

ROUTES AWARD WINNER 2009: BORKA PAVIĆEVIĆ

Cultural decontamination can be thankless work. Once you have one clean corner for free expression, another dark spot appears on the horizon -- or blasting through the TV set. But for the founder of Belgrade's Centre for Cultural Decontamination it's just another day at the office. Whether it's reconciliation, unification or building a healthy culture, these are all ongoing processes that must accept many voices and not just one.



© Srdjan Veljovic

Borka Pavićević (1947, Montenegro) fulfils some of the stereotypes of the old school Central European intellectual: she has a formidable presence, a large vocabulary, a taste for both dark colours and dark humour, and a deep throaty voice from smoking cigarettes. She also conjures up the image of an embattled political dissident. And indeed she fought the good fight throughout Yugoslavia's violent disintegration in the 1990s.

In the 1970s and 80s, she worked as a dramaturge and publisher across Tito's united Yugoslavia. But in the early 90s, she was squeezed out of her job leading one of the more prestigious theatre institutions in the country. Her anti-war views

did not match those of Milošević's nationalists coming into power, who had conceived "the other" as a handy scapegoat for all of the Serbian people's problems. Other populist nationalist leaders propagated the same ideas in Croatia and Bosnia -- blaming "the other other" -- and the country descended into war. By rejecting the reality that a healthy culture arises from many cultures, the region became a symbol of what happens under a monoculture: all becomes kitsch.

In 1994, Pavićević set up the Centre for Cultural Decontamination (Centar Za Kulturnu Dekontaminaciju/CZKD) in an abandoned building in Belgrade to "provoke the understanding that society was sick" and to provide a platform for democratic expression and civil society discourse. Fifteen years on, the Centre has organised more than 5000 different performances, exhibitions, theatre events, protest actions and lectures. Tireless and provocative, Pavićević talks the talk and walks the walk. "Democracy must be rethought every day!"

Steve Korver spoke to her in Amsterdam in January 2010 just after she received the Routes Award 2009 in Brussels.

What was the moment when you first felt that it was really going terribly wrong in early 1990s Yugoslavia?

In 1991 I was at the premier of a play about Saint Sava which got interrupted by a crowd in the gallery shouting "get off the stage!" I looked up and it was the most horrible thing I ever saw...

The power of the mob?

They were the same types who fought at football matches and joined paramilitary groups -- the ones who beat those they don't agree with. But this situation was more organised. It was as if the preparation was over and it was time for mobilisation. The performance was an invitation-only preview with all the press there and most people reacted as if nothing special had happened. But it was what Bertolt Brecht called a "street scene" because others interpreted differently: it was a warning of what was going to happen. And it is those very scenes that must be illuminated as such in theatre, and elsewhere, or it will be too late.

Are you still witnessing these sorts of scenes today?

Perhaps such a scene occurred again just a few months ago in Belgrade when a French football fan was killed by a group of Belgrade hooligans. He was just sitting in a restaurant, and they walked in and beat him to death. In reaction, the radio station B92 played a song based on the poem by the German Martin Niemöller reacting to the indifference of intellectuals to Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s... [She recites]

"First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a communist;

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew; Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out.”

They also played that same song on the radio twenty years ago. And that poem was on our wall at the Centre from the beginning.

Have you always mixed activism and theatre?

In some way yes. But with the failure of Yugoslavia -- actually it wasn't a failure because we killed it and that was a huge job to kill it, *let me tell you* -- life and politics were impossible to divorce. Especially in public life. And theatre is a public space *par excellence*...

So why a Centre for Cultural Decontamination?

It was self-evident. If this contamination comes from the reigning culture through the media, academia, books... There is *still* a bookstore in the middle of Belgrade that sells these ridiculous books about the Jewish plot against the Serbs, or “The Life and Styles of General Mladic”... But anyway, if you have this garbage just flourishing and officially backed by the army and secret services and it just spreading naturally, via for example, people talking on buses about what they saw on TV last night, it becomes obvious that you have to formulate a counter-statement by those who don't agree with this. Also if a people can be systematically contaminated with dangerous ideas, tools can be invented that promotes culture in a cross-border sense. And therefore we needed a meeting place that could represent this alternative. A place where people could see it, touch it, interact with it.

Did the regime fight back?

Well for one, the centre's name was never mentioned in the press. They would mention famous people coming to Belgrade but not that they were here to visit the Centre. But we named it as pure provocation -- as soon as you hear it, you know it is political. But the rest was boring really. We were accused of being backed by the CIA or were part of some international plot against Serbia. Then there was the macho silliness: calling us names like “witches” or “bastards”. At least we had Radio B92 to give another side of the story. But after the NATO bombings, we were closed down by the police and called “Culture's Fifth Columnists” in a main newspaper *Politika*. Ridiculous!

Wasn't your husband beaten up on live television?

Sort of... My husband Nikola Barovic is a human rights lawyer and in 1997 he was representing these Croats who were being expelled from their houses for being Croats in Zemun, a town beside Belgrade whose mayor at the time was Šešelj [the Serb nationalist paramilitary leader currently on trial in The Hague]. And Šešelj and my husband confronted each other on live TV and it escalated. You didn't actually see him getting beaten, just being chased by Šešelj through the studio -- the broadcast was cut off. An hour later, we saw him on another

station with a completely broken face. He told me that it was the work of a bodyguard's knee. He needed surgery. It was a real *drama*...

Another one of Brecht's "street scenes"?

Yes, these are the scenes that should have a normal society shout loudly: "*ENOUGH!*"

So you must have felt fantastic when a more positive street scene came to life on October 5, 2000 when a peaceful demonstration worked to finally remove Milošević from power?

Yes, it was amazing. *But listen to me:* we couldn't feel that much since we were too busy *working!* [Laughter] This was a resistance movement of many groups working together, along with students, old Partisans, free press, independent media and many individuals. There was a general awareness that we needed a million people on the streets because the police would then not dare to start shooting. But afterwards, the political parties who said they were part of 5 October came forward. Well, some were part of it, others were not...

And the party definitely ended when Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić was assassinated 18 months later... How do you feel about the current situation? One assumes that there's still plenty of gangster monoculture to decontaminate...

Well at least it's more about thieves than murderers now. And optimism exists. Society is less polarised with more people in the middle. A much larger segment of the public really want to know what's going on in this time of transition and privatisation. I have the luxury of having my journalist friends keeping me updated, but otherwise it's very difficult to understand why, for example, the park across the street is being replaced by some ugly new construction. How a certain person gave money to certain people and the right political party...

Have the goals of the Centre evolved?

People say the situation is different. That it is harder. That at least with Milošević we had a distinct entity we could fight... But I see this attitude as an excuse for doing nothing. These are all phases and the Centre should exist without phases. You should always be checking what's going on. You should not repeat! Not in theatre. Not in text. Not in everyday life. Don't repeat! Can you believe they are still "negotiating about Srebrenica". *Oh my god!* Have these people ever read anything? It was formulated when it happened. It was genocide!

The Centre worked with like-minded artists and thinkers from across the ex-Yugoslavia throughout the wars. Now with the wars "over", have these relationships been able to flourish?

During the war I thought that the connection, between people who were critical in *their* particular circumstances, will be those with more power afterwards -- or at least in a better position to work on a culture of peace. I thought this network would be the framework to build towards reconciliation. But culture is still

represented in the national sense -- just look at Bosnia today. When you are in Sarajevo you can't breathe with the atmosphere of victimisation and nationalism. People promoting a culture of peace must come again with stronger statements otherwise it will only get worse.

Obviously what happened in former Yugoslavia can happen anywhere. Have you come to recognise any universal signs that can serve as warning? You have already mentioned the glorification of the hooligan and a government-backed movement to monoculture...

Yes! Yes! But a lot of that comes from the *not remembering*. About what happened in Europe around World War II. *Not remembering* what can happen if you are not vigilant every day. There should be a conscious, deep, serious discussion about *how* to live together. Václav Havel once expressed it as: "before there was Islam over there and Coca Cola over there but now we have everything together -- so *come on people* let's just see what we can do!"

But that's why I am very grateful to the European Cultural Foundation for the prize. It helps put former Yugoslavia's problems in a broader, European context. That what happened with us has happened before and can happen again. And I am very curious as to how the reactions will be back at home. In that way, this prize is also political...

It is often expressed that the only hope for Serbia is to join the European Union...

Personally I don't see how it can survive if it doesn't. And now everyone is for it -- left, right, men, women, children, trees... Even the fascists and radicals who before defined Europe as an evil outside force out to destroy Serbia now support membership. Now that's *one* part of the story... Another part is: *come on people* it's actually about *re-entering* Europe! *My god*, have you ever looked at a map? We're right there near the Adriatic! *Hello!* And then there all these "terms of delivery": that we have to *deliver* General Mladic, that we must *stop* beating homosexuals. This makes me sick. We should do these things anyway as part of becoming a healthier diverse society again...

I hope the Centre will be a place for critical voices dealing with Europe. Voices that do not say "Yes Mister Dutch Prime Minister" or "Yes Mister Berlusconi". That's the only way we can build on Europe: changing it by changing ourselves.

How have you been able to retain your optimism and sense of humour?

I don't think about that. You have your friends and family, you get a chance to go places. Perhaps it's from a sense of duty to the people lost and the cities destroyed. Perhaps some of us feel responsible for the rise of nationalism in 1991 because maybe we could have done more to stop it. It's just something you have to do. Otherwise you just can't enjoy the city. Our Centre is small but it represents something that was once big here in Yugoslavia. Perhaps we are just repeating some place that I loved.

It's just who you are?

Perhaps a sense for injustice is biological. I really can't stand seeing all these young people with so much potential who are under a baton as if they are dead. It makes me sick in the stomach that there are no basic structures to help develop their gifts and now they are killing each other over a parking space. At times I can stay quiet, but then it just explodes. Like with this Frenchman who was killed... The other night on TV, a guy was saying "well this Frenchman was here a long time, so who knows what he was up to?" It's like saying a girl was raped because she was dressed pretty. Those sorts of statements are just too much for me. It's amazing that after all that we have seen over the last years that such a comment can still be taken seriously! OK, maybe he forgot about WWII, but -- *come on people* -- the *same thing* happened here just yesterday...

www.czkd.org

Upcoming Activities at the Centre for Cultural Decontamination

- On 5, 8 and 13 February 2010, **round tables** will take place as part of the exhibition celebrating the Centre's 15th anniversary. The Centre and like-minded organisations from the rest of former Yugoslavia are coming together with outside consultants to discuss the relations between design, cultural policies and production, the possibilities of creating "new" cultural centres and the evolution of the "old" ones created in the 1990s.

- **Woman and Success** is a multi-annual project/exhibition that studies the role of women in Serbian society. This year's the series will deal with the issues around victorious women, women heroes and women as victim.

- **Centre for Yugoslav Studies**: In cooperation with organisations from throughout former Yugoslavia, this series of studies deals with specific Yugoslavian phenomena: self-management, free schooling, role of culture, architecture, etc.

- Setting up of **Reading Library**: a space for exchanging ideas and promoting reading and books from the field of human rights and theory.

- **RISK** is a multi-annual project (2007-2010) dedicated to daring theatre production. It creates a space where the possibilities of personal choice, creativity and authorship are explored as well as possibilities of applying these to institutional production frameworks. RISK is a critique of the existing model of theatre production ("fabricated theatre") and the lack of critical thought into the nature of such productions.

- CZKD is one of the organisations helping organise a new **art biennale** taking place in a Cold War bunker on Konjic mountain near Sarajevo.