

3 IATC Critics Serve on the Jury of the International Theatre Festival MESS Sarajevo

SARAJEVO: For 51 almost uninterrupted years, Sarajevo has hosted a grand, hardy and poignantly international theatre festival in the Balkans, called the International Theater Festival MESS Sarajevo. Despite the war of 1992–1995, the threats of disintegration, the rivalry of ethnic nationalists and the post-election gridlock that has acted since October 2010 as a further brake on that country's development, the show has gone on through thick and thin in this resilient Sarajevo theater festival.

During the terrible siege of 1992–1995 — in which about 100,000 people died as Serb forces blockaded Sarajevo and launched rockets and weapons from the surrounding hills — the MESS Sarajevo festival managed nevertheless to put on an international film festival and a number of historically significant productions. Most notable among the festival's theater efforts was Susan Sontag's 1993 staging of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* — a production that drew so much world attention to the city's plight that many Bosnians have credited it with helping end the war.

The oldest theatre festival in the region, MESS Sarajevo began in 1960 as the Festival of Small and Experimental Stages. (The initials of MESS stand for Međunarodni teatarski or "small experimental stage.") Although it once grew up under the shadow of BITEF in Belgrade, the MESS Festival has emerged and matured to become a polestar event in its own right — a key nexus that gathers and promotes modern theatrical expression in the former Yugoslavia.

This year's edition was held in Sarajevo and in nearby Zenica, bringing 32 plays performed by 500 artists from 15 countries of the world and competing in six festival categories. As the city of Sarajevo itself struggles to bounce back from the genocide and from decades of socialism, the MESS festival thrives today; in many respects, it is even bigger than BITEF. To quote the words of Ivo Andrić, the Yugoslav novelist, short-story writer and 1961 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, the MESS Festival "has a future and manifold significance."

"If a piece of art is preserved and survives through the stories of many generations, and through spiritual heritage — if it remains in our memory — then we shall defeat time," stated MESS Festival artistic director Dino Mustafić in his welcome speech at the festival's opening night.

This year's 51st edition, which took place from September 30 to October 9, was also marked by an interest new development. For the first time, this festival's organizers cooperated with the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC) to form a larger festival jury that included a team of international critics and prominent journalists. In addition to its established jury structure, the festival invited (at the suggestion of Belgrade critic Ivan Medenica) three international critics — U.S.A. editor and critic Randy Gener, U.K. critic Ian Herbert, and editor of Croatian Radio Bojan Munjin — to take part as jury members, representing the IATC. They joined the main jurors, who took up the bulk of the work: Bosnian actress Gordana Boban, Mexico theater critic Fernando de Ita, and director/scenographer from Turkey Nurullah Tuncer.

In effect, the IATC jury handed out an international critic's choice — only one award — while the main jurors were tasked with selecting the majority of winners for best play, best actor, best director and several other categories from the festival's six sections.

At a press conference held to announce the winners soon after the stroke of midnight on the last day of the festival, Gener, Herbert and Munjin bestowed the IATC award to the Serbian/Bosnian ensemble collaboration, *Hypermnnesia* and to its Bosnian director Selma Spahić. The IATC jurors agreed that the stirring *Hypermnnesia* (a co-production of Heartefact Fund and BITEF Theatre of Belgrade) represented a new theatrical tendency in the region.

“As international critics we are already well aware of the quality of many of the international groups we have seen in this MESS festival,” the IATC jury stated in its citation. “We think it more useful to give our award in recognition of some fine local work, with which we less familiar. So we should like to present our one prize to the cast and director of *Hypermnnesia*, for a production that was not only urgent and topical, but a very fine piece of theatre. We salute both the ensemble that brought their experiences to the stage and the director, Selma Spahić, who gave them their exciting coherence.”

A devised creation, *Hypermnnesia* exploited the popular form of documentary theater for its methodology, techniques and stage presentation. Engagingly, the piece wove together the personal and intimate biographies of eight young actors from Sarajevo, Belgrade and Pristine. Through a process of improvisation, these actors each told and examined their lives as adolescents and teenagers growing up in extreme circumstances in ex-Yugoslavia. In collecting the clear and objective memories of the childhoods of these young actors, *Hypermnnesia* charted the impact, described the scars, and refracted the broader political consequences of the Balkan region’s turbulent recent past.

The Grand Prize for Best Production, dubbed “Golden Laurel Wreath Award for Best Performance,” went to *Radio Muezzin*, directed by Stefan Kaegi of Germany’s Rimini Protokoll. Like *Hypermnnesia*, *Radio Muezzin* was also a work of documentary theater. In *Radio Muezzin*, four Egyptian muezzins from the mosques of Cairo share their real-life stories against a multimedia scenic background. Unfortunately, these muezzins’ livelihoods of singing calls to prayer had been threatened by a government decision to replace them with a centralized radio version. *Radio Muezzin* did not fail to resonate in this predominantly Muslim country.

Director Oliver Frijić took home top honors for best director for his positively compelling stage version of the Academy Award–winning 1985 film *When Father was Away on Business*, one of the most significant works of Abdulah Sidran. Staged as an intimate epic, the play captures the seriousness of the times (during the conflict between Tito and Stalin), the dark comedy of everyday life, and the fears associated with living under Communism in Yugoslavia in the early 1950s. The story is told from the viewpoint of a boy who is six years of age and whose father ends up in jail due to the Cominform turmoil.

Second prizes (called “Silver Laurel Wreath Awards”) were handed out in the six sections of the festival. Of the foreign shows that populated the World MESS section, a silver laurel was bestowed upon *Gardenia* created by Alain Platel and Frank van Laecke for Les Ballet C de la B of Belgium. A documentary dance-theater piece, *Gardenia* conjures the closing night of a transvestite cabaret in Barcelona where seven middle-aged men recall their double lives as cross-dressing movie stars and as ordinary civil servants.

At the same press conference to announce the winners, Gener praised *Gardenia* for “its humanist portrayal of elderly cross-dressers, all former cabaret dancers and drag artists, most of them in their 70s. *Gardenia* is a delicious cocktail that mixes poignant glamour, documentary facets, the yearning for transcendence and a social-justice message—it is a kind of *Follies* for third gender. Given the fact that homosexuality is still a name that dares not

speak its name in the Balkans, the very fact that this show was performed in Sarajevo speaks very powerfully to the MESS festival's relevance in tackling some of the deepest contemporary issues of this global moment."

In the Mittel Europa section, devoted to works that explore the political concept of Central Europe, *When Father was Away on Business* by Atelje 22 was named the clear winner for best performance.

In the Future MESS category, aimed at reflecting cutting-edge and avant-garde tendencies, Teatro Sotterraneo of Italy was honored for best performance for its *Dies Irae – 5 episodes about the end of the species*, in which five fragments full of nude bodies and blood splattering imagine the end of the human species.

Of the children's productions presented this year, *Book of Wandering* by Malo pozorište "Duško Radović," a company from Belgrade, completely delighted and charmed the jury as this year's best.

Moreover, special jury awards were handed out to choreographer Edward Clug for Bosnia's *Rosas for Anne Teresa/Football Stories*, a dance-theater work exploring masculinity, and to the Italian composer Giorgio Battistelli for *Sconcerto*, in which a full orchestra of musicians disconcertingly play for themselves while their tormented conductor flails in his attempt to bring order to his mind's chaos.

As can be gleaned from this brief survey, a striking majority of this year's festival winners consisted of theatrical non-fiction and new Balkan creations. The preponderance of excellence in these two genres — especially in *Hypermnnesia* where the two forms collide — reveals the flickering vitality of contemporary theater in ex-Yugoslavia grappling with thorny Balkan sociopolitical realities while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of both theme and content.

It has been frequently stated there has been a lack of awareness about what culture is in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially of awareness of any unity in culture. And so the high quality of contemporary theatre at MESS stand in stark and stunning contrast to what Dino Mustafić has described as "the catastrophic state of culture" in this divided and malfunctioning country. In his welcome speech quoted above, Mustafić decried against the "extremely difficult social and economic conditions" presently being confronted by Bosnia's top arts institution.

"There are certainly hundreds of reasons why we should protest [and] raise our voices against careless public services, against corruption, against poverty, against low salaries and pensions — against this or that," Mustafić said. "But tonight, this festival wants to protest against the dire state of culture — against the closing of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Art Gallery — against the shameful ignorance toward the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art — against the fact that for nearly half a century, not a single facility was constructed purposefully for culture — against the fact that there no jobs are being created for young artists, that there are no investments in cultural infrastructure, that we perform plays under the sky with no roof over our heads — against the closing of our theaters — against the disintegration of cultural and historical monuments."

For such a small country, Bosnia and Herzegovina can boast of having 14 ministers of culture. Ironically there is no cultural policy in place, and the country has still not formed a state-level

government following the October 2010 elections. While leaders of the country's six largest parties continue to fail to overcome their differences in talks on forming a national government that would bridge Serbs, Croats and Muslims in some semblance of a unitary state almost two decades since war tore them apart, several of Bosnia's most important cultural institutions face financial collapse owing to a prolonged dispute over who should be responsible for their long-term funding.

In addition to the closing in September 2011 of the Arts Gallery, which had been in existence since 1946, the legal and financial status of the following state institutions are now in a state of complete disarray: the National Museum of Sarajevo, the National and University Library, the Kinoteka (National Film Archives), the Historical Archives Museum, the Museum of Literacy and Theater Art, the Library for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

"The Ministry of Civil Affairs has not devoted a single cent this year to the work and survival of [these cultural institutions]," Mustafić said. "The budget of the Federal Ministry of Culture has been reduced by 73% since 2007, while the budget for the Sarajevo Canton Ministry of Culture and Sport was reduced by about 30% since 2008."

Creating a democratic, capitalist society from the ground up is a slow and painful process. Unfortunately, Mustafić's report on the condition of museums, libraries, archives and galleries make it clear that time is running out in Bosnia's arts and culture sector as a whole. Toward the end of his speech, Mustafić asked the audiences to switch on the flashlights they were given as they entered Sarajevo's National Theater, where the opening night reception was held.

"I ask you, the audience...to cure the darkness of cultural politics — to give light to the opening of the MESS Festival," Mustafić said.

As confusion over arts funding drags on in Bosnia and Herzegovina, how good it is to discover in Sarajevo an artistically rich international theater festival that serves as another point of light shining over that country's darkened horizon.

— BY RANDY GENER