

CULTURE AND THE ARTS SERIES

NEW WEST

REVIEW

THEATRE IN HELL

THE MENDENHALL ON
UNDER THE GUN IN
SARAJEVO

LATE BLOOMERS FIRST PRIZE WINNER
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DOUG ARRELL, LEANNE GRIFFIN
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ART UNDER THE GUN IN SARAJEVO:
THEATRE
in **HELL**
 BY MARIE MENDENHALL

The third floor apartment on Regina's Retallack Street faces similar low apartment buildings across the alley. Although buses and cars rumble past to the nearby shopping mall, Goran Savic remarks on the quiet. He takes some rolled-up papers from the bureau in the sparsely furnished living room. They are his and his wife Dzemila Delic's acting awards, won at international theatre festivals, and he shows them proudly. He puts his finger through a tear in one: They had come home one day to their 13th storey apartment in Sarajevo to discover a large-calibre shell had whizzed through the apartment window and buried itself in the bookshelf at the other end of the room, tearing through their achievements as easily as through their lives.

Savic spent 18 years on the stage of Sarajevo's National Theatre of Bosnia-Herzegovina. He and Delic have been together since she joined the company in 1979. Savic still remembers his first glimpse of her, during a festival. "Dzemila is one of the greatest actresses in Bosnia," he says fondly. "We live together, we work together, we were in the war together, we came to Canada together," Delic says, glancing at him with a small, private smile.

They are refugees, living in Regina since December 1994, taking English classes and learning how to live in a foreign culture that does not always make sense to them. They speak haltingly, searching for still-uncomfortable words, translating for each other, filling in with gesture the words they cannot find. Neither knew English when they first arrived. Delic, fluent in German and

**TWO ACTORS PROVIDE AN
 ACCOUNT OF HOW THE
 WAR HAS DEVASTATED
 A ONCE-THRIVING
 CULTURAL CENTRE.**

Serbo-Croatian, relied on Savic to interpret for her, but after several months of English lessons she converses more easily and can even read novels and magazines.

They talk most easily of pre-war days, of their work and their relationship. The 500-seat National Theatre employed actors full-time in its repertory company. Government-funded the theatre produced mainstream work, from world classics to contemporary Yugoslavian playwrights.

Born in Zagreb, Croatia in 1945, Delic began receiving awards for her acting ability while still in high school in Prijedor.

She played leads in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and Chekov's *Three Sisters* while working for the National Theatre of Banja Luka, Bosnia from 1967 to 1969. In Sarajevo, she acted in more than 500 repertory plays, as well as in dramatic productions on television and radio.

Savic was born in 1951 in Belgrade, the capital city of Serbia. After graduating from university with a degree in philosophy and theatre arts in 1976, he went to work in Sarajevo. His favourite role was Ramong Gejza, an army officer in love with the wife of a colonel, in *Tunerah in Theresienburg* by M. Krljeze, a well-known Croatian contemporary playwright.

When war broke out in 1992, journalists like Erika Munk noted Sarajevo's cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic traditions, "...where inherited identity could be ignored...where most families were mixed and tolerance was an ethic" (*Theater*, vol. 24, no. 3, p. 15-16). Savic and Delic are good examples of this ethic: he is Serbian, while she is Muslim. They could not believe an ethnic war would be raging in the streets of their beloved city.

Savic was convinced that politicians would be able to stop the fighting, that everything would be over soon. He could not see the issues as black-and-white, blaming one group to side with another. He believed a compromise would be reached.

Instead, everything changed around them. The buses, streetcars, trains and other transportation systems which had once taken them around the city stopped running. People had to line up for food, water and other basic elements that had once been taken for granted, while snipers hit targets on the streets and in the lineups at random.

DZEMILA DELIC IN *MOSTAR'S TRILOGY*
(TAKEN BEFORE THE WAR IN THE 1980'S).



PHOTO: BY PERMISSION OF D. DELIC

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When Savic and Delic realized war would not only continue but become a way of life for them, it was too late to leave easily. The National Theatre closed; they hunkered down in their apartment, unable to escape the daily fighting on the streets below.

Money soon became irrelevant. There was no one left to collect their rent, no water for long periods, and no food left to buy. A black market flourished. Savic's mother in Belgrade sent food, prompting him to say with a wry smile, "My enemies were feeding me."

They tried not to feel despair. Delic spent the time reading and writing. Savic cut up an old roll of wallpaper and taught himself to paint, often lying on the apartment floor. He painted brightly coloured still lifes of the knickknacks that decorated their apartment, then street scenes and landscapes. Some of those paintings now adorn the walls of his Regina home.

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A few smaller theatres and a film company continued producing during that time. A wartime theatre festival, with Susan Sontag's famous production of *Waiting for Godot* as bombs fell, helped focus world media attention on the war. In Sarajevo, theatre had always been a social force, and actors had social responsibility, says Dr. Alexander Dundjeric, a Belgrade-born theatre director now working at Bishop University in Quebec, after a year at the University of Saskatchewan.

However, Savic frankly disapproves of "propaganda," as he terms efforts at political protest by smaller theatre groups. Theatre is art, not politics, he says. They met their social responsibility as actors in other ways. Savic took part in an educational television program on language. Delic read letters on the radio, as people wrote in to ask what had happened to members of their families. Occasionally, a family



DZEMILA DELIC ON STAGE IN *THE WIFE OF HASSAN AGHA*, IN BANJA LUKA (BEFORE SARAJEVO)

PHOTO: BY PERMISSION OF D. DELIC

would write to say they had been reunited.

"That for me was satisfaction," she says.

Savic also worked on a co-operative independent film; he does not know if it was ever finished or released. The film used the historical Yugoslavian missionary-teacher Ivan Frano Jukic to make comments on the fighting. Like Jukic's ideas, the film was anti-war, Savic points out, but it did not try to show one side as right and another wrong.

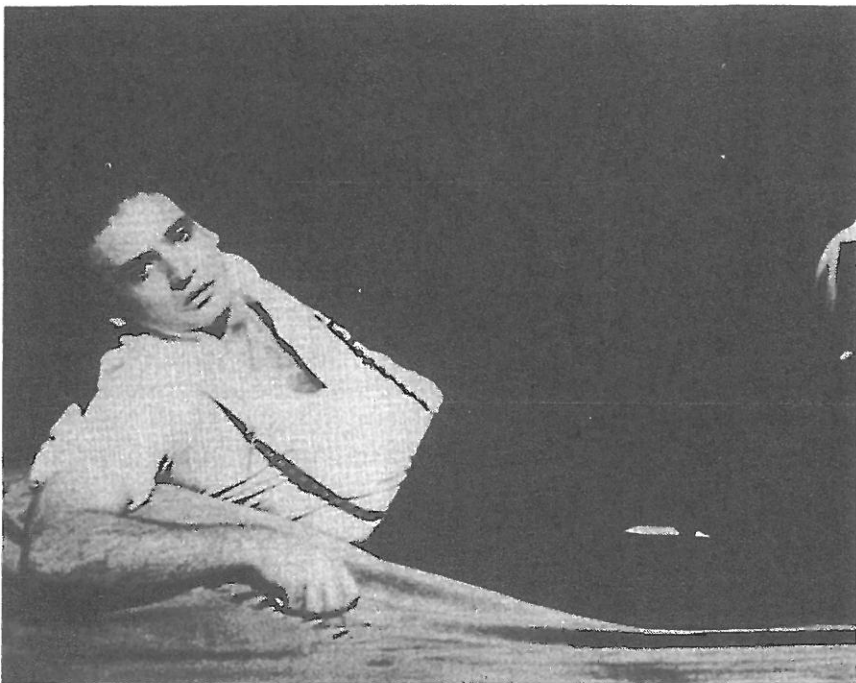
Then one day, as they were filming a scene on the street, Savic's close friend and camera operator Ranko Sipovac was killed by sniper-fire. The assistant camera operator and another actor were also killed.

"I am lucky," Savic says grimly. He can find no reason or excuse for their deaths. Serbs, Muslims and Croats produced theatre together in Sarajevo during the war, he says, the same as they had before it.

"I have friends on both sides, from before the war," he comments.

It is a sentiment that was echoed by many in Sarajevo, in 1992, when people demonstrated against the ethnic nature of the fighting. The population shifted as people came in from outlying areas to replace those leaving. Before long, opportunism, crime and new power struggles irreversibly changed the city.

About a year-and-a-half after the war began, National Theatre actors began to produce plays again at the urging of the Bosnian military. Savic says he can find no English words to explain how or why this occurred, except to say it would be complicated even in his own language.



GORAN SAVIC AS RAMONG, GEJZA IN TUNERAH IN THERESIENBURG

"You must work. In war, if you are not a soldier, you must do something. It was a very strange situation."

Others, like the journalist Munk, have called theatre the spiritual defence in Sarajevo, in the same way that the army is its physical defence. Savic and Delic joined others in remounting their repertory productions, such as the audience-favourite *The Wife of Hassan-Agha*, an *Othello*-like tragedy based on misunderstandings. They did not mount plays of overt political protest against the war because they had a sense that the army would stop them if they did.

Admission was free, and the theatre was always full. Unlike some of the smaller theatres, the National Theatre had a storehouse of props and equipment from before the war, but electricity was intermittent. Delic says they often used kerosene lamps to light the theatre. Bombs and sniper fire continued around them during rehearsals and performances.

"Theatre in hell," Savic calls it now. "When guns talk, it is not possible to do art."

The noise and the stench of war dragged on. Several times they heard shooting or shelling in their apartment building. While Savic and Delic had been well liked by others in the building, now they were only strangers. Savic even sensed a change in the audiences, and felt he was losing his connection with them.

Finally, after the deaths of many friends and the gradual wearing-down of their belief that order would be restored, they knew they had to leave. In July 1994, packing only one suitcase, they visited Savic's brother in Croatia, remaining until December 14, 1994. They speak Croatian, and could have stayed, but ethnic fighting continued there as well.

and find the people friendly. Yet there is a sense of loss, a bewilderment, like a shadow around the eyes. Nothing is as one thought it was, nothing will ever be the same. Even the rattle and roar of the buses Delic once took to English class or airplanes landing at the nearby airport can make her flinch, remembering the noise of bombs and sniper-fire.

Still, they maintain an inner strength and optimism, proudly showing the awards, photographs and art they managed to smuggle out in their one suitcase, along with Delic's prize possession: an antique coffee grinder. Their first priority in coming here was to stay alive, Delic explains. Their second is to learn English very well.

"It's hard for us," Savic comments.

"But we must do it," Delic adds. "That's better than war."

ACTRA Saskatchewan branch representative Bill Siggins says they will probably find little opportunity in Regina. Siggins heard of their arrival through the Fédération internationale des acteurs/ International Federation of Actors (FIA), which had been asked by the head of the Croatian actors' union to help Savic and Delic approach Canadian unions.

The two were astonished to find that most

"Croatia is not our country now," Delic says.

They had also come to fear the unexpected outbreak of war, and wanted to escape it. In encyclopedias, Savic found Canada described as a strong country with a multi-national, multi-cultural policy. It seemed as close as he could come to the Sarajevo he once knew. They contacted the Canadian embassy.

Now they find themselves in the company of more than 100 other former Yugoslavians who have come to Regina in the last three years.

They say they like Regina

THEN ONE DAY, AS THEY WERE FILMING A SCENE ON THE STREET, SAVIC'S CLOSE FRIEND AND CAMERA OPERATOR RANKO SIPOVAC WAS KILLED BY SNIPER-FIRE. THE ASSISTANT CAMERA OPERATOR AND ANOTHER ACTOR WERE ALSO KILLED.

Canadian theatres run a play for only three weeks before closing. Savic says he played a role in one play for 15 years in Sarajevo, and shrugs. Although reluctant to predict the future, he talks enthusiastically about directing. Delic wants to act again. They wanted to stay in Regina, but now feel they must move to a larger centre such as Vancouver, where they have friends from their former country and expect to find more opportunity to work in theatre or film.

"We can't live without our jobs," Delic says. "We don't know anything different."

Savic and Delic still hope for more help from Canadian actors' groups. Their stay in Regina introduced them to English and to a friendliness that Delic calls "a big surprise" after their wartime experiences.

Would they go back if the fighting stopped? Savic shakes his head.

"We can't live anymore in that town. It is a different people. The meaning has changed."



GORAN SAVIC AND DZEMILA DELIC PHOTO: MARIE MENDENHALL

"We had the most beautiful country in the world before the war," Delic adds, choosing her words slowly and precisely. "It will never be like before." **NWR**

Marie Mendenhall is NeWest regional editor in Regina.



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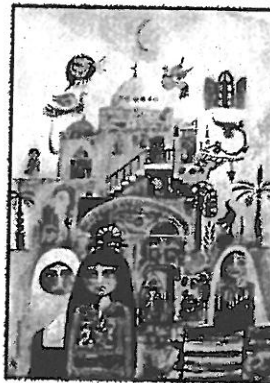
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