

# Scenography of the Unimaginable: Exploring Trauma of Others in *872 days. Voices of the besieged city*

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*The article explores the scenographic rendering of trauma in the theatre performance 872 days. Voices of the besieged city staged by a small theatre, Subbota, in Saint Petersburg, Russia. The performance delves into the complex issues of private narratives of traumatic experiences, which, for decades, were deemed unimportant and even disruptive within the context of victory and glory of The Great Patriotic War. The production is based on memoirs and diaries of witnesses of the Leningrad siege. This study explores the connection between the scenographic ecology and empathic unsettlement, which is understood as a tool of approaching trauma through the experience of the audience. The article analyses how the scenographic rendering of trauma allows for potential representation and understanding of traumatic experience. It further looks at a theatre space as a place for mourning and reflexivity that allows the possibility of working through past trauma to better understand the present.*

## Introduction

*‘The blockade of Leningrad... Impossible to imagine, must not be performed, prohibited to interpret.’*

With these words, the official webpage of a small Saint Petersburg’s theatre, Subbota, introduces its performance of *872 days. Voices of the besieged city*. Created by director Tatiana Voronina, scenographer Elena Zhukova, light director Evgeniy Ganzburg and choreographer Natalya Shurganova, the performance explores the personal narratives of witnesses to the 872 days of war, which became known as the siege or blockade of Leningrad.<sup>1</sup> The siege was a long-lasting military blockade of the city of Leningrad, present-day Saint Petersburg, launched by German and Finnish troops on 8 September 1941 in the Eastern Front of the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> The siege was lifted on 27 January 1944 and is known to be the longest and most devastating siege in history in terms of casualties. Since its premiere in 2019, the performance has been played regularly, with a recurring performance every 27 January to commemorate the official end of the siege.<sup>3</sup>

*872 days. Voices of the besieged city* is one of a rare contemporary performative context that addresses specifically the Leningrad siege. By exploring the siege from the perspective of traumatic experience it addresses the complex and painful side of the

tragedy that is often avoided by the preferred socio-political and cultural narratives that are rooted in the grand narrative of the nation's great victory.<sup>4</sup> Based on memoirs and diaries of witnesses of the siege and on the book *Leningrad Under Siege: First-hand Accounts of the Ordeal*, the performance emphasizes that the siege is a complex and lasting traumatic experience and explores the tragedy through the magnifying glass of the irreplaceable and haunting loss the citizens of Leningrad suffered.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, using a scenographic framework I approach and analyse *872 days. Voices of the besieged city* as an effort to find a pathway to empathize with the past trauma of millions of people, to humble oneself, and thus get a chance to work through the echo of this trauma. I argue that using scenography as a tool to address the human, intimate side of the siege, the performance has the potential to open a wound that healed wrongly and highlight a different angle to the historical trauma that did not seem to belong to itself. In this article, I address the following question: How can interrelations between scenographic ecology and empathic unsettlement render possible a representation of trauma in the performance context?

To explore the scenographic ecology and engage with empathic unsettlement, my main method of the analysis is a combination of the description of the performance and my embodied exploration of it. This method allows me not only to describe what is seen but also to comment and analyse the performance through my experience. I transfer it into the text as an action rather than a static image, which in its turn allows me to emphasize in the written form the processual quality of scenography. Furthermore, as I position myself in the context of the perceiver, I remain fully aware that this tragedy that I have known since I was a child is new to a lot of readers. I also acknowledge that the siege was never presented to me as a part of the grand narrative but rather delivered through the prism of a historical moment that is simultaneously too painful and so blissfully distant that it does not require to be talked about.

There is no one universal way of accounting for everyone's experience and understanding. Based on studies in psychology and trauma, one can lay a base ground to how a subject may be perceived, but one can never speak for each experience by and large. Empathic unsettlement allows me to employ the knowledge that is accessible to me, personal and emotional, as a woman who grew up in Russia and engaged with its culture and history through most of my life, without appropriating the experience of others or claiming that I can fully comprehend it.

As my exploration primarily addresses the representation of trauma of others, it is important to underline that the performance explored in this paper does not diminish the value and impact of the tragedy on the following generations. It does not suggest a different view on the tragedy *per se* but rather addresses it from a different angle, one that already exists as the historical fact but still presents a painful and ambiguous point for discussion. A restoration of the tragedy's hidden and sometimes repulsive and cowardly side as a form of useful desacralization could bring the spectator closer to the experience of the Leningrad citizens, which is necessary for working through the trauma. At the same time, this desacralization inevitably creates the deviation from the historically and socially preferred narrative of remembrance. An attempt at representation of an alternative truth that contradicts one *objective* version of a historical explanation can

be seen as an attempt to point out weaknesses and to destroy the narrative of selfless sacrifice and mass heroism that allows avoidance of the question of the price of victory.<sup>6</sup> Yet, ignoring the pain and despair that take place as a part of a traumatic experience leads to discarding of trauma itself.

### **Difficult past: contextualization of the siege in the socio-political and cultural contexts**

Before delving into the heart of the performance's objective, it is important to contextualize the complexity of the representation of the siege in the post-war memory of the Soviet and later Russian socio-political and cultural narrative. The siege and the narratives constructed around it belong to a co-called *difficult past*, which emphasizes a historical period or an event, that does not create a clear consensus in the society it addresses.<sup>7</sup> It is often entangled in the discrepancy between how that past is seen in personal narratives and represented in the official discourse. Historian Tatiana Voronina emphasizes that war was an important component of the political legitimization of Soviet authority. Therefore, narratives of war were not seen as means of psychological therapy for the post-war generation but as tools in solving the urgent political tasks of the Soviet leadership.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the official history of the siege of Leningrad influenced by Soviet ideology was called to mark only those sides of everyday life that serve the heroic narrative of successes and achievements while leaving traumatic everyday experience aside.<sup>9</sup> The language of heroism became, what Voronina calls, a *special method* to narrate stories of the war and siege, which consolidate only one side of human experience. Another side – marginal, painful, shameful – disappeared along with witnesses and it could not be discovered and comprehended fully by descendants.<sup>10</sup> This shadowing of personal experience that prevailed in the official narrative adds to the complexity of the presentation and understanding of the siege from the perspective of the traumatic experience, disrupting the connection between individual suffering and collective struggle during the siege. A specialist in Russian culture, Catriona Kelly, addresses this specific phenomenon as 'war glory minus war suffering'.<sup>11</sup>

The cultural sphere mirrored this complexity. Some examples of cultural expressions, written ones especially, showed the tragedy and loss as a result of the siege through the prism of human experience; for instance, diaries, memoirs, and collections of reminiscences.<sup>12</sup> Publication of these works during different periods of Soviet history was prohibited or heavily censored, however, and with many corrections that most of the time did not reflect the truth. *Leningrad Under Siege: First-hand Accounts of the Ordeal*, the book on which the performance is partly based, is one of the well-known examples of a written work – a collection of witness accounts of the siege. The extensive research, interviewing, and writing of the book was conducted by Ales' Adamovich and Daniil Granin between 1977 and 1982, with parts being published as early as 1977. The censorship, however, prohibited the publication of the book due to the depiction of looting and similar narratives that might, according to officials, highlight the siege from a wrong side. The whole book was first published in 1984.<sup>13</sup>

The lack of available scholarship that engages with the representation of the siege in theatre highlights the fact that the big cinema screen might have been a much more desirable platform for engaging with the subject.<sup>14</sup> In the 1960s, the so-called Thaw period, temporary relief from strict censorship created a possibility for an attentive reflection on the siege as an episode of the war that was not yet so long back in time. Movies such as *Winter Morning* directed by Nikolay Lebedev and *Daytime Stars* by Igor Talankin and Olga Berggolts addressed the experience of suffering of citizens of Leningrad during the siege. However, in the 1970s a new approach to the subject was demanded by the Brezhnev government.<sup>15</sup> The biggest project of that time was the movie *Blokada*. The main focus of the movie was to show the siege in epic proportions and to move away from the intimacy and darkness of the earlier cinematic works by creating a patriotic blockbuster.<sup>16</sup>

During the historical period of Perestroika and Glasnost, when traumatic experience of the siege's witnesses could have been uncovered from a different angle, the socio-economic aspect came to influence how it was once again viewed and formulated. In order to qualify for support from the State during the deep economic crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, witnesses of the siege needed to be accepted as heroes of the war, which would put them on the same level of benefits as those who actively fought for and defended the city.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the narrative of victimization, of comparing themselves to the victims of the Holocaust, for instance, was not accepted by witnesses of the siege because it would mean their role in the war was different from that of the soldiers and civil defenders. As a result, as social theorist Elena Trubina underlines, the construction of history and memory of the siege is primarily dictated by a system of values, discursive practices, systematic mechanisms and configurations of power rather than by uncensored human experience.<sup>18</sup>

The unexpected and difficult freedom of the transition period of the 1990s inadvertently created a space to address the difficult past, including the tragedy of the siege. Already existing texts of memoirs and biographies were openly published. To ask uneasy questions about the siege became possible even if still limited due to new apparent politics of silencing and secrecy. The cultural landscape in general made clear complexities and controversies surrounding the subject of the siege, understanding of it in the public space and wariness of the discussion. The significant example of the gap between the ways the siege is perceived is the controversial discussion around the attempts to establish a museum dedicated to the siege that in the end was never built. While one group of people wanted the siege to be shown from the perspective of heroism and strength, another wanted to emphasize the struggles, uncertainties and suffering of ordinary people, and a third group wanted to highlight the responsibility of the political power of the country for the mass death of civilians.<sup>19</sup>

During this period, theatre also became one of those public platforms that took on itself the serious task to speak of the difficult past, thus attempting to make peace with it.<sup>20</sup> Among the most recent performances that address the siege is *67/871* staged by Teater Pokoleniy (Theatre of Generations).<sup>21</sup> Based on the play written by the late

playwright and leader of Teater.doc Elena Gremina, the performance uses the strategies of verbatim theatre to explore the painful past through interviews with witnesses of the siege. Furthermore, *Hecatomb. Siege Diary* directed by Yana Tumina and *900 snowflakes* directed by Tatiana Sidorova do not only address the tragedy from the perspective of human experience but target young audiences, exploring possibilities of talking to children about that difficult past.

Right now, in Russia one is witnessing a rapid deterioration of that relative freedom of the past two decades that allowed a space for reflexivity and exploration of the difficult history. The fast-paced militarization of major sectors of society, including cultural, once again pushes historical events, such as the siege of Leningrad, towards the moralistic narrative of great victory at all costs.<sup>22</sup> This narrative serves the agenda of the political regime much better than attention to human suffering and value of the life of an individual.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, alternative narratives that would not only see the siege as a crime against humanity but inadvertently point out the role that the Soviet leadership and Stalin himself played in the siege's horrible losses are directly threatening to the present-day political regime that in many aspects inherits structures of the Soviet regime.<sup>24</sup>

Why struggle to understand and address past trauma when what is at hand is already ungraspable and unimaginable? The past holds a lesson, however, when it comes to the construction of memory and history and the strive for its representation in the present, which allows for recognition of past traumatic experiences that are devaluated by the narrative constructed in the duration of time by the political regime that succeeds in 'calculated misrepresentation of the memory of the past'.<sup>25</sup> As reliable sources of free speech, information and critique in Russia are being gradually persecuted, prosecuted and cancelled, strangling any attempts to build and maintain a civil society, it is more important than ever to acknowledge the sources of alternative thinking and understanding that appeal not only to knowledge, as it can be easily disrupted and deformed, but to empathy. To work through trauma is not only important on a personal level but on a much wider social level. This performance is one of the small contributions to critical thinking through empathy, which allows one to acknowledge the traumatic past and to hope for a different future to arrive through the alleviation of that past trauma.

### **Touching from a distance: scenographic ecology and empathic unsettlement**

Arguably, any presentation and perception of other people's trauma are a negotiation of possibilities, attempts and expectations, rather than a concrete set of rules and actions. In her work on affect, trauma and contemporary art, Jill Bennett emphasizes that once trauma is represented and seen as 'an expression of personal experience' it becomes susceptible to 'appropriation, to reduction, and to mimicry'.<sup>26</sup> Bennett wonders if by means of art and performative expressions, trauma can become something beyond 'the deposit of primary experience', which, as she claims, is potentially *unshareable*, even if it is communicated.<sup>27</sup> At this, she argues that trauma-related art forms 'are best understood as *transactive* rather than *communicative*', and instead of conveying

others' personal experiences, 'it might lead us towards a conceptual engagement' with it.<sup>28</sup> In his turn, theatre scholar Patrick Duggan, in his exploration of the trauma–tragedy concept, suggests that instead of focusing on representation, which can be claimed impossible, theatre and performance can try to 'bear witness to trauma' so that the audience members could, in fact, experience the void in articulation of trauma, which would 'put them in the region of re-witnessing or rehearsing their own trauma'.<sup>29</sup>

I lay a challenge to the potentially *unshareable* quality of trauma in the ground of my exploration of the performance's scenography and its connection to and influence on the spectator's encounter with the traumatic experience of others. In the analysis of *872 days. Voices of the besieged city*, I rely on the turn in scenography studies that advocate a holistic approach to scenography and see it as 'a way of constructing the physical, perceptual, and emotional environment of/for the event'.<sup>30</sup> The holistic approach allows us to move away from seeing scenography from the perspective of a static scene towards understanding it as a multisensorial, affective and interactive practice that includes material relations between human and non-human actors, material and immaterial elements, affective atmospheres and cognitive processes.<sup>31</sup> I address the connection between scenography and spectator in the words of Joslyn McKinney and Scott Palmer as 'an experience or a set of potentialities rather than a singular message' that take place through direction of the encounter with multifaceted qualities of space, materials, visual and sonic elements.<sup>32</sup> This specific idea of a set of potentialities is crucial when it comes to the exploration of trauma and traumatic experience that are claimed to perpetually evade representation and comprehension.

In the context of representation of trauma, my exploration of the performance's scenography takes root in the work of scenography scholar Rachel Hann and her interpretation of scenography as 'a crafted ecology or system of affective materials, atmospheres and orientations'.<sup>33</sup> Hann's definition emphasizes the processual qualities of scenography as an action of coordination and suggests that scenographic ecology manifests itself in 'how the material elements of theatre orientate a feeling of place, where the act of placing is an ongoing experiential process (rather than a set object) that recognizes how our bodies acclimatize to, and literately make sense of, an environment'.<sup>34</sup>

Scenography as a process of place orientation, according to Hann, includes diverse aspects of actions that take place in the time and space of the performance. As place orientation considers 'personal and social decisions, atmospheric and affective qualities of physical environment, stage formats, and relations between the stage and the spectator',<sup>35</sup> it is responsible for the experience of the spectator, which happens in the process of a material encounter. Furthermore, Hann underlines that materials in scenography possess a *scenographic* trait which 'isolates and affords a particular perspective, or critical framework, that identifies the potentiality of stage architecture'.<sup>36</sup> Hann emphasizes that materials can be scenographic in their nature, that is they have a 'distinct potential for dramatic action'.<sup>37</sup> Thus, I centralize scenographic ecology and the operation of scenographic materials as a key element in the representation and communication of traumatic experience of others and take

embodied exploration as a method of encounter or, as Hann calls it, the ‘bodily act of place orientation’.<sup>38</sup>

An encounter with scenographic traits of the performance’s materials generates an active participation on the side of the spectator, which triggers their cognitive, emotional and aesthetic response, and what is crucial in engagement with the representation of trauma, the spectator’s *response-ability*.<sup>39</sup> By this, Duggan emphasizes that the spectator is never really a passive perceiver but exists in the condition of *embodied empathic witnessing*.<sup>40</sup> In her turn, Bennett indicates that empathy ‘is characterized by a distinctive combination of affective and intellectual operation’ and underlines that, while an art form cannot transmit ‘the essence of a memory that is “owned” by a subject’, it can potentially ‘envisage a form of memory for more than one subject, inhabited in different modalities by different people’.<sup>41</sup> Empathy, however, even with Bennett’s and Duggan’s careful consideration of its role in the perception and engagement on the spectator’s side, is a precarious feeling that can turn from commitment to the understanding of others’ experiences to its appropriation.

In this case, considering my experience as a spectator as it is generated through a material encounter with the performance’s scenography, scenographic traits of those materials, and a complex context of the crossing of my knowledge of the siege and decades of the political, economic and socio-cultural narratives, I wish to address a possibility of *empathic unsettlement*, a concept coined by the American historian Dominick LaCapra.<sup>42</sup> According to LaCapra, empathic unsettlement signifies engagement with trauma of others as ‘a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place’.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, he proposes to approach empathy as ‘a form of virtual, not vicarious, experience’ where ‘emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that experience of the other is not one’s own’.<sup>44</sup> Empathic unsettlement implies engagement with critical thinking and practice of learning, and one who engages with trauma of others, in this case me as a spectator, needs to *expose* themselves to unsettlement to be ‘cognitively and ethically responsible’.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the analysis of *872 days. Voices of the besieged city*, I argue that the staging of trauma is akin to LaCapra’s notion of *writing trauma*, as opposed to *writing about trauma*.<sup>46</sup> It is not about staging as true to reality as possible but about conditioning aspects of reality that could help the spectator approach the unimaginable. Scenographic materials tune the atmosphere to create an affective encounter with the traumatic experiences of others, thus generating a possibility of empathic unsettlement in the active role of the spectator as an agent, or, as Maaik Bleeker refers to them, a *seer* ‘who combines what they think they see with subjective experience to augment and extend scenography’.<sup>47</sup> This conditioning happens through the orientation of scenographic materials and how relations are constructed between human and non-human actors, including immaterial aspects, such as light and the sound of voices. Acts of scenographic materials create a fertile soil for empathic unsettlement on the part of the spectator as an affectively engaged witness and as a co-creator of the performance. Scenography can be seen as a kind of tuning

of the spectator's perception that challenges them not just to listen but to hear and not just imagine but come as close as possible to understanding the trauma of others.

### **Through the glass, darkly: staging the experience of others**

To engage with the performance *872 days. Voices of the besieged city* is to start outside of those clearly demarcated spaces of the theatre's building, foyer, and the room where the designated stage is located. The performance happens in the heart of the city where the traumatic experience of millions took place, now bustling and busy with everyday life. The theatre building was once already a scene of the original tragedy. Its official address, 30 Zvenigorodskay Street, housed communal living compartments in which eighty people died of starvation during the siege.<sup>48</sup> Before it even starts, the performance is site-specific, for the place and the memory of it. The entire city is a stage in which the space of the representation, filled with affective experiences, is only a small part.

To access the room where the performance takes place, the audience needs to go upstairs from the foyer of the theatre. The stage is located on the second floor, but the deafness of the isolated space, the dim light and the brick wall on one side of the stage turn the architectural construction of the building upside down. One enters a space that is no longer a second floor of a theatre but a dark basement, a bomb shelter, a tense environment of encounter with the experiences of others. For the duration of time, it is a living body of the performance of which all human and non-human agents become a part, creating together a specific material situation that allows the spectator to engage with the complexity of the performative world.

The entire performance takes place behind transparent walls that separate the actors from the audience on three sides, meeting at the brick wall in the back. Lacking a visible entrance, the space inside these walls appears airtight as if the actors are sealed in. The seemingly simple interior of the enclosed space consists of several simple furniture pieces, tables and chairs, dimly lit lamps hanging from the ceiling, music stands, and pages of books scattered in a thick layer on the floor (Figs 1 and 2). Throughout the performance, as the characters narrate their stories, these objects are moved around almost automatically, disengaged from the stories' content. Lamps are manipulated to hang lower or higher depending on the desired dimness of the space. They are pushed around in imitation of air raid commotion. Pages of books are blown around by the current from the actors' movements. In some scenes, the actors glue them with water to the transparent walls. In others, they are falling, following unpredictable logic as the water dries.

Hann emphasizes that scenography as place orientation 'amounts to a crafting of stage geographies as felt atmospheres through material and technological intervention'.<sup>49</sup> Objects provide a recognizable connotation of what one experiences in everyday life, thereby object manipulations carried out by the actors bring possible meanings forward, rendering scenes familiar. The tables are moved around, building different constellations together with human bodies. Sometimes, the actors sit by the tables, as if in school. Sometimes, they hide under them, as if taking shelter from





FIG. 1 *872 days. Voices of the besieged city*, photograph courtesy of theatre Subbota's press service.

bombs. Automatization of these manipulations with familiar objects and their apparent detachment from the narratives add a sense of mechanized routines and everydayness to what in its core is a recollection of the traumatic experience.



FIG. 2 *872 days. Voices of the besieged city*, photograph courtesy of theatre Subbota's press service.

The presentation space is simultaneously a bomb shelter, a basement, a room in an apartment block.<sup>50</sup> It is demarcated not only physically by means of the transparent walls but also atmospherically, by means of light and sound, which spread throughout the dim deafness of the performance space as if through a concrete chamber. While the walls create a physical distance between the actors' bodies and the spectators, sounds and light travel freely, distorted by the artificial border, often making it impossible to identify at once who is speaking and where that person is standing.

The plot of *872 days. Voices of the besieged city* is built on two parallel timelines. The first timeline opens the performance in the form of an interview with a woman, a surviving witness of the siege. She is the only one who can be seen as some sort of protagonist as she is the sole actor who appears to interact with the spectator, for instance, by establishing and maintaining direct and intense eye contact with the audience. At first, she is seated on a stool right in front of the transparent wall, as if addressing the audience, but as the performance unravels, she proceeds to walk among the nameless characters; where the spotlight finds her every time the plot returns to the present moment of the interview (Fig. 3).

The interview is not contextualized in time, and it is not clear how long after the siege it was taken, yet she is seemingly invited to talk to a public, to educate them – us. The practice of education about the siege as a part of the great victory, to induce the sense of patriotism, especially among school children, was common practice throughout Soviet history.<sup>51</sup> Yet, unlike in real-life educational practice of the post-war era, the interviewee shows clear disturbance by the questions and seems unwilling to answer them, repeating that it is painful to remember and talk about the



FIG. 3 *872 days. Voices of the besieged city*, photograph courtesy of theatre Subbota's press service.

siege. The interviewee's presence becomes a manifestation of the discrepancy that, according to trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, lies 'between the story of the unbearable nature of event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival'.<sup>52</sup> She is a personification of a traumatic experience, as her clear belonging to the past, among the ghosts, is akin to the repetitive nature of trauma, which the victim is unable to work through, and as a result, remains stuck in the past through compulsive repetition of the traumatic memory.

The plotline of the interview returns repeatedly throughout the performance, interrupting the second timeline, which presents a complex web of stories told by actors who portray those who found themselves in Leningrad at the time of the siege. Stories are narrated from the perspective of people of different ages, genders and occupations. Each story is told in fragments that interlace with each other to create an emotionally charged, verbal image of the besieged city. A child wishes for their stepfather to die because he eats more food than them. A man lies next to his pregnant wife, unable to sleep from hunger. A boy decides to steal food from a man on a market when he laughs at the object the boy tries to exchange.

Despite the same background, these fragmented stories do not communicate with each other or with the plotline of the surviving heroine. They all talk about a tragedy that is associated with one specific period in the history of the war, but it does not unite their experience or create one specific narrative that can be used to teach the spectator about the sacrifice of each in the name of glory for the country. The monologues scatter, fall apart, as the actors do not look at each other and their distant gazes are directed somewhere above the audience, which makes the narration of their traumatic experience as if they themselves are perpetually reliving it. The detailed descriptions lack a closure to traumatic experience in a verbal narrative as the stories are left unconcluded, hinting at their inescapable nature.

All characters apart from the interviewee are dressed in simple grey clothes that allow them to almost merge together. The bleak colour scheme is reminiscent of blurry black-and-white photographs from the war as well as of prisoners' robes, referring to their perpetual imprisonment in their traumatic past. As their personalities are painfully reduced to a grey mass, they become victims not of this specific tragedy but victims of any war and crime against human life, that even in the twenty-first century we are failing to understand.<sup>53</sup> The interviewee is dressed somewhat differently. Her clothes are similar shades of grey, but she wears a dress and a coat, her hair is done up, and, most strikingly, she is wearing shoes while the others move around barefoot. The shoes refer to the difference between the worlds of those who survived and those who did not. The barefooted characters belong to the world of the dead, as they most likely were buried without their shoes, which were either kept by others or sold even before the victim's death. The shoes become what Duggan refers to as 'a constructed performative Barthesian punctum'.<sup>54</sup> Together with other recognizable materials of the production's scenography, these shoes become an important punctum of the connection between the spectator's haptic knowledge and the act of representation of traumatic experience.

### **Unsettling distance: negotiation of space as the practice of working with trauma**

From the moment one enters the performance's space, and the presentation starts, material qualities of the transparent walls take a central place in communicating effects and affects in the production's ecology. It also immediately becomes an unsettling, uneasy object when it appeals to the spectator's orientation, which is connected to the 'learned orders of knowledge'.<sup>55</sup> The walls trigger a system of knowledge that refers to distancing oneself from others, not unlike to save one's life as during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, it is transparent, allowing no visual obstruction of the presentation. On the other hand, it is an insurmountable, physical obstacle that creates constraints to moving closer. It brings about the metaphorical existence of a theatre's fourth wall into material presence, turning it into a recurring negotiation of its presence and absence in the spectator's perception. Hann emphasizes that scenography can be understood as 'a richness of lived materiality and the orientations that proceed from this experiential context'.<sup>56</sup> Thus, a cognitive distance of time, space, and, ultimately, the traumatic experience of others, take on a material shape and become haptic, present, and in it – painful. The possibility to see but not to influence, offered by the transparent walls, reminds of mediatized representation of the suffering of others, and, possibly, of the numbness we learn to feel when confronted by it.

These walls carry sets of potential connotations that are negotiated repeatedly throughout the performance as a part of the material encounter that navigates the space. The walls are perpetually distancing and protecting the outside from what is inside and vice versa. They are a division that cannot or should not be overcome, to let those outside, the spectators, come too close to something unbearable. The past becomes a dusty museum artefact and memory turned into history where it can never truly reach us and communicate its story. Simultaneously, the walls mark a sealed, protected space where air should not get in, as it could endanger and start a process of rotting of that which is preserved inside the demarcated space. They visualize a paradox of memory of the siege of Leningrad as something holy, unquestionable, that should not be disturbed, and at the same time, something distant that should not affect us today.

The scenographic traits of these transparent walls are not called to reinforce one particular reading of the performance, however, but to challenge the spectator's understanding through material means, to unsettle, and to disturb. This disturbance happens in between the actors' actions and the spectator's perception in which scenographic traits of the transparent walls are activated and their materiality becomes flexible. By interacting with actors and the spectator's perception, the agentic capacity of the material is activated. McKinney and Palmer emphasize that the agentic capacity of materials in scenography is linked to understanding how they respond to 'the physical capacities of the stage' as well as to how actors improvise with them.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, agentic capacity is directly connected to perception, in which the spectator takes on an active role by engaging with the scenographic materials through available means, in this specific case, through vision.

Due to the specificity of human vision, once the spectator becomes focused on the actors' bodies and objects behind the transparent wall, the surface temporarily disappears from one's view. It dissolves when material qualities of other surfaces take over the spectator's attention. The surface of the fabric of clothes and desks, light from the lamps, and the play of shadows on actors' skin acts as orientation of the spectator's attention. Every time the actors come in direct or indirect contact with the wall's surface, however, its material qualities are rendered present in the spectator's vision. At different points throughout the performance, the actors come very close to the front of the transparent wall, stopped by it in the middle of the action, unable to reach from a distance, which is as much physical as it is temporal. In one scene, the actors violently topple over the tables towards the front wall as if trying to smash it, but the tables do not reach the surface. In another, they are glueing pages of books on the walls with water, activating their surface through touch. Similarly, the interviewee is touching the surface of the wall as she answers some of the questions addressed to her, moving slowly within the perimeter of the walls, activating haptic perception through the spectator recognition of the touch.

Furthermore, these walls are subject to a perpetual negotiation in their purpose of surface and border. During one of the scenes, movie projections appear on the front wall, drawing everyone's attention to them. Black and white movies, ghostly, barely visible no matter from which angle one looks at them, and, yet, painfully melancholic even if unrecognizable. Projections once again create a material shift, suddenly making tangible the materiality of the transparent walls from a different perspective (Fig. 4). The projected images pass through the transparent surface, falling on the actors



FIG. 4 *872 days. Voices of the besieged city*, photograph courtesy of theatre Subbota's press service.

gathered behind it as in cinema theatre, and on the background wall. In this scene, the actors are watching imagery unravel on the wall in the same way the spectator does. As Duggan underlines, ‘the very nature of bodies witnessing bodies creates a visceral human connection, enabling the audience to be physically and emotionally moved by what they are presented with’.<sup>58</sup> The wall is a surface that we all see from our respective sides that suddenly brings the spectator closer to those behind the wall, stuck in their remote past and whose experiences are meant to be unreachable. Yet, the projections on the wall create a shared experience that could never take place in real life.

As McKinney and Palmer rightfully notice, ‘bodily-based and affective responses to the aesthetics of performance might in themselves constitute a kind of understanding’.<sup>59</sup> The practice of distancing through scenographic traits of the walls is a part of the orientation process of scenographic ecology that directly influences the experience of the spectator. Challenged by means of scenographic materiality, the spectator refers to the learned order, which creates a possibility for recognition of the experience of others without appropriation of it. Constant negotiation of distancing and coming closer is directed towards the experience of the empathic unsettlement, which comes in realization of *seeing* and even *knowing* but also being unable to fully grasp and to come closer, therefore never appropriating it as one’s own. LaCapra emphasizes that with empathic unsettlement as a main tool of one’s approach to trauma of others, it is important to remember that, when working with trauma through rituals and mourning, one ‘can viably come to terms with (without even fully healing and overcoming) the divided legacies, open wounds, and unspeakable losses of a dire past’.<sup>60</sup>

In the final scene, the actors start to glue pages on the transparent walls, as if sealing themselves inside, behind the pages of books through which one often learns about the past. In doing so, they change the material conditions of both the pages and the walls. The walls become tangible, apprehended. There is no more going back and forth in the spectator’s vision, and the walls’ presence is cemented throughout the act in which they become solid by means of a contrast between the tangible and haptic qualities of the paper and the transparent qualities of the walls. The barrier between *us* and *them* becomes more present and feasible.

The ending of the performance does not provide any closure. In *872 days. Voices of the besieged city*, the survival or death is not placed in the context of glory or gratified sorrow, which would allow for it to come to some form of closure. Instead, it is the roughness of it that seizes the attention front and centre when addressing the perception of the spectator. As LaCapra emphasizes, empathic unsettlement ‘poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritual uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit’.<sup>61</sup>

Scenographic rendering of the siege of Leningrad and its traumatic experience re-appropriate the narrative, attempting to come as close as possible to the ungraspable trauma of others, beyond the construction of time that rendered the tragedy unapproachable. It does not allow the narrative to disappear into an umbrella term of greatness, where the experience of one is deemed insignificant in contrast to the mythology of mass heroism and conscious sacrifice. It also does not allow me, as a spectator, to approach the narratives of others’ trauma from the perspective of

*vicarious victimhood*, that is to identify myself with victims.<sup>62</sup> Instead, from a comfortable cognitive category of knowing facts, the spectator is moving to a visceral category of sensing, of being unsettled, which allows for new forms of understanding to appear. That understanding is not connected to historical knowledge of the tragedy but to the bodily knowledge of trauma, not necessarily connected to personal experience or to feeling of sympathy that the suffering of others can trigger in the perceiver. It is connected to deeper, empathic referencing that allows one to be aware of the separation of our own experience and the experience of others.

Addressing Marianne Hirsch's definition of *postmemory*, Milija Gluhovic details that it entails 'reaching across lines of differences to the experience of others to whom one is not related by blood', thus establishing 'a kind of connective memory work'.<sup>63</sup> The tangible materiality of the walls that repeatedly appears and disappears in the spectator's perception, the atmospheric space created by scenographic materials, the city outside the theatre building, that acts as an original stage to the tragedy – all these aspects are working on establishing a connection between the traumatic experience of others and the immediate perception of the spectator.

## Conclusion

The study explored how scenographic ecology and empathic unsettlement create a potential to learn and understand the trauma of others as well as why there needs to be a continuous dialogue with trauma as a process of working through, given that the recognition of trauma is one of the tools to construct a democratic, civil society. Continuous negative shifts in Russian political, economic, sociological and cultural spheres influence the connection between the memory of the country's past and how it is controlled by the current political narratives of the regime.<sup>64</sup> In the Russian context, traumatic historical events are often grounded in 'underdeveloped and unstable narratives' and the siege of Leningrad is one of the examples.<sup>65</sup> Nowadays, attempts to approach and collectively work through the traumatic footprint of the siege once again, as throughout the Soviet time, becomes crippled by glorification of a war from the perspective of self-righteousness, where suffering is only seen in the context of a higher purpose.

As Voronina underlines, even at the best of times, the processes of reflexivity about the innermost are not easy.<sup>66</sup> To accept the trauma of others is to accept the reflexivity and diversity of personal experience. Furthermore, it is to potentially run the risk of undermining a carefully constructed ideology of selfless heroism in the name of country. Most importantly perhaps, if the traumatic reality of war, its real causes, and casualties, are left unaddressed for a long time, we see how a plea of '*Never again!*' may turn into the chilling tagline of '*We can repeat it!*' as people's reflexivity and critical thinking are gradually replaced by an oblivious bravura of the militant ideology.

Reflecting on the difference between absence and loss, LaCapra underlines that 'when loss is converted into ... absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia'.<sup>67</sup> Disregard or lack of access to the graspable knowledge of trauma and loss of others turns experience into the absence of it and excises the possibility to work through trauma. As Haughton poignantly observes, in the

space of ‘a post-truth and revisionist historical moment, creating the conditions for analytical engagement, critical thinking, creative inspiration, and personal and collective intimacy and affect is significant, and increasingly rare act’.<sup>68</sup> Thus, right now, maybe more than ever, there is a need to employ all available resources and tools to revise the past traumas, whether those of the siege of Leningrad, political repressions, or the Chechen wars.

Duggan writes that ‘the theatre can provide a space for a safely distanced encounter with and witnessing of trauma in order that it might be more clearly processed and regulated into “normal” consciousness’.<sup>69</sup> In turn, Haughton posits that a performance environment offers ‘a space for release, a space for recognition, and hopefully, a space for sincerity at times’.<sup>70</sup> *872 days. Voices of the besieged city* is an attempt to break through the wall of distance and history to show that, no matter the time, the trauma will always be present and will carry its effect on generations to come unless it is worked through.

In the performance, the representation of the traumatic experience of others moves away from seeing the siege as a symbolic capital of the great victory of the nation, towards a painful, complex, unimaginable human experience. It attempts to re-approach its own narrative and to come as close as possible to the ungraspable nature of the trauma of others. In doing so, it takes tentative steps of working through trauma on the collective level to prevent its disturbing repetition. Despite lacking the dramatic, in-your-face message of violence inflicted on people, which can be expected in the representation of a traumatic experience, the performance allows a space for reflexivity, contemplation, learning and empathy. Under the pressure of revisionism, disinformation, propaganda and general numbness to experiences of others, an appeal to deeply human, to *empathy*, might be one of the key elements of change.

## NOTES

- 1 For more information about the performance see the official webpage of theatre ‘Subbota’, Saint Petersburg, at <https://teatr-subbota.ru/performance/872-dnya-golosa-blokadnogo-goroda/>, accessed 25 April 2023.
- 2 Richard Bidlack and Nikita Lomagin, *The Leningrad Blockade, 1941–1944: A New Documentary History from the Soviet Archives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
- 3 The performance is still in repertoire and was recently played on 9 May 2023.
- 4 Perception and representation of the siege of Leningrad are associated with the efforts of officials to engage in a very narrowly understood *patriotic education* of the youth. Documentary research, an attempt to look from a different point of view, expansion of the context in such topic is rarely supported by the State, more often even perceived with hostility, as something unnecessary, sometimes harmful. For more on the performance and its context see Valentin G. Levitsky, ‘The Saint Petersburg Theatre of Generations’ Documentary Performance about the Blockade “67/871” Based on the Play by E. Gremina. Experience of the Artistic Interpretation of Documentary Material’, *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University*, 9, 3 (2019), pp. 495–511.
- 5 Ales’ Adamovich and Daniil Granin, *Leningrad Under Siege: First-hand Accounts of the Ordeal*, translated by Clare Burstall and Vladimirt Kisselnikov (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2007); Lidia Ginzburg, *Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka. Vospominaniya* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2014); Olga Berggolts, *Blokadnyj dnevnik (1941–1945)* (Saint Petersburg: Vita Nova, 2015).



- 6 Tatiana Voronina, *Pomnit' po-naschemu. Socrealisticheskii istorizm i blokada Leningrada* (Moscow: NLO, 2018); Elena Trubina, 'Fenomen vtorichnogo svidetel'stva: mezhdru bezrazlichiem i "otkazom ot nedoverchivisti"', in Sergey Oushakine and Elena Trubina, eds., *Travma: Punkti* (Moscow: NLO, 2009), pp. 171–205.
- 7 Sofia Tchouikina, 'Blokada Leningrada kak trudnoye proshloye: skorbnaya "antigosudarstvennaya" pamyat' i muzei', *NLO: Neprikosnovenniy Zapas*, no. 128, NZ 6/2019, at [https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/neprikosnovennyy\\_zapas/128\\_nz\\_6\\_2019/article/21907/](https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/neprikosnovennyy_zapas/128_nz_6_2019/article/21907/), accessed 15 April 2023.
- 8 Voronina, *Pomnit' po-naschemu*, p. 45.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Catriona Kelly, "'The Leningrad Affair": Remembering the "Communist Alternative" in the Second Capital', *Slavonica*, 17, 2 (2011), pp. 103–22, here p. 109.
- 12 For example, published memoirs and poem of Olga Berggolts. Olga Berggolts, *Daytime Stars: A Poet's Memoir of the Revolution, the Siege of Leningrad, and the Thaw*, translated by Lisa A. Kirschenbaum (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018). For further reading see Irina Sandomirskaja, *Blokada v solve: ocherki kriticheskoy teorii i biopolitiki jazyka* (Moscow: NLO, 2013).
- 13 Natalia Sokolovskaya, ed., *Lyudi khotyat znat'. Istoriya sozdaniya 'Blokadnoy knigi' Alesya Adamovicha i Daniila Granina* (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo 'Pushkinskogo fonda', 2021).
- 14 I acknowledge my lack of access to the theatre archives across the country during the times this research was conducted. They might have provided more information about plays and performances created during this period in the Soviet Union that touch upon the subject of the siege and war in general. However, even an extensive study conducted by Sergei Ostrovsky and Laurence Senelick does not pay particular attention to the representation of war in Soviet theatre. Furthermore, they underline the desire of the Soviet political leadership to use the Great Patriotic war as a platform for the bright future of the country, avoiding reflexivity about its loss unless it served the purpose of Communist politics. They mention only one play that focused on the pain and loss of ordinary people during the war: *Alive Forever* staged by The Sovremennik Theatre in 1957. For more on the history of Soviet theatre see Sergei Ostrovsky and Laurence Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).
- 15 Aleksey Pavlovskiy, 'Retseptsiya fil'ma "Blokada" Mikhaila Yershova: leningradotsentrichnaya pamyat' o voyne v sovetskom kinematografe 1970', *NLO: Neprikosnovenniy Zapas*, no.128 NZ 6/2019, at [https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/neprikosnovennyy\\_zapas/128\\_nz\\_6\\_2019/article/21868/](https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/neprikosnovennyy_zapas/128_nz_6_2019/article/21868/), accessed 17 April 2023.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Voronina, *Pomnit' po-naschemu*.
- 18 Trubina, 'Fenomen vtorichnogo svidetel'stva', p. 187.
- 19 Tchouikina, 'Blokada Leningrada kak trudnoye proshloye'.
- 20 Alexandrina Shakleeva, 'Rozhdennyye s ispugu: istoricheskaya pamyat' v spektaklyakh Dmitriya Yegorova', *PTJ*, May 2019, at <https://ptj.spb.ru/archive/96/memory-place/rozhdennyye-sispugu-istoricheskaya-pamyat-vspektaklyax-dmitriya-egorova/>, accessed 15 April 2023; Elizaveta Spivakovskaya, 'Laboratorii istoricheskoy pamyati: novaya svoboda ili novyy escapism', *PTJ*, May 2019, at <https://ptj.spb.ru/archive/96/memory-place/laboratorii-istoricheskoy-pamyati-novaya-svoboda-ili-novyy-eskapizm/>, accessed 10 April 2023; Nataliya Yakubova, *Teatr epokhi peremen v Pol'she, Vengrii i Rossii* (Moscow: NLO, 2014); Birgit Boymers and Mark Lipovetskiy, *Performansy nasiliya: literaturnyye i teatral'nyye eksperimenty 'novoy dramy'* (Moscow: NLO, 2012).
- 21 Levitskiy, 'The Saint Petersburg Theatre of Generations' Documentary Performance'.
- 22 In July 2022, a so-called 'Group for the investigation of anti-Russian activities in the field of culture' was organized by different representatives of cultural sectors in Russia. This group is called to investigate and censor any expressions in the cultural sphere that can in any way undermine or criticize the political regime, the so-called special military operation in Ukraine, or discredit the army. In November 2022

- another organization was created by the State Duma. The ‘Cultural Front of Russia’ led by Dmitry Kuznetsov, representative of the Just Russia – For Truth party, secretary of the group formed in July sent a deputy request to the heads of federal theatres about new productions connected to the events in Ukraine that took place since 2014.
- 23 In October 2022 the Saint Petersburg City Court recognized the Siege of Leningrad as a genocide of national and ethnic groups that were making up the population of the USSR, placing the full responsibility for the siege on Germany and its allies. Simultaneously, an updated number of the siege’s victims became public, claiming the death toll of at least 1,093,842 people. See Novya Gazeta Europe, 20 October 2022, at <https://novyagazeta.eu/articles/2022/10/20/saint-petersburg-court-recognises-siege-of-leningrad-as-genocide-en-news>, accessed 1 March 2023. However, in the present-day political situation the acknowledgment of the horrifying traumatic impact of the siege on the country in parallel with, for instance, the Holocaust, is appropriated by the media as justification of Russia’s actions in Ukraine as a part of the confrontation of Russia and the West. See Izvestia, 20 October 2022, at <https://iz.ru/1413349/irina-bykanova/davnie-schety-pochemu-blokadu-leningrada-priznali-genocidom>, accessed 1 March 2023.
- 24 Tchouikina, ‘Blokada Leningrada kak trudnoye proshloye’.
- 25 Milija Gluhovic, *Performing European Memories: Trauma, Ethics, Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 3.
- 26 Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 6.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid., p. 7.
- 29 Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 114.
- 30 Sodja Lotker and Richard Gough, ‘On Scenography: Editorial’, *A Journal of the Performing Arts: On Scenography*, 18, 3 (2013), pp. 3–6, here p. 3.
- 31 Astrid von Rosen and Viveka Kjellmer, ‘Introduction: Re-imagining Scenography in Relation to Art History’, in Astrid von Rosen and Viveka Kjellmer, eds., *Scenography and Art History: Performance Design and Visual Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021), pp. 1–12.
- 32 Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer, ‘Introducing “Expanded” Scenography’, in Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer, eds., *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), pp. 1–22, here p. 10.
- 33 Rachel Hann, *Beyond Scenography* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 21.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid., p. 20.
- 36 Ibid., p. 28.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., p. 3.
- 39 Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, p. 185.
- 40 Ibid., p. 109.
- 41 Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, pp. 10–11.
- 42 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
- 43 Ibid., p. 78.
- 44 Ibid., p. 40.
- 45 Ibid., p. 42.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Maaïke Bleeker in McKinney and Palmer, ‘Introducing “Expanded” Scenography’, p. 7.
- 48 Natalia Starodubceva, “‘872 dnya’: Mnogolosie blokadnogo goroda’, *Art-zhurnal OKOLO*, 10 September 2019, at <https://okolo.me/2019/09/872-dnya-mnogolose-blokadnogo-leningrada/>, accessed 17 May 2022.

- 49 Hann, *Beyond Scenography*, p. 22.
- 50 Throughout the text, I distinguish two types of spaces, relying on drama and theatre scholar Gay McAuley's terminology. According to her, *the performance space* encompasses the space where actors and spectators 'meet and work together to create the performance experience' (McAuley, 1999:26) that is not only designated stage space but a whole environment of the performance. In its turn, the presentational space means 'the physical use' of the stage (McAuley, 1999:29), in this case the demarcated environment behind the transparent walls. See Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).
- 51 Voronina, *Pomnit' po-naschemu*.
- 52 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 7.
- 53 Grey mass is a Russian expression that defines a large group of people who do not have their own opinion, follow conservative norms and values without question, and focus on day-to-day survival rather than achieving goals. This metaphor is transferred into symbolism through the use of the prisoners' grey clothes.
- 54 Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, p. 73.
- 55 Hann, *Beyond Scenography*, p. 34.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- 57 McKinney and Palmer, 'Introducing "Expanded" Scenography', p. 12.
- 58 Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, p. 87.
- 59 McKinney and Palmer, 'Introducing "Expanded" Scenography', p. 2.
- 60 LaCapra, *Writing History*, p. 45.
- 61 *Ibid.*, pp. 41–2.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 63 Gluhovic, *Performing European Memories*, p. 24.
- 64 For example, a liquidation of the international human rights organization and Nobel Prize winner Memorial on 5 April 2022. Among other things, Memorial's work was directed at uncovering and preserving information on the victims of the Great Terror and the post-war era. This work was deemed especially offensive, if only because it questioned how the memory of repressions can be seen in relation to any other narratives that can potentially deconstruct the mythologization of the great nation's victory.
- 65 Evgeny Dobrenko and Andrey Shcherbenok, 'Introduction Between History and the Past: The Soviet Legacy as a Traumatic Object of Contemporary Russian Culture', *Slavonica*, 17, 2 (2011), pp. 77–84, here p. 77.
- 66 Voronina, *Pomnit' po-naschemu*, p. 8.
- 67 LaCapra, *Writing History*, p. 46.
- 68 Miriam Haughton, *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 207.
- 69 Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, p. 96.
- 70 Haughton, *Staging Trauma*, p. 32.

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