

**STREET THEATRE IN GROŽNJAN, CROATIA:
*EYE ON THE SPARROW, WADE IN THE WATER,
AND LOST FOREST***

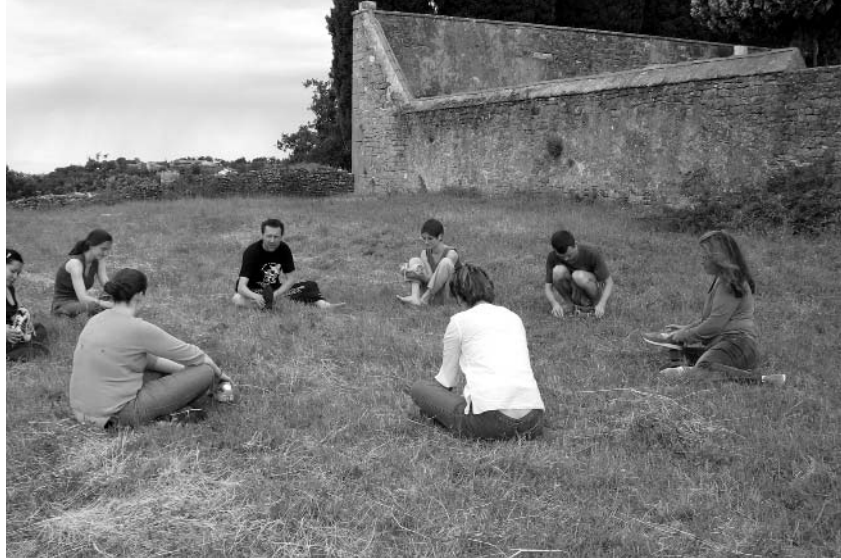
Jane McMahan

Since the summer of 2005, I have been directing a vocal-theatre workshop in Grožnjan, Croatia, as part of the Jeunesses Musicales International Centre's summer program. My involvement with Grožnjan began thirty-five years earlier. In the mid 1970s, I was a student there in a workshop led by Andrea von Ramm, a noted interpreter of medieval vocal music. Living in her medieval house, I experienced for the first time an international culture of artistic people who stayed up late every night drinking grappa and discussing art and politics. Even so, the work was intense. What I learned most from Andrea was to follow your ideas even if they were wild and a little outrageous. At the time, I was active in leftist politics and the student movement, as well as what seemed like a contradiction, a newly graduated singer from a music conservatory who planned a career performing classical music.

Under Andrea's direction, we developed and rehearsed a street theatre performance based on a medieval mystery play around the story of Lazarus. One day before it was scheduled, we learned that authorities in Tito's Yugoslavia would not allow the performance to take place. I began to realize that art, music, and politics were not so separate.

Four years ago, I attended an international puppet festival in Croatia. On a nostalgic visit to Grožnjan, I learned that Jeunesses Musicales still ran an active summer program. When I saw that none of the events featured voice, I decided I would try to create a workshop of my own and bring to it as many of my Barnard and Columbia students as I could and also try to attract a wide spectrum of international students and faculty. I wanted to expose these students to the eye-opening artistic internationalism that I had experienced. That same day I met the director of the program, Mojca Makovac, and we immediately understood each other and began to plan the first workshop.

Not long after my arrival the following June, I was approached by the artist Rok Zelenko, who remembered me from the 1970s and showed me a book he had written about that period in Grožnjan. We flipped through the pages, and there I was in a photograph, as Maria Magdalena with arms



Acting class with Patryk Steczek, 2005



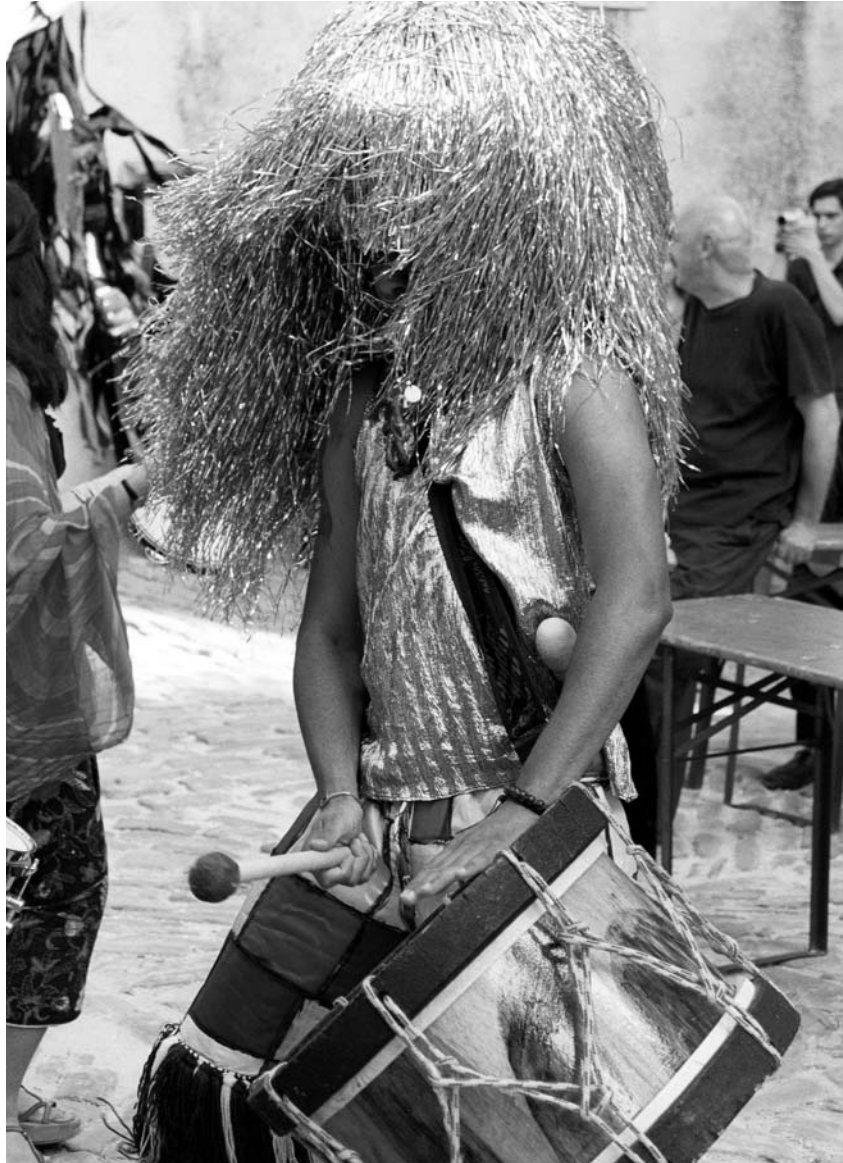
“Must I Be Bound” from *Eye on the Sparrow*, 2005

outstretched, looking down at the body of Lazarus. Since we had been forbidden to perform, we had walked through our parts while a camera recorded us. Later, Rok bestowed on me Andrea's straw hat that had been left on a peg in his house before she died six years earlier. I only wore it after our rehearsals started to develop and I knew she would approve.

I went to Grožnjan wanting to create some form of political street theatre, but it was clear to me that I had no business telling people who had experienced the dissolution of their country, the move toward capitalism, and the horrors of a war that I could hardly imagine, what to do or how to perceive those events. At the same time that so-recent past could not be ignored. At least my students and I could show an awareness of those terrifying events and empathically participate in the darkness and the hope, the mourning and the renewal. What better way to express this than through music and the most human of all music, the voice? I think in terms of voice, so it was natural for me to construct the street theatre performance around vocal music.

Our first performance, in 2005, was called *Eye on the Sparrow*. In rehearsal, we had practiced transforming ourselves into a tribe of birds through Grotowski-influenced exercises led by Patryk Steczek, our drummer, who came to Grožnjan from Arlekin Theatre in Łódź, Poland. In the prelude to the piece, members of the group crouched and moved mysteriously through the village, signaling each other with eerie mouth whistles before joining up around a leader who was drumming tribal rhythms and gathering a crowd. After an incantation from Patryk, the group sang the South African "Siyahamba" and, dancing, led the spectators to the next site. In the forecourt of an ancient chapel, they sang and danced a medieval round, "White Sand and Gray Sand." Gradually, discordant sounds crept in, disturbing the perfect harmonies as the leader donned a primitive wooden mask to become a force of negativity, but the masked figure was held back by the steady gaze of a giant sparrow puppet that functioned as the totem of the group.

A joyful wedding dance scene followed, accompanied by Sephardic and Croatian songs, but was interrupted by another confrontation between the masked figure and the sparrow. A few steps from the wedding, the mood changed to one of fear for the loss of women's freedom with an Irish traditional song "Must I Be Bound," then changed again as the audience was led to a central green space that looks over the town walls to a vista of valleys and hills. While a youth (Peter Davis) sang a medieval song about a lark's flight



Carnival leader Olinda Brasil in *Wade in the Water*, 2006



Kasia Tercz in *Wade in the Water*, 2006

by the *trouvère* Bernard Ventadorn, two flower-crowned maidens danced in the background. Eleanor Lipat, in Filipina costume, performed a traditional dance about the stages of a woman's life to a background of varied drumming.

The idyllic mood on the harmonious village green was broken by a staged reading of a segment of a mock description of a musician's daily life, from Erik Satie's *Mémoires d'un Amnésiaque* (1912), delivered sentence by sentence in French, then English, then Croatian, as an actor mimed the actions. Suddenly, from an upper window, a loud gong sounded, shattering the peaceful pageant and drawing the crowd's attention to a group that sang the Appalachian song "Nottamun Town." The fantastical lyrics and grotesque images of this song about a world turned upside down, full of contradictions, generated a bleak mood that was then dispelled as the group led the way, singing, under an archway and up a cobbled lane. A Joan of Arc figure in a doorway (Christine Fena) sang a medieval song, "Plangiamo" and a deep basso (Bogumił Kozłowski) fiercely sang another medieval song, "Santo Lorenzo," from a stairway that mounted the side of the village church. The audience was drawn into a walled courtyard to hear "Rublje na užetu," or "Washing on the Line," composed for this performance by Joseph Rubinstein, set to lyrics by contemporary Croatian poet Borben Vladović. An atonal piece for mixed voices, its chord clusters and close harmonies recalled traditional Croatian harmonies but in a new and unusual context. The lyrics describe the vision (seen from a train) of neatly piled clothes as a symbol of sustenance. Throughout the performance, the sadder segments were often followed by the song "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," a Gospel hymn that functioned as the tribe's sustaining theme and lent its name to the show.

Eye on the Sparrow clearly made an impression. The images were noticed and talked about, and "Joe's piece" was performed at subsequent concerts and very much appreciated. While never directly referencing the war, we alluded to it throughout by alternations of consonance and dissonance, a joyful wedding and a loss of freedom, a peaceful revelry and a world turned upside down. Like the theme song "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," the giant sparrow's difficult and impermanent victories implied the vital importance of holding onto hope in the face of despair.

The 2006 street theatre performance, *Wade in the Water*, was also built around a band of actor/musicians that led the audience through the village.

A carnival group was led by percussionist and dancer Olinda Brasil, who had trained us to play the instruments he had brought with him and to dance in Brazilian style. Brazilian carnival contains various political elements. The call-and-response chants often mock powerful figures. The dance form *capoeira* has its origins in a disguised martial art developed by African slaves.

Carnival itself is an eruption of high spirits that is the opposite of good behavior and hovers on the borderline of the uncontrolled. We encountered some of the risks involved during a week of practice sessions while the director of the summer program was away. Due to a momentary lapse of judgment, I allowed our group to make practice runs through the village to develop a feel for carnival interaction. Most of the residents seemed to enjoy it, but some evidently did not. When our director returned, she had to deal with the complaints. We were told to cut the village practice sessions down to a dress rehearsal and were forbidden to play in the open air restaurant that abutted on the building that housed our practice rooms. This ban inspired a very effective opening scene.

The members of the troupe in their carnival costumes hid on the ground floor and made an ear-splitting carnival racket. The wide wooden doors heaved back and forth before bursting open. The cast tumbled out to become totally silent, blinking in the sunlight as though released from Plato's cave. They immediately moved onto the restaurant's contiguous piazza and silently mimed playing their instruments in the patrons' ears. The group then moved away, turned a corner, and began the procession to a deafening noise.

A very large audience joined the procession to a square where a group (led by Amy Frishkey) sang a traditional Bulgarian song in close harmony. Suddenly they were interrupted by mocking actors on stilts (faculty Kasia Tercz and Robert Wojciechowski), who danced a grotesque caricature and shoved at the singers, starting a fight with the carnival group that dispersed and regrouped. The group then drew the audience to another square. This pattern recurred throughout the performance. In one scene a group sang a French traditional song, "Compagnons de la Marjolaine," about a vigilante group that protected the town at night. At the next site, singers performed solo classical songs in different languages with guitar accompaniment by faculty member Igor Paro, offering a sort of "pure" art music to a

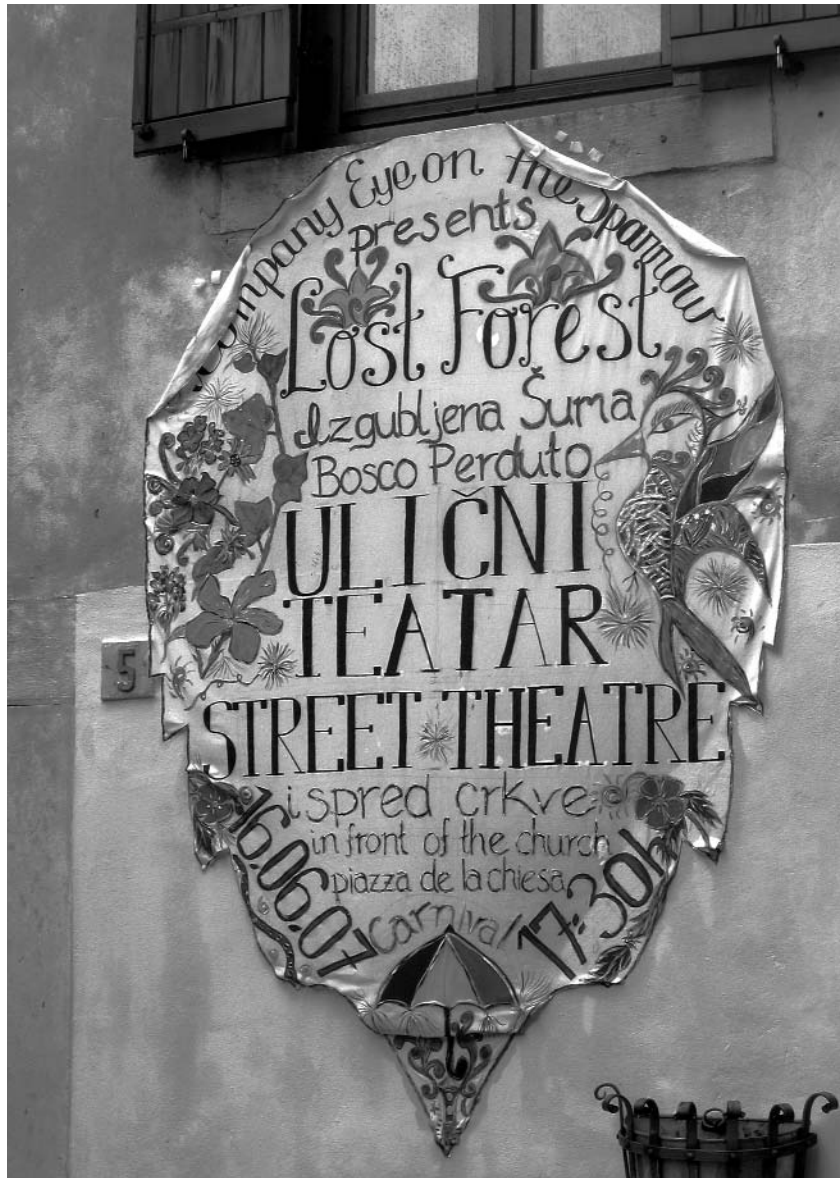
transfixed crowd. Each time, the peace was shattered as the group was confronted by sinister forces on stilts.

A beautiful Indian woman, Megha Kalbag, chanted a visionary Hindu poem from the top of a stone stairway to an aural fabric of improvised percussion sounds. She looked out at the sea one last time and descended the stairs into a scene where an Indonesian prince (Dylan Kumara Widjiono) engaged on a personal quest and overcame a dragon from the sea by means of a slow-motion traditional Indonesian dance. Robert Wojciechowski, from Polish puppet theatre Arlekin, manipulated a giant red puppet dragon that he and Dylan had built together. A group singing a Ladino prayer, "Cuando el rey Nimrod," and dancing with religious ecstasy, led the crowd to the next scene.

The concluding sequence involved a series of river songs in different locations: "Shall We Gather at the River" led to "Down by the River to Pray," then Jackson Brown's "Rock Me on the Water," and finally to the spiritual "Wade in the Water." The performers passed through unfolding banners painted with Fauve-ish intertwined fish in blues, reds, and purples (stylistically influenced by the work of artists Rok and Lea Zelenko), drawing the crowd of spectators after them to freedom and joyful celebration. But the "bad guys" on stilts were not allowed to cross. Repelled, they collapsed to the ground (a difficult and artful thing to accomplish on stilts). The group finally relented. To the poignant strains of "Plovi, Plovi," a familiar Croatian song about the sea, two small children from the village, holding hands, revived these pitiful enemies and led them across the Red Sea (or the River Jordan if you prefer) to freedom and celebration. The stilt characters then joined in with a dance that was a benign grotesquerie, and many of the audience took part in the informal Samba celebration that completed the performance.

How much of the performance's subtext did the spectators notice and identify? Impossible to say. If we had directly alluded to the war in former Yugoslavia, we would have had no business telling anyone to forgive their enemies. By setting it in a fable, we were able to allude to this without causing offense. Giving a role to children asserts a faith in the future, especially during a time when we cannot stomach the present.

This performance related to the war and its aftermath in other ways as well. Central to the loosely constructed plot are ethnic groups who try to



Banner for *Lost Forest*, 2007



Jane McMahan leading the procession for *Lost Forest*, 2007

express a variety of cultural identities while being threatened by powerful figures that loom above them. Different cultural identities are not just tolerated but valued as a source of artistic richness.

The ethnically diverse cast exemplified this variety in its makeup and through dance, movement, gesture, costume, art, and music. Different vocal styles were exploited as well, from a straighter vocal tone where desired, to a plangent tone, to a flowing tone, to a gruff throaty tone as needed. Our accepted musical vocabulary spanned a variety of genres. My guiding approach was inclusive of differences, and we were not too holy about the right way to do things. Inventive theatre provided us with links among these styles as our carnival procession moved through different sites that functioned as sets and backdrops. The whole village was one large stage set, uniformly ancient and free of cars. Our sites were carefully chosen, and we developed our performance while working in them and with them. Our painted props were minimal and suggestive. The only spoken words were *dozite* and *vieni*, to beckon the crowd to follow us. The rest was song.

By choosing “Wade in the Water” as the title song of the piece, we likened the experience of this group of carnival people to black slaves who struggled for freedom. My initial image in devising this piece was leading the audience through a body of water to freedom, and my technique was to immerse ourselves completely in songs about water that would become the source of our ideas.

The following year, June 2007, the unifying image was Earth. I was inspired by an article in the *New York Times* by Jane Perlez, entitled “Forests in Southeast Asia Fall to Prosperity’s Ax” (April 29, 2006). The language struck me as unusually evocative and poetic. This article stayed with me for a year and a half, and when the time came, I felt I had no choice but to base the next performance on it.

Once again we began with a carnival group of everyman and everywoman carousing and looking for something meaningful in life. This time we had two leaders: Olinda Brasil, who returned as a faculty member, and Yvonne Maginley, a student from Antigua, diversifying the ethnic and gender makeup of our leadership. Yvonne taught the group African songs as part of our carnival offering and danced *capoeira* with Kate Smith, another student who had lived in China for three years and sang “Swallow Song” in fluent Chinese.

We followed a similar pathway through the village as in previous years,

singing in many languages songs about trees, birds, and nature. Mislav Maračić, a fourteen-year-old boy from Grožnjan, was our totem figure. A sensitive performer with clear eyes, long hair, an open face, and angelic smile, Mislav embodied a tree spirit that spread joy, peace, and comfort. Towering on stilts, cloaked in flowing scarves, and waving leaf-decked branches, he received the group's homage in songs that included Handel's "Ombra mai fu" (about a plane tree), Schubert's "Frühlingsglaube" (about a linden), and Falla's "Asturiana" (about a pine). A Russian song about two ash trees led the audience to an old wall of the village.

At the foot of the wall was our Lost Forest, a meadow bordered by flowers and old stones that looked out toward the valleys and wooded hills. Animals and puppet figures—a snake, a bird, a dragon—swayed in a gentle dance to Brazilian drumming. A lost woman (Kate Smith), slowly walked a spiral stone maze as she sang "Forest Fragments," accompanied by Kimmy Szeto on violin. This song was newly composed by Joseph Rubinstein, setting passages from the newspaper article mentioned earlier. It tells of the ecstatic beauty of the place and of the rare species of trees that are about to disappear as developers move in. A loud gong rang out. Two surveyors (Martin Zelenko and Oliantai Kovač) casually but purposefully entered the Lost Forest. One planted an ax in the ground. They did not notice the animals and the singer as they measured and took notes. The animals slowly withdrew. As the surveyors left, the soprano sang Vaughn Williams's "We'll to the Woods No More."

The troupe and audience walked back to the center of the village, accompanied by a song in Italian-Istrian dialect and by "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." Members of the group paused to place offerings on a tree and to give spectators sprigs of lavender from the Lost Forest.

Street theatre hardly ever goes exactly as planned. Our ending was slightly marred by a loud sound check for a coming evening program, but the group carried on. *Lost Forest* received warm applause. The mayor of Grožnjan even asked for a repeat performance. An environmental issue is something to which all groups can relate. Such an issue will draw opposing groups together and become part of the healing process.

Ironically, the people who own the garden that became our Lost Forest and who so kindly lent it to us for our performance, are said to be thinking of building a swimming pool on the site. So our Lost Forest may soon be lost indeed.

As in the two previous years' performances, *Lost Forest* presented a microcosmic populace slightly out of control in carnival fashion and contained the idea of a search for meaning, purity, self-expression, art, or all of the above, in an array of languages and cultures, together with the threat of a Pharisee mentality that undermines and destroys these values. It also depicted the need to persist in the face of disaster, to build hope, and to protect what matters.

Even if the audience doesn't understand the words of the song or entirely grasp the storyline, if the cast does and cares deeply about it, there will be an intensity that will be riveting and will carry the story. In the minds of the audience, the images we offer become linked like flip cards or a storyboard. The music itself conveys some of the meaning of each song and creates a succession of emotional responses that may be all that is needed to tell the story. The form itself brings the cast very close to the audience who also shapes the piece.

Grožnjan itself plays a large part in molding our work. The village is a magical place. Every time I go there, I am flooded with energy that makes creative things happen at an astounding pace. I see this in the students and faculty as well. We have produced a plethora of concerts and performances in a very short time, each one different and vital. The students seem to make huge leaps in their expertise in a very short space of time, just as I have as a director.

Some of this can be explained by the extraordinary facilities we are given for the work. These include a large studio with a grand piano; a former school with a large dance room and three floors of practice rooms, and other spaces that are left undefined and improvisational; and a lovely small wood-paneled recital hall with good acoustics. Add to that the invigorating sunlight and the constant sound of songbirds; the views of surrounding hills and valleys and the distant gleam of the Adriatic; and a village of stone walled, tile roofed houses on a human scale that is like a stage set everywhere you turn. Grožnjan is a theatre where all the senses are engaged: the scent of lavender or cedar, the touch of sun or wind on your skin, the rustle of leaves in your ear, the touch of long worn stones underfoot, the endless view that allows the imagination to range and stirs excitement. Here street theatre is the natural medium.