“Far Away, So Close”

Psychosocial and Theatre Activities with Serbian Refugees

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The Theatre [...] is the craft and art of transforming what one looks at into something that regards us. Its raw material is relationships. I have never believed in a theatre that claims to transform a number of individuals into a communion. Collective identity may perhaps have had positive aspects in social communities characterized by small numbers. But mass civilization has produced such monstrous surrogates of this fabled unity that we have no nostalgia for them. The image of theatre that guides me is not that of an action that unifies, but that of a circle of encounters and barter. Various people gather around an action that binds them and allows them to debate, to discover a territory, a time, in which to exchange something. It is the very fact that each one can deepen his knowledge of his own specificity that creates the solidarity between them. [...] The fact that today cohabitation with the different is often felt like a dramatic historical situation must not make us forget that it is the matter on which the theatre has always worked, on which those who make theatre their profession must know how to work [...].

—Eugenio Barba (2001:n.p.)

Introduction

Since April 1999, I have been living in the Balkans where I have worked as a workshop facilitator, trainer, and supervisor with psychosocial and cultural integration projects. These efforts are a part of the emergency relief services that focus on the persistent problems caused by the recent wars. All of the projects have included theatrical components and some were centered on the communication and relationship-building logic of a “theatre game.”

It is impossible to summarize a professional and human experience that is now over four years old and includes various projects within which I played a
number of different roles. Therefore, I have decided to concentrate only on my experience in Serbia in 1999. This choice has been made primarily for two reasons. The first is technical: my experience in Serbia led to the emergence of some convictions that have become fundamental to my overall approach. The second can be defined as political: in the Kosovo crisis, the international intervention (first and foremost the military and journalistic one) was centered on the victim/perpetrator/savior structure (Losi 2002). Within this framework, the victims were the Albanians, the perpetrators were the Serbian population as a whole, and the saviors were the NATO Forces and international humanitarian workers. Writing about the experiences of some of the people considered to be the “perpetrators” enables us to understand the groundlessness of this simplistic schema/classification and, perhaps, to understand the groundlessness of any “humanitarian” or “anti-terrorist” military attack.

Serbia, August–December 1999

I arrived in southern Serbia on 4 August 1999, two months after the end of the war in Kosovo. Places and people showed clear signs of the NATO bombings; at that time, one would still run into groups of Serbs escaping from Kosovo following the end of the “humanitarian war.” In unfinished buildings, and in the mud under bridges there were groups of Roma who were also fleeing from Kosovo but were by no means welcome in Serbia. In total, during this period, there were some 180,000 people living in these conditions. When I entered Serbia, hundreds of refugees from Bosnia and Croatia were arriving daily. Previously, they were sheltered in collective centers in Kosovo but after the war there, they had to flee to Serbia as “double refugees”—refugees for the second time.

My task was to create a psychosocial project consisting of creative activities for children, adolescents, and elderly refugees living in the collective centers in southern Serbia.

When I arrived in 1999, a total of 400,000 refugees from Bosnia and Croatia who fled from their own countries following the previous wars in the Balkans lived in Serbia, where roughly the same number remain today. The most unfortunate among them, around 40,000 people, had spent the last six to ten years of their lives in hundreds of collective centers scattered around the country, living sometimes with up to 30 people per large room. They were accommodated in what were once hotels, motels, schools, or former construction yards located many kilometers from the nearest small villages, without any public transportation. There was only one bus per day to take the children to and from school—but often the children did not go at all. They survived thanks to the assistance given by the national Red Cross, but even that became unavailable as each war and economic crisis meant that feeding the army became the top priority. Only a few were able to work and earn the average wage for local underpaid jobs (about 40 Euros—U.S.$40 at that time—per month for 10 hours of work a day, six days per week). Alcoholism and depression were rampant among adults and adolescents who did not see any prospect for the future.

Unfortunately, from a bureaucratic point of view, the Serbians that had just come from Kosovo, except for the “double refugees,” could not be defined as refugees and instead were classified as IDPs (Internally Displaced People), because Kosovo was formally still part of the Yugoslavian federation. For this reason, they could not officially be included in the project. These are the kinds of political contradictions and constraints one often faces when working in emergency relief services. Therefore, our project had to focus on the actual and double refugees, trying to involve the IDPs as much as possible without
being too obvious about it, because this would have caused political problems with the local government.

The deep poverty of southern Serbia was intensified by the embargo and became intolerable during the war. In contrast to what was happening at the same time in Kosovo, due to the international perception of the Serbians as the “perpetrators,” there were very few international humanitarian agencies and NGOs in Serbia. My car was the first one in many months to visit the collective centers in the southern part of the country.

Immediately upon our arrival, the staff and I were barraged with questions, requests, and demands regarding the problems that had been brewing for a long time and for which we had no answers. Worse still, the IDPs from Kosovo, who we encountered during our trips, had basic, urgent needs to be satisfied before turning to the psychosocial ones. In a context in which the beneficiaries had primary needs that no person or agency was able to satisfy, it was very difficult to concentrate solely on a creative program. Additionally, I felt the pressure of limited time: given the political situation it was likely that I would have to abandon the country and the project in a short while.

**Theoretical Background**

This type of project is tightly bound to practical and urgent action and leaves little time for theoretical elaboration. In this case, I was guided by my previous experience, four main ideas, and by a simple ritual model. I would be lying if I said that all the theoretical implications were clear to me before designing the project. It was, as it always is in these cases, a trial-and-error experience. What theory exists has been derived from my experiences.

**Sustainability and community-needs sensitivity vs. pre-packaged models**

I do not believe in international “saviors” who take action according to a predetermined model, think they can “save” a group with a one- or two-month workshop, and then disappear or maintain only feeble contact. Unfortunately, this harmful approach is very common in emergency relief services. But to improve what is no longer a short-term crisis but rather an endemic emergency, efforts must be made to ensure that the community takes its destiny into its own hands according to its own models. Therefore, it should not be “fed” coping tools or, even worse, helped to cope with a situation that is unacceptable. Instead, one first asks the community what its priorities are in order to understand its resources. Then one must adapt one’s competencies to meet those needs. Simultaneously, one tries to ensure that the expectations, which will emerge as a consequence, can in fact be met, at least to some extent.

Therefore, I do not impose theatre. My experience and my know-how are in the area of using theatre in the process of community-building, but I always try to respect peoples’ existing abilities and goals. In this case, the communities living in the collective centers were more interested in sport and handicraft activities than in creative arts; and even then, only a few of the creative arts involved the theatre. I respected these choices and tried to take advantage of the existing resources. Theatrical activities remained only an informing logic, a communicative reference model, and my way of passing that model on in the training.

**Individual vs. group in the construction of roles in war-torn communities**

While visiting the centers, I realized that regardless of their very strong common history, the inhabitants’ sense of community was destroyed to such
an extent that the refugees were unable to collectively claim their rights. Community building needed to be one of the first aims of the project.

Psychosocial activity aimed at community building in difficult circumstances has to focus on three components: relationships, communication, and creativity. The objective is to reconstruct *roles*—on the individual, group, and community level. However, when we work on reconstructing a sense of community in conflict situations, we must always keep in mind certain implications, which I often encounter in my experiences in war-torn societies. An example illustrates the point. Working during and just after the war among groups of Kosovar Albanians interested in the creative arts, it was necessary to interact with an incredibly compact community/communion that never doubted its nationalistic values and seemed to reduce its existence only to such values. All the international trainers with whom I talked were frustrated with the workshops since they found themselves interacting with a collective body that responded collectively. This led to rhetorical and standardized results but also made dialogue between the trainer and the group and, above all, between members of the group impossible. In my opinion, the emergence of this dynamic had two causes:

1. *Political*—The war in Kosovo was called “humanitarian” so it implied a relational triangle: victim/perpetrator/savior, and this had an effect on the relationships between individuals. Every person, when relating with someone else, had to follow a precise narrative, according to the group-identity to which s/he belonged. The workshops were run by international trainers (the “saviors”) for Albanian groups (the “victims”). Within this triangular frame, it was impossible to raise multiple voices.

2. *Technical*—The trainers were used to working in Western countries where the creation of a group and an emphasis on rituals are the prerequisites of any workshop. Therefore, they did not understand that in these situations, deconstruction of the group’s rhetoric, the *empowerment* of individual differences, and criticism of the rituals of war would be the only actions that
could lay the foundations for long-term intercultural and interethnic processes. Happily, these actions are also effective in the very short term. However, in a war-torn situation, there is no free expression of multiple voices, and differences within the same ethnic group tend to be suppressed in a process of self-censorship. Thus, the group must be given the opportunity from the very beginning to experience its own limits. This is done in order to counteract the fact that anger or nationalistic feelings, reactive racism, justification of hate, and self-victimization often become the only prerequisites for belonging to the group in these circumstances.

In an endemic situation, like the one involving refugees in Serbia, even this “negative” sense of community no longer existed. In fact, building their sense of community from the wrong perspective might throw them back into a situation similar to the one just described. More likely in this case, the arrogance of the winning group would perhaps be replaced by the depression and anger of the group defeated and recognized internationally as perpetrators not victims. For these reasons, the process must be understood, as indicated by Barba, as a circle of encounters and barters and not as a search for communion. The first act of a workshop or a creative process was therefore to bring people back to an awareness of their individual value and own means of expression.

**Creative communication/social communication vs. coping mechanism**

In situations where social problems and discrimination have strong political implications, artistic activities and especially theatre are of special value because they create a relationship between creative communication in the group and social communication in the more political sense. In this specific case even if we could have recreated a sense of community among those living in the centers, this would not have solved their problems. It would have only improved an unacceptable objective situation. Once a process of creative communication had been initiated, leading to the reformulation of individual and group roles, we had to help the people develop this into a larger social communication exercise connecting effectively with the society outside the centers.

The first objective was information. Most Serbs did not know of the existence of the collective centers. The Milosevic government had used the media to focus on the refugees in order to enhance nationalistic feelings and the acceptance of suffering inflicted upon the common enemy. However, the media had hidden the conditions these individuals lived in to avoid the dramatic evidence of political contradictions. Consequently, exhibitions, shows, concerts, photographic displays, ritual tales, and so forth produced in the centers and presented outside were designed to lead to the recognition of the existence of the centers and of an “other” Serbian history. This we hoped would also help to overcome some of the prejudices and stigma that had put additional weight on the refugees.

The second objective was political. Publicizing the creative identity of the refugees and displaying the conditions in which they lived were both in themselves acts of opposition to the regime and agitation for change.

Therefore, in this case, the creative arts were chosen not only as one of the privileged tools for the development of coping mechanisms (see Dokter 1998; Jennings 1999) but rather for their “performative” and “eventual” possibility: the possibility of initiating processes within the group that would establish them on the basis of individual difference with the ability also to communicate this to a wider social arena.
The Complex Circle Model

For the Serbian project, I used the ritual model of a complex circle (Schininà 2002). Its basic principle is to consider theatre as a means of communication, which, regardless of the activity undertaken, brings about a circle of barters and encounters and is also able to present these barters and encounters to a reality outside the circle. The ultimate goal is to begin to change perceptions of certain problems and to include multiple voices and narrations in a collective act of communication.

Technically, everything starts with a group of individuals, each of whom has his/her own characteristics. To form the circle, they construct relationships according to the inset model:

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A
A B
A B C
A B C D
A B C D E
A B C D E F
A B C D E F G
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The individual (A) is always himself/herself and free but his/her actions interact with the actions of others (B, C, D, E,...); thus, they change and are changed by one another in a linear relationship. This continues until the line contains the entire group. At this point, a ritual circle is created, in which each person retains his/her individuality and his/her own characteristics but also develops personal relationships, and expresses feelings and questions that are shared with the entire group.

The group becomes the place in which diversity is respected and personal or collective relationships are recognized by everyone in the group. The process
develops with problems being pluralized and the resources of every individual member being shared. The same circular mechanism can also be established among groups and institutions.

In the Serbian project, this model can be applied within each group of children, adolescents, and elderly people living in the centers. Each letter is an individual, while the lines represent some of the possible creative relationships. The circle is the symbolic structure of the group and the setting. The same model applies to the other centers.

The various groups of activities build the circle; they develop their linear relationships through creative exchanges and the display of the creative results.

Additionally, the same process is valid for the entire community of refugees living in the various collective centers. The different groups involved in the same activities—for example sports or art—in the centers create a circle, with the lines representing their possible creative encounters (or sports clashes, as we will see).
The circle is a symbolic but also a practical space in which to create relationships and a sense of identity. This led to the idea of utilizing a large room in a social center in Nis (the largest city in the area) as the common room for events. This way, whenever one of the centers’ groups wanted to present something, there would be enough space to invite all the other centers. But the circular relationship had to be expanded within the region of Nis. The Nis common room had to become a significant point in the dynamic between the associations, the formal and informal groups, and the region’s political bodies.

**Implementation**

**Assessment: selection of the centers and identification of which creative activities to run**

In the first weeks, I repeatedly visited 20 centers, which were selected because they had the highest degree of vulnerability among the hundreds located in the area. In addition, without being too obvious about it, we included in the activities two spontaneous centers (the name given to those structures used for refuge by the IDPs from Kosovo) and three Roma communities.

Initially, I wanted the people living in the centers to identify their own needs and address them, but I had to be very precise about the limits of what I could offer through the existing guidelines of the project. I did not want to create false expectations and subsequent frustration. The only way I could accomplish this was by going and talking with people and developing close relationships, without which the entire process would have been impossible.

In all the centers, I gathered the adolescents, the women, and the elderly and started by trying to understand what activities the residents were organizing themselves. This included finding possible trainers within the community and trying to help young people to identify their creative interests. Bringing people together, due to long-standing tensions, was not always easy and took time. What I found most surprising was that very often the adolescents, when asked to identify which activities they would like to do, were not able to understand the concept of choice. My collaborators and I tried to find different words and metaphors, but in some cases we never succeeded. It took us a while to make the painful discovery that for people whose wishes had never been granted, the act of making choices and identifying desires was foreign. Sometimes we had to make proposals ourselves. Other times we asked the most responsive adolescents and elderly people to identify the groups’ interests and prepare lists of activities with the names of the people who had expressed those choices.
The Staff

In all of the centers, we tried to identify refugee intellectuals, artists, and artisans so that we could train them to work with children, thus giving them a social role while at the same time allowing them to recuperate interests that often had been neglected for years. In addition, we offered facilitator roles in the project assisting our experts to the adolescents who were helping compile the lists. Some, but not all of them, accepted.

It was also necessary to find outside expertise to facilitate the activities skillfully. As soon as I arrived in the country, I began to look for artists, actors, animators, intellectuals, musicians, teachers, instructors, psychologists of the arts (a discipline that once existed in the former Yugoslavia), and anyone else with previous experience in community work. We spread the word in bars, cultural centers, associations, scout groups, and so on. We put up notices in theatres, in newspapers, in front of cinemas, and at the university.

In order to start, I needed to identify what resources were available. I needed to know that the technical terms I had to use were understood. I needed to learn about the existing approaches to creativity and working with communities. Then, I needed to locate professionals who were among the best in their fields, with an attitude conducive to community and group work. Finally, I wanted people who belonged to different segments of society but were all creative and, above all, committed to social communication. In this way, they could facilitate the social communication process, even if this was not their specific task, disseminating the work they were going to do in their respective communities. The selected team consisted of photographers, playwrights (from alternative theatre, commercial theatre, and television), local rock stars, members of NGOs in visible opposition to the regime, a doctor, a movie animator, some scouts, and graduates of the Sports Academy. Although the group included refugees and IDPs, the majority was from the local population. This group became what we referred to as the “central team.”

Training

I trained the central team, asking them to pass along the model that emerged from this process to the adult refugees living in the community centers who were willing to work with us. As soon as young facilitators in the centers were identified, each began training in a program specifically designed for them. I asked an experienced local NGO specializing in youth development to train the young facilitators.

The first time the central team came together, even before talking about their contracts, I decided to test them. I explained the terrible situation in which some Roma IDPs were living. I asked them to go, without me, to these Roma settlements. The objective was to carry out creative activities with the children that had as their objective the prevention of skin infections, which were caused by the insect bites that were ravaging their faces. A doctor provided the content and we prepared a program built around the story of a bird without water, which through songs, stories, drawings, and a workshop offered advice to the children as well as to the adults. We came up with the idea of leaving a birdcage in the camp, along with bird food and hygiene instructions. Our assumption was that if the children could take care of the birds, they would take care of themselves. I knew the squalor the team was likely to find and its political implications. The Roma were kept in terrible conditions so that they would return to Kosovo rather than stay in Serbia—even if at that time it meant certain death. I knew that in this context such a program would
not have significant results but I needed to evaluate the team’s reactions. When they came back, they were shocked and offended by the conditions in the settlements but already they were thinking about how to improve the program. I realized that through this test of fire, we now had a team. Later, Roma activists themselves facilitated the activities in their settlements.

I will not dwell on the various aspects of what amounted to on-the-job training. This training was loose, taking place in variable settings and groups, including long conversations in the car and at dinner. However, I would like to emphasize a great richness that this form of training has in emergency situations. The lack of a specific structure and thus the informality, leads to a less
As mentioned previously, after some weeks we had lists of activities that the different groups wanted to take place in the collective centers. They varied from hairdressing to percussion, from theatre to rock music and photography, from football to volleyball and basketball. Many mothers asked us to run activities for very small children so that they could have some time for themselves.

The actual plan of activities tried to balance the requests made by the communities, the theoretical assumptions behind the project, the logistical implications of each activity, and the expertise and personal attitudes of the staff. We attempted to put into practice the model of the complex circle—creating safe spaces in the centers for creative expression and exchanges between individuals who had differences. We tried to create events that fostered mutual exchanges between the different creative groups within the centers, between the individual centers, and between all the centers and the wider Serbian society. The process and the results are outlined in the short description below.

Creative Corners

In 20 collective centers, 2 informal IDP centers, and 3 Roma settlements we created safe spaces for children, adolescents, and elderly refugees. A space would be created in a room, when possible, or otherwise in a corner, next to a wall or, in the worst case, such as in the Roma settlements, in a tent. These
spaces were rehabilitated and equipped in order to run the different activities. They had to look nice; the community had to take care of them. In these spaces, the children and adolescents found a way of expressing their feelings and abilities by painting, singing, playing instruments, performing in plays, participating in photography and video workshops, and any other activity they selected. Each was carried out for an hour and a half, twice a week. At least two activities were held in each “corner” according to the specific requests of the centers’ inhabitants. In some of the centers, adult refugees with artistic or artisan skills led workshops for the youngest in addition to the weekly program. These included icon carving, painting, piano classes, and crocheting.

Adolescents and young people carried out activities for the younger children on a voluntary basis. They had been trained to do so and worked with the central team. The adolescents participating in a creative activity during the week organized the same activity for younger groups, thus improving their sense of responsibility.

“What a Fucking Place”

The common room in Nis became the space where the results of the activities from the various corners of the different collective centers were performed for the public. It was also the place where young and old refugees and the IDPs, even those not involved in our project, could show, perform, and meet each other (by organizing concerts, parties, solo exhibits, fairs, etc.). It was the place where the different stages of the project were presented and discussed. Each time an event was organized, the inhabitants of the centers were invited to attend (with financed transportation), helping to establish a circle of creative communication. The media, journalists, politicians, and other townpeople were invited as well, thus enlarging the circle to the level of social communication.
The beneficiaries, through a written questionnaire following informal discussions, chose the name of the common room. The name created some problems with our donors and with the local authorities, but we were able to keep it. “What a Fucking Place” opened in October 1999 with a concert by a refugee rock band and the exhibition of paintings and photographs produced in the corners. Adolescents and their families from all the centers were invited, as well as representatives from local youth authorities, organizations, and the media. It was a great party.

**Memory**

Memory activities were organized at seven centers. During the sewing and card tournaments (daily rituals for the Serbian community) our animators encouraged the elderly who were so inclined to tell their stories and express their feelings. They used affective memory games and an autobiographical method, partially inspired by Duccio Demetrio (Demetrio 1997). A dramatist, involved in all phases of the process, wrote each story into a short story or monologue in the third person. The short story or monologue was then given as a gift to the person involved. If s/he agreed, this person could tell her or his story or have it told by an actor during a special storytelling evening that took place once a month in each community center.

All the stories told throughout the month were presented during a special memory night that was held every month in the common room of Nis. The elderly “owners” of the stories and their communities were invited to Nis for the event. They could tell their stories or listen to them being told, or could also decide not to present the story. The memory project created stronger relations between adults, as well as between the elderly and youngsters in the centers, reaffirming the role of the elderly within their communities. More generally, the memory evenings held in the common room of Nis, in front of a mixed audience of refugees from the centers and the local population, including artists, the authorities, and media, were of a political as well as social relevance.
After several weeks, it became clear that in some centers—not surprisingly the ones with the worst living conditions—the memory sessions provoked collective outcries, even though the program tended to work on positive memories and to avoid the subject of the war and loss. Because of this, a special program was developed for these centers, where the activities of the memory program were accompanied by psychological support and a psychologist was added to every team.

Health Education

In the Roma settlement a team of animators, directed by Doctor Nebojsa Brankovic and Nejsha (a marionette doctor), carried out a special health education program. The purpose was to explain, using games and marionette shows, how to maintain a minimum level of hygiene given the terrible conditions in which they lived. Of course, the children paid much more attention to Nejsha, who had the same facial features as Doctor Brankovic. Later, the program focused on sex education, mother-child relationships, HIV/AIDS prevention, and contraception.

There was an immediate evaluation of the project: each time our car appeared in a Roma settlement, the children would run around the vehicle to greet us; after a while they did so with the palms of the hands completely open and still. It was to show us that they had washed their hands. This education program was closed when the national health authorities were finally allowed to take care of the health situation in the Roma settlements and the IDPs were included in the national health-care plan.
Soccer and Basketball Leagues

In each center we organized one or two sports teams. Adults as well as youths participated and the teams ultimately included a very large number of players of all ages. There were two leagues between all community centers, one for children and one for adolescents and adults. It was a huge success, except for some organizational problems (for example, some players received their shoes too late and demanded to replay all the games!). On every day of the league, all the teams and their fans would arrive in Nis to play in various combinations. Teams from the town also participated. After the games, recreational activities were organized in the common room. These sports activities were based on the model of the complex circle and we tried to have a very performative approach to the leagues—creating events and exchanges. After the first year, the leagues were no longer organized. The teams were incorporated into the different leagues taking place in the municipalities where their centers were located. Mutual matches between the teams of the various collective centers were and are organized directly by them.

Cinema Club

A movie club was organized in the common room of Nis. A children’s film was shown every other Friday afternoon, while a film for everyone else was shown in the evenings. Experimental films for students and adolescents were shown on the last Saturday of the month. On all occasions, a debate followed the film. The programs were also shown in eight remote centers, in a kind of traveling cinema that also included post-film discussions as well as organized games. The films were selected according to their subjects. Two participants, Sasa Stefanovic and Srdjan Vresnik, were involved with the games, as well as with choosing the videos and facilitating the debates. Vresnik was a refugee from Croatia living in one of the collective centers. He began as an adolescent volunteer and is today a creative facilitator and a student of psychology.

2000

The Classic Theatre, a private theatre company associated with the government, started a program focused on children’s visions of the end of the millennium. Twenty-five workshop-rehearsals were held in various community centers. The children were supposed to direct the rehearsals and create the drama. The result was presented in the common room of Nis in January 2000. All the children involved and their families were invited to participate. Unfortunately, because the Classic Theatre was not trained for this type of work, instead of a process the result was a prepackaged product. The theme for 2000 inexplicably focused on Cinderella.

But if the free and creative communication mechanism failed, the social communication mechanism worked well. When I arrived in Kosovo in May 2000, I was invited to attend the same show in the Serbian enclave of Gracanica. The Classic Theatre, though not paid to do so, continued to present the show, and also provided material assistance in the Serbian enclaves in Kosovo and to refugee centers throughout the federation. This part of the project ended after the first year however, while the centers involved continue to host community theatre workshops for children.
Three and a Half Years Later

Three and a half years later, Serbian society has undergone great changes. In 2001, after a very heavy electoral defeat, Milosevic became a prisoner in The Hague and the embargo of Serbia ended. Refugees and their plight were among the top priorities on the new government’s agenda (at least until the new Prime Minister was assassinated). The project is still alive because the centers still exist, even if the new government has begun to close some of them and resettle the refugees in private homes. The government wanted to close all of the centers by the end of 2003. Indeed almost all the hotels have been privatized in the meantime and the new owners are lobbying for new solutions for the remaining refugees. Those who still live in the centers are now suffering hardship due to increases in the cost of living.

I completed the final training and the last supervision with the team in December 1999. Two other internationals and then the Serbian staff itself managed the project after I left. The core of the team remains in place even though some left because the project was not given proper support and others because they were just worn out. There were moments of extreme poverty in which the group worked on a voluntary basis and other phases in which the project received substantial funds. In the first few months of 2000, a lack of funds meant no opportunities to improve the program. This was followed by a phase in which, for logistical reasons and by choice of the international manager, the work inside the centers got done but the transition to the subsequent circles stopped (Segre 1999/2000). Therefore the common room was used more as a safe place for the refugees being hosted in and around Nis than as a place for building relationships between the various centers and making connections to the outside world. The sports activities continued but without any leagues. The memory project continued successfully in the centers but no more memory evenings were held in the common room. The itinerant Cinema Club turned out to be the most popular activity.

From October 2000 to the spring of 2002, the social communication component was again established as the essential part of the process, but there was
no further analysis or training on the psychosocial component of the work. Finally, in the spring of 2002, the project was handed over to a group of local NGOs, many involving the former central team and some including former adolescents who had been part of the activities over the years. Overall, the project continues to reach its beneficiaries through its model of intervention. For instance the rock groups of the creative corners of some centers recently released their first CD. All this can be considered as a positive and important achievement for the group.

However, what are truly surprising to me are the facts:

1. The group did not receive any training or any form of supervision about the content of the work and their experiences for two years. Psychosocial and creative activities are not like other types of work; they keep you constantly involved, burning energies and capacities. I am firmly convinced that the priorities of this type of project must include some structured exchanges, supervision, and training of the staff, not only at the beginning, but throughout.

2. The project has been duplicated almost identically every year. Some activities were shifted from one center to another, and new centers have been involved, but the structure and the activities remained the same, even when the reality outside has developed and changed radically. I believe that a project has to be linked to its social and historical context and should be reevaluated and redesigned constantly because the needs of the beneficiaries keep changing.

Conclusions

Working on rituals, on the construction and reconstruction of individual, group, and collective roles, on community building, on the creative re-elaboration of mourning and anger should all be vital activities for war-torn and war-displaced communities. It is also essential to support the empowerment of internal differences and work on the collective limits and borders of each of the communities involved in war. This is from the perspective of strengthening individuals, increasing the diversity of their experiences, and for long-term intercultural goals. Theatre and theatrical actions are able to satisfy these needs. Theatre has to be understood here as a means of developing relationships, communication, and expression that concentrates on the construction of roles. It contains the possibility of creating a circle of barters and encounters between differences and a real ability to work on the “borders”—to forge passages and relationships between individuals, groups, and communities.

This opportunity is the proper domain of the theatre because theatre’s natural outcome is social communication. This process is fundamental when working with communities in war-torn situations, but it is also fundamental when, in order to change the status of a group or wider society’s perception of a group, it is necessary to introduce its problems and ethics into the circle of communication between political subjects and decision-making powers. This process, starting with individuals and arriving at institutions, facilitates the construction of plural communities that contain extreme differences among members. This process has the capacity to reveal differences even in closed social systems that are characterized by an intense cohesion forged in the name of “compulsory” values/non-values.

The above-mentioned process is linked directly to ritual. Theatrical ritual has always had a capacity to create a collective space for peaceful confrontation.
and dialogue among differences. The modern practice of theatre and psychosocial animation in war-torn situations is therefore nothing new. Theatre has always dealt with confronting the limits of human experience.

Notes
1. This article is a translated, updated, and summarized version of the article “Così Lontano, Così Vicino,” which appeared in Comunicazioni Sociali (Schinina 2001).
2. All photos were taken by facilitators and beneficiaries of the project, adolescents involved in the photo laboratories of the creative corners, and volunteers involved for some months in the project. No professional photographer was allowed to take photos of the activities if not involved in the process. Some of the photos were developed in the photo laboratory of the creative corners.

References
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