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Aeneas in Kosova: Inter-cultural Perspectives on Theatrical Creation in a Canadian-Albanian Context

Abstract

From October, 2005 through to October 2006 a process of parallel theatrical creation was agreed upon and undertaken by two playwrights, Michael Devine of Canada and Jeton Neziraj of the disputed Serbian territory of Kosovo. Each would write, in isolation, a stage treatment of the Aeneas legend, using Virgil as a foundation but not as a template. Neziraj, the Artistic Director of MultiMedia Theatre in Prishtina, and Devine, an experienced international director, would then collaborate on producing the two works simultaneously in Albanian. The works, Devine's *Aeneas Ghost* and Neziraj's *Aeneas Wounded*, produced together under the title *Aeneas 06*, were radically different in tone, approach to the subject matter, and style. Their differences offer much to the theatre researcher about the nuances and challenges of inter-cultural theatre projects. This paper explores the process of creation which led to the production of *Aeneas 06* and offers observations on how such processes might be approached in future.

In October 2005 I met with Jeton Neziraj, the Artistic Director of a theatre company based in Prishtina, Kosovo. Through the auspices of a company called Conley International, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), I had arranged for a theatre student at Acadia University in Nova Scotia to apprentice with Mr. Neziraj's company over a period of three months in the summer of 2005. That had formed the initial basis of our contact. When I visited Prishtina in October of that year, I arrived with the intention of furthering our collaboration. As I am a theatre director who works extensively in eastern Europe, the idea of collaborating on a production appeared to be an attractive inter-cultural project to propose.

Our first contacts with each other revealed the first clues of how challenging such a project might prove to be. Mr. Neziraj is fluent in English, and I am accustomed to working in languages I do not speak, so the prospect of directing in Albanian, one of the oldest extant Indo-European languages, was not overwhelming. There were, however, linguistic issues of a slightly different nature. Was one to refer to "Kosovo", as the Serbs refer to their province, or to "Kosova", the emerging independent entity of the majority Albanian population? How to spell "Prishtina", with the Serbian accented "s" or the Albanian "sh"? These are not petty distinctions in a region fraught with conflicts which seethe perpetually under the surface even when they are not exploding into flame.

Other issues presented themselves as I prepared for my first meeting with Mr. Neziraj. I have spent considerable time in Serbia over the past four years, presenting papers at conferences and directing and creating theatre productions in Belgrade, Nis, and Užice. I count many Serbs as my friends and colleagues—one, a young director, I assisted in bringing to a Canadian university for post-graduate study. In my head lay competing, and more or less incompatible, versions of the conflict between Serbs and Albanians which

had reached its flashpoint in the 1990s after a long historic build-up. My student, Meghan, had carried no such preconceptions or received knowledge into her work in Prishtina with the theatre. She soon bonded with the vibrant arts and ex-pat community there and passed on her positive perceptions to me. The Albanians with whom she spent time were passionate about the cause of their fight for independence and definitive regarding the atrocities they alleged had been committed by the Serbian forces under Milosević and Mladić. I, on the other hand, had been treated to varying versions of events from Serbian friends which revolved around the idea of justifiable response and unpublicized expulsion of Serbian citizens from Kosovo.

In Prishtina's downtown core there is a 10 metre-high painting of the founder of the KLA, or Kosova Liberation Army. Jeton Neziraj pointed it out to me, describing the man as a "father of the nation". In downtown market stalls in Belgrade and Nis one can purchase large, heroic portraits of Ratko Mladić and Arkan, or books fulminating on the treatment these national heroes have received at the hands of a gullible and craven western media. The divide is deep, perhaps even deeper than the one which historically involved my own ancestors. The Devines of Canada are only lately removed from those of Derry, Northern Ireland, and the family has a murky history of involvement with the Irish Republican Army and of Republican sympathies generally. In Canada, of course, a Devine was free to grow up with the son of Scottish Presbyterians as a best friend. But the romance of nationalism and sectarian thinking lingers through generations long after the fighting has stopped or a family has emigrated. Through my youth I would find myself avidly reading books on the history of the Irish Catholics who fomented the Easter Rebellion of 1917, on the great leaders, Michéal Collins and Padraig Pearse, or about the men who went on hunger strike at the Maze prison in 1981—including a young man named Michael Devine, from Derry, Northern Ireland.

Canadians have no material reason to hyphenate ourselves, and yet many of us do. "Irish-Canadians" and "Ukrainian-Canadians" are indistinguishable to any of the more recent waves of immigrants who have settled in Canada over the past thirty years. Yet such distinctions appear to matter, in a country which adopted multi-culturalism as public policy under the Trudeau government of the 1970s. The idea of difference being welcomed, even celebrated, appears naïve to the ethnocentric European mentality. There is continuing resistance to this philosophy, as witnessed in the elections taking place in France in early 2007 and those which took place in Québec in March 2007. The Netherlands is discovering its veil of tolerance is thin and easily ripped. Black Americans continue to be disadvantaged on most measurable levels in American society, now even outmatched by their Hispanic counterparts, who bear a closer cosmetic resemblance to the ruling majority of that nation.

Canada is not immune to these tensions. In recent years the most troubling division in Canadian society has not been that which exists between wealth and poverty, but that which borders urban and rural communities. The divide is increasingly demographic in nature. Immigrants of every colour, ethnicity and religion pour into Canada's main cities—Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montréal. The smaller towns and rural communities remain white and European in orientation and outlook. In coming years this issue will bear addressing if it is not to prove more divisive than Canada's better-known clash of linguistic identities.

These are some of the issues and perspectives I carried into my meeting with Mr. Neziraj. As we sat at a restaurant, filled with well-paid UNMIK and KFOR personnel and beyond the means of ordinary Albanians, it was clear that producing a play in such a deeply divided society, one with a finely honed sense of resentment, was going to be fraught with challenges. What could a Canadian theatre artist contribute in such a context?

We agreed first that an established play would be a pointless exercise. Neither of us has any interest in the "canon" of received western European plays. Canadian theatre has been in self-imposed thrall to these imperialist Trojan Horses for too long, and they have little to say to contemporary Albanians. Neziraj and I wanted to create something original which would in some way bridge the gap between the contested history of the region and its contemporary reality. As I mentioned the Trojan Horse allusion Neziraj looked up. Part of *The Aeneid*, in Albanian lore, takes place in Illyria, the ancient homeland of the Albanians. Could the epic poem not serve as a template for a meditation on the state of a deconstructed society in search of an identity?

The methodology of creation is best negotiated through an awareness of limitations as well as potentialities. Costs of production, for instance, must be factored into any new creation's structure, as sadly pragmatic as that may sound. The reception environment must be considered—for whom is this work being created, and in what manner should it reach them? Above all, what roles are the creative leaders to take and how can they best collaborate?

Jeton Neziraj has created a successful theatre company in Prishtina against daunting odds, one which has, until recently, focused on theatre for youth and social development. His main talent as an artist, however, is as a playwright. He was eager to engage in our project as more than a producer. I would direct, that was clear; but the need for a second authorial voice presented itself. In the negotiation of authorship between director and playwright the playwright must always win. Directors are not merely interpreters, at least not those, like me, who desire to work as creative artists rather than glorified stage managers. In the context of a project taking *The Aeneid* as its basis it seemed appropriate to bring the contested nature of the narrative of Aeneas' journey from Troy to Rome to the creative process as well. Therefore we agreed to produce *two* plays, one written by Neziraj, the second by myself, each of which could be produced separately or in tandem with the other, using the same scenography and actors. Neziraj, as an Albanian Kosovar, would write his story. I, as the second-generation of Irish forbears and a passionate multiculturalist Canadian who has worked for years in the Balkans, would write mine.

Over the course of the next six months we wrote our plays without consulting each other. A planned workshop in Canada fell through because Serbian authorities wouldn't issue Neziraj a visa. He was effectively a citizen without a country. This anger infuses his play, *Aeneas Wounded*, which I first read in June 2006. When we met in Skopje to discuss the next phase of the project Neziraj had already read my play *Aeneas Ghost*, which I had emailed to him—ironically enough, while working on it in Belgrade. Neziraj commented that a play like *Aeneas Ghost*, with a fragmented narrative and unpunctuated text reminiscent of Heinar Müller, had never been seen in Prishtina. He was excited, however, to produce it, feeling that Albanians would be willing to risk a less conventional piece of theatre. His own play was more lyrical and impressionistic. It took sides in a very clear

way. I did not know how I would deal, as a director, with scenes which featured a lying Serbian general and a gentle, bereaved Albanian couple.

In October 2006, one year after we had made our original pact, I arrived in Prishtina to begin six weeks of rehearsals. Neziraj's company had recently moved into offices in a theatre run by a second company. The introduction to the challenges of theatre production in Prishtina began early. Soon it became apparent that we were competing for space on the stage and in the rehearsal room with virtually every company in Prishtina, including high schools and university programs. I held a day-long workshop and cast the show with two women and two men; within a day I had lost one of the women. Two days later I lost her replacement. Then her replacement had to back out of the show. After a week of rehearsals I had used four women in the same set of roles.

Actors take on as many jobs as possible, theatrical and otherwise, in Prishtina. They always say "yes" and then attempt to negotiate the schedule. Even though I possess extensive experience creating flexible rehearsal schedules in eastern Europe, Prishtina presented an extreme situation. Actors were used to perhaps three to four hours rehearsal on a given day, and the schedule would not recur every day or even five days a week, but instead over many weeks, in fits and starts. As they are cast in productions at various theatres which open and then are re-mounted periodically, the actors must make themselves available for these re-mount rehearsals. One of my actors, a popular and talented young woman, had, in addition to my rehearsals, weekly television rehearsals and as many as three other plays to rehearse on a particular day. The woman who had replaced the third of the departing actresses had to leave, two weeks into rehearsal, for ten days to attend a film festival in Tiranë. The requirements of a Canadian actor under the Canadian Actors' Equity contract seem almost precious in comparison. It is useful to note here that we were, in effect, rehearsing two plays simultaneously, a task which would have been arduous enough in less occupationally-cluttered environment.

Further aspects of inter-culturality surfaced in the creation of a rehearsal methodology. As a director who also teaches an approach to acting I call BoxWhatBox, a system of training which emphasizes the unlearning of accrued physical and emotional habits and the re-learning of wonder and play, I insisted that the cast warm-up and train for a period at the beginning of each rehearsal. Keeping a small rubber ball in the air is difficult to do when trying to smoke a cigarette, and therefore adjustments were needed on both sides; they would participate full bore in the exercises if I gave them sufficient break time to smoke. Rehearsals would begin to die at the three-hour mark, a period most Canadian theatres would consider too short to achieve any real progress. I do not believe in coddling actors, but it is a misery to work them beyond their creative motivation. Rehearsals therefore became targeted and based on floor research—that is, discoveries made on the floor, in movement, rather than around a table, reading and talking.

The table work has been a feature of western theatre since the first days of Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko at the Moscow Art Theatre. It is still prevalent in eastern Europe, as it once was in America and Canada. In recent years such table work, and long discussions of character and motivation, have diminished in North America. Whether this is a feature of the economic exigencies which have resulted in rehearsal periods steadily shrinking, from six weeks, to a month, to the current standard of two and a half weeks at regional theatres, is difficult to say. Perhaps the North American psyche is more

easily willing to eschew reasoned consideration for action, if the current state of our television and film media are any indication. What is certain is that directors and actors in Canada have rapidly become adept at making artistically valid choices quickly, shorn of the meandering and often self-indulgent discussions which bring rehearsal to a standstill. There is a price to be paid for not being able to make necessary mistakes in the practical research of any endeavour, and that price is context; the findings may prove correct, but lack dimension or the feeling of validity. This is a clear and present danger in the current North American theatre.

Nonetheless, that percussive, staccato rhythm of working is welded into the methodology I bring to productions. Actors are expected to avoid the limitations of a short rehearsal process by doing considerable research on their own, outside rehearsal, then bringing the results of their deliberations onto the floor. This was not the manner in which Albanian actors are accustomed to working. Nor has it regularly been the case in Hungary, Romania, or Serbia, when I have directed. Such an approach takes actors of a level of commitment as to seem almost unrealistically idealistic in the competitive, time-driven environment of professional theatre. The actors of the twin production which was now known as "Aeneas 06" were, fortunately, of the character where they could bridge the gap between their conventional practice and my expectation. The work progressed rapidly. Neziraj soon became a part of rehearsal, re-writing and agreeing to cuts in scenes, a process to which he was not accustomed. At thirty he is already a successful playwright and essayist in Kosova and is unused to having his work challenged. There is no evident dramaturgical process in Albanian theatre at the moment, although there are many dramaturgs. Neziraj's willingness to work within this new paradigm set an example for the actors and set the tone for the production as a whole.

As the photographs accompanying this article attest, the approach I take to inter-cultural theatre production involves designing a scenography which creates a flexible sense of place and atmosphere, a universal arena, but one which incorporates particularities of culture rather than some formless, ambivalent space. There are many reasons for this approach, not least of which is the variable cost of the many elements of theatre production and their availability in different countries, such as lighting instruments, filters, iron or wood, costume stock or wardrobe personnel. In Prishtina, for instance, the supply of electricity is not always consistent. Our rehearsals were marked by periodic blackouts which could last an hour or more. More than this, however, there is an aesthetic involved, one which takes its cue from the early work of theorist practitioners such as Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig and, more recently, Robert Wilson. Nothing extra should be allowed in a production which combines the influences of two or more cultures, no talismanic presence of one culture over another should persist onstage unless it has a demonstrable dramatic purpose. This is not theatrical minimalism but something rather like it which I prefer to call aesthetic determinism: you create only what is necessary to engage the active imagination of the audience.

Aeneas Wounded and *Aeneas Ghost*, under the title "Aeneas 06", opened in Prishtina at the end of October 2006. The plays continue to be produced in Prishtina and throughout Kosova, and have travelled to Macedonia and Albania. The production has been invited to theatre festivals in Berlin and Strasbourg in 2007. Jeton Neziraj and I have begun to discuss a new collaboration for 2008. His theatre, and Kosova, have truly begun to open

themselves to the world. In so doing there is an implicit acknowledgement of the limitations of nationalism and tribalism.