



SHARON POLLOCK: FIRST WOMAN OF CANADIAN THEATRE Edited by Donna Coates

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Sharon Pollock in Kosovo

Jeton Neziraj

In 2003, a few years after the war in Kosovo ended, some colleagues and I established the Centre for Children's Theatre Development (CCTD). Through our work, we aimed to aesthetically improve children's theatre in Kosovo, while using the theatre as a platform where we could address important social and political topics. However, we had very little experience, so it was necessary to seek other people's assistance. Thus we started by trying to create links with artists, theatre practitioners, and theatre institutions from different parts of the world.

Theatre in Kosovo had suffered from the country's ten-year period of war, repression, and isolation. During the 1990s it barely functioned. Albanian culture was a key target for the hegemonic politics of the Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević. Theatre was unavoidably one of its casualties. Hence after Kosovo was freed, we wanted to connect culturally with the world. Just as space ships use frequent signals when trying to connect to Earth, we started sending messages to people and theatre institutions all over the world. We found it very encouraging that we immediately began receiving many positive responses. Some

people offered to share their experiences, others sent books, and so on. Sharon Pollock, the distinguished Canadian playwright whom we had contacted by email, replied and offered to send us her next royalty cheque, which she was hoping to receive from one of her staged plays in the United States. We were thrilled by her response but asked her to send books instead of money since, at that time, we had few resources. We never did receive the books that Sharon sent us, though. Who knows where they ended up? Somehow, when I think of those books, I always imagine that they may come one day; those “lost books” make me think of the sentimental stories of letters mailed during the Second World War, which finally reached their destinations some forty or fifty years later.

From that time on, I continued to keep in touch with Sharon. She read one of my plays for children and offered some valuable comments. And every time I met someone from Canada, one of my first questions was, “Do you know Sharon Pollock?” I knew she was an important figure in the world of theatre, but I have since learned that she is legendary, one of the most prominent personalities in theatre.

After I visited Canada for the first time in 2008, Sharon again mailed me a generous package of books on theatre. Among these books were some of her plays. Finally, I could read her work! That same year, I started working as the artistic director at the National Theatre of Kosovo, and my colleagues and I decided that Sharon Pollock should be one of our first invited guests. On her first visit to Kosovo, she gave a lecture on Canadian theatre and facilitated a workshop designed for young playwrights. At that time, Sharon and I also initiated a Canadian–Kosovo cultural exchange project named “PlayLuaj.” By then, I had read one of her best-known plays, *Blood Relations*, and as soon as I finished it, I was convinced that it should be made available to Kosovar audiences.

***Blood Relations* at the National Theatre of Kosovo**

In 2010, the National Theatre of Kosovo decided that *Blood Relations* should be staged in the upcoming season, and that it should be directed by the well-known Kosovo director Fadil Hysaj. After he read the play, he said to me, “This is my play. No one in Kosovo can stage it better than me. It is made for me.” I saw that his enthusiasm stemmed from more than just wanting a new theatrical adventure. The opening of *Blood Relations* took place on 17 December 2010, in Pristina, with all of the profits from the production allocated for humanitarian causes. We donated the money generated from ticket sales and sales of the published Albanian version of the play to Naxhije Deva, a pioneer actress of the Kosovo theatre, who was on the verge of poverty. In offering our funds this way, we felt we were embracing the same spirit of humanism and empathy that Sharon tries to evoke through her writing and through her intellectual engagements, evident in the support that she had so kindly offered us from the first time we were introduced to each other. We were also delighted that Sharon was able to attend the opening of her play in Pristina.

I have been asked many times in Canada why we decided to stage *Blood Relations* in Kosovo. My response is usually straightforward: this is an excellent play, which functions well in different cultural and social contexts. I believe that this is an essential feature of a good play – that audiences can easily find references in different social and cultural settings. Yet when I selected this play as a part of the theatre’s program, I had something else in mind, too – something that I believed to be important, whether the audience could relate to it or not.

At that time (and still today), the UN mission in Kosovo was initiating trials against some of the former Kosovo Liberation Army soldiers who had fought against Serbian forces. These soldiers were being accused of murdering some of the traitors who had collaborated with the enemy. In the eyes of many people in Kosovo, especially those who had suffered at the hands of enemy forces, the killing of these traitors who had in turn killed mostly civilians was understandable, perhaps

even justifiable.¹ Some also felt that justice might have been served had these traitors been arrested and jailed for their acts, but most were released for lack of evidence. This was the disturbing Kosovo political background at the time when the history of the American Lizzie Borden, the central character in *Blood Relations*, was introduced to the Kosovar audience.

This was the link I made between Sharon's play and what was happening in Kosovo. But at the same time, I was also convinced that the play would function even without this "contextualization." The director chose to treat the play solely in terms of its content, without making any overt parallels with other contexts. His decision, to use a symbolic and ritualistic approach (quite popular in Kosovo theatre), offered an unusual dimension, most likely different from the way it may have been staged in Canada or other countries. In my opinion, the play was staged very well and received a favourable response from the audience.

"The Hotel" Play

My collaboration with Sharon has continued since the staging of *Blood Relations*. As a part of our "PlayLuaj" project, Sharon and I have started working on a play tentatively titled "The Hotel." Our discussions on how to approach it have been extremely useful for me: as a young playwright, I have had the opportunity to observe Sharon's creative process, and at the same time, to be a part of this process. We have gathered a lot of the material necessary for writing the play, but there is still much work left to do. The topic we have chosen concerns a post-war location, a place like Kosovo, but not necessarily Kosovo. It is a place that has suffered through war and is trying to rebuild itself and find peace. The plot summary so far is as follows: a director (maybe Canadian) is invited by an international NGO to work on a short performance with actors who come from both sides of the conflict. The play is to be shown on the last day of the donors' conference, at the end of which the NGO hopes to gather sufficient funds in order to

continue its activities in bringing reconciliation to this country that was destroyed by war.

As expected, many questions remain and we still have many unsolved issues. However, it is fascinating to see how two people with such different perspectives approach both the content and style of the play. Sharon writes, of course, from an outsider's perspective, as a "witness" to war, but at the same time she clearly discerns post-war problems, such as the emotional aspects of the characters and their inter-relations. By contrast, as an insider, as someone who has directly experienced war, I tend to be "overly involved." Obviously, bringing these two diverse experiences and perspectives together requires a great deal of understanding on both our parts. Although our collaboration remains unfinished, I hope that audiences in both Canada and Europe will one day be able to see this difficult and challenging work on stage. I also hope that the Canadian–Kosovar project "PlayLuaj" will continue. The distance between our two countries may be an obstacle, but with Sharon, anything is possible.

NOTE

- 1 For more background on Kosovar theatre during the war, see the following twenty-four-minute video, which includes an interview with Jeton Neziraj and clips from recent productions. nitenews.org/jeton-neziraj.kosovo-war-theatre.

