

Kosova's Dodona Theatre for Children and Youth – The Muse of Resistance

In 1998 the world was transfixed by the tragic events taking place in Kosova (Kosovo*). Yet, amidst the campaign of terror inflicted upon the Albanian civilian population and the NATO bombs falling, a theatre for children and young people played a very special role. Lowdown has commissioned Jeton Neziraj from Kosova to tell the story of Dodona Theatre for Children and Youth.

Theatre for children and young people in Kosova has a short history. The first theatre troupe for children was founded in 1986, comprising enthusiastic amateur actors and usually producing puppet shows, which were played in different settings. In general, Kosova has had a poor governmental record for organising activities for children and youth. This was even a part of the state politics of the time of Yugoslavia, which treated Kosovar Albanians as second-class citizens, even though they constituted 90% of the population in Kosova.

In 1992, an old building in the outskirts of Kosova's capital, Prishtina, was turned into a theatre. Due to the shape of the facilities, the theatre had a narrow and a shallow stage and only 167 seats. A children's theatre troupe, founded a few years earlier, settled inside this building and offered two programs – the morning one performing children's shows, and the evening one performing youth shows.

Enver Petrovci, a renowned Albanian actor who had built a successful career in ex-Yugoslavia, and who, in the time of political turmoil had left its capital Belgrade to return to Prishtina, was named director. The beginning of the work in this theatre, later known under the name 'Dodona', was a major event of the time.

It was exactly the time of Yugoslavia's disintegration – the war in Bosnia had just started, while for the Albanian population in Kosova discrimination and apartheid were ongoing. The occupation of Kosova by the Serbian regime had paralysed the whole of Kosova. The schools and the University of Prishtina were closed, tens of thousands of Albanians were thrown out of their jobs, the only daily newspaper in the Albanian language was banned, as were the Albanian speaking TV and radio stations. Most of the cultural institutions were closed or put under state-imposed Serb management. At the time this campaign of violence and discrimination was widely referred to as 'the violent measures'.

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Having understood that he was to be expelled from his position as the director of Dodona Theatre for Children and Youth, Enver Petrovci signed a contract with Faruk Begolli, who had just created a private firm for theatre, film and design. This contract made it possible to utilise the evening stage for activities programmed by Faruk Begolli's firm, while the theatre benefited from the percentages of the tickets sold. Faruk Begolli was one of the most famous film actors in ex-Yugoslavia. He, together with Enver Petrovci, came back to Kosova and opened the acting school inside the Faculty of Arts of the University of Prishtina.

Soon after signing the contract, Enver Petrovci was expelled from his job and a Serbian director was appointed. Although the state-imposed director didn't allow for the exams of the acting school to take place on the stage of the theatre, most of the time the exams were carried out onstage without his knowledge. In most cases, Dodona Theatre employees would find a way to get the director drunk until all the exams were finished. The same was done when the theatre was used for different shows, concerts, launching of new cultural activities and anniversaries of different schools. However, not all the plays escaped censorship. The choreographic play 'The Albanian Odyssey', by our late choreographer Abdurrahman Nokshiqi (Abi) who

spent his ballet career dancing in many world theatres, was banned on the day of the first show, with the argument that it contained 'nationalist' elements.

Until 1998, Dodona Theatre was the only cultural institution to function in the 'semi-freedom' of the time. Apart from showing plays for children, the theatre stage was used for the rehearsals and exams of the students of the acting and directing school who, after the closure of their schools, attended classes in improvised classrooms inside private houses and in other locations adapted as classrooms. Most of the actors acting in evening shows were students of the acting school, with Dodona becoming a sort of laboratory theatre, creating the first experiences for new actors and directors.

Due to the lack of a budget, most of the productions in this theatre had very poor scenery and most of the costumes were made by the actors themselves. Actors and others working in these productions were paid from the tickets sold. Comedy was the most favoured genre and brought more audience members to the theatre. One play, 'Professor, jam talent se jo mahi' (Professor, Am I Talented or What?) directed by Faruk Begolli, was shown about 360 times, with some people seeing it more than 10 times! Due to frequent movements of Serbian 'police' patrolling on the streets and their frequent provocation of the Albanians, going to Dodona Theatre became a very difficult journey. The real trouble was returning home after the shows. Because of this, the actors sometimes slept in the theatre after the shows or rehearsals.

During these years life in Kosova had become very hard. Kosovar Albanians were living in a kind of ghetto. Dodona Theatre was considered one of the very few spaces where people felt 'free'. Inside the walls of the theatre the audience could laugh and cry freely... Dodona was the only place that made them feel proud and dignified, while outside those walls they were treated in the most inhuman way. The actors, directors and the others working in Dodona Theatre had an added, yet unseen, enthusiasm for their work. Their work was seen as a kind of protest against the violence and a manifestation of dignity and non-submission. In its ten years of work, Dodona Theatre became a symbol of Kosovar theatre and culture. It was justly called 'the Muse of Resistance'.

The war first started in certain villages and towns of Kosova. However, the gloomy atmosphere was also present in streets of Prishtina. After a stressful and a sorrowful day, the audience came and relaxed by watching the comedy plays at Dodona. Going to Dodona was becoming a rite. Regardless of the danger, the police and the military control points, the audience continued to come and watch the plays. The tensions of the war rose especially in the last few days prior to the commencement of NATO bombing on Serbian forces in March 1998.

After an exam held on the stage of Dodona, Adriana Abdullahu, a young actress who had just graduated from the acting school, went with her professor Enver Petrovci and some of her colleagues to have a coffee in a coffee shop in the centre of Prishtina. The city's life in those days was almost paralysed. People went out very rarely. Everything was pending. In a hail of fire from automatic guns coming from unknown terrorists who fired at the coffee shop, Adriana was killed and a colleague of hers was severely wounded. The day after, Adriana's colleagues and the professors gathered in the small courtyard outside Dodona Theatre to pay her their last respects, the state-imposed director banning the gathering in the theatre where Adriana had acted most of her roles.

Adriana was considered one of the most talented actresses of her generation, and was buried in Ferizaj, her hometown. Her funeral procession was disturbed by military forces with tanks and jeeps, alarmed because of the impending NATO bombings. Adriana's burial was in a way an end of a chapter, opening up, at the same time, a new one, maybe the saddest one in the history of the Albanian people – the forced deportation of almost one million people and the killing of some tens of thousands of innocent civilians...

Enraged by the NATO air intervention, the Serb police and (para)military forces launched an unforeseen campaign of terror on the Albanian civilian population in Kosova. Prishtina, along with other cities in Kosova, emptied within days. People were forcibly driven out of their homes and then expelled to Macedonia or Albania proper. In the border between Kosova and Macedonia a crowd of over 200 thousand people had gathered waiting to cross over to Macedonia.

Just like almost one million other Albanians, Albanian artists too were subjected to this misery. Most of the artists who had worked in Dodona Theatre were expelled forcibly from Prishtina. Faruk Begolli was one of the few who had managed to exit the convoy of escapees and shelter at his sister's house, somewhere near Prishtina. For almost three months, until the Serb capitulation, Begolli managed to come out only as far as the house balcony. Some of the young artists who had performed at Dodona had joined the Kosova Liberating Army fighting against the Serbian forces and trying to preserve the civilian population from the Serb atrocities. Others remained hidden in cellars of houses all over Prishtina, under constant fear from the terror of Serbian bands which went on killing the few remaining citizens.

Some of the actors of Dodona Theatre who happened to be refugees in Macedonia founded the 'Dodona in Exile' theatre. Different groups, functioning within this theatre, produced plays for children which were shown in different refugee camps throughout Macedonia. Also, earlier staged at Dodona Theatre, Vaclav Havel's play 'Audience' began performing for the refugees. Upon hearing this, Vaclav Havel wrote a letter of support to the people of Kosova and expressed his gratitude for performing his play in front of the refugees. After the war ended, Dodona Theatre recommenced its activities, with actors, directors and students starting to work again in the same space. In the first two years after the war, Dodona Theatre collaborated closely with UNICEF, and many plays for children based on landmine awareness were shown in different villages of Kosova.

The wars in Bosnia, Croatia, Kosova and finally in Macedonia have opened up many wounds. Finally, people of the region seem to have understood that 'the bloody chapter' is now closed and must not be repeated. Though reconciliation seems very distant, there is still hope.

The latest initiatives for the creation of a contemporary theatre for children and young people are very promising. The Children's Theater Center in Shkup (Macedonia), founded some years ago, publishes contemporary plays of Balkans authors and produces these plays themselves or in collaboration with the theatres of the region. Recently, the Center for Children's Theatre Development was founded in Kosova, aiming to develop playwriting and contemporary theatre for children in the region. Meanwhile in Zagreb, Croatia, a network aiming to link theatre for children and young people in the region, Epicenter, was founded.

These and similar undertakings are serious attempts to promote cultural emancipation and to fight the typical clichés of the Balkans, which call for hatred, war and vengeance. The development of theatre for children and young people is a good alternative to violence and hatred, offered to the Balkans for its salvation.

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* Lowdown acknowledges that Kosova is referred to as 'Kosovo' in English. However, Kosovar Albanians use the original name, 'Kosova', and as this article gives voice to the experiences of Kosovar Albanian artists, we have used their preferred terminology. We apologise for any confusion.