

Kosovo

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Vain generals, mix-ups and Elvis: Kosovo play turns peace talks into farce

Jeton Neziraj's Negotiating Peace is a frenzied comedy drawing on Bosnian and Kosovan wars



Philip Ottermann in Pristina

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Negotiating Peace had its premiere at Pristina's Oda theatre last week and is going on tour. Photograph: Atthe Mulla

When political leaders present war as the only solution, it is up to artists to remind people that finding peace is still possible.

That is the starting point for a Kosovo-based theatre company, Qendra Multimedia, whose new play returns to the last war in Europe before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and explores how it was stopped.

The lesson it draws, and the genre it chooses to present its findings, is unexpected: the Kosovan playwright Jeton Neziraj's Negotiating Peace shows the diplomacy of peace as a farce, albeit a necessary one.

Dramatising roundtable talks between the fictional warring countries of Banovia and Unmikistan, the play is a frenzied comedy in which vain generals can only be lured to the negotiating table by promises of Hollywood films celebrating their actions. Opposing parties get drunk while negotiating demilitarised zones, mix up drafts of ceasefire agreements and sign on the wrong dotted line. Maps of disputed territories are partitioned with paper scissors until holy lands turn into showers of confetti.

And yet, at the end of the 90-minute performance, former enemies lock arms to sing Elvis Presley's Peace in the Valley, and a Ratko Mladic character wets himself as he realises he is going to end up in front of a war crimes tribunal.

"When you talk about serious things, you must not talk about it in a serious way", said Orest Pastukh, a Ukrainian actor who is one of five members of Qendra's multinational cast with first-hand experience of their country going to war. "If we would speak seriously about war and peace, everybody would go mad."

The play, which is going on a European tour to Germany, the Czech Republic, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina next month, is loosely based on the Dayton accords that in 1995 brought a halt to the three-and-a-half-year Bosnian war, the deadliest chapter in the breakup of Yugoslavia.

At its premiere at Pristina's Oda theatre last week, it also mixed in elements of the peace settlement that four years later ended the war in Kosovo, a conflict that is often remembered as the west's last "good war" and a counterfoil to the Iraq disaster that followed soon after.

"I realised that the negotiating table was also a kind of stage," the playwright Jeton Neziraj said. Photograph: Atthe Mulla

To end that conflict between Serbs and Kosovo-Albanians in the breakaway province, Nato acted more swiftly and aggressively than it had done in the Bosnian war. In downtown Pristina, gratitude for the US's assertive leadership in the peace talks is still palpable. There is a statue of a waving Bill Clinton, a bust of Madeleine Albright and a street named after Richard Holbrooke, the bulldozer diplomat who led the negotiating team in charge of solving the Balkan crisis.

It may seem surprising, therefore, that in Negotiating Peace, moral certitudes come wrapped in sarcasm and not in pathos. The Holbrooke-type character, Joe Robertson, played by Harald Thompson Rosenstrøm, a Norwegian, is not just a "beast of peace" but also "a schizophrenic, a brutal Mazarin" who gets sexual kicks out of nailbiting crisis talks. In one scene, he writhes on the round table in hotpants and a leather harness, whipping himself into a frenzy with a white flag. At the end, the play rewards his efforts not with a statue but "his very own emoji".

"When I read Holbrooke's memoir To End a War, I realised that the negotiating table was also a kind of stage," Neziraj said on the eve of his play's premiere. "And a dramatic stage on which actors were acting quite bizarrely", involving negotiators staging walkouts and new political borders being drawn on napkins."

He said studying the Dayton agreement, as well as the Oslo accords signed between Israel and Palestine in 1993, had robbed him of the illusion that peace talks were structured conversations led by experts in their fields. "They are the fruit of the wills of individuals at a certain moment," Neziraj said.

In Kosovo, a degree of cynicism about the diplomacy of peace was inevitable, he said, especially as tensions flared again last month after a standoff between gunmen and Kosovan police at a monastery near the border with Serbia. During rehearsals, Thompson Rosenstrøm asked if there were evacuation plans in place if Serbia were to invade. The director, Blerta Neziraj, Jeton's partner, assured him that the presence of Nato troops meant a Russian invasion of Norway was more likely.

Jeton Neziraj: 'We in Kosovo live in an interim state, which is not war but neither a fully fledged peace' Photograph: Slavica Zivner

"War doesn't end when you lay down your arms," Neziraj said. "We in Kosovo live in an interim state, which is not war but neither a fully fledged peace. It is an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, because the war bill of the '90s has not been completely paid off."

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Neziraj is aware of his own cynicism, and Negotiating Peace eventually manages to snap out of it. Towards the end of the play, the summit looks like a failure: faith in the UN is shot to shreds, there are calls for a second conference organised by the EU. The chief negotiator appeals to the audience for advice to break the deadlock.

As the play tours around the Balkans, the company intends to invite different real-life witnesses on to the stage. In Pristina the job fell to Aida Cerkez, a veteran Associated Press correspondent who covered the siege of Sarajevo from the Bosnian capital. Her 10-minute monologue changes the mood of the play.

"The only precondition for peace is to get everybody around the same table," she said after the curtain call. "And to get everybody around the same table, you have to militarily weaken the dominant side. As long as one side can think it can win, there's no reason to sit down at the negotiating table. In Bosnia, that condition was met by Nato bombing."

Cerkez rejected the idea of the end of the Bosnian war as a blueprint for ending other conflicts, but said it held lessons nonetheless. "Peace is not the absence of armed conflict," she said. "In Bosnia we are living the absence of armed conflict, not peace. But that's not nothing. It's a lot."

As the cast celebrated their first night with shots of raki in the theatre bar, the Ukrainian actor Pastukh reflected on the situation in his home country. "This play made me realise that every war must have a fatale, but I don't know how this would work in Ukraine," he said. "Serbia got off lightly, and as a result some of the same problems are now rearing their heads. After our war, will we have another Kosovo, or a Nuremberg?"

Had taking part in the play made him more pessimistic or more hopeful about his own country? "That's an interesting question," Pastukh said. "I think I have become more realistic. Whenever there is a peace settlement in Ukraine, it will be a grey area. There will be some positives. But there will also be some negatives."

Negotiating Peace is on at Leipzig's Euro-scene theatre festival on 8 and 9 November, and at Prague City theatre on 13 and 14 November.

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