

## ART/THRIVE ARC

### INTERNALLY DISPLACED Breaking Boundaries of Silence

By  
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I met Doruntina Basha, a writer from Kosovo, at the Women Playwrights International (WPI) most recent conference in Stockholm. Both of our selected plays addressed the trauma of the war-torn Balkans; hers dealt with the aftermath of the war as reflected in the relationship between a wife and step-mother; mine zeroed in on systematic rape – a subject that was/is still very taboo in her country 14 years after the war. She invited me to lead an atelier with young actors/playwrights in Prishtina the following spring to conduct an artistic exploration outside traditional theater practice and performance. And, as an outsider myself, I would both lend credibility and provide a safe container in which to investigate raw and volatile emotional territory.

We called the atelier TRANSFORMING TRAUMA THROUGH ART: *War Rapes and the Re-collection of Self and Community* and the title itself challenged the wall of silence with its unapologetic directness and transparency. Several of the women who joined the ensemble were already vocal in street theater happenings and yet they hungered for a less polemical investigation into gender violence. Rather than further alienate a scarred and skittish public they wanted to focus in on the silenced women themselves - women who were their mothers, aunts, sister and best friends who needed recognition more than revenge.

We invited Sevdie Ahmeti, a human rights activist - who conducted extensive interviews with rape survivors and witnesses of the Kosovo war of 1998-99 - to share her insight into the specifics of the crimes committed during internal displacement, deportations and rape camps. Her journalistic reportage was harrowing, horribly specific and yet helped to particularize the women who had suffered. However, these accounts were still safely embedded in black and white text, rather than embodied with urgent and undeniable immediacy. Their stories were not yet ‘word made flesh’. And these women’s ‘flesh’ was particularly vulnerable since survivors remained 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. As Sevdie remarked; “Most women choose to endure silence rather than risk the unknown.”

This revelation encouraged the ensemble 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’. And so, we began our investigation with reading aloud from archival rape testimonies which we ultimately decided would become the foundation for our piece. We also decided 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 began to uncover 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.

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 so many 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, just recently, 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 overwhelming empathy and understanding.