I FORGET, I Remember:
A Canadian Director in the Serbian Theatre

Michael Devine

Since 1995, my theatre career has increasingly been focused overseas, in the countries of eastern and central Europe. I direct for state theatres, from mid-sized to very large; I conduct workshops on acting, using a method I developed called ***BOXWHATBOX***; and I attend conferences on Canadian Studies as an invited speaker. Thus all my activities abroad involve being a Canadian in a foreign culture and articulating, explicitly or implicitly, what that means.

In March 2005 I was invited by the state theatre in Užice, Serbia to create a new show, using BOXWHATBOX techniques, centred around a theme of my choosing. All my previous work with national and state theatres overseas has been with established texts. My BWB work has been kept rigorously separate, for use with students. Here was an opportunity to see if BWB could be applied in a professional context[1].

Not just an ordinary context, either: Serbian culture is profoundly nationalistic, and remains so, three years after the fall of Milosevic. No one I met had fought for Serbia or supported the dictator and his savage henchmen, Mladic and Arkan. Yet all of them, to a person, expressed their anger at the NATO bombings and their resentment of how an equally culpable Croatia, to their mind, has benefited from NATO hypocrisy. This is not an environment where a theatre artist can disingenuously exclaim "I just do theatre, it's not about politics". It *is* about politics.

Therefore the task of a visiting theatre artist is complex. How to create a performance which speaks to the sense of loss and disenfranchisement of a people, which seems so key to their national identity? Certainly not, as I was encouraged to do at a press conference, by entering into a discourse on the advantages of the "Canadian way" of dealing with Balkanisation (this as the Embassy's Cultural Officer plunked a Canadian flag down on the table). There is only way, it seems to me, to address macrocosmic questions of identity: by finding microcosmic examples and piecing them together into a narrative. The narrative would not be about being this or being that, but about what we lose and what we gain, in the fight for memory.

To direct a play, in a language you do not speak, in a culture where you are temporarily residing as a foreign guest, is an exercise in creative displacement. A displaced artist is better able to recognise weaknesses and assumed strengths of their approach to making art in their home culture. As well, exposure to a new culture, not as an observer but as a participant with a deadline and responsibilities, effectively removes the romantic patina that is often attached to foreign cultural experiences like visiting residencies. There is no possibility of a cultural

[1] BOXWHATBOX is a method of actor training I've developed, as a means of getting actors to re-learn what it means to play. To "play" means, to me, to have the ability to question assumptions, to toss an idea in the air and juggle it around, to look at something seemingly fixed or static and see it in a fresh way. BWB has three core aspects: *demechanisation* games to unlearn physical habits, *rhythm* exercises to create fluidity, and exercises in *non-linear text* and *image creation*. The ability to create performance material from BWB comes mainly from the non-linear text and image creation exercises, which I devise specifically for the actors with whom I'm working.

imposition by the visitor, nor is there any chance that s/he can wholly assimilate the customs and nuances of the host theatre culture. The middle ground must be sought, not as a compromise, but as a cherished terrain where something that is not quite the product of any one culture can be created.

I FORGET

I decided to base the work around themes of memory and forgetting, especially the involuntary nature of these processes, and to call it "I FORGET". In late April I created the structure. There would be three main stories, consisting of three *frames*, or scenes, each. In between these frames there would be *transition* scenes, utilising the actors' own experiences to create mini-narratives related to the notion of why we remember some things, and forget others, regardless of our will. None of the stories would have an Aristotelian structure, i.e., a conflict-crisis-resolution throughline. The time lines would be scrambled, at least in some cases, to be consistent with the experience of memory. The dialogue would be in Serbian.

To create the dialogue for these fifteen scenes, I would utilise exercises I devised with the actors. The exercises would involve structured improvisation, as well as games designed to accentuate competition between characters, and a lot of time with a hollow rubber ball, just playing. The rubber ball goes with me everywhere I go. It embodies every single principle that is important to acting – responsibility, concentration, rhythm, flexibility, the proper employment of ego, the disciplined use of the mind. If everything else fails in rehearsal, I can always bring out the ball, and all will be well.

The six actors had been selected for me prior to my arrival in Užice. Members of the repertory company, they varied between 24 and 35 years of age, all with conservatory training and years of experience working at state theatres. Ivana's family had been dispossessed of their house in Kosovo. Igor was a Bosnian Serb who could not return to Sarajevo. Vaha was a Muslim Serb. It was clear no generalisation could be made about *being Serbian*. But how to cast a show you've created characters for with actors you haven't met?

In Canada, a director meets prospective cast members formally, in an audition situation, or informally, over coffee. It matters whether they are known or unknown, Equity or non-Equity, if they are available during the period in question or not. Almost everything in Canadian theatre is based on the freelance system, which relies on putting a series of pieces together for a specific period of time. Actor training in Canada is so variable, both in depth and quality, that a director simply has to know more about each actor than the monologue they have so carefully memorized or the fact that they can cold read a part. Time and other political factors militate against taking this much time to get to know an actor, however. In fact, all the differences I am describing here have something to do with the idea that Canadian theatre has become a slave to time, and to organisation. Organisation, on many levels, can be an incredible advantage, beginning with the protection of actors from predatory hiring and rehearsal practices. It can go too far, however, and in so doing strangle a project which exists outside the normal parameters of a theatre's structured approach to making theatre.

Rehearsal

As I've done at theatres across Europe, my first act was to work the actors through a series of physical and improvisational exercises, over about three hours. I don't need actors to read for a part. What does reading have to do with acting, anyway? Watching their bodies, their modes of expression, how they unconsciously relate to the world and to each other (and to me), is the material I need for casting. With all the agony actors go through memorising "party pieces" in Canada, hearing of a process like this might drive them to despair. In actuality it's easy to understand and theatrically valid. Good characters fall into a range of archetypes. So do actors. In a rep company, having a full range of archetypes is crucial. All I'm doing in a workshop audition is testing the range of the archetypes identified in each actor.

The atmosphere was cordial, but wary. There was a significant amount of pressure involved. The actors were facing the prospect of working with a foreign director, primarily in a foreign language (in rehearsal), on a show with no initial script. For the theatre's Director General, a jovial, greying man named Zoran, there was the challenge of selling a product that the director could only describe in vague terms, to be produced in 24 days. I was gratified that the Canadian Embassy, which consistently supports my work in Europe, was committing to the project sight unseen – but aware that the Public Affairs and Culture Officer would be coming to see it. Would the show be "Canadian" enough for her? She had already made a "suggestion" that I include some French text in the show; you know, because then it would be "more Canadian".

An additional factor was that directors in eastern and central Europe are the undisputed masters of their domain. A director is expected to create the scenography, the sound, lighting, costume and props designs, and sometimes even to provide a sketch for the poster. Canadian theatre, on the other hand, is inherently collaborative. I've worked on shows in Canada where I was in Toronto and my designer was in Montréal. It presents a challenge, but the expectation is that the director will provide guidance and leadership, while allowing the artists to ply their crafts. By contrast, I wish I had 50000 lei for every time an actor, designer or technician in Romania has told me "it's your decision" or "you're the boss". This is surely a legacy of totalitarian government, the idea that taking initiative (or responsibility for a mistake) is counterproductive to one's survival within a social polity.

This had been my consistent experience in theatres in eastern/central Europe, until I arrived to work in Užice. Faced with a situation fraught with peril and seemingly devoid of certainty, the six actors with whom I was paired took on all the responsibilities of true collaborators – even, to my shock, asking me in one rehearsal if they could go off by themselves to improve the dialogue. The price of this mutual respect was often unpredictable. It might mean that I was obliged to do a lot more drinking after rehearsal than I might otherwise have done; or, it might play itself out in my learned tolerance of the constant smoking, eating, and cellphone answering which manifested itself onstage, in rehearsal. Actors in Serbia can be made to work seven days a week, if a director wishes. So my implicit deal with the cast was that, as long as the work progressed, we would work their way, and I would cut rehearsal off when the work had ceased to be productive.

Besides, I had a show to design, one which included numerous slides which acted as titles for the three stories ("Sasha and Napoleon", "Magda", and "Attila"), as well as the photographs brought in by the actors. These photographs became the foundation for the transition scenes. The most profound impact was the immense personal investment on the part of the actors in the show. These were scenes where one of the actors would step forward and speak directly to the audience as themselves, with the projected photo in the background, and talk about something which had moved them deeply and which forced a reflection on the nature of memory or forgetting. For the audience, too, there was a sense that these performers, who were known in the community, were making an intimate gesture. In a play with an English title, featuring a Canadian director and writer, the spectators were surprised to find a gesture that was so local in scope. The transition scenes were fragments of the actors' lives, offered in the service of creating a bond with their audience. This was the macrocosm writ small.

In a way these scenes were *anti-transitions*. Typically, transition scenes are used to maintain the spectator's link with the story. These transition scenes had different narratives of their own. So the structure of the play became the distancing element, rather than the transitions – the spectators moved from one emotional environment to another, feeling the transitory nature of experience and the fleeting quality of memory.

As rehearsal progressed, some of the usual impediments I have experienced dealing with repertory companies in Europe began to surface. No one told me that the actors were going to be absent for three days on tour, or that the theatre was rented out to schools and children's groups at various times. In Serbia, this is all par for the course. Directors are expected to pitch occasional hissy fits to stop the theatre from encroaching on their rehearsal space and time; otherwise they may be perceived as weak, and in post-Communist systems nice guys definitely finish last. My struggle in bridging the cultural divide the past ten years has been to hold on to my personal, as well as my professional principles. I believe in treating people with respect and consideration. There have been times when that has been used against me, but I persist nonetheless. Yes, I believe there is something Canadian about that.

Rehearsals progressed at an astonishing rate. The first stage rehearsal produced two transition scenes; the second, four more. Flexibility was a key factor in our ability to work together. I'd felt instinctively that the stories weren't the right place to start, no matter how important it was to me or how central to the show. We needed to personalise the show. I began to ask each actor about the story behind his or her photo. What do you remember? What do you forget? What came before, or after? The object was to find something related to memory and forgetting, rather than a linear exposition of what happened in the photograph. Here's an example: Nemanja's photograph is of his mother when young, holding him and his brother. The story he told the audience was called "St. Arcangel". His mother's father fought in WWII with the "Chetniks", a group of Serb nationalists. One day in battle he was cornered at riflepoint by a soldier fighting for the Uštaše, the Croatian fascists. The Croat decided, for some reason, to let him go. A couple of weeks later the Chetnik unit runs into the same guy – only this time Nemanja's grandfather has the gun. The Croat pleads for his life, saying, "remember, I let you go". He even told him his name. The unit commander, however, orders Nemanja's grandfather to shoot the Croat. Every year

after that, the family celebrated the Croat's name day, rather than their own name days, because without his act of mercy there would have been no family. His name: Arcangel.

Nemanja related this story in unsentimental terms, while Vaha and Igor played out the scene in a stylised physical manner mid-stage, with the photo of his mother beaming down on them all. The effect was simple, direct, and overwhelming; the audience broke into spontaneous applause on opening night. Here was something Serbian, surely, a tale of valour and mercy and respect for one's enemies; but none of these qualities is innately Serbian, of course. These qualities are part of a larger narrative about loss and how it defines you, and how what you remember is often a large part of who you are.

Actors do not all possess the same skill-sets. In casting the show I realised that I'd unconsciously made some fortuitous pairings. ***Sasha and Napoleon*** involves two childhood friends who have been separated for years and who encounter each other in three different scenes. It requires a lot of *playing*. Napoleon has to create advertisements which incorporate moments Sasha will remember from their youth. They both play "Yes, but…" a clown game I use when competing intentions need to be highlighted (a player cannot say "no"). In the third scene, when Sasha is revealed as being homeless and adrift, I blindfolded her and asked her to create reactions to a series of passerby, none of whom she would have foreknowledge of. Vaha, at brilliant clown and improviser, was Napoleon; he was paired with Biljana, a methodical actor nervous about her abilities in improvisation. He was instinctively active, she reactive. The combination of Vaha's kinetic quality and Bilja's methodical grasp of character created a wonderful dynamic.

Magda, the second story, involves a woman who does phone sex by night for what she believes to be a social good, and a desperate man who keeps calling her back. Tanja, an Amazonesque actor with the approach of a juggernaut, played Magda with a level of Slavic emotion that was nearly operatic. Once Tanja begins to dominate, she can play both parts of a scene, to its detriment. She was paired with Nemanja, the cast junior at 24, a compact, taciturn fellow who initially appeared overmatched. Gradually, however, he found intentions strong enough to stop Tanja's monologue as his character Karl moves from anger and violence to opening himself to the possibility of a hopeful future.

Attila was the title of the third frame. In it, a man of about forty leaves his homeland and his close group of chums for North America. Initially, we see him standing at a gravesite. Behind him, we see scenes from what appear to be his life, though he is absent from them. In the end we realise that it his grave, and that he has returned to his friends, after dying. Attila was played by Igor, a Chekhovian figure in rehearsal, all brooding silence and immobile reflection. Alone amongst the actors, he had mastered stillness and silence, and I shaped the scenes around this talent accordingly.

These six actors all reminded me of actors I've encountered in Canada, England, America, and in Europe. They had most of the same preoccupations as actors I've worked with elsewhere. Their lives were fiendishly complex, but I think, in the end, no more complex than the lives of the itinerant freelance Canadian actor. We form a community of the displaced, at once a part of our cultures, and yet privileged to be citizens of the theatre.

The poster and programme were completed. The opening arrived, having been twice delayed. This seldom happens in Canada, and if it does, there is a whiff of desperation or failure attached to the project. Here, we were taking the time required, within reason, to complete an interesting and unpredictable project. The Cultural Officer from the embassy was elated. The Director General was relieved that the show had proven to have a link with its audience, such that it could be played over and over within his repertory. The actors felt justifiably proud of their ability to adapt to the unique demands of the situation. We had produced a piece of artistic merit with a broad appeal, outside of the confines of a rigid subscription season, infrastructural and union restrictions.

This was neither a Canadian play, or a Serbian play. Two cultures were inextricably entwined in the performance. I prefer to think that theatre is a home where universalities can be celebrated without descending into stereotypes or cheap generalities. National culture should be less a bastion to be defended than a cauldron into which one can pour dizzying notions of how humans live and might live.

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