

PART 1: KOSOVO

In 2012, I spent six months on a Fulbright grant to Kosovo, where I taught and directed at the University of Pristina. My final assignment there was directing the graduating actors in their diploma production of the Albanian-language play *Njerez Me Shpresa Te Thyera* at the National Theatre. Three years later, back at my home university in Texas, I directed the play again, but this time in English using a new adaptation our company had developed and named *Men with Broken Hopes*. Today, I would like to highlight the dramaturgical process driving this two-part, international collaboration.

First, let me share some basics about my host country. Less than half the size of Vermont, Kosovo is a geographic region that was part of Yugoslavia until its dismemberment and dissolution and then part of Serbia until the Kosovo War in the late 1990s and official declaration of independence in 2008. As a geographic region, Kosovo historically was, and today remains, home to a majority population of Albanian-language speakers known as Ghegs, who do not identify themselves as Kosovars, but rather as "Kosovar/Kosovo Albanians." As one of the youngest and poorest countries in Europe, Kosovo has a rapidly growing population estimated at 2 million, almost all of whom are of Islamic heritage, although most are not observant.

Chances are, that if you know of Kosovo, it is likely because of the Kosovo War in the late 1990s, during which Kosovar Albanians fought for independence from Serbia. During this war, Serbian forces attempted to drive out the majority Albanian population from the region. The U.S. news media chronicled village massacres and the forced exodus of nearly a million Kosovar Albanians in what quickly became known as ethnic cleansing or genocide. NATO involvement resulted in the bombing of Belgrade and other strategic, Serb-held cities, including Kosovo's capital city Pristina.

At the University of Pristina, I was tasked with directing the 10 graduating men in their diploma production at the National Theatre. The playscript chosen was *Njerez Me Shpresa Te Thyera* ("Men with Broken Hopes"), which was written in the early 1970s by z. Shaip Grabovci, the father of theatre professor Arbnesha Grabovci Nixha. Premiering in 1972, the play was written and produced in the standard Albanian mandated by the National Theatre. Our production also would be in standard Albanian, which I do not speak. Assisting me were my theatre faculty liaison Hazir Haziri and interpreter Fjolla Hoxha. By default, I served as production dramaturg.

The play is set on a ship filled with American soldiers returning from Vietnam to the U.S. Most of the soldiers are young, poor, and have been wounded physically and/or psychologically. Two of the soldiers are African-Americans, and a third is an immigrant. In Act I, we are introduced to these men who have spent ten months together in battle.

In Act II, we discover how their hopes (“shpresa”) for a better future have been broken. This is not a docu-drama as much as it is historical fiction written by a Kosovar Albanian with keen sensitivity to human and universal themes rather than historical accuracy.

My first challenge as dramaturg was translating the Albanian script into English. Today’s Standard Albanian, also known as “letrare” or literary language, is used in government and education. Developed after World War II and formalized in 1972, the language consists of approximately 80% Tosk (the predominant dialect in Albania), 10% Gheg (predominant in Kosovo), and another 10% from other sources. As a unified language, Standard lacks the colloquialisms and local color spoken by most of my actors, who had grown up speaking Gheg, but several struggled with the Standard Albanian and its different lexicon and pronunciation.

Since I don’t speak Albanian, I hired an interpreter, Fjolla Hoxha, who worked with me for over a week to produce a verbatim, albeit only auditory, translation of the script. During our sessions together, she helped me begin to understand the idiosyncrasies of the dialogue, the characters, as well as the historical-cultural context. Given that most of my students and actors were not readily conversant in English, Fjolla also served as interpreter for my classes and workshops, and she attended almost every rehearsal. From the verbatim audio files, I concocted an essential outline of the script, which served as my rehearsal script.

In my discussions with Fjolla and later in rehearsals, I discovered several paradigmatic cultural differences at work. Most notably was that Kosovo, like many former Communist countries, continues to operate without regard to intellectual property and copyright law. As in Shakespeare’s times, to have physical possession of a script means that you can do anything with it. You must credit the author of the play, but you, as director, have the right to interpret and, in turn, receive equal billing. I met twice with the playwright before rehearsals began to discuss possible textual changes and, each time, he responded politely, “You are the director. Do what you want.”

What I wanted was a dramaturgically viable text and compelling production that would appeal to my cast and to the Kosovar Albanians in the audience and that would ring true to the Americans in attendance—primarily the staff of the U.S. Embassy along with soldiers from nearby Camp Bondsteel. To accomplish this, I needed to address the most fundamental tensions embedded in the text: one, race and ethnicity, and, two, war and military protocols. I also needed to solve the music called for but not specified by the text.

According to my all-white cast, the solution to depicting race was simple: the actors playing black characters would blacken their faces with makeup, which was and remains

the socially accepted norm in much of Europe. Our eventual decision was that there would be no makeup: instead, the white soldiers would wear white t-shirts, and the black soldiers would wear black t-shirts along with their standard BDUs or hospital slops. Only the white Captain and black Sergeant would wear a shirt or jacket over their t-shirts. I ended up ordering the t-shirts but was able to borrow a few uniforms from the National Theatre's stock. How our audiences interpreted all of this, I don't know.

What did trigger a perceptible audience response was the language we reconfigured for this production: all scenes with the Captain were spoken in Standard Albanian, while scenes involving enlisted soldiers were spoken in Gheg or a hybrid spoken in each actor's home city or village. When the black sergeant appeared, he spoke Standard Albanian, which was responded to disrespectfully by the white soldiers, who answered him in Gheg. This language choice was novel and bold: most audience members had never heard Gheg spoken at the National Theatre. Fortunately, there was no consideration of the N-word: as my actors explained it, there are words for the color black and for dark, but there are no pejorative racial terms. They noted, instead, that the worse thing to call someone was "spiun," their word for spy.

For the songs demanded by the script, we chose well-known, Vietnam-era songs that were sung in English but without their refrains repeated in Gheg. Fortunately, two of our actors played instruments well enough to accompany these songs and, thus, avoid having to sing a capella.

For our research about the Vietnam war, I shared numerous youtube videos, which my actors appreciated intellectually but, overall, seemed non-plussed. They already had experienced war directly and personally; they had lost family members and friends, homes and communities. Nine of the 10 had been displaced physically with most going to Albania. One actor revealed at the end of our time together that he had witnessed the execution of his teacher during a massacre in his village. They knew what war was; I did not.

What I knew came from my father and the stories and slides from his two years in Vietnam. So, one evening, we Skyped with him. His explanations about the war were enlightening for all of us: he talked about the moral implications of fighting a war that so many GIs believed was neither justifiable nor winnable. He also addressed racism and classism in ways that made practical sense to the actors. A week later, we Skyped my brother Steven, who had recently retired from the Air Force and who had been part of the war planning that governed the NATO bombing of Serbia, including Kosovo.

Most impressive and practical, though, was the night that three US Army soldiers visited a rehearsal. All three were from my home state of Georgia and currently were stationed

at nearby Camp Bondsteel. They watched an entire run-through and then workshopped with the actors about correct military behavior, e.g., how to stand, salute, address a superior, etc. Their time with us proved invaluable, and the three returned for the premiere at the National Theatre the following month.

During my eight weeks of rehearsals, I was interviewed three different times for national and regional television. Usually, I was asked about my reaction to Kosovo and then for comparisons of my students back home in Texas with my students and actors in Pristina, all of whom were significantly older due to the many years lost to the war and then rebuilding the infrastructure. On the day of our premiere, I had an official press conference at the National Theatre, which was attended by writers from three different television stations, who all showed up at different times. Two of these crews filmed the premiere and later shared edited clips on national and regional television.

On both nights of our run, the theatre was packed with attentive and appreciative audiences comprised of both Kosovar Albanians and Americans. The actors performed skillfully and passionately, and their diploma production was deemed successful by their professors, who announced that actors now could graduate. The responses of the press as well as that of the playwright were favorable. Overall, I was very pleased and proud...and relieved.

PART 2: TEXAS

Three years after returning to Texas and my home university, Sam Houston State University, I decided to adapt and produce Grabovci's play as an independent faculty project. The university is located in the small town of Huntsville, 70 miles north of Houston and is infamous for being the prison capital of Texas as well as the home of the state's execution chamber. My timing was auspicious in that the university had just built a small performance space and was eager for an inaugural production to open it, which ended up being our production, which we now called *Men with Broken Hopes*.

Again, I contacted z. Shaip to request permission to adapt his script, and again he reminded me that permissions, adaptation approval, royalties, etc., were not necessary. While he was curious about any substantial changes that might be made, he was just overjoyed that his script might be of interest in the U.S. Fortunately, both he and my interpreter Fjolla Hoxha agreed to avail themselves as needed. From the beginning, I wanted our English-language version to align as much as possible with the original, which immediately was evident in our marques and publicity materials.

One of the requirements for faculty projects at SHSU was that the students involved could not be part of the semester's other five season productions. Fortunately for me, I had a surplus of interested, available, and very talented students. We even had enough

actors of color to eliminate the need to double cast as well as the need for specialized clothing to depict race and ethnicity. Instead, three black actors were cast, respectively, as the Captain, who spoke formal English, the cook, who spoke "street" English, and the Sergeant, who spoke both, depending on the circumstances. For the immigrant soldier, I cast a Mexican-American actor, who, by his own acknowledgment, looked less European than the two other Mexican-Americans in the cast.

Helping us throughout were our stage manager/assistant director Carolina Reyes and our student dramaturg Annie Morales. While my familiarity with the play's content and context necessitated my ongoing dramaturgical oversight, I relied on Annie to record and organize our ever-changing English text and to provide quality control so there was consistency for each scene and each character. To accommodate our daily changes and growing number of files, we all used DropBox.

But, first, we had to produce a working, English-language script. To do this, I sent hours of audio files to a transcription service, which, in turn transcribed verbatim every word spoken during my initial sessions with interpreter Fjolla three years earlier. Without plugging the service, I will note that the turn-around was very quick, the transcription accurate, and the price a reasonable \$1.25 per audio minute. From the verbatim transcriptions, both Annie and I culled out the discussion, but retained the dialogue, which we formatted so that it resembled a standard script readily usable by the actors.

After many nights of round-table discussions, we put the actors on their feet with that day's rough draft. Usually, Carolina coordinated the rehearsal of one scene and Annie another, while I floated back and forth between the two. Our goal was to find ways to make the original Albanian dialogue "fit" the mouths of our American actors. Each resulting adapted scene was then run in front of the entire company, who, in turn, pointed out what worked and what didn't. We also incorporated the same songs, again accompanied by two actors, but without the Gheg refrains.

We improvised greatly with word choice, syntax, and pronunciation to create the local color needed for our Americanized production. Each of the actors was granted license in developing the language of his character. For example, our Mexican-American actor playing immigrant Michael adopted a strong Mexican dialect and even ended up speaking Spanish alone during his most emotional moments. Similarly, our black actor playing Sammy spoke the heavy "street" dialect from his childhood in Houston.

By end of process, the dialogue sounded almost "right" to us, but there remained many awkward moments when what we heard just didn't jibe with what we saw. I deduced that there were several possible reasons for this. One, the Albanian script was now 45 years old and dated, and much of the formalized Standard language now read

awkwardly, even in Kosovo. There were numerous words and phrases that just didn't translate, e.g., in Albanian there are words for the color black (*zezak*) and for dark (*ngryrsur*), but there are no pejorative words comparable to the N-word.

Two, the original language and acting style in Kosovo, both then and now, tend to be much more heightened and stylized than what we in the U.S. would consider realistic or psychologically believable. For my actors in Kosovo, everything was possible: drinking, smoking, rough housing, stripping down to their underwear, rolling in the floor, and ad-libbing.

For them, playing the action of the play was one of jumping from one flash fire to another, with each fire growing more intense and exciting. Because they all were playing at or over the top, the result was a very visceral experience that was surprisingly integrated and effective and meshed beautifully with the script. In Texas, on the other hand, my actors were much more reserved and their choices safer.