The first thing that needs to be said here is that this is neither a comprehensive nor scientific account of the current state of professional theatre in South Eastern Europe, the region traditionally, but now somewhat pejoratively, known as the Balkans. Rather what I shall attempt to essay is to convey a few vivid images, snapshots if you will, of theatrical activity in the region, based on my personal experiences as a theatre practitioner and an outsider with no blood ties to any of the region’s constituent peoples.

**SLIDE 2**

It is unusual for Canadians to think explicitly along ethnic lines, even though as a nation based on immigration our integration policies are notably distinct from those of the United States. Historically Canadians have favoured a multiculturalism approach which celebrates each culture’s distinctiveness rather than the “melting pot” approach of our American cousins. Canada has generally adhered to the approach that if the instinctive reflex of peoples to remain separated from each other is not judicially enforced, and ethnic divisions are not allowed to fester, then the desire to remain distinct can be accommodated within a larger tent.

In this new age of promise, which heralds the possibility that the politics of fear and the greed-based economics of globalisation will recede as the dominant forces in world affairs, the issue of ethnicity may seem outdated, slightly quaint, even. Aren’t we all past that? Can’t we all just get along?

I offer these remarks as an introduction to the central trope of my observations on creating theatre in the Balkans: difference is everything, and ethnicity is at the root of the distinctions most people in the world continue to make in determining their own identity and that of others. This is, of course, what theatre is about: asking questions which force us to assess who we are, and what we are doing, here, now, past and present. Where you come from, what language or dialect you speak, what religion you practise, the colour of your skin, the nature of one’s heterodoxy, all are markers of identity. In an affluent society such as the one we share in North America we can delude ourselves that such differences don’t matter. But the societies of the Balkans are older and perhaps wiser in understanding the primal attraction of tribalism. Ethnic difference has remained a matter of life and death since the time of the Ottoman occupation right up to the present day. All too often those of us from comfortable societies like our own take on a kind of “white man’s burden” attitude to the social reconstruction which is taking place in the Balkans, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Gaza. Why can’t they be more like us?

A Canadian who attempts to impose his beliefs when working in the Balkans risks being labelled naïve at best and a cultural imperialist at worst. I remember doing a press conference for national media in Belgrade in 2005. The Culture and Public Affairs Officer from the Canadian Embassy, which was partially sponsoring the show, took a small Canadian flag out of her purse and placed it on the desk in front of me as I sat down. Predictably, the first question responded indirectly to this act of territorialism: what did I have to teach the Serbian people about theatre and culture? I chose not to answer this question directly, except to say that theatre should never impose anything on anyone. The question was a reminder of the minefields, literal and metaphorical, which litter the landscape of the region.

Other questions—landmines—often go unasked and are instead felt, communicated through the vocabularies of gesture, inflection, the addition and subtraction of politesse. What am I doing there? There is often an assumption that I am a descendent of one of the resident peoples, perhaps a man who came to Canada to escape the brutal excesses of Milošević or the son of a father tortured by Croatian chetniks who sided with Hitler, an Albanian from Kosovo or a native Macedonian hounded from his land by the Greeks and Bulgarians. With this question comes its essential corollary. What side am I on? Impartiality is understood only as a tactical posture by partisans, and even the most tolerant, worldly member of the younger generations now taking responsibility for the future of the region are subject to the virulent nationalism which runs through all the Balkan peoples. Kosovar Albanians expect me to demonise the Serbs and to ignore their own acts of terror. The Serbs ask me why they have been demonised by an ignorant West but fail to acknowledge their complicity in the war crimes of Milošević. The Croats label themselves Central Europeans, disdaining their poorer neighbours, those unblessed with coastlines attractive to rich western Europeans. The Bulgarians covet parts of Macedonia; Macedonia fights with Greece over the use of its name; Greece fights with Turkey over Cyprus; Serbia reluctantly cedes Kosovo and begins to reacquire a part of it by stealth; Croatia waits for the inevitable break-up of Bosnia-Herzegovina to take their share of the spoils; the Albanians keep their cousins in Kosovo and Macedonia at a gentle arm’s length while not discouraging dreams of a Greater Albania.

The fact is that my ancestry is Irish and Flemish. Like most Canadians, my roots in Canada go back only a few generations, but I have no blood ties to Eastern Europe. Yet I have spent twenty years going back and forth from Canada to the many countries which emerge and submerge and re-emerge there, making theatre in as many cultures as will welcome me. What am I doing there?

The answer is that, as a person from a nation of shallow roots, I have been raised to suspect nationalism and its slightly less toxic relation, patriotism. Our place on this earth is ephemeral. We are renters, though we may constantly cry ownership of what we take. Whatever “it” is, it has been “owned” before; it will be owned anew. We are passing through. Therefore I feel no need for reasons based on parentage, or geo-political determinism, to ply my theatrical trade far from the shores of the land in which I was raised. I have come to a set of beliefs which coalesce around the idea that difference must be acknowledged, not ignored, and that there are universal vocabularies we can use to glean meaning from our distinct existences and to connect them. Such a vocabulary is that of the theatre.

**SLIDE 3**

The theatre is its own country. I feel at home with theatre people from disparate lands in a way that I often do not around people with whom I share other, more traditional affiliations, such as family, nationality or educational status. There is another reason. When one travels, one becomes brave, by necessity. Actions that would be inconceivable in front of those who know you well become permissible, possible. You can break away from a pre-determined perception of yourself. I think this appeals to the North American frontier sensibility: *you can re-make yourself*.

So I come to countries such as Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece and the new, disputed country of Kosovo not to change their cultures but to enrich my vocabulary, my store of intercultural tools. I hope that there is some reciprocal value involved; through the productions I have directed, the plays I have created and the BoxWhatBox methodology I have developed for alternative performance creation, perhaps I can leave a small legacy of altered perception, or at least the possibility of an altered perception. The ways of theatre in Balkan countries vary widely in the amount of money and technological sophistication involved, but the actor training, the approach of directors, and the structure of the theatre system has not changed substantially since Stanislavski. Ironically. the reading of Stanislavski’s teachings, in fact, is at times almost as inaccurate as Lee Strasberg’s. So there is benefit to be accrued from an outside influence and an introduction to alternative ways of creating narrative and training for performance.

**SLIDE 9**

**Section 2: Serbian Theatre**

I have directed four productions in Serbia, as well as leading a BoxWhatBox workshop at the international student-run festival F.I.S.T. Its theatre tradition is rooted in the sense of national identity which emerged in the 19th century but which harks back to the coming of the Slavic peoples to the region in the 6th century and which takes as its touchstones the Turkish oppression which took place over a period of nearly 500 years and an historic military defeat at Kosovo Polje in 1389.

Serbian actors are well trained in text-based psychological realism of the Russian school. Most train at one of the three main national conservatories, although there are now private acting academies springing up. There is a well-established, if somewhat impoverished, system of theatres which runs through virtually every city. Each of these theatres has its own repertory of actors and runs a rotating schedule of plays which may appear over a period of years and as infrequently as once every two months. Increasingly the system is evolving toward the mode of contract-by-production as is used in North America, but the rep system remains the foundation of Serbian theatre. Actors are well-known in their communities and often travel back and forth between cities to do plays. The sporadic production schedules of the rep system enable them to do this.

**SLIDE 4 (Sirano)**

One of the downsides of such a system is that increasingly, as actors rove from city to city doing theatre, film, television and dubbing work, rehearsal periods are fractured. The old-style European rehearsal, mythologised by American writers such as Norris Houghton, taking place over six months or even a year, has been reduced to one or two months in almost every case. While this sounds luxurious by Western standards it must be remembered that often a director may be without one or more actors at virtually every rehearsal, and that days and even weeks may go by where rehearsals cannot take place because there is not enough rehearsal space or the schedules of all concerned do not match. This kind of discontinuity would be deeply unnerving to the average North American actor (or director), used as she is to a three or four week period where her sole focus, at least for the eight hours a day she is required to be present, is the single show she has been contracted to perform. For actors in South Eastern Europe, however, this discontinuity is of a piece with the schedule of performances. As has been the case for at least three hundred years in Europe, actors in the Balkans are expected to pick up a performance that is being re-mounted with a single day (or less) of rehearsal. A busy working actor for a rep company in Serbia may be a member of a company based in Niš, and is expected to travel back and forth from the capital to perform and rehearse the shows in which she or he has been cast; this may be as many as 8-10 shows in a year. In addition to those 8-10 shows there are shows which continue from year to year which they must retain in their minds and bodies. The production of my play ***Cyrano XXI*** which debuted at the National Theatre of Serbia in Niš in June 2007 is still running once or twice a month, by way of example. On top of this the actor may have television, film or radio work they must negotiate in terms of fitting it into their schedules.

**SLIDE 5 (I FORGET)**

When I first came to New York to train as an actor I apprenticed at a classical rep company, the Classic Stage Company. In my time there I often thought that such a system, for an actor, was ideal; rehearsing plays of established value during the day while performing at night. An actor has the opportunity in such a system to develop their performance while at the same time honing their craft. The disadvantages to an actor of such an approach were not as obvious to me as they are now. Once you are contracted to a rep theatre you are subject to the perceptions—and the casting decisions—of its directors. Changing a person’s mind in any facet of life can be a daunting challenge; in my experience few actors succeed at changing the mind of a director in terms of how and in what they should be cast. A repertory actor takes a significantly lower salary for the benefit of contractual stability. Actors who cry poverty in the United States should think before they murmur; the average wage at Serbian theatres is less than $400 US a month.

**SLIDE 6 (I FORGET)**

The notion of independent, alternative, or fringe theatre is slowly taking root in Serbia and in the Balkans generally, but the entrenched system is difficult to dislodge. There is always resistance from established elites and the forces of cultural conservatism, who favour big theatre plants with large lobbies for entertaining patrons of culture. In Serbia there is a system, as elsewhere in the region, of national theatres supported by state subsidy, with a smaller constellation of municipal theatres supported by city administrations. Politics is a factor in decisions as to who takes on the administrative jobs running these theatres; there is scant tradition of arms-length funding as exists in Canada. In this predominantly conservative environment, where the repertoire heavily skews towards classics, fashionable international fare and plays of the national canon, alternative theatre makers have begun to establish the ground whereby new work, in both form and content, can flourish. Companies such as Open Arc Theatre Cluster, sponsored by international organisations, which produced my productions of ***I Dream*** *and* ***HAWKS*** in site-specific locations in southern Serbia in 2006 and 2007,

**SLIDE 7 (HAWKS)**

are an example of companies which are modular, flexible, and which view theatre as a part of a larger approach to re-shaping cultural attitudes. Such artists are warmly welcoming of international influences and collaboration. They deeply regret the excesses of their previous political regimes, as they are able to witness firsthand the animosity and wariness it has created in neighbouring cultures. Considerable progress is being made by young Serbian theatre artists in forging projects which bring together Croats, Slovenes, Bosniaks and members of the international community. The situation in Kosovo remains volatile and a rapprochement may be some years off, but hope can be found that initiatives such as those I am currently undertaking will bear fruit there as well.

It has always been remarkable to me that cultures that are so much older and deeply connected to their history—often to their detriment, in terms of internecine warfare—have proven so open to alternative approaches. I was going to say “new” approaches, but this is a word with which North Americans are obsessed and which Europeans justly suspect. They have, in many ways, seen it all. This frees them, paradoxically, from the delusion that there is one political system that works above all, or one way of doing theatre. In this we have, oddly, much to learn about innovation from the encrusted historicity of Eastern and South Eastern Europeans.

Newness in theatre is often closely associated with whatever technological bells and whistles have been developed recently. While there are certainly directors in the Balkans who still hitch their aesthetic wagon to the technological train, there is an appreciation of what Jerzy Grotowski called “Poor Theatre”, theatre which depends on the actor’s instrument for the communication of meaning. The actor, not the text, is the most basic unit of the theatre. In developing BoxWhatBox I consciously sought to combine Poor Theatre aesthetic principles with other techniques I found valuable in creating a universal theatre vocabulary, such as those of Eugenio Barba, Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*. My purpose was never overtly political in the manner of Boal, but more in line with Brecht’s belief that theatre is innately political, and that consciousness, on the part of the performers and the spectators, is essential if one is to engage in a healthy questioning of the state of one’s society. Thus the goals of BoxWhatBox are not prescriptive or pedagogical but rather to enfranchise the performer and spectator by creating objective pools of perception amidst the islands of subjectivity which divide us.

**SLIDE 9 (BoxWhatBox)**

In BoxWhatBox the performers are asked to assist in creating a *performance text*. There are many ways we do this, but generally the process involves finding a theme or set of themes around which to base the creation of a narrative. Then a set of *frames* are developed, usually by the animateur/director. These frames function in the way the old commedia dell ‘Arte scenarios once did; as a set of outlines, scene by scene, which the actors would be expected to flesh out. To fill out these frames we engage in a process of *targeted improvisation*. I develop games, exercises and etudes for the actors in a particular cast which focus their creative abilities on the objectives of their characters within a defined set of parameters. Character is thus created through action. Actors understand a process based on action rather than theory. Their investment in such a process is always deeper and more personal than when they are asked merely to perform the role of interpreters of established characters and narratives. Often, in fact, their investment really is personal: in the 2005 production of ***I Forget*** at the National Theatre of Serbia in Užice, I asked the cast of six to bring in a photo from their past which, when they regarded it, caused them to question their memory of the circumstances of the photograph. We developed transitional scenes from each photograph which played out between the three narrative frames I had developed for illuminating the theme of forgetting and memory. The actors addressed the audience directly when taking charge of their personal photograph memory. This technique has quite a different effect when it takes place in an environment where the actor is as well-known to his or her community as the local actors were in Užice. There was a sense of shared confidence, an act which amounted to theatrical complicity, which took place. The personal investment of the actors, and their willingness to transform a personal memory into an objective moment in a wider narrative, demythologised their roles as performers while adding to the theatricality of the experience.

**SLIDE 10 (Kosovar Theatre)**

**Section Three: Kosovar Theatre**

I have directed three productions in Kosovo, two in Prishtina before independence and one in Prizren in 2008, close after the declaration of independence. I have also given two BoxWhatBox workshops there.

It’s a fascinating place to work. Politics hangs heavy in the air. The status of the nascent nation is still very much in play. Poverty is endemic. The National Theatre has a yearly budget of just €125000 to pay for a company of actors, the maintenance of a huge building, all the administration personnel, upkeep of props and costumes, promotion…and of course the productions. It’s an impossible task, and as with anything in Kosovo, necessarily involves the art of cutting corners, the negotiation of discounts and occasional copyright theft. The average salary at the theatre is about €150-250 per month. A freelance actor might make three times that on a production, but they sacrifice the stability of the paycheque. A smaller provincial theatre like the one in Kosovo’s second city, Prizren, runs on €5000 a year.

Thus the term “Poor Theatre” has a very concrete meaning and application in Kosovo. Audiences still carry the received attitude regarding elaborate production that most audiences in the West carry, but their expectations have become more flexible given that their own expectations of life have undergone similar revision over the past twenty years. Costumes can be recycled. The technical staff at theatres, usually comprising only one or two men, are masters at converting old set pieces into new pieces. There is a limit to this, of course. Fabric and materials wear out, and some costumes and set pieces can’t be altered because the plays in which they feature continue in repertory. A director learns quickly the art of the possible: what one can reasonably ask for, and what one should not expect to get. New lighting instruments are expensive, and gel filters are hard to acquire and expensive for what you get. Lighting design does not exist as a separate art form (or a separate budget line); the director is expected to fulfill this artistic function. This is typical for Eastern European theatre in general. Sound design, depending on the needs of a production, can be done by individual artists and executed by technicians following the orders of a composer or the director. I design all of my own soundscapes in Eastern Europe, working with a technician. In Canada I would be considered a megalomaniac, but this is among the aesthetic adjustments one can make in an environment such as Kosovo. People and their skills can be cheaply purchased, although the timing of task completion or the reliability of the individual (who may be working several other jobs) is variable. Fabric is relatively inexpensive and costumes can be built relatively cheaply if one finds the right designer or costumier. This is an example of an aspect of production that in the wealthy European and North American theatres is hideously over-priced.

I admit to a profound bias against the excessive capitalisation of the bourgeois western theatre. As people are paid what they regard as fair wages—that is, wages calculated against some mythical market value—the number of productions, and the type of play being produced, is reduced accordingly. Audience becomes paramount in accounting for the choice of and commercial viability of a play. The market determines all. In Kosovo, as in most of Eastern Europe, the market is important, but theatre’s role in artistic and community leadership remains at the forefront of decisions, even as market forces slowly eat away at the notion of a wide repertory.

What is missing at the moment in the Albanian Kosovar theatre are plays which take a truly theatrical perspective. What I mean by this is that plays which are critical of current political practices, or which cast a cold light on the behaviour, mores and attitudes of Kosovars, are still not welcome. The wounds are still too fresh from the vicious, soul-searing confrontation with Serbs over the past twenty years, with generations of repression having preceded that. Yet this theatrical perspective is essential if Kosovars are to mature and become, in actuality, a people rather than a tribe. A nation cannot afford a one-sided version of its own history without poisoning its children. One thinks of the contrast between post-WW II Germany, which continues to actively confront its Nazi crimes, and that of Japan or Croatia, which have never adequately done so. Japan’s and Croatia’s political discourse and its citizens retain an infantile quality; Germany has resumed being a world leader. In the Balkans Albanian Kosovars are merely following established protocol. Apology is a form of weakness; it’s always someone else’s fault, some earlier transgression or crime is responsible for the crime one commits.

**SLIDE 11**

Creating new theatre, utilising new methods of creation, is implicitly a political act in Kosovo. I travelled to Prishtina in 2006 to create two new plays with playwright Jeton Neziraj, based on the subject matter and themes of Vergil’s ***Aeneid***. The ***Aeneid*** is a poem about the hollowness of war and the spiritual void created by a reliance on the tribe as a benchmark of communal identity. Aeneas is a reluctant, guilt-filled hero, having essentially run from the loss at Troy. He keeps running until he finds a convenient time and place to take the land and identity from another set of people, re-establishing the Trojans as the forerunners of the Romans. It’s all justifiable, of course, if you blame the hardships visited upon you by previous combatants and you don’t look too closely at how similar your actions are to theirs. This zero sum game is, for me, the essence of political discourse in the Balkans. The objective is to grab as much as one can and to solidify one’s hold as much as possible. This results in such anathematic acts as ethnic cleansing. No group in the Balkans is guilt-free of such crimes. Jeton’s play focused on the duplicity and evil of a Serbian general to two victimised Albanian of the country who had lost their son. It was generally more positively received than my play ***Aeneas Ghost***, which featured a damaged Aeneas lost between worlds.

In developing the two plays that would become ***Aeneas Ghost***, which I wrote, and ***Aeneas Wounded***, written by Jeton, I discovered in a very practical way the workings of Kosovar theatre. The actors are well-trained in the traditional Stanislavskian manner. They are generally excellent improvisers, as befits members of a culture which is forced to improvise every day in order to survive. The actors are playful and physically expressive in a way that Serbian actors often are not. They are also notoriously unreliable in terms of on-time attendance or even showing up at rehearsal. As with all other issues in Kosovar society, there is always a reason for such behaviour. The exigencies of life in a poor society where one cannot buy extra time through services like a baby-sitter or a late-working dentist; the need to work several jobs to make ends meet; the failure to trust that the acting job for which they have been hired will actually pay; a need to attend mosque five times per day. One of my ***Aeneas*** actors apologised for his lateness at a rehearsal because he’d been in court explaining why he was carrying a loaded gun on the front seat of his car. A director in such a situation cannot haul out the Equity rule book and blithely lecture actors on professionalism. A director must be able to put his concept and ideals in his or her back pocket and to be at all times a pragmatist. The ideals, and the concept, can be pulled out at any point where it seems propitious. First, however, one must prove as versatile and ingenious as the actors one is working with and the culture where you are working. In Albanian culture, adaptability not only a paramount virtue but a test of belonging.

**SLIDE 12 (PJML)**

An example of this test of adaptability occurred during rehearsals for ***Punch and Judy Murder Love***, a play I created with Kosovar actors in 2008. I lost three and a half weeks of promised rehearsal to another director who was already working at the theatre. Without a second rehearsal space, it became a game of territorial chicken. Having already been in rehearsal for two months, he prolonged his rehearsals, telling the Director of the theatre he needed a bit more time to get things right. His production, of a relatively simple Martin McDonagh play, did not visibly alter over the extra time. Mine, confined to occasional rehearsals truncated by his technical needs, the rotating power outages which are a daily feature of Kosovar life, and by the daily absence of one or more of my own actors, developed in sudden surges divided by lacunae of inactivity. A six week period to create a new play using an alternative performance creation technique became a three week exercise in creative expediency. The actors responded fearfully, but brilliantly. The Director of the theatre continuously apologised to me for cutting my time, but did nothing about it. I was expected to alter my plans. Directors in Kosovo, and often in the Serbian theatre as well, prolong their stay at a theatre, spacing out rehearsals over weeks and months of intermittent rehearsing. The money remains the same. This model does not work so well with an international director who is contractually bound to move on to another country at a fixed date. At the opening, after a prolonged series of standing ovations, the vision of the play and the approach had been vindicated, but I was under no illusion that in this provincial Kosovar theatre the Director had any appetite for risk any greater than doing a community-theatre level Irish play.

Albanian theatre is fighting the entrenched presence of a garden-variety realism which Stanislavski would describe as mediocre, representational theatre. It talks truth but does not walk truth; to be fair this is the case everywhere where actors are not called to account for taking shortcuts in characterisation or training. The profound absurdity of life in Kosovo is not mirrored on the stage, save in the work of Jeton Neziraj and his company CCTD. The questions which are raised every day, about humanity and life when faced with inhuman situations, are seldom confronted in theatre except in abstract or partisan terms. This is a weakness which must be addressed. The founding of CATT, the Centre for Alternative Theatre Training, is one step I have taken to contribute to a new generation of artists who, like Jeton Neziraj, are unafraid of collaboration—even with former enemies—and who are willing to ask questions every society needs to ask.

Where theatre will go in Kosovo, and in Serbia, in the next ten to fifteen years is an open question and one in which I take a passionate interest. The talent level exists to do theatre which is of international level—not only the kind of universalist pap which routinely tours the festivals, hosted by the rich and the guilty, but theatre which expresses the essence of these mesmerizingly complex peoples and which manages to strike a chord in each spectator as well. I do not believe infrastructure is the issue, although an influx of money to pay artists and purchase more modern technology is always welcome. Rather the issue is one of cultural will. Just as Serbs are slowly waking up to the fact that their government betrayed them with the active complicity of its military and a minority of tribalist thugs in the 1990s, Albanian Kosovars are awaking to the fact that open political discourse which extends beyond ethnic divisions and viscerally remembered grudges is a critical factor in the maturation of any society. The theatre has traditionally played a role in political and social discourse in Eastern Europe; it should be allowed to, again, through the introduction of new theatre techniques, international influences and collaborations with one’s former enemies. Therein lies the wonder of the Theatre, which is simultaneously a mirror to one world and a society and culture all its own; it conveys dual citizenship on all who commit themselves to it at the expense of their selfishness and subjectivity.

**Michael Devine**