed an

7 Améry 1977, 14.

8 Eliach 1983.

oral culture of memories in Jewish settlements in cities like New York. It is from speaking to such survivors that Yaffa Eliach (1935-2016) collected and published the tales for her book. Eliach states that:

*This collection of hasidic tales is not a mystification of the Holocaust, nor is it a negation of the value of armed resistance and the physical struggle for one's life or death with honor. It is simply an attempt to bring to light yet another, unexplored aspect of the Holocaust. The tales become a link, a historical continuum between the spiritual world of the period before the Holocaust and the rebirth afterward.*⁹

In *Memoria*, no attempt is made to gestalt the children's memories as if seen from the children's perspective. On the contrary, the actors recreate the adults' memories of episodes from their childhood. The spoken memories illustrate how the war was the everyday for the children, and they can be viewed as a meta-narrative about death as a life condition. The memories are based on the Hassidic community's instinct for survival, which includes recourse to music and dance. Laukvik's live music performances resonate with the community's strong bonds and connection to music, and it is notable that the characters sometimes seem to be performing a constant vibrating movement, which could represent a sort of "inner dance".

On another level the performance focuses on the trauma experienced by the children, which continues to haunt them as adults who survived the war. Primo Levi and Jean Améry are obviously examples of such circumstances. To them, the memories about war and the time in the camp are not only painful, but also related to the feeling of guilt that comes with being alive. Laukvik has mentioned to me that while researching *Memoria* with Winther, they became aware of the high number of suicides among Holocaust survivors. Laukvik describes it as a bit like an epidemic. Former prisoners clearly felt guilty that they survived, while many others perished, and they would question whether they deserved to be alive. They had gained freedom, but the memories about the camp had become yet another prison. During the *Memoria* performance prominent authors, who were traumatized by Holocaust memories, are mentioned: "Silberstam, Rosenbaum, Mayer, Levi, Kotler."¹⁰ Visually this is manifested with the revealing of the two portraits of Levi and Améry, mentioned earlier, and their apparent role as silent witnesses to the memories being spoken in the performance.

On a third level the performance of *Memoria* references the more immediate acts of remembering required of the cast, such as how and when words and actions must be presented on stage in order to give the performance both substance and a message for the spectators to take home. The three levels of memories are woven together in the performance in the way the children's voices are followed by voices which refer to the two philosophers, while the artistic track is the actors presenting the whole story. It is through this rhetorical device that memories of war are presented. The enunciation of the war is connected to all these notions of memory in a way which makes silence speak.

9 Eliach 1982, 228-34.

10 Laukvik 1990, 18, 25.

Performing the conflicts that arise from remembering past traumas and the resulting amnesia are an important dimension of *Memoria*, which presents the acts of “forgetting”, as if they are in conflict with the memories. Trauma’s double-sided meaning illustrates the opposition that may be inherent in *re-enacting the memory* and forgetting, whether deliberately or unconsciously. This is the dichotomy that is tackled in *Memoria*.

On the stage, the two sides of trauma become visible. The music, for example, fills the space where the speech is missing: Muteness struggles against other means of communication. In a sense, *Memoria* deals with the landscape of the concentration camp as a country within civilization: This landscape has become part of transnational history, which tells about bodies beyond borders. In the case of *Memoria*, bodies beyond borders also refers to the bodies beyond our imagination. It is hard to see, how one can discuss this condition without referring to Artaud’s *The Theatre and Its Double*, in which he writes about theatre of cruelty. In his First Manifesto Artaud wrote:

*The problem is to turn theatre into a function in the proper sense of the word, something as exactly localized as the circulation of our blood through our veins, or the apparently chaotic evolution of dream images in the mind, by an effective mix, truly enslaving our attention.*¹¹

SCENOGRAPHIC ELEMENTS AS REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR

Although minimal, the scenography in *Memoria* manages to refer directly to the *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*. One example comes from the chapter, “The First Hanukkah Light in Bergen-Belsen”. In this instance the telling of the tale manages to link memories to the atmosphere of the Jewish feast:

*Then Hanukkah came to Bergen-Belsen. It was time to kindle the Hanukkah lights. A jug of oil was not to be found, no candle was in sight, and a Hanukkah belonged to the distant past. Instead, a wooden clog, the shoe of one of the inmates, became a Hanukkah; strings pulled from a concentration-camp uniform, a wick; and the black camo shoe polish, pure oil.*¹²

This piece of narrative becomes the stage director’s remark: *A tiny little child’s wooden shoe left behind*. In the performance, Laukvik finds the “string” and “polish” and lights the “wick”. The weak flame provides a visual interpretation of the childhood memories about the tiniest light in the darkness of the camp. The light in the narrative becomes the light in the performance, and also more generally the light has a particular role in this production, from general light to the little flame and then darkness. Darkness becomes a metaphor for death, but darkness also can be interpreted as silence; a resistance against forgetting and oblivion.

The first of the narratives in *Memoria* is about a boy called Moshe, who with his Yiddish song gains the strength to survive the “Entlauschung” (de-lousing

11 Artaud 1958, 65.

12 Eliach 1983, 14-15.

process) on an extremely cold and starry night in the concentration camp. Even if the soles of his feet were frozen to the snow and his lips had shrunk into two blue lines, he clung to life, as he remembered the song sung by the rabbi. But these memories of survival also reminded him that while he was singing, hundreds of children around him were transformed into frozen, dead bodies. In the *Hasidic tales of the Holocaust* it says: “Don’t fall my young friend, don’t stumble! You must survive’ A Hasid must sing, A Hasid must dance; it is the secret of our survival.”¹³ This line forms a witnessing motive in *Memoria*, when Frans Winther reinforces the message by saying, “Fall nicht mein junger Freund, stolpere nicht. Du muss überleben. Ein Chassid muss singen, ein Chassid muss tanzen. Das ist das Geheimnis unseres Überlebens”.¹⁴ The meaning of this quotation gains a certain symbolism through performative connotations and their reference to the actors’ resistance.

The perspective in the other narrative is different. It describes Stella, a child survivor of the Holocaust, who is now a grown woman. As a woman Stella becomes dizzy every time she sees a doll, because she is taunted by the recurring memory of a soldier luring children with a piece of chocolate. When the children closed their eyes and opened their mouths to get a piece of chocolate, he shot them. “Like lifesize dolls, they were laying in the grass.”¹⁵

Both these tales refer to children’s experiences, which have become trauma memories about war. Despite their tragic side, paradoxically, these tales also offer hope through life affirming singing and dancing. Using the images of frozen bodies and lifeless dolls, the actors engage and affect the spectators through a series of physical actions. Towards the end of the performance, for example, Laukvik, suddenly picks up, what has seemed until this point, an apparently harmless doll. One may perceive it as another silent witness to the entire narrative of the performance, but when Laukvik tears off the clothes of the doll, the spectators realize that the doll in reality is a disguised teddy bear, which under the clothes has a band on its arm emblazoned with a symbol of the swastika. She then removes the table cloth and reveals a hidden zinc tub, filled with water; Laukvik drowns the teddy bear in the tub in an exceedingly dramatic way, before hanging it. This little episode represents the memory war the survivor experiences when seeing dolls, and at the same time it questions the ambiguity of trauma, where revenge and reconciliation might be at war over the same place in the landscape of memory. The episode also prompts the spectators to think about the children whose parents were forced to follow an ideology they, perhaps, did not find agreeable.

ARTISTIC MEMORIES IN MEMORIA AND IN THE SPECTATOR’S CO-CREATIVE PROCESS

It is obviously difficult for people who have not experienced the Holocaust to enter the mindset of trauma of this particular history. However, according to Cathy Caruth, trauma may be used as a tool in history, and in the arts, to open the way for a mutual engagement: “In its most general definition, trauma describes an

13 Eliach 1980, 125-30.

14 Laukvik 1990, 10.

15 Ibid.

overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”¹⁶ It is likely a similar empathic exchange might occur in a performance. One could add that Erika Fischer-Lichte’s notion of the feedback loop when used to analyse *Memoria* encompasses both the actors’ own artistic memory as well as the spectators’ engagement with, and investment in, the production. Here I will draw on my own experience as a spectator of Odin Teatret’s performances since the beginning of the 1980s.¹⁷

Odin Teatret Archives contain materials right from the formation of the theatre company in 1964. In this archive, there are two notable performances, both of which throw light on the meaning of the actors’ own artistic memories in *Memoria*. Else Marie Laukvik played a significant role in both these productions. First, in *Ornitofilene* (1965), written by the Norwegian writer, Jens Bjørneboe (1920-76).¹⁸ This play was core material for Odin Teatret’s first performance, which opened in Oslo in 1965.¹⁹ The other example is from *The Gospel of Oxyrhincus* (1985-87), in which Laukvik played the Hasidic Jew and tailor, Zusha Mal’ak. Through researching these performances, it is possible to see how Laukvik draws on her body memories of her childhood in Norway, the memory of folk songs and her professional experiences, which on stage she relates to the Yiddish songs. Being able to draw on personal experience means that Laukvik’s performance gains in authenticity and integrity, and at the same time, one also sees how these memories are not ornamentations but interfere with one another in a way which leaves traces behind. If you look at *Memoria* in relation to Else Marie Laukvik’s 55 years as an actress at Odin Teatret, one will discover, how *Memoria* not only is a performance about Holocaust memories, but can furthermore be perceived as a performance about the artistic body memories that Laukvik has built up during her many years with Odin Teatret.

These performance memories associated with *Memoria* also relate to the way presence is used, and how, as expressive antagonist, it offers the opportunity for spectators to co-struggle with the memories. Over the years, I have held several conversations with Else Marie Laukvik about her preparatory work for *Memoria*. We have discussed her inspiration for the piece, a Russian lullaby, vigorously contrasting tender love with the cruelty of life during war. This lullaby also provided the inspiration for the poster, used on *Memoria*’s stage set.²⁰ In Laukvik’s personal

16 Caruth 1991, 181.

17 I have published a number of articles and books on Odin Teatret’s performances. Lately together with Dr Adam Ledger, Birmingham University, we wrote on Eugenio Barba as theatre director in “The Tree of Performance Knowledge” (Kuhlmann 2018).

18 *Fugleelskerne* (The Bird Lovers) is the original Norwegian title of Jens Bjørneboe’s play. (Bjørneboe 1966).

19 This play is one of the very few, which uses a dramatic text as the point of departure for the production. Since the late 1960s the textual material has mainly developed from poems and text fragments or from the actors’ material to become a dramaturgical montage, primarily put together by Eugenio Barba. This is an example of that artistic practice, which Hans-Thies Lehmann formulated as part of the theatrical shift of paradigm, which occurred with postdramatic theatre. (Lehmann 2006).

20 The conversations were recorded and form a primary source for the present article. The recordings took place during CPH Stage2016, 08-11.06.2016 and 03.09.2016 at Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Denmark.

staged autobiography, *My Stage Children* (2014), she tells how *Memoria* came into being: “This lullaby song was written by a woman, who after a big massacre in Lithuania during the Second World War saw a three-year-old child walking alone in the street.” The poster on the *Memoria* stage set alludes to a child, left, lost, and forgotten during war. The poster is made more poignant by the child being framed by barbed wire fencing surrounded by perched birds. (See Fig. 2)

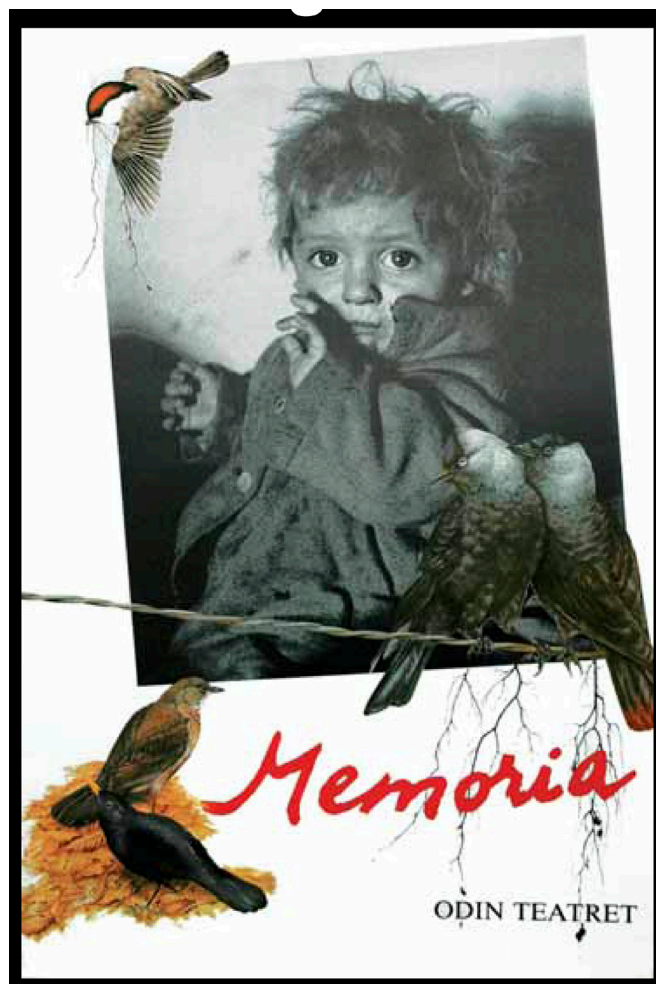


FIGURE 2. *Memoria* (dir. Eugenio Barba, *Odin Teatret*, 1990). The poster of the performance. *Odin Teatret Archives*.

While researching and rehearsing *Memoria* Else Marie Laukvik and Frans Winther found notes and poems from the concentration camps. Winther then composed music to frame the texts, and chose performance styles that make it seem as if the instruments themselves are characters on the stage. For example, the accordion is characterized by extended notes and harmonies, while the violin has a more energetic presence. Overall, the music underscores the interplay between the singing and the dancing, and the underlying texts. From time to time, Laukvik’s vocal score tends towards mourning in a dialogue; a characteristic that is enhanced by the choice of instruments. As a sort of counterpoint to the melancholy in the Yiddish songs, the actors decided to also use some more traditionally poetic

elements from *Hasidic tales of the Holocaust* such as the themes of love and humanity.²¹

Memoria is performed in three parts, which essentially repeat the same basic story. Over the three parts, however, the time for this re-telling becomes steadily shorter. The music repeats recognizable bars, as if accentuating the endless return of the performing memories, which remain. Winther also uses other musical quotations, for example the playing of a little fragment from Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, which introduces a childish beauty to a night scene in the concentration camp. The lightness in this musical quotation does not last for long, however, as the major key is replaced by the minor, producing a qualitatively different sound, that suggests the sorrow in the narrative. In this way, the memories are given a specific musical quality, as if joy and sadness are in conflict. The use of silence and whispering also helps to suggest the recalling of the unsaid, while the memories in the actor's body language resonate in order to invite in the musical-cultural body memory of the spectator. Meanwhile the use of darkness adds an extra dimension to the trauma taking place on stage.

The first words spoken in *Memoria* are: "A melody can also save a man's life – about the melody from Bobov"²², while the performance ends with the poem: "Dream little bird / all birds are sleeping now / under your branch by the great tree / a foreigner is singing and weeping."²³ These two fragments, which frame the performance, encompass the hope of prophesy, the sentimentality of a lullaby along with symbols from Jewish mourning rituals. There are many performative elements in the written text of *Memoria* including *the singing and mourning*. These words are performative, without bearing the illusion of representation. The performance-manuscript is, therefore, framed by words, which allude to a ritual about remembering, related to the trauma. This is performed against the background of the narrative, but also relates to the actors' craft of remembering on stage. What we call performance presence on stage becomes the transcendence of the narratives as collective memories.

MEMORIA AS REMEMBRANCE OF PERFORMANCE KNOWLEDGE

Despite the tragic theme of *Memoria*, when the actors finally leave the theatre space in silence and almost darkness, one can hear a little bird singing. This birdsong helps to make the audience feel more ambivalent about what they have just seen. Despite the gloomy narrative there is the suggestion of naive hope, leaving the closure of the performance open to interpretation.²⁴ Such ambivalence

21 Yaffa Eliach has described the *Hassidic tales of the Holocaust*: "it has been a constant source of inspiration to men of letters, among them Y. L. Peretz, Martin Buber, Elie Wiesel and two Noel Laureates in Literature, S. Y. Agnon and Isaac Bashevis Singer", (Eliach 1980, 125-30). The article ends with "A Bobov Melody" – a narrative about the 14-year-old boy, Moshe, whose story constitutes a central part of the narrative of *Memoria*. Bobov is a Hassidic community that follows Haredi Judaism, which has its roots in an area in Galicia in southern Poland. Today this community exists in cities like New York, Montreal, and London, as well as in Israel.

22 Laukvik 1990, 2.

23 Laukvik 1990, 25.

24 Odin Teatret's latest ensemble production, *The Tree*, which has the war as a general theme, ends with the sound of tiny little birds singing.

is also apparent in the poem from *Todesfuge* (1945), written by the Romanian-Jewish poet, Paul Celan, and included in *Memoria*. The last line of the poem, "er befiehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz" suggests the kind of hope that Barba would like *Memoria*'s spectators to feel as the performance closes to the sound of birdsong.²⁵

The Hasidic tales of the Holocaust, which underpin *Memoria*, are characterized by what Eliach has called "a blend of folkish elements and sophisticated wit."²⁶ (Eliach 1983: xvi). For Eugenio Barba the enunciation and performance knowledge of *Memoria* are expressed in the quotation from the song about "memories from a country, which one is longing to go back to, and about a foreigner singing under a tree and weeping".²⁷ In my view this knowledge is not only attached to the expression of the historical memories, but also to the actors' bodily expression as a marginalized action. (See Fig. 3)



FIGURE 3. Else Marie Laukvik in *Memoria* (dir. Eugenio Barba, *Odin Teatret*, 1990). Photo - *Odin Teatret Archives*.

When considering performance knowledge for a production like *Memoria*, war memories become not only individual stories but also collective memories. This theme has in its own right become a part of theatre art, in particular in relation to the encounter between stage and audience. This frame establishes a community,

25 Laukvik 1990, 25.

26 Eliach 1983, xvi.

27 Laukvik 1990, 25.

in which the spectators share an experience of the traces left from the actors' presence in the theatre space. From my point of view, in *Memoria*, Laukvik embodies and gives voice to collective and transnational war memories. What could be perceived as a window on a war of memories actually becomes a more global presentation of witnessing and sharing trauma in human life. On closer inspection, the here-and-now-perspective allows the performance to become an almost ritualized realization of time and space. What seems to be a global concern, is also a local and very concrete one, when the focus is on the human capacity to remember.

In that regard the actors' ability to make the spectators feel as if they are actually experiencing the trauma in a performance's narrative requires a certain mode of being, which in itself relies on the actor's ability to affect spectators. At first glance this is about catharsis. But it is more than catharsis, and it is also different. The notion of catharsis, as we know it from Aristoteles' *Poetics*, means literally a cleansing, stemming from a ritual context. In a theatre setting this might imply the spectator taking on the trauma of the character in the tragedy, and so removing their burden. *Memoria*, however, is performed in such a way, that it seems that the actors embody the trauma, even though they are but the media for this catharsis. The trauma on stage is created to resonate in the body and mind of the spectator, and it can be the case that this body memory also provides a means to forget.

The use of repetition in the performance becomes a sort of enactment of memory – or forgetting. This dichotomy between remembering and forgetting, links both to bodily and mental trauma in *Memoria*, and it is notable that where the words end, the music takes over as a realization of the unspeakable, the inscrutable, and what affectively operates beyond our normal perception. At this point, how the actor uses her body to tell the story, the expressivity of the actor, reaches a limit where one can experience the actors' expression at which point bodily and spoken narration become one and the same.

In retrospect the trauma in *Memoria* evokes those performance traces, which the participants leave in the performance. Actions and timely displaced memories are woven together, and while the transformation happens through the presence of the actors, it evokes a particular focus for the spectators, like a sensorial memory. One can say, that the memorized and the memorizing support reflect the complexity of remembering collectively. Thus, *Memoria* can be understood from a transformative perspective, transgressing the borders of conventional understandings of the real. The transgression means that the actor moves beyond the conventional borders of theatre performance, and it also triggers memories of forgotten encounters with the traumatic aspects of history. At this point I would like to bring in my final quotation, from Rebecca Schneider who wrote:

As theories of trauma and repetition might instruct us, it is not presence that appears in the syncopated time of citational performance but precisely (again) the missed encounter – the reverberations of the overlooked, the missed, the repressed, the seemingly forgotten. Performance does not disappear when approached from this perspective, though its remains are the immaterial of live, embodied acts. Rather, performance plays the

*“sedimented acts” and spectral meanings that haunt material in constant collective interaction, in constellation, in transmutation.*²⁸

The theatre performance can remind us about what we thought we had forgotten. *Memoria* is sometimes performed in private homes, where the domestic setting and scenic space merge, for example in a kitchen or dining room. In such settings the performance effect of immersion becomes more intimate. The sensorial capacity of the spectator helps to make the experience a true body memory, while the performance emphasizes how concrete memories of war correspond to the overarching question about memory culture in a contemporary perspective.

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28 Schneider 2011, 102.

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