

Days and Nights with Dah

Bill Cleveland

The Sun tickles my crusted left eye, signaling morning. I feel like I have been taken hostage and stuffed into the trunk of a 60's compact car. I slowly unravel. Seattle to Amsterdam to Zurich to Belgrade-- eighteen hours of travel, on two chicken dinners, one lukewarm washrag and three hours sleep. I look at my watch. Its 1:00 A.M. in Seattle as the turboprop hits the tarmac in Belgrade. After I sleep walk through the multiple security and customs checks, Dah Teatar actress Sanja Tasic is there to meet me. She tells me its 9:00 A.M. I am barely awake, but we are late for rehearsal.

The city is a blur as we speed over the Danube into the heart of Belgrade. Sanja is one of four actresses, two directors, two interns, a musician and a sceneologist who comprise the Dah Teatar Research Center. Careening through the old city, she discusses her work, the current political climate, the curse of slow drivers, the state of theater in Serbia, and the history of Dah, which means "breath." She has been with Dah for the past eight years, which, she says, makes her a new-comer.

Dah was established in 1991, on the eve of the decade-long civil war that turned Yugoslavia from one of communism's most civilized bastions into its most Balkanized and traumatized remnant. Distancing themselves from their classical training, Directors Dijana Milocevic and Jadranka Andjelic founded a new company based on Odin Theater director Eugenio Barba's idea of the "poor theater"—a theatre born of whatever material resources are at hand and engendered by relationships inside and outside the company.

But the onset of war changed everything. It jolted them out of the rarified realm of abstracted and archetypal studio-based work into a chaotic universe of brutality, betrayal and the street. Within weeks, Dah's co-directors auditioned actors and created a Barba influenced street performance challenging the official position that the war in Bosnia did not exist. This bold and, some would say dangerous act was the first of many in Dah's perilous and adventurous thirteen-year history.

I came to Belgrade to document Dah's rich history for a new book. The story of their work, amid the landscape of cultural confusion and violence in what is now known as "the former Yugoslavia," is one of six stories that will comprise *Art and Upheaval: Artists at work on the world's front lines*. This book will recount the history and practices of artists who are working to resolve conflict, promote peace, and rebuild civil society in communities facing extreme social, political and military upheaval throughout the world. Needless to say, it's been a long and complicated project.

My two weeks in Belgrade turned out to be far more than I had expected. The impetus for my visit, an event called *Days with Dah*, promised to share both the company's history and repertoire over a ten-day period. What I had not anticipated was a hands-on exposure to the company's unique training process and culture. That first day, in addition to viewing the company in rehearsal, we began a daily regimen of rigorous vocal and movement exercises. We also used movement, vocalization and memorized text to begin creating a series of personal "scores." Dijana and Jadranka eventually used these mini-narratives to demonstrate how they painstakingly sculpt individual and collective scores into a web of narrative collages that, over time becomes a finished theater piece. But we were just dabbling. While I and the dozen or so *Days* attendees eventually spent seven days learning and practicing these techniques, the typical Dah piece takes nine to twelve months of six-day weeks to complete.

Over the course of our ten days together, we practically live with Dah in their recently renovated, and still evolving, rehearsal and office facility. Located on the bottom floor of a 1930's school building, the small three-room space houses all of the company's training, rehearsal and administrative activities. Given their disfavor under the Milosevic regime, the group had never before been able to secure a regular work space. But, in the short time they have occupied this new studio, company members have made it a real sanctuary for the intense intimacy of their work together. While it was an unexpected privilege to have had unfettered access to the workings of the Dah family during my visit, I now know it was critical to the task of documenting their story.

On the rare occasions that Dah opens its doors to new actors, they make it clear that the group has survived only because of the total commitment of its members. Over the years, the company's dedication and discipline became a potent palliative to Yugoslavia's toxic and chaotic unraveling. The imprint of this history on the company is palpable. The Dah process is characterized by hard work, stamina and patience, particularly patience. When director and actors are making a work, they strike a delicate balance between pushing the material into place and waiting for something to emerge. This fragile dance of will and receptivity is something I would never have seen or understood if I had not been there day after day.

In addition to our daily practice and regular talks on the company's history, we were treated to performances almost every night. In all, three demonstrations and two full productions, spanning the company's historic repertoire were presented. In an extraordinary gesture to the mainly English speaking participants, three were performed in English.

Our first performance, *Documents of Time* took us to one of Belgrade's classic theaters where the piece was presented on the terrazzo steps leading to the mezzanine. In it two old women carry books containing the collected memory of humankind up and down the stairs, all the while chattering about bygone times and lost memories. The piece was created in during the NATO Bombing of Belgrade, in the early summer of 1999. It reflects the heartbreak and confusion of a city being bludgeoned into "liberation." Dijana Milocevic describes it as "the testimony of reality dissolving in front of us." Over the course of their up and down dance the old women eventually stumble into a territory that transcends the understanding they seek-- a place called "forgiveness."

Many of Dah's works are influenced by American history and writers. One such piece is *The Helen Keller Case*, which we saw near the end of the workshop. Incorporating text from Keller and her teacher Annie Sullivan as well as Blake, Shelley, and Emanuel Swedenborg, the piece uses Keller's journey from "dark to light" as a metaphor for the human struggle for freedom.

Needless to say, for someone in search of the Dah saga, the opportunity presented by *Days with Dah* was a bonanza. But there was more. As a follow on to the formal program, I spent four more days with the company. During this time, I had a chance to interview all of the principal company members. I also spent hours pouring through Dah's well-organized archives. My written documentation and fourteen hours of interviews has added yet another layer of valuable stories and historical insights to my research.

It was a significant journey, for me and my work. My assumptions and expectations were challenged and changed. I even came home in better shape. Now, I am looking forward to crafting Dah's story from the bounty of interviews, books, stories, and memories I returned home with. I am also looking forward to nurturing the indelible friendships that took root in Belgrade.