

Interview

Oana POCAN

DAH THEATRE SERBIA. THE THEATRICAL RESEARCH CENTRE

Abstract. Representing initially only an ambitious theatrical project, which couldn't find its place in the cultural context of former Yugoslavia not even from a legal point of view, DAH theatre had been existing since 1991 and intensifies year by year its national and international impact. Talking about DAH meant for the one of the trainers, Sanja, not only a mere interview, but the affirmation of a real profession of faith; the passion in evoking what work in this team, the past and future projects. Even the single fact that this contemporary theatrical laboratory was born and manifested in parallel with the war, that shook completely the former Yugoslavia, is enough to understand the purifying, elating, salvaging function of theatrical art (understood as a joining between dance, voice, movement and acting).

DAH - the theatre with a social implication

DAH Theatre was formed in June 1991 as the first theatrical laboratory in Yugoslavia. It is an independent company concerned with the development of contemporary theatre. By its experimental work, the theatre stimulates the potential of artists and individuals to contribute to a society in transition. In 1993 DAH Theatre expanded its activities by forming the Theatre Research Centre. The latter hosts workshops, lectures, seminars, guest performances and festivals. The work of the Centre is aimed towards a constant exchange of knowledge, experience and ideas among artists and participants from various theatrical and national traditions.

DAH Theatre performances

The International School for Actors and Directors takes place annually, and the first session took place in June/July 2002 in BELGRADE, Serbia, with the participation of artists and theatre students from

EKPHRASIS, 1/2008

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY RESEARCH
AND THE CINEMA OF REALITY

different parts of the world and Serbia. The School is an intensive three week program of events and practical working sessions designed for both actors and directors based on contemporary theatre techniques, and DAH Theatre's specific path of creation. The starting point of the School is the new approach in which both directors and actors will indulge in a creative process of physical and vocal training, creating materials and through the process of montage, of creating a performance. During this period the students work and learn from the core members of DAH Theatre: director Dijana Milosevic, and actresses Maja Mitic and Sanja Krsmanovic Tasic, renowned voice and movement specialists.

DAH performances are impressive, but they always referred to social, exterior events, even important political events, or to essential moments from the performers' personal life and development: **Crossing the Line - Women Build Peace** (2008-2009) (a collection of women's authentic testimonies about the wars, that had happened on a soil of former republic of Yugoslavia from 1991 till 1999); **In/Visible City** (2007-2008) (make the multi-ethnic structure of the cities in Serbia and the richness of different ethnic cultures more visible); **In Search of the City** (2007), and so on.

Sanja Krsmanovic Tasic (1963) Graduated at the Philological Faculty, University of Belgrade, and at the Faculty for Physical Education, University of Novi Sad, group for Modern and Jazz Dance. Core member of DAH Theatre since 1993, she created programs

and performed as one of the principal actors. From 1982-1990, she became soloists of the Belgrade Contemporary Dance group. She works as a dance and movement pedagogue since 1984 and from 1995-2001 co-founds and leads the "Center for Artistic Dance" in Belgrade. She conducted workshops on movement and acting world wide.

O.P: First of all, thank you for accepting to answer to my questions. The first one S.K.T.: you are a dancer and when you came to DAH you had to put the dancer and the actress together. How these two completed each other?

S.K.T.: It's a good question actually because it's funny I remember when I was young I was acting a lot in the school, the British school, but when I came back to Serbia I did not spoke Serbian so well. I could not say [r] (this is very important), I was pronouncing [a:] like in English. So, I was very shy to speak and then, because dance was my first love, I decided to continue dancing because I do not need any words. But for me, at the beginning, it was very difficult because my body has these clichés from dance. And for a while - it took maybe two years - I had to get rid of these body clichés that dance puts into you, to find my own body expression. What was interesting it's that I had very bad muscle pains. So, if you have problems with your body when you are doing your training it's normal. I was much trained, my muscles were very strong and for two years I had muscle ache because of the training that we did in *Dah Theatre*. Because it was a completely new way how I was using my body. I remember

I couldn't climb the stairs how much my muscles could hurt - can you imagine! - I think the biggest turning point in my life, in theatre was "*The Kelly Heller Case*" because in this performance we worked very long with very deep material, very strong material and what was happened actually I really connected my acting-being and my dancing-being into one. This was my turning point. Dijana, my colleague, mentioned that there always are some performances very important in our development, who make you grow a lot, change a lot; for me, this was the performance that really represented a big step further, a big jump. This was the moment when I went back to dance - in a way. I realized that all I knew was only spoiling what I was doing as an actress, because there was too many clichés, it reflected the way how a dancer thinks, not an actor way of thinking. It's a completely different path, because the dancer thinking is very abstract - it's entirely in movement, shape, colors, and rhythm...

O.P.: It's a lot of technique in the development of your body...

S.K.T.: A beautiful technique with the body is important, because the body is able to express feelings, but sometimes it is empty, and acting makes the feeling very concrete. It's really something about real life, you have to offer the concrete thought that it is behind the movement. This makes it reach and very close to life - in a way - because for me sometimes dancing is like a dream, it's like painting; it's like music, unreal. Acting is something that is really here and now, someone's thought can be

sad, and can be happy, and can be rude, and can be bad, but also can be very human and noble. I really prefer to concentrate on these thoughts, this message.

O.P.: So, what Dah means to you?

S.K.T.: For me, it is strange because I am an ordinary woman, I have a family: a husband, two children, a cat, a home; but for me, *Dah* is like a monastery, it's like a Buddhist monastery. It is a place where you go because you want to develop as a human being, in a spiritual way. In this monastery, you have different rituals and you have different exercises. But this way of life and work - as an artistic horizon of expression - what you achieve is some kind of a change into the world. I think this is important, and it is a very peaceful change. It is not a change that you go out and protest, or put a bomb around your body and you go somewhere to make a drastic political statement. On the contrary, it is something that we do every day and doesn't have to be only performance, when people watch what we have done. We perform this ritual every day of our life and with a group of people around, and we really believe in that very human, noble spiritual way of transforming the world.

O.P.: It could be like a catharsis?

S.K.T.: It could be like a catharsis, but it's like some kind of a natural change. You go on this way of change and you develop your personal world, and, probably, the world of human beings.

Jasmina: (*one student from International School*): Sorry to interrupt you. Do you remember the story from this movie

Offret (The Sacrifice -1986) by Tarkovsky. It has a story in the beginning, about a monk who planted a tree; and for years and years he was watering that tree, and I don't know in how many years the tree came to life just because every day he was watering that tree. I think that's what you are talking about

S.K.T.: That make sense, because sometimes people said "Why are you do what you do?" There are not many people who watch us, we don't make mass performances for thousands of people, and we don't like this. We want that any person who comes to watch us have a strong experience of the performance: we do not like to be watched from some two hundred meters, like some little actors doing something on the stage. We really want this direct exchange of energy. And I have this deep believe that this requires a lot of sacrifice, a lot of quiet dedication, it requires every day testing your personal skills. It's very difficult. But, I realized it really makes sense in a much deeper way than just ordinary life.

O.P.: So, this every day training was like a salvation in dark time, I mean during the war. Dijana told us about your rehearsal during the war, about the bombing. It was like a shelter: Dah was a place where every problem was gone, a place where you could rediscover yourself like a human being.

S.K.T.: Yes, because this is a practice that makes you feel very safe – in a way. In the same time you risk very much, because you are offering your own body when you do the training. When we were

in New Zealand and the bombing started in Serbia (1999) my entire family was here in Belgrade. I felt – and you know because you, also, have a child - it was a terrible moment- if you are a mother you want to take your babies, this is all you think about, nothing else exists. At those moments it was a very hard workshop, very demanding – the Tadashi Suzuki workshop. We were unhappy and crying and sad about the whole situation, and I was to this workshop and they ask me: "Why are you going to this workshop in this terrible situation?" And I said this is the only way I can survive this period before we go home. Because this workshop is so strong, this technique is so demanding that you have to be here and now. You have to be present and think only of this moment, just to be able to save your body, not to get hurt, to work very hard. I discovered that this is a way you can overcome difficult situations. In our work, you became very focused on what you are doing, and if you do it hundred percent focused, you don't care about what is going on around you, and you find your own path to resist. Simultaneously, you discover how to say things that are important to other people. For example: when we performed "*Documents of time*", people were crying so much after the performance and we asked: "Are you sad? Why are you crying?" And they said "No. Thank you. We are sad in a beautiful way, and we need this sadness to overcome the whole experience of bombing, the whole story; to put it behind. We needed this

experience to be able to go on". And this is very nice. It is really what we said about healing, forgiveness and how to go on.

O.P.: How was the training in Odin Theatre?

S.K.T.: For me it was a whole new world. Actually, we mentioned a lot of Odin Theatre because for us it was the model for our entire work. Can you imagine to work with a group of people for forty two years? To be married with someone for forty two years? It is a big success and it's also very difficult; you can love this person very much, but you cannot imagine working, developing, to going on with somebody for such a long time... It's fantastic! We came here and we discovered how much everything is important for them: the spirit, the relationship with people, the giving, and the dedication. It's very beautiful. I felt connected with them when I saw how much they are connected with India, theatre anthropology, researching ...And for me it was like home, because I lived so many years in Asia. I did Indian dance and I was also doing classical ballet; somehow it makes sense to me, because what we are doing in *Dah Theatre* is also connecting things and connecting audiences with us. Then Eugenio Barba explained it so well – because they have the same principles – so this is why we felt connected.

O.P.: I want to ask you about performances "work in progress". Which is the idea of such a performance?

S.K.T.: It was 2000, after the bombing, and for a while – for ten months – Dijana and Maja went to America. I was alone

in Belgrade, I was working with *Youth Drama Group*, fundraising for *Dah Theatre* for our ten years anniversary. Because I was alone, I was doing a lot of work by myself, in the working space. Actually, it was a good period for me, because I created two important pieces for myself: one is "*Dancing with darkness*" my solo, and the other one comes from thinking of all my characters that I did in *Dah Theatre* and who are completely different. I thought that it will be interesting to show how I worked on these characters, what is the elaboration story. Maybe it will be interesting for people to know some secrets of the performance. I worked many, many months on this, and when Dijana came back -I didn't know how to put the parts together. I asked her how to connect them and she said: "Chronologically". Because she's a director, I thought she will invent a very complicated way of editing, for putting all these parts together. Instead, she said: "Just chronologically! You play the first year, the second year and so on..." So, we worked together and I performed for the first time on our Tenth Anniversary. I wanted to do something for this event, to show what I made and become these years. I wasn't working for ten years on *Dah*, only eight; But my question was S.K.T.: "What did I do in these eight years?" It went well and I think it was interesting, but now I am thinking maybe to create another work. But you shouldn't do it often, maybe once in ten years. Ten years is a good period because you have a lot of material.

O.P.: How did you feel the character after eight years? Was it different? Was it the same approach?

S.K.T.: Because of the way we work all the material is very fresh. All the material is there.

O.P.: Because of inner story.

S.K.T.: Yes. Because of inner story, it comes from you, it's deep inside you. It is not something imposed, and because of that it's very much still in you, it's still alive. In a way, what happened is that when you did it, years before, you just did it. And after a while, new experiences make you analyze more profoundly, you realize some details, you realize why you are doing this. For example, I had this big impulse to change something in my life in 1993, because of the war. I wanted to do performances on myself; I wanted to protest against the war. I found a theatre where I could speak and I could express myself, it's very political involved theatre. I thought then it was very important and beautiful for, but it was later, when I analyzed, that I realized the connections and how important was to fulfill these needs. In that moment I didn't think "This is the theater where I can express my thoughts about the war". It all came later.

O.P.: How is it to teach at an International School? How do you see yourself as a teacher?

S.K.T.: I was teaching many years before *Dah Theatre*, and this is one of the most beautiful things that you can do in life, because you are able to share something

you know with somebody, you develop a very deep connection with this person. I am very interested in this new idea that we practice every year in school, in life: that is "interactive teaching". It not only you that teach, but you learn something from the person you teach, and this offers a permanent an exchange. A very important interpersonal exchange.

The three of us we have a lot of experience giving workshops alone, but the School is always very special, because of our relationship between ourselves. It is about how we work as a team, how we try to complement each other and to inspire each other. It's like building something, and is also similar to how we work on performance. S.K.T.: this exchange, the impulse you give and you get it back. It is a lot about how I, and Dijana, and Maja work in theatre. So, this is why the school is so important and special for all of us.

O.P.: We noticed that you all are so involved and enjoy what you do; and after all these years, we would expect – somehow - the teacher to be bored. I never noticed any sign of boring or tiredness all these three weeks.

S.K.T.: Every time the work seems new, because the group is new and also we are trying not to repeat ourselves. All these years we had so many different processes, in different ways of techniques, and what we are trying to do now is to offer different aspects. We have people who are coming again for two times, three times, and it is very challenging, because it is something new that these people should learn.

O.P.: How about the future? What are your plans?

S.K.T.: What we are very much involved is a perspective from inside the war, a very engaged work. Also, Maja and me we are planning to do children performances about our cats, different stories...

O.P.: I know that you are going to do some workshops for people with disabilities and special needs.

S.K.T.: Yes. This is a project that I am involved in, and I will start very seriously this summer and in December it will finish. This is one of the types of activity that I am very interested in. In away it is like a circle, because I am back to some of my origins

with dance and choreography, and we will work with people who are deaf, who are blind and people who are in wheelers chairs. We will create a performance with these people. We want it to be a very high quality performance and we will have dancers, very good dancers, from Belgrade, and they are already involved in this project and they will work with these people.

O.P.: Good luck with your projects and thank you for your time. I know that you were several times in Romania and we hope you will come again.

S.K.T.: It will be nice.

The interview was taken at the seventh edition of the International School for actors and directors, organized by the DAH Theatrical Research Centre of Serbia, gathering 14 participants from all over the worlds (Australia, New Zealand, USA, Sweden, Japan, Romania, Serbia). The artist, the "soul" of this workshop among with the other two colleagues (the same as in all editions), was very open-minded, proving professionalism, sociability, emotional availability, spreading – at the same time – freedom, creative energy and merriness. There were three weeks of vocal and movement training and demonstrations of those belonging to DAH ("work in progress"). We were not only a group, but a team, although each of us was coming from another cultural area, with very different experiences, we were all "open mind", we satisfied out appetite for acting/dance/discovery of yourself; but – especially – we proved that passion for theatre did not have geographical or linguistic borders.

For more information on DAH (founding, performances) please contact the official website: http://www.dahteatarcentar.com/index_eng.html