

Dijana Milosević

Strength from Separation

The milestones in my life consist of very personal events. But when I look at those events in their full complexity, I find that the really important ones are influenced by politics and remain under the wing of the powerful bird that we call history.

In 1985, after finishing my first year at the Drama Academy of Belgrade University, I visited Odin Teatret in Denmark. I went there almost by chance and with my friend and colleague, Jadranka Andjelic, with whom I later founded Dah Theatre. We wanted to travel through Europe, to earn some money working at different student jobs, and to see as much theatre as possible. We had heard about Odin Teatret from one of the assistant professors at our Drama Academy. He had seen the company at the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF). When he heard that we wanted to go to Sweden in order to earn some money, he convinced us that we should go to Denmark. We wrote to Odin Teatret and it seemed very easy. The theatre's secretary said that we could come and that beds would be waiting for us. Later on I understood how lucky we had been. It was very hard to coincide exactly with when the group was in Holstebro, since they were touring most of the year and even when they were at home, their rehearsals were normally closed to occasional visitors. It happened that they had just premiered *Oxyrhincus Evangeliet* and were beginning to perform it.

We hitchhiked to Holstebro, totally unprepared for what we were going to encounter. I saw a few posters from Grotowski's Theatre Laboratory on the walls and a few silent actors: a guest performance was playing and they were whispering. The feeling of arriving at a strange castle was mixed with the feeling of finally coming home to find my real - even if a little bizarre and dysfunctional - family. The next day, with very few other spectators, I saw *Oxyrhincus Evangeliet*. My mind was blown away and, while I thought that I understood nothing of what the actors were saying and doing, at the same time I knew "this

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was it". Somehow, I had always known that theatre was something made by a group of people who dream together, and here it was - I had found it. And I knew that this was why I had chosen this art as my own way. But I did not know what to say to them or what to ask, and when some of the actors proposed a meeting with Eugenio Barba, their director, I refused because I really did not have any words.

In the performance, through her character, Zusha Mal'ak, a Hassidic Jew, Else Marie Laukvik said these words: "One man's dream is another man's reality". I understood those words much later on, when I received the text. The whole performance was in Coptic, but somehow these words were exactly what had been transmitted to me through it. I knew that I needed to live my dream. But it took me another three years to approach Eugenio Barba to ask if I could c o m e t o O d i n Teatret to assist him or to observe their work. Again I was lucky because the company was finalising the work on *Talabot* and I was invited to observe the process actively. In that performance, Julia Varley, who worked on the character of anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup, said: "I finally found my strength at the world's end!" With those words ringing in my heart, I went home. And with the words of Eugenio Barba who, just before I left, asked me what plans I had when I returned home. I answered that I would love to form a group, but that it was impossible in my country. He answered that if I believed that it was impossible, I would always feed this impossibility and would never be able to found my theatre. Those words were the final layer of my milestone and it took three years for me to put that milestone in the right place in my life.

In my pocket, on the way home, I had a train ticket to Berlin, where one of my

best friends lived, and very little money - perhaps enough for one coffee and a sandwich. I planned to get to Berlin where my friend was waiting for me, spend a few days with her, borrow some money from her and go back to Belgrade. On the border of Denmark and Germany, after the Danish customs officers had left, German customs officers entered my train compartment. After looking at my passport, they asked me how much money I had. When they heard about the situation in my wallet they deported me back to Denmark without a word of explanation, and left me with the police. I was desperately watching my train leave, with the train ticket that was no longer valid, empty pockets, and a heavy bag full of books and posters. The Danish police were very kind and told me that there was no way I could travel through Germany if I did not have a minimum amount of money with me. They told me that my embassy was in Copenhagen, but I did not know if that would be useful: it was on the other side of Denmark and I was not even sure that they would help me. Of course, I knew that I could have asked Odin's actors and director to help me, but I felt ashamed, even more ashamed when I thought that I would have to go back and explain to them what had happened. Then I realised that my good friend, Christoph Falke, an assistant to Eugenio Barba, would help me. I phoned him and asked him a rather unusual favour: to send me a substantial amount of money right away at the police station. Christoph is German and he was furious at the behaviour of the German officers. He immediately sent me money and, with a triumphant smile on my face, I caught the next train where I met the same custom officers who were astonished that I could show them the required amount of money. I felt victorious: friendship and theatre could conquer cold bureaucracy and borders! What I did not realise



Maja Mitic, Aleksandra Jelic, Aleksandra Damnjanovic and Jugoslav Hadzic (left to right) in *Cirque Macabre*, directed by Dijana Milosević. Photo: Djordje Tomic

then, but would understand just two years later, was that the face of Europe was changing. That face, distorted by an ugly smile, was looking at my country, which was also changing and sinking into isolation, nationalism and bloody war after bloody war. Right then, knowing that I was going home with something solid to stand on, planning to form my theatre group, I felt as if I had wings. But at the same time I was left with a bitter taste in my mouth.

In 1991, with my colleague Jadranka Andjelic, I founded Dah Theatre in Belgrade, the first theatre laboratory in my country, which then was still called Yugoslavia.

In my language "Dah" means breath, spirit and movement of the air. For us in my theatre, it also means to gather strength, to persevere, to be spiritual and to create. If one reads it backwards it becomes "Had" or "Hades", the underworld in Greek mythology.

We founded our theatre in 1991, the same year civil war started in our country. Our world had changed in ways we had never expected. Without wanting to do so, we became observers of the very particular kind of conflict that is civil war. From the very beginning of our work we had to confront difficult questions: what is the role and meaning of theatre? What are the responsibilities and duties of artists in times



Dijana Milosević. Photo: Vincent Abbey

of darkness, violence and suffering? Can art and theatre be tools for peace? These questions, emerging from the experience of living in a war-torn country, shaped our performances and our future life in the theatre.

Our starting points for founding our theatre were very specific: we wanted to make non-political theatre that would be performed for a limited number of specta-

tors, indoors. Our decision to make non-political theatre came from our disappointment with political theatre in Yugoslavia during the 1980s. It was a rhetorical, verbal theatre that did not ask the right questions, did not have the energy of life and creativity, and whose directors had started to become very dark political figures in our country's macabre political situation. I felt that this

kind of theatre, labelled political by its creators, was a precise example of what Peter Brook called "dead theatre", and lacked real responsibility towards its spectators. So, our natural response was not to make political theatre.

But what happened in reality was totally the opposite of our initial intentions: our first performance *This Babylonian Confusion* was based on Bertolt Brecht's poems. It was an outdoor performance, witnessed by hundreds of spectators and it was an anti-war performance. Why did that happen? Those were the times when the government of our country denied that it was engaged in war; all the media and press were silent. Many people came to thank us after the performance because they had finally heard something publicly critical of our government; something they also felt, but that was officially denied and all mention of, forbidden. After our performance, the world that surrounded us no longer had just one face. The theme of our performance was a quote from Brecht: "Will there be singing in the dark times? Yes, there will be singing about the dark times." Then I understood that we become political when we are personal. This performance deeply influenced my perception of my country and my city and made me at peace with them. The next important milestone had found its place in the map of my life. I decided to stay in my country during the war because I realised that there were so many people who longed for change. I realised that I had a voice that could make itself heard through theatre.

When the bombing of Yugoslavia started in 1999, I realised that I no longer grasped anything. In that moment, all the years of working in theatre, fighting for sense amidst destruction, did not help me to comprehend what was going on. First I thought that I would not make theatre any more, that I ought to do something that

could help people more effectively. But I soon realised that it was impossible to do anything at all. In that bombing war I could do nothing: neither stop the atrocities that my country's government was perpetrating nor help people who were being bombed. In that kind of high-tech war you can only sit and wait to see if a bomb will fall on your house or not. I asked myself what I could do: what did I know how to do best? And naturally the answer was "theatre".

We started to work on our production *Documents of Time* without an idea of what the theme of the performance would be. My actresses had enough confidence in me to accept the situation. And slowly, while the world around us was literally falling apart, I understood that I needed the perspective of someone very, very old, who could look at the 20th century with different eyes and with the wisdom of age. We chose to work with two characters, both of whom were very, very old ladies. I also realised that, to be able to say anything to the world then, I needed the perspective of another space. I chose to make a site specific performance on the staircases of museums and their associated buildings. We believe that *Documents of Time* kept us sane and alive, and brought us to better times. Through that performance I found forgiveness and an understanding of the world.

Helen Keller, a famous deaf and blind American writer and activist, wrote the last sentence used in the performance. She said, at the end of one century and the beginning of another: "This century, this wonderful century is coming to its end. And right in front of us I see the gate of the new century, on which, in letters of light are written these words: this is the way to wisdom, light and happiness."

My real insight from that time was the fact that we were able to work. We had

to move from the school where we rented a small studio and which we considered our space, because the school was a target, and a bomb had dropped just beside it, destroying a few houses and part of the street. Thanks to the hospitality of an amateur theatre in the centre of Belgrade, we got a working space. The fact that it was in the centre of the city did not make things easier for us; many buildings were bombed there too. We never knew what the next target would be.

My actresses, Sanja Krsmanovic Tasic and Aleksandra Jelic, the musician Nebojsa Ignjatovic, our set designer and my partner Nesa Paripovic, and myself came to the rehearsals every day, during the air raids. Most of the time, everyone would arrive after sleepless nights, scared and worried. Three of the group had children whom they had to leave at home because it was safer not to move around. Often, when I arrived at rehearsal, I was thinking about how we would not be able to work because we were too tired and upset, with our heads full of terrible rumours of what might happen to us and to our country. So, almost every day I would enter the theatre saying to myself: "Okay, let's just have a coffee, talk a little and go home. I do not have the right to keep these people away from their children, during the air raids, with our minds elsewhere." And I told everyone that they had every right not to come to rehearsal or to leave when they wanted. But they came every day and they never left before the rehearsal was finished. A miracle was happening: as soon as we entered the space, we would start to work with full concentration. Something was stronger than the madness around us; stronger even than we were: it was the years spent in the silence of the workroom, through which we had acquired our technique, discipline and concentration. The years of struggling against difficult conditions, and fighting with

ourselves in order to do our work in the best way possible, without excuses and with full commitment, started to work for us. In the midst of destruction, thanks to our craft, we were protected and stronger even than difficult circumstances.

In 2000/2001, I received a Fulbright scholarship to teach at Georgia College and State University in the USA. It was not an easy decision for me to leave my group for nine months. For some time, while it was not definite that I would get the scholarship, I kept quiet about it because I was not sure what I wanted to do. I felt that the scholarship had come at the right moment. I longed to have a break from the political situation in my country. I longed for something completely new that would offer new challenges, I was tired of constantly worrying about how to survive as a group and I needed some financial security. It seemed that the moment was right because we were not planning to start work on a new performance and we had earned some money, so the rest of the group would be able to survive. We also had an offer from 7 Stages, an American theatre company from Atlanta, to make a co-production with them. At the same time, I was worried about how the other members of my group would react. I decided to accept the scholarship, hoping that later it would also open some doors for my theatre group. The actresses in my group were angry and sad when they heard about my plans. After an initially difficult conversation, we spoke about ways to keep in touch during the period and ways in which we could continue to work together. Maja Mitic,

Sanja Krsmanovic Tasic and Aleksandra Jelic in
Documents of Time, directed by Dijana Milosević.
Photo: Dijana Milosević

the core member of the group, decided to spend the same period in the USA with her daughter. Sanja - who has a family in Belgrade - decided to stay there, but we found a specific time in the year when we could meet and work together in the USA.

I left for Georgia with hidden tears in my eyes, but knowing that deep in my heart my decision was right. We all needed a new chapter in the life of our theatre. We needed to share responsibility in other ways than previously. And, for the first time, I needed to be able to say that life will not stop if I leave my group. I will let them be responsible for their life in the group, to mature. As in a love relationship, I needed to know that I could leave when I wanted; to be able, in fact, to remain even more committed.

But I was deeply worried because I was leaving my country during a very dark period of dictatorship. None of us knew where it would lead and with the new elections we expected that something big would have to happen. I prayed silently for a peaceful solution, while at the same time being ready to return from the USA the very moment things got out of control at home. Every day my partner, who had joined me, and I expected something terrible to happen. My first weeks as a college professor were coloured by that feeling. One morning in October 2000, the telephone rang in my apartment in Milledgeville, and my friend from New York told me to switch on the television. I knew that something was happening. While I was watching the live broadcast from the streets of Belgrade, I saw



our Parliament building in flames. Unaware of tears rolling down my cheeks, I was trying to phone home, to phone friends, anybody, just to hear if they were alive, but it was impossible to get a connection. Fortunately it was the historic 5th of October when, in two days and without bloodshed, the people and the opposition put down Milosevic's regime, because the military refused to go on the streets to kill their own people. Everything was over in two days and finally a new era began in my country. For the first time in my group's life while I was abroad, I felt relieved knowing that nothing terrible would happen while I was away. I knew that instead of falling apart as a theatre group, we had gained new strength from the separation. And I knew that my decision had been right and that a whole new phase was about to begin for my theatre.

When we celebrated the 10th anniversary of my theatre in 2001, we had just returned from the USA, and I got another powerful insight. The title of our anniversary festivities was "Endurance and Transformation". Apart from our performances, we also presented performances and demonstrations by theatre artists who were very important to us, who were directly or indirectly our masters and friends. We organised a series of discussions with the above-mentioned theme to which we invited many colleagues from our country and from abroad. Among other speakers, we invited Nenad Colic, an actor who had worked with us, but who had left to form his own group. To my surprise, he did not talk at all on the theme of the round table, but instead started to say how important it was for him to have met and worked with us and how, without knowing it, we had brought him back to the profession that he

had wanted to leave. He said something that rang in my mind: that even if we, Dah Theatre, might want to stop our work at some point, we did not have the right to do so, because his group and many other individuals and groups to come would take our example as their beacon. I was deeply moved. I realised that we do have an important responsibility to carry on.

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