

Sanja Krsmanovic Tasic

Dancing with Darkness

The core members of my theatre group, Dah Teatar, are all women. We were all born in the 1960s in a country that was called the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. I was born in Asia, in Pakistan, but we all grew up with the same knowledge and ideas: the concept of *brotherhood* and *unity*, the sense that our beautiful country spread from Triglav (Slovenia) to Vardar (Macedonia), and consisted of six socialist republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia; that people with different religions and nationalities lived in harmony, in a land that was - as we were proud to say - "something in between", a socialist country that had escaped the Russian domain, and was as developed as any other western European country. We had the freedom to travel. Our red passports were valid for any country in the world without a visa, with very few exceptions. We were fed on this dream and, even though I knew that both my parents were Serbian, I would declare myself and my brother to be Yugoslavian. The concept of being just Serbian was too narrow-minded, too provincial. We learned to believe in this idyllic world. Little did we know about the restless spirits, the decades of smothered hatred, the turmoil of events that were yet to come.

I can still remember my parents talking about my future. In their words one of my principal talents would have been a keen sense of observation. They would say, "She has an eye, she may be a journalist one day, she watches the world around her, observing and noticing each and every detail."

But my greatest obsession as a child, besides dancing, was to imitate, do myself what others did, not to talk like them, but to move like them. I loved dance and danced all the time, singing quietly to myself. While watching the ballet that my parents would take me to (whatever it was: *Peter Pan*, *The Sleeping Beauty* or *Swan Lake*), I could not resist dancing in the aisles between the seats the same way - I thought - as the dancers did on stage. It was most

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embarrassing for my parents, and others in the audience would laugh, watching the five-year-old dancing away with sweeping movements, being the swan.

Later in India I was spellbound when I watched classical Indian dances. It was not the mere movement that amazed me, but by intuition I sensed that there was something deep going on behind the movement, a secret story, a tale told for centuries over and over again. The precision, the rhythm, the beauty, I felt and loved it so deeply that I convinced my parents I should learn it, at least for a while.

I recognised this deep meaning, these roots of messages transmitted by the actors' bodies in the work of my theatre, and knew this was where I belonged. Through my body and voice I could tell my stories, I could tell other people's stories, I could also speak out at last about so many things.

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On our most recent tour in Siberia in an interview for the local television, I was asked what is it like for me to represent or act out a metaphor or a symbol. This question came from seeing the dominant symbolism in the performance *Documents of Time* whose characters are the ageless Goddesses/ Documenters of Time. I replied that I do not think about the metaphor or symbol, I am just a very ordinary old lady, a little tired, a little nostalgic, in a continuous exchange of words, actions and dancing with her friend, another old woman. The characters could be two women from Belgrade going to the open market together, chatting about old times and their lives. They could be our wise grandmothers, or you and I when we become old and fragile.

And the grandmothers knew what was

under the calm of our forty-six years of peace and brotherhood and unity. They still remembered and prayed for things to be forgotten. In 1980 the great leader of Yugoslavia, our beloved absolutist president Tito died. He was a hedonist, and he loved his people to live well too. With his death, the turmoil started. Bit by bit things were beginning to unveil.

In 1991 hell broke loose, the war and the painful tearing up of our country started. Also in 1991, Dijana Milosevic and Jadranka Andjelic, two brave young theatre directors, decided to form an independent theatre group. They called it Dah Teatar, *dah* meaning breath. At that moment, I was still a dancer, a dance teacher, a mother of two small children, embarking on a two-year course in dance. The official media, newspapers, television, were slowly continuing what they had begun some years previously: the lies and propaganda of hatred and war, whilst all the time proclaiming there was no war.

They started to draft the young men, and I was terribly afraid that they would take my husband one night, any night, but still they proclaimed we were not at war. Then my friends started to leave the country; my Croatian friend left Belgrade with her family, and many more. My friend Lily from Zagreb ended our friendship by writing: "I cannot be a hypocrite and continue this correspondence. My husband has gone to war. Who knows? Maybe he is shooting at your husband right now, in the trenches." Nationalism started to spring up everywhere, old bones were dug up and people started to remember the horrors and the violence and the hatred. They forgot in one second the forty-six years of brotherhood and unity. We had our Milosevic, but the other five republics had theirs too, and as the big beautiful country split up, the brothers of yesterday started to spit on one another.

I was so helpless. What could I do? How



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Photo: Vincent Abbey

could I act? I did not want to be a politician. Our street protests were battered by tanks in 1991 and 1992 - Serbian tanks. Milosevic knew that the first move had to be against his own people, against those who disagreed with him. All at once I felt my art was too abstract. I could dance and dance and dance, but it expressed nothing. I needed my voice, and luckily I found it in 1993. I believe it was pure destiny that I saw the sign that read "Dah Teatar Workshop" in September 1993.

I knew Jadranka from elementary school, and when I met Dijana and Maja as well I had the feeling I had known them all my life. I found my voice and my true art, I found my group and second family, and I found the other "floating islands".

One of the first characters that I worked on in 1993 and 1994, Anarch Hunger, was like the character of the old lady from *Documents of Times*, again a metaphor, but this time a metaphor for power, force, militarism. Here I had no empathy. What I had was despair and anger, a feeling of helplessness, a feeling that a terrible war and suffering was happening so close to me and that I had absolutely no influence on the things to come. There were many Anarch Hungers around us, pushing us to war and violence and ethnic hatred and nationalism: politicians with their blazing ambitions; generals, hungry for real action after living so many years on stand-by; fathers proud of sending their sons to be food for the guns. I suddenly realised that many men were being Anarchs with the women silently standing by, as I did. For me Anarch Hunger had two faces: the public one of the man in power, who does not move much and gives orders with his hands or fingers, and the secret one, the grotesque caricature, the deformed freak. Working on this character was my sweet revenge, my way of expressing what I

thought of them all, the killers of light, the murderers of energy, the kings of darkness, the shallow, narrow, bloodthirsty minds I discovered on every step in the public and everyday life of my country. With my body, face and voice I could show what they really were like, ridicule them, and present them as sick and deformed as they really are, show their ugliness and true selves. To create the character of the Secret Anarch we even used photos of real politicians and mobsters from the daily newspapers.

Most of the time as actors creating theatre, we are involved in a great search, the search for the character. Sometimes we start only from a theme in which we are interested, and work freely from our own bodies and minds, and the persons we interpret seem to come to life gradually. Bit by bit we clarify who they actually are, what they are like, and enrich them with details, with specific walks and physical attributes. It is like creating new life, a new human being who is perhaps a compilation of many human beings we know as well as our own. Then we find bits and pieces of text or song and give them their sound dimension through voice.

In the performance *The Legend of the End of the World*, the starting points that defined the characters were again metaphorical. Because there were three actresses (Maja Mitic, Tina Milivojevic and me), what the directors (Dijana Milosevic and Jadranka Andjelic) saw were: grandmother, mother, daughter (I was the mother); past, present, future (I was the present); the three Moiras; three witches; three goddesses; three refugees; three raped women... We did not even have names. We had our colours, we had our relationships. We had the water, salt and coffee, the songs, screams and dreams to express ourselves, the walks, jumps and turns. This was more than enough. Even all three in some moments were one: one

woman, the woman in ruins, again and again.

When I look back, there were not many productions where my character had an actual name or represented an actual person who really existed or was a character from a play or novel. They were a shaman, an old lady, a woman refugee, a contemporary woman, a scientist. But for me they had to be concrete and precise, full of the detail of real lives in order to be material and convincing, to be characters with whom the audience could feel empathy.

We worked on the performance *The Helen Keller Case* for seven months before I discovered that I would play the role of Helen Keller. During this process, all the scores were based on my life, most of them done in the first person. Dealing with my memories and childhood, many repressed details from the past came out. So what I was confronting was a character, a famous person who had actually lived, a severely handicapped woman whom I was supposed to represent whilst retaining the vitality of my carefully selected actions. Getting to know Helen Keller through our research produced not only empathy for her but admiration. Her inner growth was amazing because her starting point was miles from where we usually are when we come into the world. Because she had such a great obstacle, she became a true warrior, a *Warrior of Light* as Paulo Coelho would say. Her empathy for the suffering people of the world was astounding. She felt the injustices, and she who could not speak, shouted loud and clear for the whole world to hear.

The technical challenge to me as an actor in having to represent a being with no sight or hearing (eyes without focus, the extra-sensory body that feels and experiences the world through every pore and millimetre of the skin, the hyper-developed

senses of touch, smell and taste that Helen possessed) was less demanding than the spiritual ordeal she had to endure, in developing from a wild and hopeless creature into a profoundly spiritually developed human being, a true Saint.

She needed to grow and glow more and more through the performance and one of my greatest losses when the tour of this performance ended abruptly was that, even after eleven months of irregular performing, I felt that this was something I had not yet fully accomplished.

There was another character with a name: Mr. Plotnikov, an old Russian actor in exile. He was a character from Carlos Fuentes' book *Constancia*, created for *Travellers*, a performance we presented only three times and then had to abandon, just like the previous one. (*The Helen Keller Case* and *Travellers* came to an end because of the NATO bombing of our country in March 1999 which resulted in two of the Dah actors, who were from Britain and the USA respectively, having to return to their countries.)

Mr. Plotnikov is a bitter old man, with a wide Slavonic soul, to whom I can relate, being a Slav myself. And subconsciously, as a model for his bitterness and disappointment, I used the bitterness and disappointment of someone very close to me: my father. As one of Meyerhold's collaborators, Plotnikov had to leave Russia, fleeing from repression losing his ideals, his homeland and his profession. My father was a true communist idealist who believed in all the true goodness this movement prophesied. What he encountered was the tainting of his ideals and the corruption of other comrades. Without having to travel anywhere, he lost his homeland, watching it break in little pieces in bloody wars. He lost his profession when he was forced to retire early after the arrival of Milosevic, because he was against the nationalist, greatly pro-



Dancing with Darkness Photo: Vincent Abbey

Serb, views of the new government. He believed in the multi-ethnic, multi-nation Yugoslavia that he had represented as a diplomat for many years in foreign countries. He was a polyglot, an educated man, in love with art, who had to live, like most educated people, on the brink of poverty. Headstrong and proud he rarely accepted help and became more and more bitter as the years passed.

In 2000/2001, my director Dijana Milosevic received a Fullbright Grant, and spent the year teaching in the USA. Maja Mitic, my acting colleague, also spent the year in the USA, so I was mostly alone in Belgrade, occasionally going to the USA to join them for work, keeping shop, leading the youth group, giving dance and acting classes and workshops. I used to arrive in the mornings to work alone in the room,

creating more materials for my new solo piece, an ongoing project that took three years, and preparing a work demonstration, that I wanted to present for our 10th anniversary.

I consulted Dijana about this work by e-mail, and when she returned in May, we put the whole thing together. Because we already had Maja's demonstration *The Flame at the Bottom of the Sea*, which deals with the actor's basic skills, my intention was to base my demonstration on my journey through the different characters I have performed, and the concrete methods we used to create material for performance.

I liked working alone, confronting myself with myself, searching for the inner life, watching myself from the inside, being free to create my own schedule and time-table. For me this was a special time of freedom and a great test of self-discipline.

One day I realised that as part of my work demonstration I wanted to create something Torgeir Wethal had asked us to do years previously, during one of our workshop meetings: a "trailer". Instead of writing a short *Curriculum Vitae*, he asked us to present in five minutes, through our bodies and actions, what we had learned and done until then professionally in our lives. I wanted to create that kind of trailer; a short montage not just of my professional but also of my personal life. I wanted to show in three to five minutes my journey as a human being and performer. In this short sequence I wanted to transform from me/Sanja in different phases of life (all taken from various scores I had created already) to Sanja moving from one character to another in my journey as an actress.

The starting point for this was the floor because I was a baby being born, and in the demonstration this section was preceded by the character, Plotnikov, who speaks a short text from *Travellers*. I thought it would make

a good montage if, after saying his text, Mr. Plotnikov could sneeze (an action that existed in the performance). As a result of that violent sneeze he would have a heart attack (something I invented for this occasion), roll gently on the floor and die, to resurrect again through the baby Sanja which would mark the beginning of the trailer.

The trailer also ended with Plotnikov, who would sneeze, have a heart attack, die, resurrect again so that I could achieve the Cycle of Life, recreation, reincarnation, of the human being - and also of me as an actress. I would have the possibility to be born again as different human beings, like the characters I played.

The demonstration went well at its premiere, and many people noted that the part that was strongest for them was the little trailer scene that occurred almost at the end. In autumn 2001, Dijana and I continued the work on my solo piece, this time determined to finish it. The piece dealt with loss. The violent loss of the performance I loved and the character I was still trying to develop and grow through, Helen Keller. It dealt with the loss of homeland (meaning the old Yugoslavia we were born in), the loss of common sense... In January 2002, in the midst of the work, I suffered the first major personal loss in my life: the death of my father.

Two and a half weeks after his death I was about to perform my demonstration *Singing Body, Dancing Voice* at the Cultural Centre REX in Belgrade, when during the rehearsal something strange happened. In the part of the demonstration when I am being Mr. Plotnikov and say, "Better to be seen no more, than to be seen humiliated", I started to lose my voice. We tried again, Dijana asking me to cough out, but the same thing happened. At the very beginning of this speech, my voice would simply fade out,

and I felt as though I was choking. And this went on and on. I would drink a little water, cough, speak normally, and try to relax... and again when I transformed into Plotnikov, the pathetic little man with a funny walk and a hoarse voice, I lost my voice. I moved my lips in silent despair. And then it came back. "They killed him? Is that why they killed, censored and sent the best of us to death?" With the sneeze and the heart attack, while I gently rolled to the floor to die, I realised that I was my father, that actually this text of Plotnikov's was so like my father, especially this sentence, and that in some way I had really predicted his death. My father coughed rather than sneezing but he had a massive heart attack, and died on the way to the hospital. And as Plotnikov, my character, dies, in the next moment in the trailer I am born, and life continues... In that moment I suddenly realised how much of my father was in Plotnikov, and how I had been almost unaware of it all. That evening I was stressed about my disappearing voice, but the performance went well, and I believe I pushed through it with Dijana's help.

In March 2002, after three years of thought, work and contemplation, we at last premiered the performance *Dancing with Darkness*, Dah Teatar's first solo performance. Two days later we heard on the news that not even the country we live in is what we thought, that it had been re-named "Serbia and Montenegro", so we lost it again in a way, or at least the beautiful name of Yugoslavia. Even though the name has been

lost, I believe I will still always say that I am a Yugoslavian.

The themes stay real, and live again and again. In a way the memory of my father lives on in the sad, bitter actor Plotnikov, who has a new life in our most recent performance *Maps of Forbidden Remembrance*.

SANJA KRSMANOVIC TASIC

(Yugoslavia) was born 1963 in Karachi, Pakistan. Most of her childhood she lived in Asia and started her dance training at the age of four. She graduated in Spanish language and literature at the University of Belgrade, and in Modern and Jazz Dance. From 1982 to 1991 she was one of the principal dancers of Belgrade Contemporary Ballet of Smiljana Mandukic. Currently she is working as creative movement and dance pedagogue. She is one of the core members of Dah Teatar since 1993, participating in all the group's performances and projects since then. She has two children, Anastasia and Sabin.