

ART/THRIVE ARC

by Elizabeth Hess

Doruntina Basha, a writer from Kosovo, and I met at the Women Playwrights International (WPI) conference in Stockholm, 2012. Both our plays addressed the trauma of the war-torn Balkans and she invited me to lead an atelier with young actors/playwrights in Prishtina the following spring. We focused specifically on systematic rape and called the atelier: TRANSFORMING TRAUMA THROUGH ART: *War Rapes and the Re-collection of Self and Community*.

Sevdie Ahmeti, a human rights activist - who conducted extensive interviews with rape survivors and witnesses of the Kosovo war of 1998-99 – was invited to share her insight into the specifics of these crimes committed during internal displacement, deportations and at rape camps. Her report was harrowing and yet helped to particularize the women who had suffered. Sevdie remarked that survivors remain silent not only out of a sense of personal shame, but also out of a sense of duty, expected within Muslim culture, to preserve one's family's honor; "Most women choose to endure silence rather than risk the unknown."

The ensemble talked about their wish to not only give voice and visibility to these survivors who cannot speak for themselves or reveal their identities, but to also restore their dignity and re-integrate them into society as women who are so much more than the ostracizing label of 'victim'. Our investigation began with reading aloud from selected rape testimonies and these archival accounts became the basis for our piece.

We chose to use only the words of the survivors, working mostly in the original Albanian language, but sprinkling the text with the English translation to give the work resonance on a global scale. By moving beyond a narrow definition of these women as victims to an expanded understanding, the ensemble uncovered the depth and complexity of their individual and collective experience as they struggled to excavate their dark secrets.

We chose to work with fragments of the testimonies, thus underlining the 'splitting off' of the self during rape. These fragments were then explored physically, as the ensemble inhabited the text in a visceral, yet metaphoric, way. We discovered as we began to interweave the text that no one had chosen to focus on the rapes themselves but rather on all the details of degradation and humiliation that accompany such violence. In this way the ensemble made it clear – without spelling it out – that rape is not about sex, but about power.

Initially the ensemble moved through the empty space with shopping bags, back-packs and purses that were filled with water bottles, make-up and an article of clothing. These few objects became transformative - a water bottle was poured over one's head as she spoke of being thrown in a well; lipstick was smeared on ankles as another spoke of being stabbed in the legs so she couldn't run away; hair was tucked into a baseball cap to be disguised as a boy; eye-shadow became bruises; a bra became a blindfold; sweatpants became a restraint; a scarf became a ghostly veil; baby clothes became an abortion.

In the aftermath of the rape all the women covered their faces with their hands in a gesture of collective shame. They then began to reach out to each other: washing another with water; combing their hair; restoring a piece of clothing; rocking them in their arms;

offering water to drink. We actually referred to this section as ‘ethnic cleansing’, reversing the notion of objectification and eradication and instead introducing recognition and restoration.

Once all the women were attended to, they then picked up all the ‘fragments’ and restored the space to its original neutrality, only now it was filled with their voices as they came together and sang a traditional Albanian folk song while they faced the audience to be witnessed as women in the world.

On the final day of the atelier we presented the piece to a small invited audience. The response was evocative and emotional, as the material release buried contents that have festered in the culture for 14 years. Two weeks later at POLIP – a literary festival in Prishtina - the sensitive, yet transparent, approach to the material astounded one journalist who wondered if we were aware that Serbs were in the audience, to which Doruntina replied, “Yes, we want to reach out in a spirit of reconciliation.” And, several months later at the BeFem Festival in Belgrade, Serbia - which was the first time most of the ensemble had entered ‘enemy territory’ - they were indeed met with great empathy and understanding.