

In 1999 Sanja Mitrović's (°1978) life changed. In March of that year the first NATO bombs fall on the city of Belgrade, in which she lived at the time, a sad endpoint in a series of civil wars that had been tearing the Former Yugoslavia apart since 1991. The intervention of the international community would lead to a few thousand civilian deaths, the declaration of independence of Kosovo, and the fall of Serbian president Slobodan Milošević. In this context, a young Serb studying Japanese language and literature begins to doubt her future. As a translator she is looking at a useful and serving role, too subservient perhaps. In the grander scheme of what is going on around her, expressing and clarifying someone else's words suddenly no longer seems like a fulfilling task. She feels a desire to develop her own voice and her own vocabulary. To those who consider Sanja Mitrović's track record, the way in which her voice develops from a compulsive sense of autobiography quickly becomes apparent. Anger is the initial drive which, as the years go by, shifts and expands into more universal stories. Little by little she relinquishes her anger, exchanging it for a curiosity towards the way in which universally human and political mechanisms function.

'History' consists of a collection of self-constructed stories. Some of the 'big' narratives grow into versions of reality that threaten to repress personal perspectives which may deviate from the official accounts. Other implode and leave their audience displaced. More than anyone Mitrović is familiar with these volatile dynamics of a narrative. Growing up in the post-Tito era (the president died in 1980), she and other Yugoslavs had to give up the socialist ideal of a country united in brotherhood. The civil wars enforced their own narratives. To her frustration, in 1999 Mitrović experienced the ways in which Serbs – all Serbs – were framed as the bad guys of Europe. 'All sorts of stuff was happening in my name. Political movements sprouted up, with which I didn't want to be associated. And despite of it, I was being labeled as a "bad" Serb.' This gave Mitrović a final push to let her own voice be heard. After an audition for the Croatian company Montažstroj she was given a chance to tour Europe as a performer. In 2001 she moves to Amsterdam to attend the Mime School there. In 2008 she receives an international breakthrough with her directorial debut *Will You Ever Be Happy Again?*, in which she and German performer Jochen Stechmann confront each other's experiences of belonging to reviled and ostracised nations.

*Will You Ever Be Happy Again?* was performed more than 150 times and is Mitrović's most autobiographical work. Themes such as nationalism, immigration and xenophobia will run through her subsequent performances, but the need to speak in her own name assumes a different sense of purpose. *A Short History of Crying* (2010) is no longer only about Mitrović's own story, but it looks at systems of codification surrounding grief which are to be found in different parts of the world. *Crash Course Chit Chat* (2012) explores the (shaky) survival and continued existence of the European Union and the idea of European identity. It is the first show in which Mitrović does not take part as a performer. In *Everyone Expects to Grow Old But No One Expects to Get Fired*, produced in 2012 in Guimarães in Portugal, she works with a mix of professional and non-professional actors for the first time. The evolution from performer (with her own story) to director (who shines a light on other

people's stories) not only illustrates a development towards a more mature craft, it also bears significance on the level of content: a growing awareness of the necessity of multiple perspectives. It is a necessary to confront several stories with one another so as to stage the absence of one dominant, 'true' account.

In an attempt to shape these multiple perspectives Mitrović construes the performance as a dialogue. First and foremost, it is a dialogue between her and the performers, whose personal stories constitute the most fertile working material. On an individual level, it is about the art of storytelling: from the human 'material' that exists out there, she gives shape to a puzzle, a new one every time, according to the characters of people who work together. This dialogue, however, does not remain intra-subjective, as people do not just live their own lives. They are surrounded by the lives of others, and situated in a specific social and political context. That context, too, delivers pieces of the puzzle, which in every performance reveals a different (self)-portrait, forever transforming, of 'small' people within the grand scheme of history. In this sense, you could consider Sanja Mitrović's work, on the one hand, as a perpetual reenactment of the loss of a meaningful overarching narrative, and, on the other, as the search for a new identity. There is no hope, or even wish, to ever fix that identity in a definite and permanent way. The puzzle can never be completed. 'We always come back to our wounds,' she says. A wound which is autobiographical, yet universal.

In the dynamic of this perpetual dialogue, the audience has an important part to play. Participation is not a goal in and of itself, but it is a self-evidence. For Mitrović, the audience are 'active thinkers' with whom she converses in the course of the performance – such as the interactive work *SPEAK!* (2013) – or, at the very least, after the performance, when critical discussions are organised and encouraged. For Mitrović, the physical presence of the audience and the performers in a shared space determines the power of theatre as a medium. 'The beauty of theatre is that it doesn't allow you to sink back into the dark, in the way that film does, but that it makes you visible as an individual in the collective. In our digital age I think we should cherish this live presence.' The contact with the audience leads to new influences and insights. It also implies that a performance is never fully 'completed', and each work grows and changes throughout the entire tour. In that sense, you could state that Mitrović's practice is an ongoing conversation, with performances manifested as temporary moments of solidification. Even after a tour the experience extends and feeds into the next project.

Mitrović's work addresses big political themes, yet never takes the form of a political pamphlet, or offers fixed 'solutions', because it is the responsibility of a the theatre maker to 'open out people's thoughts, not to close them down'. In order to open as many thoughts as possible, she takes the roundabout path of fiction, though that fiction is based on a detailed study of reality. The basis of every performance is a long period of research and extended interviews. Subsequently, Mitrović weaves this real data into a fictional performance, in the course of which she demonstrates how easy it is for 'objective' facts or documents to become subjectively nuanced. For such hybrid form of theatre, the writers have coined a term 'docu-tales'. Mitrović's

approach sometimes takes her to unusual places, such as the clubs of football supporters to which she went in search of participants for her latest work *Do You Still Love Me?*, a piece about love in its most obsessive form. *Do You Still Love Me?* links the love of actors for their craft with the love of football supporter for their team.

The performance was first presented in the French city of Reims with supporters of the Stade de Reims, after which a new version was produced in Rotterdam with the Feyenoord supporters. In Brussels four supporters of the Royale Union Saint-Gilloise will stand on stage next to four professional actors. What Mitrović discovered in the stories of actors and football supporters was that two such ostensibly different groups had, in actual fact, a lot in common. 'Two worlds which on the face of it appear very different are, to a certain extent, quite similar.' Both groups seemed prepared to make great sacrifices, and to forego a 'normal' sense of family life, for that other, greater love. In proposing such correspondence *Do You Still Love Me?* touches on the idea of extremism, a theme which reappears throughout a lot of Mitrović's work, both in the political sense as well as – like here – in a personal context. According to Mitrović, real love does not tolerate extremism. 'Low-level, everyday extremism is dangerous, whether it's about praising your country, glorifying your flag, or idolising your football team. You attempt to prove your love by blindly praising its object, but this is not love. Real love resides in a critical distance. It's a critical reflection which allows you to love someone, or something, even more, with all their faults.'

This insight echoes the experience of someone who left their homeland in order to learn how to look at it afresh. The displacement did not lead to an 'epiphany', or to a clearer insight into the history of the Former Yugoslavia, but rather to a *different* way of looking, marked by the physical distance and a sense of loss. Sanja Mitrović approaches this sense of loss head-on in her every performance, building a body of work which aims to offer up new puzzles, and tell new and unfinished stories, with the critical love for all that is human as its warm, beating heart.

Evelyne Coussens, April 2015.