

## **Breathing Sense into Women's Lives Shattered by War: Dah Theatre Belgrade**

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In the contemporary world, destruction and violence can only be opposed by the creation of sense (Motto, Dah Theatre Belgrade).<sup>1</sup>

### **Setting the Stage**

The various ethnic and religious groups and individuals who suffered enormously during ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia deal with the legacies of violence and human rights violations in a number of ways. As a human rights lawyer from this region, and someone who is scarred by the war, I have immersed myself in literature and art that explores armed conflict and its impact on women. After the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, and since my arrival in Australia, I have been following closely the transitional justice processes in my homeland (such as trials and initiatives by local peace activists aimed at reconciliation) and have always been present — with my mind, heart and research — with peace activists from the former Yugoslavia in their struggle to address past atrocities. My particular experience affected my intellectual and spiritual being and has driven my academic work in the direction of the ongoing exploration of the causes and consequences of war in my homeland as well as the trauma, resilience and utmost courage of its people.

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Local non-government organisations established since 1991 have been working to assist communities in the former Yugoslavia with the complex processes of dealing with the past. One of these, Dah Theatre Company of Belgrade, Serbia (Dah), was created in 1991 in the wake of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In the Serbian language ‘dah’ means ‘breath’, and for the theatre company it signifies ‘to breathe in, to gather strength, to persevere, to be spiritual [and] to honour the spirit of life’ through ‘warmth, movement [and] creation’.<sup>2</sup> Since its creation, Dah’s goal has been to ‘empower people in facing the difficulties of a society in transition’.<sup>3</sup>

Dah’s ultimate aim is to use theatre as a mode of reconciliation across ethnic and religious lines that were produced by bloodshed and reinforced by nationalist elite politics. During its rich career the company has worked with different organisations across the region to capture the pain of civilians who suffered most during the recent Yugoslav wars.

### Crossing the Lines

This paper is based on an interview conducted on 9 December 2009 with Dijana Milošević, a director of Dah and the producer of the play, *Crossing the Lines* (Milošević 2009). The play was first performed in May 2009 and is based on the book, *Women’s Side of War*, an anthology of testimonies by women about the wars that occurred between 1991 and 1999 in the territory of the former Yugoslavia (Women in Black Belgrade 2007). *Women’s Side of War* was compiled and produced by Women in Black (Belgrade), an anti-militarist and feminist organisation. Dah and Women in Black have been working together for almost two decades, during which time they have crafted street performances and theatrical plays to raise awareness about gender inequality, militarism and nationalism in Serbian society. *Crossing the Lines* has been performed in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia; and Slovakia was the first country outside the former Yugoslav borders that Dah visited with the play.

*Crossing the Lines* uses the verbatim testimonies (the actual and authentic words) of women, displaced persons, refugees and survivors of the Yugoslav wars to reach audiences on both the verbal and 'emotional and psychological level'. The play captures the suffering of women across ethnic lines and divisions to show that pain and suffering do not have a particular ethnicity or religion. It aims 'to stimulate women to start speaking, and through confession of their own sufferings [to also] recognise the suffering of others'.<sup>4</sup> *Crossing the Lines* brings together communities, survivors, artists and civil society activists to recognise and discuss war crimes.<sup>5</sup>

As a lawyer, when I found out about *Crossing the Lines* I was curious to see how Dah Theatre could uncover women's experiences and testimonies on the stage and what it could reveal that a regular legal version of testimony could not. While watching the play it became clear to me that the stories told in this performance are not only oral histories but also legal testimonies of war crimes and that we, the audience, bear witness to this. The theatre performance is significant since it embodies an experience of sexual abuse and violence against women during the Yugoslav wars and tells an otherwise untold story. It embodies testimonies that could be used in the courtroom, visceral human experiences that, through art, are told to us as bare truth.

This paper is enriched by original images from the play and by images produced by artist and photojournalist, Narelle Byrne in response to Dah Theatre's photographs. Her photographs demonstrate a commitment to generating awareness of social justice issues with the goal of fostering love and peace based on knowledge gained through personal experience and travel around the world.

## Creating the Stage



Figure 1 Dah Theatre 2009 Original scene from *Crossing the Lines*.  
Actresses: Ivana Milenović, Sanja Krsmanović Tasić. Reproduced with  
permission of Dah Theatre



Figure 2. Narelle Byrne 2010 *Across The Land* photograms. Reproduced  
with permission of the artist

*Crossing the Lines* draws on first-hand experiences of women during war and is a form of documentary theatre built from the words spoken by witnesses giving testimony about their experiences. Like *Talking to Terrorists* by Robin Soans and *My Name is Rachel Corrie* by Alan Rickman (about an American college student run over by an Israeli Defence Force bulldozer), it is based on diaries and emails. Milošević explains:

Reading the moving, honest and personal stories of incredibly brave women from the book *Women's Side of War*, I could see images, hear voices and witness events of the past. And that felt like descending into the underworld, into Hell. The challenge and the responsibility was not to stay in that place, but to return to this time to join to the company of those souls walking in the dark (Milošević 2009).

Milošević selected fifteen stories from the book and adapted them to the theatre. According to her it is a 'historical book' because 'the testimonies of women are used in their authenticity' without political or other goals.<sup>6</sup> She felt it was necessary for the women's voices to be heard and she used Dah Theatre to present them.

The British author and arts critic Michael Billington (2005) argues that 'The theatre has no obligation to give a complete picture. Its only duty is to be honest'. In verbatim theatre the honesty may confront audiences with a horrific reality by 'requiring them to witness' crimes and see the pain in front of them (Young 2005: 100). As Milošević puts it, 'the context of the testimonies was more important to us than the form in which we delivered it'. Some local reviewers, such as Isaković (2009), were concerned that the 'constant repetition of stories of survivors, while necessary for facing the past and reexamining responsibility, at the same time runs the risk of annulling them, making them monotonous so they lose the real voices of the women survivors'. Milošević, however, believes that 'live words presented through performance have a much stronger impact on the audience' and that the real words of the women are what captures the audience's attention. She also believes that one of the main features of this production is that it:

Only tells the facts without political accusations, so even the extreme

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nationalists were silent because we took the stories of women from all of the former Yugoslavia: from Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia. That was very important because it was a sort of equalising, not in the sense that we all suffered the same, but that a victim is a victim, regardless of his/her nationality (Milošević 2009).

The most negative reactions Dah faced were accusations that because the majority of the stories were about Bosnian Muslim women, they gave more voice to 'Bosniak victims'.<sup>7</sup> Dah replied that the play was not 'a set of scales, so we did not have a kilo of stories from each region and that most of the stories are from Bosnia because the worst crimes happened there'.<sup>8</sup> Despite these rare reactions, Milošević argues that the play has the potential to overcome extreme right attacks because it looks at survivors, most of whom are women.

As well as achieving a critical view of what happened in the context of the violence in the former Yugoslavia, *Crossing the Lines* also aims to provoke audiences to rethink their own responsibility and that of their communities in committing atrocities in the recent past. Although a representation of reality and not reality itself, in the performance the audience is reminded that what happened *was a reality* and someone needs to be held accountable. That the play has also had a profound effect on the actors is revealed in this comment: 'The show has helped me make peace with myself, with my country, with my feelings of guilt and responsibility' (Harati 2009).

*Crossing the Lines* has touched upon various themes of the Bosnian war such as the role of the media, sexual violence, hope and the struggle for survival. To remind the audience of the role of the media, the stage has a video screen on which footage of the Yugoslav wars is occasionally shown, with English subtitles, for a few seconds during the play. Its use, Milošević explains, was to demonstrate 'the role of the media in the war, their translation and interpretation of the events in the former Yugoslavia ... we have been broadcast live, and constantly interpreted and translated by various media'.

Sexual violence and abuse which profoundly affected the women of Bosnia, and on which much feminist research has particularly focused

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(Stiglemayer 1993; MacKinnon 1993; Nikolic-Ristanovic 1999 and others), are also portrayed, along with their devastating consequences. This is perhaps best captured in the words of a woman raped in Prijedor as spoken by one of the actors: 'I wish to become a mother. But how? For me a man is a horrifying force of violence and pain' (Women in Black Belgrade 2007: 91). Bosnian women were deliberately targeted to humiliate and degrade the enemy. Rape was highly organised and calculated and, for the first time, recognised by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) 'as an instrument of terror' (*Prosecutor v Kunarac et al*, judgment 22 February 2001).

## Interlude



Figure 3 Dah Theatre 2009 Original scene from the play *Crossing the Lines*.  
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Crossing the lines  
Out of lines  
Means different colors  
Sounds  
Ways  
Crossing the days  
The thoughts  
Souls  
Crossing every time  
Every day  
Crossing together  
The senseless war  
Crossing history  
So They put the lines  
Words of women's future  
Remind us  
Remembering life in peace  
Crossing the south and the north  
The east and the west  
Balkan  
We walk across the earth  
Out of lines  
When we see each other  
We know  
We are together  
When we think of each other  
Miles far from  
Together  
Remembering our dreams and goals  
The wholeness  
Despite lines and sides  
Senseless war  
We are not alone  
Imagine  
Out of lines.

Biljana Kašić 1993 Women's Lobby, Zagreb Croatia. Reproduced with permission of the author.





Figure 4 Narelle Byrne 2010 *Creative Souls* photograms.  
Reproduced with permission of the artist

## The Audience

Now I am waiting for myself to start forgiving. But I am afraid that I will not be able to forget what happened. Sometimes I have nightmares. It is hard to continue life here, but it would be harder to start a new life somewhere else (Bala 2007).

*Crossing the Lines* was aimed at a specific audience, that is, activists and activist organisations from the former Yugoslavia. The play, however, was advertised to the general public and the one thousand people

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who have seen it include members of the general public. According to Milošević, the audience reacts very emotionally to the play because it is one thing to 'read a book' and another 'to see it staged live'. Regardless of how much people know about what happened in their own countries, during the play they may hear about some things for the first time. In this way the play has achieved its goal of 'confronting the people with the past [and with] ... what has been done in our name and what we have survived'.

Milošević does not think public exhibitions of emotion, such as crying during the play, are the main indicator of success as some directors might claim. But the strong emotional reactions of the public are important because they may be first steps towards reconciliation and healing. By using the women's own words, Dah breaks down the distance between observers and participants and enables an emotional connection between them. It also expects rational self-reflection and a critical view of the performance from the audience and, in order to facilitate this, the director and actors hold 'conversations' with the audience after each performance. These conversations are based on both the performance and the book and are moderated by a facilitator from the troupe. After the discussion the floor is open for members of the audience to share their war-time experiences and some women have spoken about these for the first time. The fact that women survivors have felt comfortable and safe enough to do this in public after all these years is another of the play's important achievements. In this respect *Crossing the Lines* has helped these women to realise that they are not the only ones who have experienced the pain. By breathing life into their words on a public stage the play has enabled them to escape the confinement of their war experiences.

Watching this performance is of significance for the law. Not only is it a witnessing of a testimony that otherwise would not be heard in a country where there is no truth and reconciliation commission, and whose justice system is slow and largely hidden from the public eye, it is also an invitation to speak out. By improvising a truth commission on stage, Dah and its verbatim theatre allowed women in the audience

to testify about the violence committed against them. The theatre provided a safe space in which these universal yet unique stories could be told and in which any ex Yugoslav woman can recognise herself, reflect and re-visit her war time experiences.

*Crossing the Lines* gives human face and voice to all women who have suffered the horror of war. By allowing members of the audience to recognise the pain of 'the other' as their own pain, and to empathise with 'the other', the performance plays a role in transitional justice processes, reconciliation and healing. I believe that such a form of theatrical expression can do what conventional legal forms cannot. It offers a woman the necessary time and space to express herself as she wants to by embodying her experience through the full and free expression of her body and voice and by permitting her to tell her story from beginning to end. A woman can tell her story while crying, smiling, sitting or lying down on stage.

Courts and judges do not offer that space, freedom of expression or time. They are interested in evidence, not in a story as such, and for the sake of evidence they will interrupt a woman witness when her testimony is no longer relevant. They need to extract certain information from her, to reopen her wound, and may even leave her emotionally devastated. In the courtroom there is no bare human connection, no empathy or time to reflect, all of which can be encouraged in the theatre. Thus, members of the audience are more prone to respond to this form of bearing witness than to the opportunity to contribute the more limited form of testimony allowed in the courtroom. Participants are able to connect on a human level with the performers and are neither physically nor psychologically distanced from them. They can pause and reflect on testimony, express themselves and even share their experience. The rigidity and formalities that the rules of evidence and procedure require in the courtroom vanish in verbatim theatre.



Figure 5 Dah Theatre 2009 Original scene from *Crossing the Lines*.  
Actresses: Ivana Milenović, Sanja Krsmanović Tasić. Reproduced with  
permission of DAH Theatre

It is significant that the former Yugoslav people in the audience may, at the same time, be survivors and witnesses themselves and some may even be perpetrators. The audience has also included men, some of whom have been very critical of their own roles in the war. In the conversations after the performance some have confessed to committing crimes during the war and have taken responsibility for what happened. As Milošević puts it, 'we have a conscious male public' and these have been present in the largest numbers in Belgrade performances (Women in Black Belgrade 2007: 91). Thus, the play does something

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courts will never do: it allows perpetrators to speak up, admit to crimes committed and go unpunished. It does what, for example, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission did by providing a safe space for speaking up and confessing wrongdoing without the fear of being prosecuted.

The play is confronting, but it is also a learning process for participants. Although not financially or otherwise supported by the city of Belgrade, Milošević and the troupe are optimistic about its future. She says the lack of support from Serbia shows that it may be 'too late or too early' to stage such a play there. Working mostly without payment and with the support of a few international women's organisations, Dah Theatre is attempting to expand the play and to contact the women who shared their stories in the book to find out how they feel now.

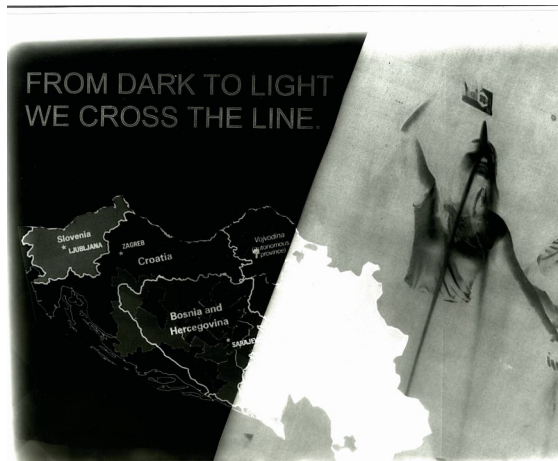


Figure 6 Narelle Byrne 2010 *We Cross the Line* photograms. Reproduced with permission of the artist

## The End

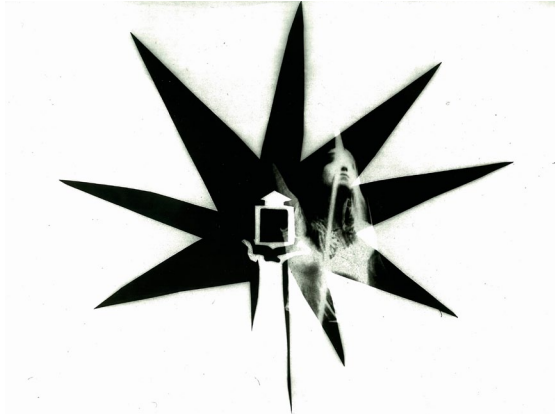


Figure 7 Narelle Byrne 2010 *We Shine Like Stars* photograms. Reproduced with permission of the artist

Dah Theatre with its play *Crossing the Lines* emphasises the universal pain of women survivors of the Yugoslav war atrocities, regardless of ethnicity and religious associations. Through the bodies and voices of the actors, the voices of women survivors of the war simultaneously reach three groups — women survivors of the war, the actors and the audience. The play brings them together in a safe space, blends their breath into one, and unites their unique paths of healing and dealing with the past.

## Notes

- 1 The motto of Dah Theatre. See < [http://www.dahteatarcentar.com/predstave/zenit\\_eng.html](http://www.dahteatarcentar.com/predstave/zenit_eng.html)>
- 2 *ibid*
- 3 *ibid*
- 4 *ibid*
- 5 See <<http://www.wluml.org/node/4949>>

- 6 Dijana Milošević interview conducted by Olivera Simić Brisbane 9 December 2009
- 7 In 1993, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ethnic name 'Bosniaks' was introduced for Bosnian Muslims (previously used by Muslims in the former Yugoslavia).
- 8 Dijana Milošević interview conducted by Olivera Simić Brisbane 9 December 2009

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— 2008 ‘Serbia: Attacks against Dah Theatre’ Women Living Under Muslim  
Laws 23December 2008 See <<http://www.wluml.org/node/4949>>

## **Case**

*Prosecutor v Radislav Krstić*, IT-98-33 ‘Srebrenica-Drina Corps’ Trial Chamber  
Judgement (2 August 2001)