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Feministica: Creating Feminist Consciousness in the Former Yugoslavia

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Feministica:

Creating Feminist Consciousness in the Former Yugoslavia

By

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The School for International Training
Gender, Transformation and Civil Society

Independent Study Project

Spring '05

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Feministica

(Lights come up on stage, revealing 5 chairs and a small table. On it are a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, a glass, and a bottle of coke

M enters, carrying a bag and comes down center, where she takes a book from her bag, opens it, and begins to read aloud)

M:

April 12, 2005

This whole trip has been so confusing for me and I have spent a lot of my time asking why it is that I am even here. I don't know if I can really expect to come out of this a triumphantly changed person as I had once hoped to do. However, if I can create something out of this that my contemporaries from this place will be proud to be a part of, then I at least I am doing some good while I am here, instead of just using my daily energy to worry and bitch and annoy people with my halting half English half Croatian stumbling. I would like to think, not that I am helping them, because they certainly don't need my help, but more that they would be proud of me. Strange to want people I have never met to be proud of me, but I feel that if I can do something worthwhile in their eyes, then my experience here will be worthwhile, and worthwhile to someone other than me. That, even if I don't return triumphant, I don't go back knowing that I just let myself become "that American" whom I loathe and who is the whole reason I set out on this whole misguided adventure anyway.

(closes the book and addresses the audience)

So, in typical me fashion, I set out to do a project about myself. Well, not myself exactly, but as close as I could get. I think my experience here stirred me up in such a profound way that by the time that I was supposed to pick a research topic, I immediately sought to connect myself in a way that I had been missing so much since leaving home. So, how to connect myself? To do a project on the people here “like me.” In this case, young feminists. And I suppose I was looking to pinpoint the differences between them and me in order to understand the disconnect I was feeling between me and here.

So I set out with a goal: to understand the process of the creation of a feminist consciousness and its unique construction in Zagreb, Croatia. And two tools: a tape recorder and a list of 20 questions – both of which failed me in some sort of profound way during the course of the project. The questions were as follows:

(turns on her tape recorder and speaks into it)

1. When did you first start to think about issues of gender inequality?
2. Did you have any personal experiences with gender inequality early in life?
3. When do you think you were first introduced to the word “feminism?”
4. What were your initial reactions to the idea of feminism?
5. How did you see your society’s feelings about feminism?
6. Did this affect the way that you saw feminism? How?
7. Why do you think more young women don’t identify as feminists?

8. When did you first began to identify yourself as a feminist? Why then?
9. How did your family and friends react when you began to identify yourself as a feminist?
10. Were there certain people in your life that were feminist role models?
11. Were there certain texts that really made you start thinking about feminist ideas?
12. What do you think are the most important women's issues that need to be addressed in Croatian society today?
13. How do you see the position of women now as differing from their position during the former Yugoslavia?
14. How do you think the war affected the position of women? Nationalism?
15. How do you see the Catholic Church's role in society? Positive or Negative for women?
16. Do you participate in feminist activism? What kinds of activism?
17. What do you hope to accomplish with your activism?
18. What realistic changes to you hope to see happen here within the next five years?
Ten years? In your lifetime?
19. Do you ever think about moving to somewhere that is more advanced in terms of gender equality? Why or why not?
20. Anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a feminist in this society?

(turns off tape recorder and places it back in her bag)

So I started out. And then I met Ana.

(opens the book again. Reads)

April 19, 2005

Today I ate a pastry and pizza. However, lets get to the important stuff, which in this case is my interview with Ana. Ana is amazing. I love the way she speaks. Her voice is so soft and smooth and her words all seem to flow together in this really peaceful way. Even when she stumbles or doesn't know how to say something, the cadence of her language still is so...pretty. Even when she cusses, it seems pretty in this really wonderful way. In fact, pretty is a good word to describe her in other ways. I love the way she does her make-up. Its how I would wear my make-up if I had an\y guts. But she's not showy or pushy about it; you can just tell she likes it. It's genuine. And she seemed to think she had nothing "interesting" to say, yet I spent much of the interview thinking how lucky I was to have stumbled across a girl who, in my very first interview, seemed to speak to exactly the types of issues that I wanted to get to without really knowing how. She spoke in quotes. Perfect, contained quotes. It was often like I could see the lines of text as she spoke the words. But it wasn't because she was affected in any way; you could tell she was simply speaking what she thought. But what she thought was so real and honest and simple and perfect, that I sat transfixed at my good luck. Its amazing how you can meet people only in passing and maybe realize how amazing they are more than even they themselves ever will. I guess that happens with a lot of people. But that's how I feel about Ana.

(sits in chair stage left, lights a cigarette and begins to speak)

Ana:

After the women's studies, and during the women's studies and you hang out with people and they ask you what you are doing in your life, you have to mention the women's studies. It was the first time I noticed, the response is really terrible, even when you're around young people who you think you know. Everybody has something to say. And we would always get into all sorts of discussions and I would hear some really stupid facts, so called facts. And I couldn't believe it. I would often come and cry about what happened last evening or the day before and it always led to a discussion about homosexuality because it's inevitable, I don't know why. All this hasn't changed the way I feel about feminism or my opinions. In a way I feel obligated to those women because I told you how much they meant to me during the war. So, I would never deny women's studies. Sometimes I just, say I don't want to go into it. Because I feel like there is nothing new that can be said about it, it's always those same arguments which I find really stupid because I don't think they actually went in deeper, they just scratched the surface. And those questions are so stupid to me and I only feel that I have less and less strength to go into it.

Everything I feel is so complicated. Even with the language, you know we have like female and male professions. And every book is written for male readers and even when the feminists, for instance our professor was, having a gathering and it's mostly women, but only two men and she was addressing them as women, and the only one who

complained were women themselves because they felt the need to say, “but we have some men here.” And then, in this language, when there is like a man, it could be 200 women and a man, it goes back to be addressed as men, but they have a problem because they thought their colleagues were...Not being taken into account. But their entire lives are like that, but they don’t see the problem. And I am even in to changing the language. I am very radical (*laughs*). Like with my boyfriend, he said he wouldn’t mind if I said, instead of “bili smo na kavi” - “bile smo na kavi.” I think he didn’t think I was actually going to say it. But I said, like “where were you?” “Bile smo na kavi” and I made him a woman. And he had to keep quiet because he said he didn’t mind but all his friends laughed at him.

Every day when I open newspaper I think about leaving. So, every day I like to fantasize. Like, go. Like those political weekly papers, they are full of naked women. This is like a porn magazine, and this would never happen in Sweden. And when I see them ask politicians about the type of underwear they wear, their perfume, their makeup. They never ask the guys, men about that stuff. And they just agree. So all those things I hate and every day I get mad. And when you see the law not doing anything about the rape, or violence because they say that, but this man he fought for our country, he has a lot of trouble, he has this post war syndrome, and they just go free. And they do it again, but we have to respect them, because he went through this hell for us. It just goes over and over again and they are doing nothing about it. It makes me really mad. I don’t feel protected at all.

Or even the, it was like a week or two ago, with this girl, I think she was 19 and her ex-boyfriend and boyfriend she was with then, they took her in the car, and raped her, and they were driving around the town with her in the back of the car. And she had her mobile and she called and gave them the license plate number, and where they were taking her. And nobody did anything about it. The police just said it was hard to find her because the car was moving even though she was giving the locations. Afterwards she tried to kill herself but she didn't...she didn't manage to. And on the other had, in Istria, these two tourist ladies from Italy, they were really old. And some...ummm...addictive personas... heroin addicts, they went for their purses. And this woman fell and hit her head and she dies later on, and it was like a national incident. Because the government, they didn't want this to be like, they didn't want Croatia to look like an unsafe place to come to. And they were afraid of losing the tourists, so, they employed the entire police force, and of course they found who did it. And now they are being punished. The sentence is much bigger then those who rape or kill. Because they thought it was really important. So, you can see they can do something but the question is will they, do they want to? So it all makes me really mad.

(puts out her cigarette)

(M rises and goes over to retrieve her journal, opens and reads)

M:

April 22, 2005

Its strange to think as I am meeting these women that in less then a month I will be required to perform as them. Although I didnt think about it this way before, now that I have started to meet them I am struck with what a big responsibility I have undertaken – they are trusting me with their stories, true most are not highly personal, but they are still their words, and they are trusting me to say them. As I meet with each one of them the responsibility is growing in my mind because they are such individuals, and individuals worthy of all the talent and grace I can muster in my portrayal of them. Today I met with Mirana. She picks her words carefully, but I get the impression that it isn't because she is searching for the English, and that she would do the same in her native language. At first, I thought she was a little stern, but as the interview continued she smiled her little smiles enough that I felt that although she was the type of person it would take years to really know, that it would be worth it at the end.

(Closes book and places it back on the table)

(Walks downstage left)

Marina:

Actually, I think the bigger problem... is the problem with gender equality I felt from the outside, but the thing that started to worry me, is when you start to feel it from the inside. That way that you feel. When you find that, you become angry. It was like more subconscious, now it's more conscious. Why I behave in that way, why I behave in

this way. And when you find out it's all a product of your society that most of women internalize, then you become angry. You want to change it in yourself, and then you want to change that... I don't want my daughters to live in a society like we have today.

And I couldn't stop talking about those problems, I was so occupied and every coffee with my friends, I would start these discussions. Even before women's studies, I was passionate about these type of problems. But then there was this reaction from some of them, "what happened to you?" I don't know, "you're talking bullshit." And in women's studies I think that's the period really when the people you are surrounded with, when you start...start to get it. What are the problems they are talking about. During that period, it something like, it happens with my girlfriends, some clique, and they start to think about it. They don't do anything - they don't do anything big yet, but they start to think. I find that important.

For women who aren't feminists? I think that it is either fear, lack of knowledge, lack of courage, because you really have to be...at some point in your life you find yourself on that other side of society. And people like to be in crowd. But it's their choice - I can't judge them.

My family is still not so happy about that. It wasn't good reaction. It's not easy for me in those kind of surroundings, but I learned that I don't need...that the first thing was to accept myself, the way I am. And after that, to accept someone else outside to accept me. I try to say to myself, this is me, and if I am not that....

I had that one part of me that was always revolutionary. I have that part in myself. And that rebellion in me always existed. But it didn't have a channel through which the revolutionary could act. And I think that "revolution" word on that book, "Revolution from Within" pulled me. I just found it in a bookstore.

So, actually, in the beginning all my role models were in books. At some point in my life, I couldn't find a role model in real life because I was surrounded by people who weren't thinking about these things. And actually, I find it good, because I was aware that I had to be a model. That I had to imagine that model. And it was a creative thing for me, which was good. And after I got involved in the women's studies, I got a lot of role models.

The Church? First place, it acts subconsciously, on women who don't think about it. They paint a picture like, this is a male world. Like male is our savior. Or for those who are particularly stupid, God is male. And I think the scary thing about it is at the subconscious level...and women are not giving lectures in church...they are sisters, just helping around, working with children, they are working with sick people...blah, blah, blah blah blah.... and on the other side, men: giving lectures. And there are men who are putting themselves in the position to talk about women's sexuality, women's body, abortion. And you open the paper, actually you don't even have to open it, you see it on the first page, you see the picture of three men. One is Catholic priest, one is Orthodox priest, and one Muslim. And it's about abortion. I don't know, its very clear picture.

About who here decides about women's body, about sexuality...they still paint the picture of virginity as a quality...What is even more absurd is women will see that, and if we don't talk about it, we in some way agree with it. And there is not enough of us who think about it. Here women still don't want to think about politics. I also had some aversion to it, but as I get older I realize everything is politics.

But, I expect more women will be interested in these problems. Because in this year, in gender studies, there is much more girls than the last year. I think is like something that shows where it's going. I hope it will continue. I think it depends on us, on these young feminists

(goes back and picks up the journal, reads)

M:

April 23, 2005

Today I had the easiest interview I suppose I will have throughout this whole process. Maša talks, well she talks like me. Although her American accent is deceiving, because American she is not, it is strangely comforting to talk to her. And she's 19, an age that is closer to my own than any I have encountered thus far. So I found myself, during the interview, wanting to forget the list of questions entirely and just gossip about something. In the end, I resisted, which was good because she had some really interesting things to say, but it made me miss being home where everyone, literally and figuratively, spoke my language.

(closes book, goes to center, and sits.)

(pours Coca-Cola into the glass and takes a sip before beginning)

Maša:

So, when did I become a feminist? I think in elementary school. Actually maybe before. I remember being really small and we were supposed to draw drawings of what we were going to become when we grow up. And I said I was going to become a feminist. And that was really early on. I probably didn't even know if I completely understood it then. Well, I told the teacher that I was going to have a hard time drawing this. And she said why. Because I want to become a feminist. And she said that I didn't have to draw it, I could just write it. But I think really seriously, I started applying it to myself in high school, when I understood the meaning of the word.

I think the war affected women a lot. One of the reasons for the war was religion, and you know, the only way you could differentiate yourself from the Serbs was to be a Roman catholic. So, the church started having a huge role. My opinion is that religion is not exactly why the war happened, but it became one of the excuses. You know, it was Yugoslavia and people lived all over. There were Serbs in Croatia, and in Bosnia, and it was all mixed. Croatia didn't exist for a long time, there was the Hapsburg Empire, and Yugoslavia, and blah blah blah, so how do you differentiate who was a Serb and who was a Croat. There were a lot of mixed marriages. I mean my father was born in Croatia, but his parents are Serbian, hence my infamous last name. Yeah, it did suck. Especially during the war. But its ok, there are a lot Milosevic's out there, it's a really common last

name. So you live next to people for 20 years, and how do you differentiate Serbs from Croats from Bosnians: its religion.

And the Catholic Church now. I think we are only a secular state on paper. They just see women as child bearers; they comment on things like In Vitro fertilization, they are going on a huge campaign against it now. And you know they have comments like, “if women weren't promiscuous, they wouldn't be barren.” And on one talk show, one priest said that, “if a woman lies like a log, of course she can not have a child.” You're a priest, you know! Like if she was a little more active in bed, she would be able to get pregnant. There are a lot of maniacs in the Catholic Church. But they can preach that, I wouldn't have anything against them preaching that to their congregations, and having enough faith in them to follow what they believe. But they shouldn't be preaching to the rest of the country and to the politicians.

And the whole situation, the Roman Catholic church...I just don't feel comfortable here. I mean, in the Roman Catholic Church, women can only be one of the Mary's. You can be either Mary Magdalene, the whore, or Mary, the virgin mother. And I feel like, I think that's very deeply set in our society. Much more often get called Mary Magdalene than the other. Just because I am a feminist, just because I am outgoing, just because I am loud. And I don't want everyday of my life to be a fight. And that's why I think about going somewhere else. And living somewhere else. I love Croatia, but I don't want to live in country where feminist is a bad word. And where, god forbid, if I was raped I wouldn't know if the police would help.

(she takes one more sip of her coke before placing it back on the table)

(picks up the book and reads from the chair)

M:

April 24, 2005

I have to admit I was a little intimidated when I was going to meet Katja today because she is a «footballer.» A silly reason to be intimidated, but if there is one section of my life that I feel completely out of control with, it is a section that is referred to as «the midsection.» So athletic girls always give me that little twinge of doubt. I need'nt have worried, of course, she was just as personable and funny as could be, happy to answer questions and laughing at herself and at the world in equal measure. She has one of those smiling faces that made you feel confident, and I left with a smile on my face as well. One more time I am realizing that I am meeting just the girls I would like to be friends with and at the same time realizing I am leaving in a couple weeks.

(closes the book, stands and walks stage left)

Katja:

Well, my initial reaction was not positive because very certain stereotypes are held here in Croatia. And I also thought feminism was something like domination of women. I connected that word to something like that. I didn't open my dictionary and look it up. Most people here will say that feminism isn't a very good idea. Because what do we want now? We have rights, we are equal and what do we now want to dominate

over the men because they dominated over us? Because they know that there wasn't equality. But now I think most people, most of the people think, now we are equal. And what? What feminism? What do we want?

I think women who aren't feminists... uh, I don't know. It's something in their own character, maybe, they just don't want to...they go with the flow. You know, "I don't want to push anything or say anything"...they don't have this... maybe this kind of energy. They may be afraid of being discriminated against or pointed fingers at. But at first, I wasn't thinking about this word, or something like that, either. In women's studies I was looking to know something more about women in society, women in history, because I study history and I know we didn't learn anything about that, and I was wondering, what about that kind of problem. And in college you couldn't find anybody to ask, so it was something like that. And this kind of work, this interdisciplinary kind of work and studying, was something I was attracted to. Not the word feminism.

But, I am kind of a realistic person, and I think things are going to change. I think in five years women's studies will be part of Zagreb University. I think our law, we have this gender equality law, and I think that we are going to have more and more cases using this law. I think that that will have, that will bring some change. I think we are going to be part of these larger changes in the world.

And, I think if I want to do something, about some kind of problem, I will stay here. I would like to live in countries like Sweden or Denmark or something like that because I think it's great for a person, not for a woman, not from that point of view. But as a woman, I would want to stay here, because there is so much to do.

Well, I guess that like your problem with Bush, I think also this government here is not very good for me. But maybe if there was somebody that was more traditional who gets elected, I would maybe think like that, like I just wanted to leave. Now, it's like nothing bad is going to happen, not like the Bush problem. The Bush problem is for the whole world.

(walks back center stage, picks up book, opens and reads)

M:

April 26, 2005

I am a sad sad individual. I had an interview with this girl named Hela today and it went really great and all. She had super interesting things to say. But the sad part was that she smelled kinda like my sister. I mean, it wasnt sad that she smelled like my sister, it was sad that i could not contain myself and kept sniffing her. I really really really hope that she did not notice. That would not only be terribly embarrassing but I am pretty sure it would ruin any sort of credibility I might have as an interviewer. Besides the smell, she seemed like a cool girl. Honest, straightforward. I dont know, they're just all cool. All the girls I am meeting are cool and I dont know what else to write.

(closes book and sits)

Hela:

I think maybe, Croatia was more open from the last two years for lots of things. In one way we can see the changes, but in another way when those changes are happening, we can see the problems exist. You know, in one way...I remember before PRIDE, before three years ago, first gay PRIDE in Zagreb, my friend was like "Oh, why you talk about how someone will beat you on the street if you are out? Don't think that our country and people are so bad." So I would say, "Ok, would you come on PRIDE?" So people would come, and at that moment we had I don't know how many fascist people who wanted to beat us, and I don't know how many policemen must protect me. And that was a terrible situation because you had I don't know how many people who were like "Hiel Hitler" and 32 people were fighting on the street after PRIDE. And in that moment we are doing some good things, we have a PRIDE, the first in Zagreb, and we say we exist and we start to change some things. And after that pride, lots of things were happening easily because people give us a support, were like "Oh , yes, you really have a problem." But on other way, you know that problem is here. After that we are not easily walking around the street. Because 10 days after that, you are scared somebody will recognize you. So I am glad to see these things happening, some people aren't afraid and are doing things.

I am not a person who thinks ...if I move somewhere else.... I think this place is very good and could be better. And I really don't want to live anywhere else. We have a lot of possibilities to change things here. And to make it better. I think everywhere exist some problems. Maybe here it's not so good as Denmark, but it's better than Albania, or something like that. People, if they can, should stay and try and change things in the

country, or support the things that are good. I don't believe that I will live better if I go somewhere else. I love to live here.

(stands and goes to pick up book, opens and reads)

M:

April 27, 2005

Today I had an interview with Ankica, a lovely blend of anarchist and feminsit and every bit what you would not expect an anachist feminist to look or act like. Totally fun. She yelled at me for wanting to order a Coca-Cola. She was all over the place and she must have said hi to at least 27 peolpe who walked by in the space of our hour long interview. But, shit, I can't say I am suprised, if I was here, I would totally be her friend, too.

(closes book and goes to sit downstage right)

Ankica:

When I heard the word, I think it was in 8th grade, just before I went to high school. I heard it the word, but I didn't know what it meant exactly.

But then in high school, then I started thinking, "What's it about?". And at the beginning was bljak really bljak. Do you know what is bljak? Like its like "I don't like it." Because I was thinking feminists were weak women. But then, of course, I went away

and thinking it all over, and little more and deeper and then I find it very very important. But I must say that at the beginning, it wasn't very good.

The main position is that Anarcho-feminism is trying to make a better world for everyone. Feminism is trying to do things for women, this is the first, this is the thing that makes things go round. But Anarcho-Feminism has a problem with the complete, men and women are equally the problem. Women are even more unaware of the women problem than men. So, its to try to stop the things that are making day by day things worse, with all things with the problem with feminist or women or every Second or Other. So, anarchism is a trying to stop the main institutions, the state, and of course the policies, and the institutions at the global level, the economic ones, like the World Trade Organizations, and the World Bank, whatever. But the main thing is that like institutions like the church, the state, the family, and schools are the ones that are giving us this first and others. So Anarcho-Feminism is trying to do it with economic, politic, domestic, violence, whatever, everything is trying to be inside of it. Political one is the most important.

But, I don't like this law thing because women are more equal today that I don't know when because we have it in the law, paragraph 7. I don't give a shit about it. I want to have it here everyday in the micro, not macro. I don't know, 20 percent of women are in politics, but this is not important, because we don't see where the problem is. It lies much more deeply than the way we are talking. In the way, what are we wearing, breathing, whatever.

Anarchism and feminism came at the same time for me. I can't say Anarchism and the Feminism, no, no ... Because feminism, when we take it and try to practice it we are making Anarchism.

(rises and goes to pick up book, opens and reads)

M:

April 28, 2005

I cant do this anymore. I just keep talking about these things, and hearing all these stories, and knowing I am just going to up and leave in two weeks. I am a doer. I do things. I see problems, and I try and fix them and it kills me that even if I wanted to do something here I couldn't because I'm leaving and I dont speak the language, and a million other things. Today I met with Ivana. Well, I had met her before but she was really quiet, so I wasnt quite sure what she was all about. She seemed super sweet, but I knew my heart wasnt really in the interview, which made me feel crappy. But my heart is feeling crappy anyway. Weighed down by all their is to do and my utter impotency to do anything meaningful about it.

(closes book and goes to sit upstage center)

Ivana:

I guess I started thinking about it all pretty early in childhood, because you always know what things you can have and what things you can do, and it's totally different

from what boys want, and that was the main thing for me, because I always wanted to do what boys do and have toys they have. That was pretty early. It was just a feeling, they were always surprised I wanted something else, and I couldn't understand why were they so surprised? And I always had to make a special effort to get this stuff.

The attraction to women's studies was I wanted some theoretical background for everything I learned before, and I got that there. But some people I talked to and agree with me about these type of things wouldn't go there because they have prejudices, and I didn't have prejudices. Because that's what scares people the most, when they hear the word feminism. I didn't call myself a feminist; I didn't consider it so important. But now I see that is. But I think I was a feminist before, on some unconscious level.

When I got to women's studies in Zagreb, and that was... it impressed me the most. Because everything was happening here, all the people working on projects, the lectures, and the education. Everything I was convinced of before, I got the background for. And everything changed.

Women's studies definitely changed my life. In a very good way. I couldn't have believed that such a place existed. And when we all came there and when the education started, I was so, "Oh my god what's happening." it's so different from the education that you get at any school or other faculty. So now I would like to be connected with Women's Studies.

(rises and goes down center to address the audience)

M:

Like many things, I think you can find more answers from the beginning than from the end. So, I guess Ana put it best when she finished her interview. I asked her if there was anything else she wanted to say. I asked her if she had a room full of American students what she would want to get across. And this is what she said.

(goes back to Ana's original chair, sits, and lights another cigarette)

Ana:

It's so hard to explain, I mean how can you explain, we used to be one country, now we all hate each other. We speak the same language, but we insist that we don't, because there are a few differences. And the language isn't here to communicate, and to bring us closer, but to divide us, it's all so strange. How do you explain how my mother and father didn't even know who they were, and then the war happened and my father was not anymore wanted here because he has the wrong nationality, and we carry the wrong surname, and everything goes down. It's too hard to explain because it's too hard for me to understand why or how it happened. Even though it was socialism, we didn't have this terrible form of communism, it wasn't like hardcore - it was much more advanced. And some things we took for granted are now in question, and sometimes I wonder if it was better back then, and sometimes I think it is. At least they had fair chances and they weren't only mothers. It's really hard to explain. Even when you go from one country to another, even within the former Yugoslavia, they have different books, different histories, different explanations for those last fifteen years.

(puts out the cigarette, and takes a moment before rising and going back to Center)

M:

Ana is right, you cannot explain. I have spent almost four months here, and when I return to the states I still don't know what I am going to tell people when they ask about my trip. I guess that it was hard, and tragic and beautiful and confusing. Appropriate, I guess, when you are talking about the Balkans, although one thing I have learned is to avoid the name "the Balkans" entirely....

And even more specifically, I am no closer to explaining what it takes to create a feminist consciousness than I was a month ago. I think it might be as unique a process as the women are who undergo it.

But that leads me to the one thing I can say, after all is said and done and I get back on the plane home. Which is that I met some incredible women, and got a little taste of what its like to exist in their worlds. They are wild women in a sterile world, and live in a time and place that doesn't appreciate or even understand the amazing things that they have to share. I feel lucky to have gotten the chance to spend a little time with them, and would like to think I could even dare to use the word "friend" in connection with them. I certainly hope that they feel the same way, especially after they see this show.

(opens the book one more time and reads)

May 16, 2005

Today I leave. But I will not forget what happened to me in this place. And I will not forget the people I met. Ana, Marina, Masa, Katja, Hela, Ankica, and Ivana.

(closes the book for the last time, and lights go down as M exits stage right)

- The End -

A Sample of the Advertisement for the Final Performance



Feministica

A new Play written and performed by Meghan Boone
Feministica is a collaborative theatre piece about the thoughts and
opinions of young Croatian Feminists.

It will be performed on Sunday, May 15th at 11:00 a.m.
at The Academy for Theatre, Film and Television
Trg Marsala Tita 5

The Creation of “*Feministica*”

Introduction

As it states in the text of the play itself, I started this project with a lot of trepidation and emotional baggage due to the experiences I had had thus far in “The Balkans.” Through this paper, I hope to explore some of the issues I faced, how I dealt with them, how I see my understanding of the initial research question has expanded, and what I plan to do with this project in the future, both as an academic inquiry and a personal artistic expression.

Part One: The Project

The reasons I came to this idea for my ISP are many and interwoven. As it states in the text of the show, I think part of me was simply trying to make a more concrete connection between myself and this place, both because I felt lost here and was hoping to use this time and experience to make myself feel more comfortable and at home, and because I felt that if this connection failed to materialize than my time spent overseas would somehow fail in one of its original intentions, which was to truly live in another place and exist as part of the community, instead of simply being a tourist for four months. So, I felt that by connecting myself to the young women I would be meeting during the course of the project, whom I saw as my closest academic and personal contemporaries here, I could somehow discover an inroad to a greater understanding of this place as a larger entity, and begin to feel a part of it, even in a small way.

But the above mentioned reasons were all more personal reasons, relating to my desire to feel more comfortable with this experience as a whole. There were also

academic and artistic reasons that I choose both this topic and this format. Academically, I have been interested in Third Wave feminism for a fair amount of time now, so the idea of interviewing the most recent generation of feminists in Croatia was really interesting to me because I wanted to note the similarities and differences I saw in the way they constructed both their own feminist beliefs as well as how they saw themselves in reference to the previous generation of feminists, topics I am also interested in pursuing back in America. Most importantly to my academic inquiries however, was the desire to understand the creation of a feminist consciousness: how it happens, what it requires, what are its roadblocks and why do certain individuals adopt it while others do not. This question I find fascinating because there are so many elements that can be explored or discussed. Also, it's important because an understanding of the process of the creation of a feminist consciousness can help feminists to foster and create the same experience for others – or at least provide the most favorable conditions possible. The final academic question that I entered into this project with was one of a cross-cultural persuasion. I know that often in my women's studies classes back home, we would discuss the need to make feminism and feminist theory as global as possible, and to incorporate other perspectives besides the rich white western perspective. Croatia is an interesting place to look into the differences between “mainstream” feminist thought and the other types of theory that are being created because of its unique location and historical peculiarity. It is European yet Balkan, rich but poor, white but still “othered,” post-communist but not post-Stalin, all at the same moment. It does not fit into either of the neat categories that people create labeled “us” and “them,” but seems to exist in some sort of limbo between the two, too close to us to be denied, but too unfathomable to not be a little scary and

“different.” I find these paradoxes fascinating when looked at through a feminist perspective, because one has to resist the temptation to “other” any group, but at the same time one can’t take the similarities between the people here and the white western feminists for granted to the extent that they would not give space for a unique and different feminist perspective originating from this place.

The final reason this project came to be my choice was both an artistic and activist one. I decided to use the format of theatre, much in the same way as I chose the topic of the project, both for personal and academic reasons. Personally, I knew it would be an artistic challenge for me because of the challenge of both writing and performing an original piece of work. Also, I had some idea that the experience of building my characters off real individuals, and individuals that I would later have to answer to, was going to stretch my boundaries as an actress, and force me to not rely on acting “tricks” I have picked up in my life. Secondly, I thought this format would be the best one for this material because I knew that if I wrote a paper on the same subject matter, very few people would ever end up reading it, both here and back in America. I loathed the idea that the time I spent here and the work I did would mean nothing because I am acutely aware of how much there is to be done in the world and the idea of spending four months without making some small contribution to the global feminist struggle is unbearable for me. So, I knew that writing a paper wouldn’t have the effect that I wanted or required of my experience here. However, I knew that if I performed a show, people would come see it. Still maybe not a lot of people would be affected, but definitely more than if I wrote a paper on the same subject. Especially for students back in America, I felt this was an effective way to connect them in some small manner to what types of things were going

on in this part of the world. Also, by telling the personal stories of these girls, I think the subject matter will reach out to the audience more than any amount of academic reasoning ever could.

So, this is how I came to the decision to create a one-woman show about young Croatian feminists. Then, of course, I had to actually make it happen.

Part Two: Preparation

The first obstacle I had to overcome was an expected one: access. I had to find young girls who identified as feminists who would be willing to participate. I started out with only two names, both of which were given to me by Zeljka Jelavic. I called them and set up appointments for the very first week. Going into these initial interviews, I was nervous for a couple of reasons. First, my interviews in Belgrade for my mini-ISP were less than ideal. Looking back now, I can see that the problems I encountered were not entirely my fault, but I am, and was, aware that my skills as an interviewer needed to be a lot better if I was going to get anywhere. I knew that I talked too fast, that I frequently interrupted at inopportune moments and that my list of questions was in need of serious revising. So, this was worrying me before the start of my ISP interviews. Also, I felt a lot of pressure going into these first two interviews because since I only had these two names, I was aware that they, in addition to being possible participants, were my only current link to meeting more girls. Finally, since I hadn't discussed the topic and nature of my project with anyone from Zagreb yet, I was simply worried that they wouldn't think my idea was worthwhile and I would have to consider scrapping the whole thing and starting from scratch, a prospect that was none too appealing.

Thankfully, the first girl I had a meeting with, Maja, couldn't have been a more perfect person to ease my nerves about all of these things. Not only was she really positive about the project and about her participation in it, she seemed confident she could help me find more girls who would also want to be part of it. Although, I have to admit, I went into this first meeting with Maja assuming that she would allow me to interview her on the spot, she did the best thing I think she could do and asked if she could have some time to look over the questions. Although this was a surprise to me initially, it actually was great because it made me feel like she really wanted to be a part of the project, and that it was important to her. From then on in every initial meeting with new potential participants, I gave them the option to either be interviewed right then or to take the list of questions and the consent form home with them to think it over before committing to an interview. This turned out to be a great thing for me because by stating up front they were expected to take time to think about it before committing, I was relieved of the feeling that I was pressuring them to do something they were unsure of. Also, for the girls who took advantage of this extra time, which was almost half of them, it seemed to give them a chance to craft fuller and more well-thought out answers.

Overall, I left my interview with Maja feeling happy and confident that my project was off on the right foot. The next day, I met Ana, who only helped to continue my happy progress. Ana was quieter than Maja, but no less positive about the project, which she seemed genuinely excited about from the beginning. She wanted to take some time before having the actual interview, as well. It is at this point in the project when I start to have my first twinges of anxiety about the time schedule I am on. Realizing how long it takes to locate people to interview, set up meetings, and now to schedule

additional meetings for the interview, I started to panic about my ability to get enough participants in the time I had.

The first two girls both came through with their promises of help, though, and I had a steady stream of initial meetings and interviews over the following week and a half.

Part Three: The Interviews

The interviews are hard to talk about in one cohesive group. Depending both on the interviewee and on the type of day I was having on the date of the interview, the atmosphere of the interviews varied. However, the comments and responses of the women all seemed to share some common themes, and, thankfully, I didn't have a single interview that I felt didn't contain enough that I thought it couldn't be turned into a compelling piece of theatre.

The interviewing experience I had while in Belgrade was really helpful to me, though, because it gave me specific concerns with my style of interviewing that I felt that I could now address in this newest round of interviews. I concentrated on speaking slowly and clearly, listening attentively to what the interviewee was saying, and not jumping in unless it was clear that it was appropriate or necessary to do so. I do think my skills as an interviewer this time around were much more effective, which in turn made me more comfortable with the interview process as a whole. I can honestly say that I enjoyed my interviews, and I think that most of the women I interviewed would feel the same way. The only problems worthy of note that I encountered were language problems, although I only had to use a translator once, and some small technical difficulties with the tape recorder, although luckily nothing catastrophic or unfixable. The girls had

interesting things to say, and I was surprised by the questions they seemed most eager to answer. The whole first section of questions, dealing with the brunt of my academic inquiry, the creation of a feminist consciousness, most girls went quickly through, giving short, to the point answers, or simply not answering at all. On the other hand, they were quick to talk about the problems they saw in society, the types of changes they felt needed to be made, and perhaps most extensively, on their frustrations with the Catholic Church and its role in Croatian society.

In retrospect, it seems clear that they were simply more comfortable talking about things that weren't personal to them, but general to the society. This makes sense because, after all, even though I was trying to foster a safe environment, they had just met me and probably just felt more comfortable discussing things other than themselves. Not to say they didn't talk some about themselves, but the longest and most fervent answers I received were on topics of societal conditions, not on personal experiences.

One goal I had laid out for myself at the outset of the project was to create a situation in the interviews that didn't make the women feel like I was in any more of a powerful position than they themselves were. I wanted them to feel like they had a large amount of control over the course of the project, and that in the end it was collaboration between all the people participating. I think I can say with confidence that I achieved this goal, because by the end, they were all making fun of me for being too adamant on this point!

Part Four: Review and Writing

The interviewing process and writing process bled into one another to a certain extent because a significant number of interviewees were introduced to me right at the

end of the time I had designated as the “interviewing period.” Although this wasn’t ideal, I was glad to get these last interviews because it brought my total number of interviews to seven, a number that is enough to show a variety and breadth of views, but not so much that it would be overwhelming to work with.

Clearly, transcribing the interviews wasn’t the highlight of this experience, but once it was done, I found a reassuring amount of material in the text that I thought could be used in the formation of the monologues. In fact, the initial monologues I put together were much too long for the final project. I had written in my journal after my first interview with Ana that I could have easily done an entire show on her – once I transcribed her interview, I realized I was probably right!

After I had the first drafts of the monologues written, I invited over all the women and had them read over theirs and give me feedback or requests for changes, deletions, etc. I was pleased that, for the most part, they seemed really happy with the way their text had come out and seemed to feel that it still “sounded like them.” But it was also really good that I had them check it over because there were a few things that some of them wanted changed or clarified. I had hoped that during this review period we would also get a chance to go deeper into a couple of subjects that I felt weren’t adequately covered during the initial interviews, namely the role of media, but they all showed up really late, and some of them needed to leave by a specific time, so I didn’t get to have the discussion I was hoping for. On the other hand, the girls that did end up staying and I had a really fun time talking about all sorts of things. I think this was perhaps more valuable than the structured conversation would have been because they ended up talking about things related to their experience as women here that I wouldn’t have even thought to

consider. Plus, this was the first evening that I really felt that I was becoming friends with the women, and building the type of relationships with them that I had hoped to when I started this project.

It was also at this point, however, that I began to really worry about my performance. Before this point, I think I was nervous just because of the normal performance jitters, but I started to realize just how much responsibility I was taking on by portraying, not characters from a play, but real people, and people I was growing to really respect and care about. This is reflected in the text of the play, as well, when I began to worry that I would not have the talent or grace needed to be both honest about what I saw yet make sure to protect the women who had so generously given of themselves and their voices, and trusted me to use them well.

This was also a problem when I realized that I needed to make even more cuts to the monologues. I knew that the show absolutely could not run over an hour, and I had initially hoped for it to be between 30 and 40 minutes. But now that I was both connected to the words and to the women themselves, I struggled to know what to cut. Also, there were some monologues that were almost twice as long as others, and I wasn't sure whether it would be better to make all the monologues comparable lengths, in order to make sure no ones feelings were hurt as well as to make the show more balanced, or to keep the longer monologues because I felt that they contained more valuable text. In the end, I decided to do something in the middle, and make more serious cuts to the longer monologues, but also to let them still be considerably longer than some others.

As for the other text of the play, it wasn't hard to find it, because from the beginning of the project I had been trying to write almost every day and had planned to

simply use the text from these diary entries as text for the show. I really liked the way this turned out because I felt it was more honest than going back and trying to insert my own voice and opinion on things that happened weeks before. There were only a couple of frustrations with this method, such as the fact that I would write something very different about Marina now if I had the chance. The text that was not diary entries was also very easy to write because I had been thinking about the project so much that it was easy to figure out what it was I wanted to say about it.

The main regret I have about the final text of the show is that it doesn't really contain anything in Croatian, a goal I set out for myself at the beginning of the project. I had hoped that I would use this rap song that the last group of graduates from women's studies had written, but when some of the girls helped me translate it, we came to the mutual decision that it wouldn't work in translation and would seem out of place in the larger text of the show.

Part Five: Rehearsing

Once the show had been written, I knew that the next step was to start "putting it on its feet," as my old acting teacher used to say. However, once I got to this part of the project, I found myself resisting this final step. I think my earlier fears about performance had been building during this period until I got to the point that the very idea of actually performing was slightly terrifying. It was at this point that my advisor, Dubravka, really started to exercise a positive influence on the project. We met and she had me read the text of the monologues for several hours, encouraging me to try different things with the

reading of them, and to play with movement and rhythm. After this initial rehearsal, I felt a lot more comfortable that I could produce a final product that I would be proud of.

The only big problem after that was memorizing the huge amount of text that I had produced. I realized in the process that memorizing an entire one-woman show was much more difficult than memorizing lines for a show that contained multiple actors who you can use for cue lines, etc. Especially since it is so important to get the lines as close to perfect as possible, because contained in the syntax of the text are keys to the unique speech patterns of each one of the girls.

Overall, the rehearsal process has been a good one, though. I feel that I will be decently prepared for my performances and that I have given the piece as much time and effort as I can.

Part Six: The Theory

I state in the show that, “I am no closer to explaining what it takes to create a feminist consciousness than I was a month ago. I think it might be as unique a process as the women are who undergo it.” Although for the purposes of the show, I think this was a correct statement, I think that in the larger scheme of things, my understanding of this process has been expanded as a result of this experience. By no means have I arrived at a cohesive theory of feminist consciousness, but I do feel like I have some ideas of where to take this inquiry in the future.

First, and perhaps most obviously, it’s important to note that many of the women come from what they describe as “liberal homes.” For the most part, they come from backgrounds that support feminism, or if not feminism per se, than at least an awareness

and social consciousness. Few of their families were religious and few described any sort of trauma within their families when they started to identify as feminists. However, I think it would be a mistake to simplify the reasons that an individual chooses to adopt a socially stigmatized position to their family background. Especially since their were girls, Marina being the strongest example, who did not come from these types of backgrounds and still identified themselves as feminist regardless. So, while I think its important to recognize that the chances for an individual to develop a feminist consciousness is higher in this more favorable home setting, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that they will do so, or that an individual in a less favorable setting will not do so.

I think it's important to also examine the answers the women gave when queried about why they think other women *don't* identify as feminists. Perhaps Ankica said it most succinctly when she broke it down into two parts – first, the lack of value that society places on feminism which in turn makes it hard for women to find places where they can learn honestly about what feminism means, and second the fear that goes along with adopting a position that would place them outside of the mainstream of society. Most of the girls echoed similar sentiments, citing misunderstanding or fear as the main reasons. Also, several girls noted the need for women to not identify themselves as feminists because of their fear that they will also be labeled lesbians as well.

This, unfortunately, is the place where the line of theoretical reasoning breaks because there is a space between the former questions and the next two questions that was not adequately addressed during the course of the interviews. The girls seemed happy to talk about the reasons they were feminists and the reasons they thought other girls weren't, but seemed unable to address why it was that they weren't affected by the

factors that kept others away from feminism. Certainly before their time at Women's Studies, many of them had absolutely no background in feminist theory or thought at all, and yet their own lack of knowledge or awareness didn't hold them back as it did for other girls, and although they might have been afraid of the stigmatization they would face, it didn't stop them from continuing to pursue that type of education. Which is, of course, the root of my initial question – why are these girls immune to the pressures that would keep others away?

Through these interviews I found two major themes that might be the beginning of answers. The first one goes back to this idea of not wanting to break the social norm because of fear of being ostracized. But what would happen to that fear for an individual who was already ostracized for another reason? This individual would have “less to lose,” in the way of society's acceptance of them. This makes perfect sense when applied to the women I interviewed. Two of them identified as lesbians, an identity which would surely have ousted them from the safety net of societal approval anyway. More subtly, and also addressing one of my questions about the cultural peculiarity of this place, some of the girls had experienced societal disapproval because of the war – due to their Serbian heritages and last names. Ana even mentioned that the women she met in women's studies meant a lot to her in the war – a time when others may have turned their back on her because of her nationality. Finally, almost all the girls mentioned experiences early in life where they were frustrated because they were chastised for not “acting like a girl.” Maša talked about both her grandmother's disapproval with her disinterest in cooking and her grandfathers disapproval that she wanted to play chess, in his eyes a “man's game.” Most of the women had similar stories, not necessarily relating to their sexual choices,

but to their struggles with the gender identity they had been assigned. In this way, as well, these women were already left out of society's picture of what they should be. (Also interesting when one considers why feminists are stereotypically considered to be more "manly.") So, in this way, these individuals' experiences with being shunned by society already may have made them more likely to adopt another identity simply because they were receiving less benefit from society anyway.

The second theme that emerged from the interviews that might answer the question of immunity to societal pressures to reject feminism is less concrete. Almost without exception, the girls mentioned something in themselves that was "different," "rebellious" or "revolutionary." This idea came up in more and less subtle ways in the interviews, but it appeared over and over again. Maša stated that, "Since I kind of like going against the flow, it (the negative stereotypes associated with feminism) also kind of made me want to be a feminist more."¹ Marina talked about always having, "that one part of me that was always revolutionary. I have that part in myself. And that rebellion in me always existed."² These types of comments were echoed in all the interviews and seem to point to some sort innate ability to "go against the flow" and an acceptance of being outside of society's good graces. I imagine that this quality, like being naturally shy, outgoing, happy or depressed, could be something we are born with, and like Marina says, is only waiting for the chance to present itself.

So, although I cannot emerge from this experience with one cohesive theory, I have several that I think could be interesting to look into further. By examining an individual's background, their positive exposure to these ideas and their present position

¹ Milošević, Maša. April 23, 2005

² Butorac, Marina. April 22, 2005

either within or outside of societal norms for other reasons, it might be possible to at least make an educated guess about whether or not they will adopt a feminist consciousness. Unfortunately, there is not way to test for an innate quality that makes them willing to break expectations and societal standards – this will have to remain the mysterious “x” factor in my theory that will hopefully be more developed in the future.

Conclusion

This project has definitely been a positive experience for me as a whole. I feel that with the time given I did as best as I could both academically and artistically. I do feel that I have created a piece of art that is worthwhile and interesting, and although academically I have not arrived at any definitive answers, I certainly have given myself a better understanding of what avenues to explore in the future.

Fortunately, the future is something I plan to use in continuing the work that I have started here. I am really excited to perform this piece back in America to see what kinds of reactions it receives and what questions it raises for people back home. I feel like it will be an effective way to connect these two groups of people in some small way, and will serve to heighten the understanding Americans have of the situation here in Croatia.

Also, I plan to use the questions I have formulated here in interviews with young feminists back in the states to see where similarities and differences exist, therefore clarifying my understanding of both places influence on the creation of a feminist consciousness.

As I said, I think this was a good experience for me to undergo and I think it will continue to be a positive experience as I continue my work on these themes.

List of Interviews

Name	Date	Place of Interview
Ana Divjak	April 19, 2005	Zagreb, Croatia
Marina Butorac	April 22, 2005	Zagreb, Croatia
Maša Milošević	April 23, 2005	Zagreb, Croatia
Katja Kahlina	April 24, 2005	Zagreb, Croatia
Hela Liveric	April 26, 2005	Zagreb, Croatia
Ankica Chakardich	April 27, 2005	Zagreb, Croatia
Ivana Perak	April 28, 2005	Zagreb, Croatia