

Anthology Vol. 1: Chapter 2 Summary

THEATRE AS A WAY OF KNOWING

by Dijana Milošević

In this chapter, Dijana Milošević, founder and director of DAH Theatre in Belgrade, Serbia, discusses the ways in which performance has been contributing to peacebuilding in Serbia since the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. She describes the independent theatre work that emerged during a period of extreme ethnic nationalism, government repression, and violence, providing a space in which Serbians could express their grief, their fear, their outrage, and their solidarity with victims from “the other side.”

Milošević highlights five of DAH Theatre’s performances, each of which responded to its particular moment in history and to the particular struggles Serbia was facing at that time, from war, to dictatorship, to NATO bombing, to revolution, to rebuilding.

Context

When the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia began to come apart in the 1990s, and each of its six republics—Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro—began to press for independent statehood, it became clear that Yugoslavia’s years of relative peace and prosperity had masked deep-seated conflicts between ethnic groups going back to at least World War II.

National leaders began to use these conflicts to manipulate the people and maintain their control. Each group drew inward, while fear and hatred of “the others” was stoked. There were many wars. Milošević says that this period “left thousands dead, exiled, and without any property or home. In Serbia, there was a major economic, social, and moral fall.”

There was no independent theatre movement in Belgrade (the capital of Serbia and the former capital of Yugoslavia) prior to 1991. Under the communist party that had ruled Yugoslavia, theatre was primarily state-sponsored and state-approved.

In 1991, as Serbia was perpetrating war with its neighbors—but denying it was doing so—Milošević and her colleague Jadranka Andjelic founded DAH Theatre. They began making work that challenged the silence and denial that had spread over the country and that provided hope, truth, beauty, and a sense of community. “While the war was spreading through what was left of Yugoslavia,” Milošević says, “and while my country changed its shape and its name, we realized that the only way to oppose destruction is to create.”

Since the dictatorship of Slobodan Milošević (no relation to the author) fell in 2000, DAH has taken up the role of posing the difficult questions and creating the spaces that are necessary for the country to move forward into democracy, responsibility, and peace.

This Babylonian Confusion

DAH's first performance, in 1992, was called *This Babylonian Confusion*. It was based on poems by Bertolt Brecht. At this time, the Serbian government was denying its involvement in the war it was perpetrating, and the media was going along with it. The play, with lines like "When those above / talk about peace / simple folks know / there's going to be the war," had a clear anti-war message. Milošević says: "By using this Brecht poem in public we wanted to openly speak about something everybody knew was happening but no one could talk about. It created space for the truth to be heard."

This Babylonian Confusion was set outside, in one of the main squares of the city, and it was seen by hundreds of people.

Documents of the Times

In 1999, NATO bombed Serbia and Kosovo in response to atrocities Slobodan Milošević was committing against Albanians in Kosovo. Dijana Milošević writes about this time:

All my years of working in the theatre, fighting for sense against the nonsense of destruction, did not help me in that moment to understand what was going on...The bombs killed mostly civilians, both Serbs and Albanians, and many of them were opposed to Milošević. It did not make any sense, and it gave new excuses to the regime to isolate the country, go after the opposition, and strengthen the order of fear and terror.

During this time, Milošević created the play *Documents of the Times*, which was centered around two very old characters, women who had lived for centuries, and who had the perspective and wisdom of age. Milošević says that these women are "the documenters of time, that still carry inside them the message of humanity and forgiveness."

Documents of the Times was performed on the steps of buildings tied closely to the city's history—museums, schools, libraries—and it was about "the human spirit and the necessity for art, for creation, for forgiveness."

(In)Visible City

After the surge of Serbian nationalism in the 1990s, many minorities in the country became reticent and withdrew from public life. Over the course of the '90s and early 2000s, incidents of ethnic intolerance and racism increased. It was in this context that Milošević and Andjelic, together with DAH Theatre's team, created a theatrical action called *(In)Visible City*, addressing the disappearance of the city's diversity. The action was performed on Belgrade's public buses in 2005. Milošević describes the piece:

Performers (actors, dancers, musicians) were "strange passengers" on the buses, characters from various ethnic groups. An actor playing "tour guide" guided the passengers along the route, bringing their attention to the multi-ethnic history

interwoven also in the contemporary life of the city.

The performance jarred people out of their daily routine and brought them back to a time when public buses were places in which people of different backgrounds mingled.

Building Peace

The examples Milošević provides demonstrate how theatre artists can use their art to respond to the needs of the people without sacrificing aesthetic quality. In fact, Milošević asserts that what allows DAH to make such emotionally, socially, and politically charged work in such a difficult environment is the “commitment and artistry of the actors.”

The author beautifully summarizes the many ways in which theatre can contribute to peacebuilding:

Theatre helps remove barriers between people and nudges them to face the truth and overcome harsh experiences...Theatre can answer people’s need to understand the moment they live in, and it can help them meet the fear, anger, prejudice, pain, and suffering in safe surroundings. It can remind people of the suffering of others. It can influence people profoundly without political pressure and propaganda. It can give the energy of life manifested in the dancing, singing body of an actor. It can make people smile together again.

More from “Theatre as a Way of Knowing”:

- This chapter includes more extensive descriptions of the performances mentioned above, as well as descriptions of two additional DAH performances. The first, *Maps of Forbidden Remembrance*, addressed the taboo topic of Serbia’s role in the 1995 massacre of approximately 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica. The second was a production of Anton Chekov’s classic play *Three Sisters*, which DAH adapted to comment on the Serbian situation.
- Milošević discusses DAH Theatre’s aesthetic “ancestors,” Eugenio Barba and the Odin Theatre in Denmark.
- She also writes extensively about the performative work of the activist group Women in Black (WIB), a “world-wide network of women committed to peace and justice,” who famously hold weekly silent vigils in public places affected by war and injustice.