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# Reconciliation as a form of Cultural Catharsis: The Role of Theater in Revitalizing Kosovo-Serbian Relations

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Reconciliation as a form of Cultural Catharsis:  
The Role of Theater in Revitalizing Kosovo-Serbian Relations

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## Abstract

The current state of Kosovo-Serbian relations is one of frozen conflict; Serbia does not recognize Kosovo independence and relations between the two communities are relatively stagnant in spite of the ongoing EU mediated political dialogue in Brussels. Thus, this paper aims to re-imagine traditional processes of reconciliation and conflict transformation between the two entities by situating it within the cultural realm of society and viewing theater as a transformative practice. In doing this, I ask in what ways theater can effectively engage with and foster processes of reconciliation between Kosovo and Serbia, while specifically analyzing two joint productions between Prishtina and Belgrade - *Encyclopedia of the Living* and *Romeo and Juliet*. While both productions incorporated Serbian and Albanian collaborators, the messages conveyed have different implications for revitalizing relations between the communities. *Encyclopedia of the Living* deals with questions of political accountability and ethnic tensions, and *Romeo and Juliet* offers a much more general message contrasting love and hatred between peoples. These productions premiered in alternative and institutional spaces respectively, but nonetheless engaged with audience members in a way that began to open up possibilities for questioning. Therefore, the creative space that both alternative and institutional theater provides not only allows individuals to come together and negotiate different narratives, but ultimately provides a way to approach reconciliation processes through a gentler and less institutional lens. Theater is here understood as a creative response in a post-conflict environment, and the paper explores the ways in which it can develop relationships, stage encounters, and create spaces for acknowledgment.

## **Introduction**

Arts and culture has arguably always played a political role within society. Acts of resistance, dissemination of ideas, and social organizing have all been formed and molded in the name of artistic expression. Theater in particular is an integral part of culture - for centuries the space that theater provides has reflected a unique combination of past and present. Yet theater can also be a creative space in which people continuously engage with overlapping dialogues and address questions of identity. These identities are continuously molded, and theater has the power to address and often humanize other perspectives throughout this process. After the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990's, ethno-national identity and fear of the "other" became increasingly politicized in order to perpetuate certain policies. Unfortunately, the politicization of ethnic and national tensions has continued to color politics within the region of the former Yugoslavia to this day. When looking at the development of these relations, it is important to analyze the current relationship between Kosovo and Serbia since this ethnicized rhetoric continues to be utilized as a justification for continued division and state-sanctioned hatred. However, through the shared space that theater provides, various arts and theater organizations have strived to combat these tensions between the two communities. The dialogue created by these performances is one attempt on the part of cultural institutions to push against the established narrative of ethno-national politics perpetuated by the respective states.

In 2015, two productions premiered which were classified as joint performances between Belgrade and Prishtina.<sup>1</sup> One of the productions was *Romeo and Juliet*, which was produced through a partnership between Qendra Multimedia in Prishtina and Radionica Integracije in

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the text, I will utilize the phonetic spelling of Kosovo's capital instead of either the Serbian or Albanian spelling (Priština/Prishtinë). By this my aim is to keep a more inclusive outlook on historical relations between ethnicities in the country.

Belgrade. The other production was *Encyclopedia of the Living*, which was directed by Zlatko Paković and produced by The Center for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD) in Belgrade in partnership with Qendra Multimedia. Co-productions of this sort are unique because they signify an alternative form of relationship and dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, which is especially notable given the frozen nature of official relations. Nonetheless, while both of these productions are classified as joint projects between the two artistic communities, the ways in which they approach and relate to Serbian-Albanian tensions is very distinct. *Romeo and Juliet* seeks to situate the age old drama within ethnic and national divisions, yet does not explicitly situate the performance within the current social context. Instead, it focuses on including both Serbian and Albanian actors in the production and was applauded by many as a gesture of open communication and reconciliation (Gillet, 2015). On the other hand, *Encyclopedia of the Living* focuses on deconstructing the mantra of ancient hatreds between Serbians and Albanians. The performance reveals the ways in which politicians and elites utilize nationalistic policies and rhetoric to conceal pertinent issues such as class warfare. Thus, while these two productions exemplify a collaborative effort on the part of cultural and arts organizations within the two cities, their place within larger processes of reconciliation can and should be evaluated with a critical lens. I will explore the role of theater through this lens of sustained cultural exchange and dialogue throughout my research and ask the questions: what role can theater assume within the realm of conflict transformation? Can co-productions contribute to rebuilding relations between members of societies in conflict? In what ways can theater contribute to the deconstruction of ethno-national tensions between Serbia and Kosovo? And even more broadly, in what ways can theater effectively engage with and foster processes of reconciliation between Kosovo and Serbia?

The aim of this research is to evaluate conflict transformation processes through the lens of cultural outlets in society, thus reimagining approaches to reconciliation through avenues such as these joint theatre productions. Currently a majority of discussions surrounding the future of Kosovo-Serbian relations are focused on an institutional level. As a result, there is a need for community voices to be heard and acknowledged if relations are going to be truly revitalized. Without community and individual engagement in these issues, there is a higher risk that future conflicts will reemerge and continue to fester. Thus, while I harbor a personal motivation to study theater's transformative role given my own personal passion, this research also aims to add to the important field of conflict transformation which needs to be expanded into more realms of society.

News outlets such as The Guardian, Open Society Foundation, and the Helsinki Committee all reported on the premiere of *Romeo and Juliet*, heralding it as a "unique and powerful collaboration" (Vuco, 2015) and a "chance to push forward dialogue and reconciliation in the region" (Gillet, 2015). The production incorporates both Serbian and Albanian actors, and is performed in both languages without any translation for the audience - the Montagues are represented by the Kosovar Albanians and the Capulets by the Serbians.<sup>2</sup> While it is definitely not the first artistic collaboration between the two communities, the amount of attention and funding it received from both governments and international organizations is substantial. The Open Society Foundation claimed that "even the sources of funding for the production represent a spirit of breaking down walls" (Vuco, 2015). The play was received well by audiences in both Belgrade and Prishtina, and was heralded by the international community as a chance to thaw relations (Ćirić, 2016). This articulation of Shakespeare's classic drama focuses on how love and

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper I will refer to Albanians living within Kosovo as "Kosovar Albanians," and reference Serbs residing within Kosovo as "Kosovar Serbs." This will allow me to illustrate the complex relations between the two ethnic groups in the community, while also clarifying some key power dynamics.

understanding can triumph over the divisions and hatred that are perpetuated through generations. Through the symbolic interaction of Serbian and Albanian actors on stage and the real process of collaboration during the entire process, *Romeo and Juliet* was seen by many in official channels as a sign that relations between ordinary members of the community are beginning to see real change.

However, on a slightly different note, the premiere of *Encyclopedia of the Living* in the fall of 2015 received much less official coverage than the opening of *Romeo and Juliet*. The messages that CZKD sought to convey were much more politicized and directly critical of both the Serbian and Kosovo governments and politicians. The play classifies itself as an "artistic intervention in Serbia and Kosovo realities" and directly addresses how nationalist elites entrench power and profit through exploiting and inciting ethnic tensions between Serbians and Albanians (Paković, 2015). It was seen as a production that aims to reveal "who the true enemy of the people really is" and reestablish the common connection between ordinary citizens (as quoted in Paković, 2015). While the production received some funding from some civil society organizations such as the Kosovo Open Society Foundation, its domestic and international presence in the media was much more limited. However, the performance still conveys the message of community responsibility, and contextualizes the conflict as a way to directly engage with the politics of the past while still addressing the needs of the present.

### **Theater and the Dissolution of Yugoslavia**

Intersections between politics and theater extend far back into the former Yugoslavia. After the death of President Joseph Broz Tito in 1980, stirrings of discontent with the Communist regime began to emerge. As this discontent continued to materialize, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) produced a document that would come to signify the future ideological

foundation of Serbian nationalist policies. SANU was founded in the 19th century and included many leading politicians, artists, and other prominent members of society who were able to disseminate their messages through the elevated platform that the institution provided. Consequently, in 1985 the nationalist novelist Dobrica Ćosić prompted sixteen members of the academy to craft a memorandum concerning the future of the Serb community in Yugoslavia - one of which was Slobodan Milošević (Munk, 2001, p.14).<sup>3</sup> The Memorandum denounced the "genocide" of Kosovo Serbs and called for Serbian politicians to act quickly and decisively. This document would eventually come to represent Milošević's political platform and be utilized as a justification for his policies when he rose to prominence (Judah, 2008, p.62). The Academy, although regarded as an academic institution, was home to countless artists, poets, and novelists who had considerable influence in the community - many of which helped to craft this Memorandum. Thus, the intellectual foundation for the conflicts within former Yugoslavia originated in part within the minds of artists who saw a clear benefit to the politicization of art and language (Judah, 2008, p.63).

The artistic scene within the former Yugoslavia was characterized by various contributors and contained a relatively wide breadth of material. Annual festivals such as the Belgrade International Theater Festival created a lively and energetic regional theater scene, one in which actors and directors could move throughout fairly easily (Munk, 2001, p.16). However, when the former Yugoslavia began to disintegrate, Yugoslav cultural institutions were caught in a situation where cross-cultural collaboration was no longer possible in a way that it once was. For one, the repertoires in Belgrade's theaters at the end of the 1980's and beginning of the 1990's began to

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<sup>3</sup> Slobodan Milošević led the Socialist Party of Serbia from its inception in 1990, and rose to power as the Serbian President until he became the President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1997-2000. Among other things, he is known for his nationalist policies during the conflicts of the 1990's and aggression towards Albanians.

illustrate more nationalist sentiments and performances that reflected the policies of the state (Clemons, 2005, p.110). It was nearly impossible to escape from the political and social context of the time, but spaces such as the National Theater and Yugoslav Drama Theater in Belgrade still managed to draw some famous actors and directors. Yet, during the 1990s there was also the emergence of alternative theater groups such as Dah Theater which was conceived as an explicitly anti-war group (Clemons, 2005). In Belgrade, theater groups and other cultural institutions such as Dah and CZKD sought to create spaces of opposition that severed the silence on a number of political and social issues (Simić & Milošević, 2014). As Eric Gordy (1999) states, the Serbian regime during the 1990's "maintained itself...by making alternatives impossible" in everyday life (p.2). These alternatives included economic and political avenues as well as information and expression; thus, a form of "nationalist authoritarianism" prevailed which sought to solidify its power through asserting a more nationalist rhetoric and agenda (Gordy, 1999, p. 8). Consequently, not only did these theaters offer an alternative to the strong nationalist sentiments and mobilization that prevailed, but they actively advocated for a society that was aware and responsible for the actions of their government. For example, CZKD is named as such because it seeks to root out these aspects of normative cultural practices that obstruct communication and reify barriers, thus "decontaminating" the space. These alternative forms of theater suffered from a lack of funding, yet nonetheless strived to create and sustain an art form that was not complicit within the politics of the state.

### **Historicizing Kosovo-Serbian Relations**

In order to fully comprehend the role of theater within Kosovo-Serbian relations, I first contextualize their political and historical relationship. To begin, the geographical region that constitutes Kosovo has long been subject to historical contestations of territorial integrity. While

Serbia claimed sovereignty over the land in medieval times, after the Battle of 1389 the region fell under Ottoman rule until the end of the World War I.<sup>4</sup> Thus, during a majority of the 20th century, except for a brief period during World War II,<sup>5</sup> Kosovar Albanians came under Serbian rule and jurisdiction. This time period was characterized by a subordination of Albanian institutions and elevation of Serbian political interests. Nonetheless, the 1970's heralded a renewed era of economic and social freedoms, and the Constitution of 1974 solidified Kosovo as a nearly full fledged federal entity within the region (Judah, 2008, p.57). As Albanians began to reassert themselves within society and regain power over various sectors of society, they simultaneously began calling for Kosovo to become a republic on par with the other six Yugoslav republics. Thus, when Tito died in 1980 the whole system began to unravel and prompted protests on the Prishtina University campus that renewed the fight for autonomy (Judah, 2008, p.52-55). This marked not only a severe backlash against communist rule, but indicated a turning point in relations between Albanians and Serbs.

These tensions continued to intensify in 1985 when SANU published the Memorandum, asserting that Kosovo Serbs were subjected to "genocide" and that "Kosovo's fate remains a vital question for the entire Serbian nation" (Judah, 2008, p. 62). These statements essentially laid the groundwork for Milošević to institute his nationalist policies, and over the next few years he consolidated his power and abolished Kosovo's status as an autonomous province. Thus, tensions between the two communities heightened even further and many Kosovar Albanians were forced out of their jobs by Serbian officials. (Clark, 2000, p.74). Yet as the Albanian population was simultaneously rising, they sought to reclaim spaces they were excluded from under Serbian rule.

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<sup>4</sup> This battle is a major point of reference and locus of mythology because it is believed by some to be the epitome of Serb sacrifice. In 1989, Milošević used the anniversary of the battle to renew Serbia's fight for Kosovo.

<sup>5</sup> During the period 1941-1945 Kosovo was briefly under the jurisdiction of Italian-controlled Albania.

Parallel Albanian institutions and forms of governance therefore appeared out of necessity throughout the conflicts of the 1990's to reclaim space within the community (Clark, 2000, p.95). Attempts by the United Nations (UN) to broker a solution between the Milošević government and Kosovar Albanians were fruitless, resulting in the 78-day NATO led bombing campaign of Serbia and Kosovo. In the aftermath of this international intervention, the UN passed Resolution 1244 which forced Serbian forces to withdraw and established an international administration within Kosovo's borders (Judah, 2008).

Kosovo declared unilateral independence from Serbia in February 2008, signifying a continuing shift in power relations from Serbs to Kosovar Albanians. Post intervention and post-independence Kosovo is dominated by Albanian symbols and politicians, and is thus engaging in a new process of state-building within the community (Fridman, 2015, p.174). Yet the Serbian government still does not formally recognize Kosovo's independence let alone this new process of state building. While the EU assumed control from the UN and attempted to foster dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina, the outcome of these efforts in transforming relations between the two communities it still to be determined. One landmark agreement between the two entities was the 2013 Brussels Agreement which established an EU led dialogue between the two capitals, and posited that neither Serbia nor Kosovo would interfere with their respective paths towards the EU. It also established the presence of Serb municipalities, yet its language was criticized for being fairly vague (Ejdus, 2014, p.3). However, this agreement did little to assuage the fears and/or hopes of both Albanians and Serbs within Kosovo. Even though it is supposed to "normalize" relations between the two entities and reintegrate the parallel Serb structures and institutions, the implementation on the ground is much more difficult to enforce (Ejdus, 2014).

Consequently, I would suggest that the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia is one of frozen conflict. While there is no actual violence, the relationships between Albanian and Serb communities and between Prishtina and Belgrade are still very complex and tense. The frozen nature of the conflict embodies an air of uncertainty which is not only problematic for the progression of relations on an institutional level, but even more so for the revitalization of everyday relations between both communities. Therefore, cross-cultural productions between Belgrade and Prishtina are especially pertinent given the capacity for theater to incite dialogue and cross boundaries that are maintained by more official channels.

## **Methodology**

### *Process*

For the purpose of this study, I conducted interviews with various individuals who work in, or partner with, various arts and cultural organizations within Belgrade. In addition, I also interviewed people who participated in the making of these two specific productions. These individuals are committed to sustaining arts and cultural projects of this genre, and provided me with a nuanced perspective of the performances and their underlying politics. In this way, I hoped to gain a complete picture of the different aspects that went into these productions, as well as understand how those involved measured its relative impact on the community. In addition, I reached out to civil society organizations that are involved with cross-cultural productions and exchanges such as the Heartefact Fund and Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. These types of civil society organizations provide yet another dimension to the politics behind the performances, as I aimed to discover what benefits they saw theatrical productions having within the community - both domestic and international. I also conducted interviews within the offices of their respective workplaces or a space that was conducive to open conversation. This allowed

me to experience the work environment that they operate within, and thus provided me with even more context for understanding their perspective given that artistic space is an integral part of my research.

Consequently, my research is focused on gathering the perspectives of individuals who are situated within Belgrade as a means to understand the position of the artistic community in the city. By exploring their thoughts and opinions about the role of theater and joint productions, I was able to better understand how theater and culture operates within this particular societal context. If I am able to extend my research in the future, I would also include perspectives from Kosovar Albanians to help round out my analysis. In addition to these interviews, I was able to watch recordings of both co-productions as well as read the translated script of *Encyclopedia of the Living* in English. This allowed me to view the performances for myself, as well as analyze the visual impact of these productions through my own theoretical lens.

In total six participants were interviewed in a semi-structured manner, four involved with arts and cultural organizations in Belgrade and two from civil society organizations.<sup>6</sup> While a set of preliminary questions was formulated before the interviews, the conversation was open to alternative discussions and often brought in other relevant aspects during the interview. Throughout the paper I will be referring to the participants by an assigned number (P-1, 2, etc.) in order to protect their identity and respect any affiliations they would not want to be made public. Since this project is dealing with sensitive issues within conflict and post-conflict societies, I adhered to an ethical code of anonymity and did not engage with topics that may cause personal distress for the interviewee. Nonetheless, all my participants showed enthusiasm and support for my research throughout the entire process and maintained open and honest communication.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix for Interviewee chart

*Positionality*

While I seek to explore issues of reconciliation in the current context of Kosovo-Serbian relations, I also need to acknowledge my own perspective on these processes. Since I am both a student and a citizen of the United States, I have an outsider perspective of the society that I am researching. I do not live within either Kosovo or Serbia and do not identify as either Albanian or Serbian. Thus, I myself am not a part of either community who has to personally grapple with these questions of reconciliation. Given the current status of relations between the two communities, it also might be easy to slip into a rhetoric of victimization as I continue to evaluate the power dynamics between the two countries. Yet, in order to fully comprehend the role of theater within these processes and their potential for transforming future relations, I must take care to accurately represent and give credence to the variety of actors within society.

Additionally, my own motivations for pursuing this research stem from my personal passion and involvement with theater in my own community. Thus, my previous background working in the theater at times allowed me to connect with interviewees on more than just an academic level. Yet while that shared knowledge and passion helped to establish trust and enthusiasm about the research I was conducting, I also continued to be aware of my own biases that I harbor about theater and its transformative potential. Within the field of theater there can often be a romanticization of performance that might not necessarily reflect the reality. Consequently, a challenge in my research has been evaluating the actual impact these productions, and theater as a whole, can have in regards to positively transforming Kosovo-Serbian relations. However, I seek to mitigate this romanticization through grounding my research in real processes of conflict transformation and its concrete results within the community. Given the increasing support from domestic and international institutions for this sort of outreach, I believe that my

research has the chance to fully comprehend broader issues of reconciliation between the two communities through the lens of artistic-political performance.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

While the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia is undergoing constant change, I will rely on certain theoretical frameworks in order to substantiate my research. I will explore the intersections of theater and politics through the broader framework of reconciliation processes between the two entities, all of which is situated within the lens of conflict transformation. Throughout my research, I will refer to the Albanian-Serbian relationship on a more individual and community level, whereas the Kosovo-Serbia relationship refers to broader state and official processes. Additionally, I will focus on literature that examines the intersections of ethnicity and politics in order to challenge the argument of ancient ethnic hatreds within the region. Focusing on this literature will thus exemplify the ways in which political and national elites utilize ethno-national rhetoric in order to mobilize support. In this way, my research explores the intersections of theater and politics within the region and how these specific art forms interact within the post-conflict realities of the Kosovo-Serbian relationship.

### ***Symbolic Constructions of National and Ethnic Identity***

Gëzim Krasniqi (2012) posits that "the concept of national citizenship merges space, nation and state through the dual capacity to include or exclude individuals" (p. 1). Consequently, the state and society is founded upon maintaining notions of "otherness" that in turn reifies a particular internal identity. Therefore, my understanding of current relations between Kosovo and Serbia will be supported by Krasniqi's notion of identity and spatial politics. Both Serbia and Kosovo have engaged in symbolic gestures of exclusion and inclusion throughout the state-building process, thus exemplifying the ways in which national and ethnic identity can often be co-opted by political

elites in order to build the symbolic state. For my research I will also draw on Verdery's (1994) and Barth's (1969) theories and define ethnicity as a malleable identity which is a form of social organization subject to manipulation. Barth refutes the notion that ethnicity is culturally determined, while also arguing that "an ethnic group's...formation and continuation is dependent on interaction with 'others'" (as cited in Hummel, 2014, p. 51). The role of the "other" is also subject to change and vulnerable to manipulation. Just as ethnicity can be mobilized for political purposes, defining the "other" is just as integral for maintaining and exacerbating conflict.

Additionally, notions of the multi-cultural or multi-ethnic state proliferate within the international community yet in reality simplify the overarching complexities. Oliver Richmond (2002) argues, "this has led to a situation where states either assimilate, dominate, or promote an ideology of multi-culturalism vis-a-vis minorities" (p. 388). Such impositions offer little when dealing with the past. It not only ignores the real conflicts that currently exist, but it does little to promote sustained dialogue within the community. Furthermore, this concept of a "multi-ethnic" state, often assumes a patronizing tone that stems from work by authors such as Robert Kaplan (1993) who argue that ancient ethnic hatreds are the underlying cause of conflict in the Balkans. Samuel Huntington (1993) also reiterates this theory in his "clash of civilizations" argument that elevates cultural determinism, claiming that it was ultimately "the end of ideologically defined states in Eastern Europe" that "permit[ed] traditional ethnic identities and animosities to come to the fore" (p. 29). These notions reflect a trend among some Western scholars to dismiss alternative sources of conflict and prioritize a primordial argument. Thus, notions of "Balkanization" arise that situate the region in the midst of major fault lines and claim that its peoples are destined to give in to passion and expel reason (Goldsworthy, 2002, p. 26).

Nonetheless, this primordial and deterministic argument is insufficient when discussing ethnic conflict within the region because it fails to take into account historical and political relationships. In Tim Judah's (2008) book "Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know," he contextualizes and historicizes Serbian-Albanian relations, as well as provides a framework for looking at current relations between the two ethnic groups. I will utilize Judah's historical framework of relations to actively push against the argument that ancient ethnic hatreds have always been present. Authors such as Dević (1998) rightly point out that until the 1980's ethnic identity was never really linked to any sort of political affiliation (p. 393). Thus, there were very real economic and political situations and social discontents within the former Yugoslavia that prompted an increasing identification with ethnicity. Others also follow Judah's line of argumentation, positing that ethnicity is insufficient to guarantee political mobilization and that the concept of immutable historical memory is lacking (Carmet, James, & Taydas, 2009; Dević, 1998). As Rygden (2007) argues, explaining ethnic conflict through a historical lens is insufficient unless one links the "micro-level past" to the "macro-level reality" that in turn "produced" the present conflict (p. 225). Where ethnic difference is insufficient to provide this linkage, elite utilization of a useable past and mythology can add a more realistic dimension. These master narratives can often come to dominant political and social discourse, thus changing the way in which people situate their own identity in relation to others.

### ***Conflict Transformation***

My interest in conflict transformation is primarily situated in post-conflict society, where the role of civil society and other non-governmental actors assume a larger part in revitalizing relations. As articulated by Wilmer (1998), a post-conflict environment is a space wherein different groups of people have a historical relationship with conflict and exclusion, and are now

engaged in reconstructing that relationship (p. 92). Throughout my analysis in this paper, I will primarily be looking at these reconstructions through transitional justice processes "from below." These processes prioritize the actions of members of the community against the dominant political and cultural institutions (McEvoy & McGregor, 2008). Following Lambourne's (2009) articulation of transitional justice, it is essential to view those processes in combination with peace building within the region in order to provide "a more holistic approach" to conflict transformation (p. 29). Lambourne (2009) explains that "this holistic and comprehensive approach to peace building implies a commitment to establishing the security, legal, political, economic, structural, cultural and psychosocial conditions necessary to promote a culture of peace in place of a culture of violence" (p. 34). This not only entails the transformation of institutions, but a shift in attitudes and perceptions towards a more inclusive society. It is here where civil society can operate to deconstruct misconceptions and promote alternative narratives to the hegemonic discourse of the Serbian state which currently deems Kosovo independence illegitimate.

As Lederach (2007) exemplifies, conflict is "driven by deep real-life experiences...that render rational and mechanical processes and solutions aimed at conflict transformation not only ineffective but also in many settings irrelevant or offensive" (p. 24). Therefore, a shift needs to take place in the realm of conflict transformation to facilitate its practical application - a shift that civil society and other cultural organizations can play a large part in fostering. In my research I will emphasize reconciliation as a "social space" that allows individuals to engage with relationships, encounters, and acknowledgment; all central components for rebuilding any kind of relations (Lederach, 2007, p. 26). Therefore, my analysis of the role of theater will contribute to previous research analyzing the mechanisms that allow people to effectively and comprehensively engage in processes of dealing with the past (Subotić, 2009). Dealing with the past is a necessary

part of any sort of conflict transformation process and should engage with both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms (Franović, 2008; Fischer & Petrović-Ziemer, 2013).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, while I prioritize an approach that looks mostly "from below," I nonetheless rely on this combination of mechanisms in order to examine how theater intersects with the current nature of the Kosovo-Serbian conflict.

### ***Reconciliation Processes & the Arts***

Reconciling relationships both within and outside the immediate community is central to how theater and arts organizations approach the framework of conflict transformation. The volumes in the two-part anthology *Acting Together* provide a solid theoretical grounding for these exact transformative performance practices. Thus, I will utilize this grounding for my analysis and argue that within the context of conflict transformation, performance can channel the energies of conflict to build a more positive and lasting change (Cohen, Varea, & Walker, 2011, p.9). These authors also draw from the concept of the "moral imagination," which I will use in my work to describe the ways in which artists stay grounded in the present amidst injustice, while still imagining and striving for a better world (Cohen, Varea, & Walker, 2011, p.3). In Dijana Milošević's (2011) chapter in *Acting Together*, she touches upon theater as a mode of resistance through the space it creates. On a very basic level, she identifies this creative space as a place where people can "simply be together and see the face of the 'other'" (Milošević, 2011, p. 28). She directly ties theater and politics together by referring to the rising ethnic intolerance within Serbia, and how theater can counteract these tendencies and provide an alternative perspective on national identity and ethnicity. Furthermore, Simić and Milošević's (2014) piece about Dah theater within

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<sup>7</sup> Top-down mechanisms refer to the conflict transformation processes that originate in state or international institutions, whereas bottom-up refers to processes that originate in civil society, NGO's, and other alternative organizations in the community. Lederach (2007) conceptualizes a pyramid of top-level, mid-range, and grassroots approaches to peacebuilding that each operate within different spheres to affect change (p.38-55).

processes of transitional justice raises legitimate questions about what theater can accomplish in a society that is divided along so many different lines. Throughout my paper I will explore these different dimensions and confront the reality of theater within a post-conflict environment.

Furthermore, I will partly rely on Augusto Boal's work with *Theater of the Oppressed* (TO) to understand the ways in which theater can interact in the political realm. Boal (2006) conceptualizes theater as a political act and claims that "each and every human being is substantively an artist" (p.18). In *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, Boal (2006) sees this form of theater as a way to reject an ideology of political "neutrality" and affirm the inherently political function of art while simultaneously engaging in theater based on democratic principles (p. 44-51). What emerges from this framework is a type of art that prioritizes open and continuous dialogue between individuals and members of the community. Additionally, Bertolt Brecht (1964) conceives "art and society as mutually inclusive," while also stating that theater is a form of education which affects change through addressing current political and social issues (as cited in Zazzali, 2013, p.693). Thus, I will emphasize art as inherently political within my research, and draw from Boal's and Brecht's work in order to understand the ways in which theater can transform the role of audience through education and dialogue. Additionally, TO situates itself within the broader literature of Applied Theater (AT), which is relevant for further discussions about its political function within society. Authors in the field of AT emphasize the need to challenge asymmetries of power and advocate for a politics of recognition in the public sphere (Neelands, 2007; Fraser, 1995). These challenges to, and recognitions of, hegemonic discourse is central to my analysis of the role of theater within Kosovo-Serbian relations. My research will therefore not only rely on literature pertaining to the political function of theater, but to its ability to alter public perceptions and create alternative narratives.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Theater as a Political Tool***

"One of the most important questions for us at the time was what was the role of the responsibility of artists that have the power of the public voice in the dark times. One of the big questions we are dealing with in our work is about the responsibility, and about being aware that we are privileged because we do have the public voice and we can say something other people don't have a chance to say" (Personal Communication, P-6, April 15, 2016)

*Encyclopedia of the Living* opens with the words, "the well of our past is truly deep and our responsibility is truly great" (Paković, 2015). The play then transitions to a historical account of the social and political construction of differences between Serbians and Albanians, grounding its text in real events and correspondences. The acts that follow employ a combination of songs and scenes that explicitly address and challenge the political and social context that currently encompasses Serbia's relationship with Kosovar Albanians. As the director and primary dramaturge from CZKD explained, "performing these stories on stage physically opened the grave" (Personal communication, P-2, April 18, 2016). These subjects, while not easy or neutral to discuss and perform, are nonetheless the topics that CZKD and other alternative forms of theater seek to tackle. The director continued, expressing that "theater by its definition has a political role" and is always situated within the particular societal context (Personal communication, P-2, April 18, 2016). Therefore, what emerged from this particular social and political context was a performance that responded to the historical relations between Serbs and Albanians. The rhetoric of Serbian-Albanian relations has long been dominated by official government and media channels; yet there are other voices that need to be heard. When asked about this need to speak out, other individuals expressed both a personal and a professional need to talk about these issues on a broader platform. The director of Dah Theater explained that within this particular context,

"we as artists have to work from our own personal obsession, and somehow this obsession meets with the obsession of others" (Personal Communication, P-6, April 15, 2016).

On the contrary, *Romeo and Juliet* was not grounded in the current social context or explicitly stated as a political form of theater. Instead, it was covered by the media as a step forward in terms of cross-cultural exchange between the two communities. When interviewing the Executive Producer of *Romeo and Juliet* here in Belgrade, she expressed that "we didn't want to deal with this particular social and political context. We were working on Shakespeare's play, and we just used this real political and social context to work with Albanian and Serbian actors in this performance" (Personal Communication, P-4, April 22, 2016). Thus, although the play is performed in both Albanian and Serbian, it seeks to move beyond these constraints to engage with broader themes of love and hatred. Yet having both Albanian and Serbian actors on stage together speaking their native languages is a political message in itself, thus making the performance political - albeit in a very different way than *Encyclopedia of the Living* (Personal communication, P-4, April 22, 2016).

These different political dimensions also extend beyond the productions themselves to include the individuals behind the scenes - most notably the directors. There were a number of exchanges between the two directors of these performances through various interviews and articles, with each critiquing the other's professional and political positions. In an interview with the writer and director of *Encyclopedia of the Living*, he called the director of *Romeo and Juliet* - Miki Manojlović - "Vučić's Mickey Mouse."<sup>8</sup> He stated that Manojlović was using the "hegemonic approach of Serbian politics towards Kosovo and installed it as a working pattern for the play" (as

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<sup>8</sup> Aleksandar Vučić is the Prime Minister of Serbia and a member of the Serbian Progressive Party. His conservative policies are seen by many as detrimental to processes of reconciliation and political accountability within Serbia, and is also criticized for controlling large portions of the media and official cultural outlets.

quoted in Paković, 2015). Since Manojlović is a famous actor and director within the former Yugoslavia, he has many more connections to the political and cultural institutions of the state. However, the Executive Producer of the production mentioned that Manojlović did not see the play as "a political statement," but instead saw it as a "crew of the people who had the need and want to do something great together" (Personal communication, P-4, April 22, 2016). Nevertheless, this "need" to produce a Serbian-Albanian performance can also be construed as a political statement. Yet, since the play did not directly situate itself within the current political and social context, it was able to be endorsed by a government that still does not recognize Kosovo independence. Therefore, even though Manojlović's background was able to attract and attain much more attention for *Romeo and Juliet*, this was precisely the reason that it drew more criticism because it was viewed as complicit with the state.

Despite the underlying politics behind the performances, it is important to evaluate the way in which they actually stimulate political dialogue. While both productions do not directly engage with the practice of TO, Boal (2006) emphasizes rejecting an ideology of neutrality in order to directly engage with questions of political responsibility. By posing social consciousness and interaction as inherently political, he argues that through theater people can create meaningful dialogue (Picher, 2007, p. 80). Thus, viewing these productions through this lens of political dialogue reveals the different kinds of conversations that can be provoked. *Encyclopedia of the Living* works to uncover and demystify commonly held stereotypes and propaganda, therefore promoting a dialogue of political responsibility and accountability. In contrast, *Romeo and Juliet* provokes a sort of dialogue that aims to situate Serbs and Albanians on an equal footing, and on the same stage, when historically that has not been the case. Both productions are also "produced collaboratively" and are "witnessed in the context of a community," thus providing a "more widely

accessible form" of dialogue for the community to reference (Cohen, Varea, Walker, 2011, p.4). While the kinds of dialogue they provoke are definitely different, any change in relations has to begin with those initial conversations. This is precisely when theater has the ability to transcend the stage and instead become a "social space" where dialogue is created organically by those who need it most (Lederach, 2007).

### ***Audience and Changing Perceptions***

"For me, the main goal of culture and art is to provoke dialogue on the topics that are uncomfortable...if we have an audience of 200, and if one person leaves this theater changing a little bit of his mindset then we are winners." (Personal communication, P-4, April 22, 2016)

One of the major questions that theaters grapple with in every context is how the audience is affected by their performance. When interviewing members of the theater community here in Belgrade, I received mixed responses about the ability of arts and culture to affect any real change within the community. While one participant claimed that "we can and are reaching the broader audiences through alternative forms of theater" (Personal communication, P-6, April 15, 2016), another individual expressed that productions like *Encyclopedia of the Living* sometimes have a problem because they "always reach the people who agree" and share the same political stance (Personal communication, P-1, April 11, 2016). Since CZKD openly criticizes the politics of the state, the audiences they draw tend to hold similar views and fall within similar circles of opposition. Yet this participant also explained that even if "I don't think [the performance] can change a lot of minds, it's still incredibly important culturally that things like this exist" (Personal communication, P-1, April 11, 2016). This tension between different publics is especially evident given the venues and media coverage that these two performances received. *Romeo and Juliet* was able to secure a place at the National Theater in Belgrade, thus marking the first time Albanian language was heard in that theater. Therefore, even though the audience may have politically

aligned themselves differently than those at CZKD, attending a coproduction play and hearing Albanian spoken in this institution is especially important given the current physical and social barriers barring a fluid cross-cultural exchange between the two communities.

Evaluating different audiences is a critical part of understanding the way in which theater effectively engages, or fails to engage, with the current political and social context. The Executive Director of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, which is an organization that seeks to foster open dialogue and cultural exchange, stated her opinion about the kinds of dialogue these productions foster:

I think that maybe more ordinary people will be interested in *Romeo and Juliet*. But I think *Romeo and Juliet* will not change attitudes or opinions of the people. With *Encyclopedia of the Living* they can start to ask questions, and that is the main difference between those two productions. Because it's a step forward when you can hear Albanian in Belgrade theater, if you have this context of nationalism, etc., but on the other side you still don't have society or state where it is possible to have *Encyclopedia of the Living* in mainstream theater and sponsored by the government. That's the difference. (Personal communication, P-3, April 20, 2016)

Consequently, this tension between alternative and mainstream forms of culture emerges when analyzing these two productions. The spaces available for both forms of performance is limited by the current political context, therefore the way they can affect the audience is limited in that respect as well.

Although the participants within the scope of my research each held slightly different opinions on both of the shows, a shared commonality they expressed was the need for this creative space to be fostered within both Belgrade and Prishtina. As one participant during my research stated - "If you don't have that space, you don't have any space to speak about the topics that are hurtful and heavy and not comfortable" (Personal communication, P-4, April 22, 2016). This space encompasses not just theatrical performances, but other forms of art that allow individuals to communicate in a way that is accessible to all kinds of audiences. The program coordinator from

the Heartefact Fund, which works to create a regional cultural space based on critical awareness and responsibility, expressed her belief "that culture has the power to solve things in a more subtle way. It might not happen now, it might happen in five years, but it needs to be continued " (Personal communication, P-5, April 20, 2016). Many who work directly within this artistic-political realm see their projects as an ongoing process that may change small aspects of society before translating to the bigger picture. As the director of CZKD also stated, "you need the creativity and the production that will open questions " (Personal communication, P-2, April 18, 2016). Creating space to open up these questions goes back to the need for continuous dialogue, which in itself is a way to defy those who would seek to maintain barriers and control what discourse is acceptable to engage in.

Regardless of the types of audience these performances drew, the creative space they provided within the current social and political climate is a constant factor. Essentially, "theater is an attempt to create a shared space...[it] can be a gentle way to initiate discussions about a country's troubled history, opening the door to different truths" (Milošević, 2011, p. 42). Therefore, both *Encyclopedia of the Living* and *Romeo and Juliet* engaged with this concept of a "shared space" by including collaborators from both Serbian and Albanian communities. Although this does not necessarily mean a functional relationship emerged, they nonetheless broke a social and political taboo by sharing a space not negotiated by the government or international community. While critics of *Romeo and Juliet* may disagree, I argue that limiting any form of space is detrimental to the overall process of reconciliation. If "aesthetic values and socio-political values can be mutually enforcing, not conflicting, commitments" then there is no reason that one should be sacrificed for the sake of the other (Cohen, Varea, Walker, 2011, p. 9). Even if we do classify "alternative theater as a gathering place for like minds" that "promotes important, open-

minded discourse in society," the type of dialogue that is deemed important should not be limited solely to alternative spaces (Clemons, 2005, p.122). One of the most important aspects of theater in any society, is the space it provides not only for dialogue, but for simply being together when otherwise impossible.

### ***The Role of the "Other"***

"I do think that theater is the space where people will eventually decide if they hate the other, or if they accept the other, or if there is the other at all. That's why I think that this curiosity phase should be used because that's where you can actually stop people from becoming the ones that hate." (Personal communication, P-5, April 20, 2016)

Throughout my research I kept returning to the question how theater interacted within constructions of "otherness" between Kosovo and Serbia. Referring back to the 1980's and the propaganda circulated by SANU, one participant noted that "everything started with artists and intellectuals and poets who started to speak as nationalists." Ultimately, it was these "nationalistic theater shows [that] prepared the public opinion and prepared the public for war" (Personal communication, P-3, April 20, 2016). This notion directly relates to what Krasniqi (2012) argues when he posits that the state is a place in which elites appropriate and manipulate space in order to reinforce ethnic and national identities (p. 4). Yet even though these tensions and nationalist rhetoric were exacerbated by elite artists such as those in SANU, that platform also has the potential to be used in alternative ways. Theater is different than other art form because "it's a live form that makes spectators share the space," and at the root of it, "most conflicts are about sharing space" (Personal communication, P-4, April 22, 2016). Thus, audience members are forced to directly confront their prejudices and stereotypes about the "other" because they no longer have an institutional or imaginary barrier between them - they are exposed to the raw nature and vulnerability of the artistic process. During this process there is the "potential for an act of recognition both of self and other" (Cohen, Varea, & Walker, 2011, p.5). As one participant stated,

theater provides "a space of curiosity that should be used" to bring together the people who don't really know what to think or what side to take. In this instance "culture could be more powerful than the regular methods of reconciliation processes" because it is a gentler process wherein individuals are exposed to but not forced upon one another (Personal communication, P-5, April 20, 2016). When given the opportunity, "theater can help people understand the point of view of the other" (Personal communication, P-6, April 15, 2016).

The ancient hatred argument as discussed above, directly relies on this notion of the "other" that lies permanently outside of the collective "we." The "other" is a social construction based on an exclusive/inclusive identity, yet what is often overlooked is the fact that this identity is often utilized by elite leaders in order to legitimate the state (Wilmer, 1998, p.107). Thus, it is inaccurate to frame conflict between ethnic groups on ancient hatreds since ethnicity is a malleable identity. It is this sort of manipulation that *Encyclopedia of the Living* directly confronts throughout the performance. As the director states at the end of the script, "When we say that someone's Albanian or a Serb, what do we actually say?" (Paković, 2015, p. 38). This production directly confronts notions of "otherness" and instead locates those tensions and hatreds within the exploitative practices of those in power. This argument is supported by many scholars such as Dević (1998) who argue that "ethnic mobilization of the 'masses' had its roots in a successful orchestration of legitimate social discontents" by those in power (p. 391). Additionally, while the "other" in *Romeo and Juliet* is still present within the Capulet-Montague conflict, it still does not directly engage or confront the real historical and political roots of ethnic tensions. Instead, it promotes a broader message of love and hatred that lies relatively outside hard-hitting discussions of ethnicity. *Encyclopedia of the Living* directly confronts the reasons behind the construction of "otherness"

and exposes the audience to the facts, while *Romeo and Juliet* focuses more on the harmful effects this "othering" has on human relationships.

Furthermore, these discussions of "otherness" also reflect on the current state of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. For one, other than a number of civil society initiatives most forms of dialogue take place on the international or state level. These joint productions aim to intervene within that field, but as of now do not constitute a majority of the available space. A conference set for May 2016 sponsored by the European Movement in Serbia stated in a press release that "the main obstacle standing in the way of normal and fruitful relations between Albania and Serbia is the lack of knowing" one another, and that "normalization starts with knowing and accepting each other" (European Movement in Serbia, 2016). Yet while this conference focuses on Serbia-Albania relations, any discussions about this relationship cannot be truly separated from Serbia-Kosovo relations given Kosovo's majority Albanian population. The term "normalization" is also a very vague concept that holds little weight when examined thoroughly. "Normal" can be defined in a myriad of ways and has a paternalistic connotation, thus the term revitalization is much more apt in this context. Additionally, despite ongoing official dialogues between Belgrade and Prishtina, there has been no real change on the ground and politicians continue to promote divisive policies (Fridman, 2013, p.148). The "multi-ethnic" dialogue that the international community tends to promote in reality hinders any real dialogue from emerging that engages with ethnicity both in the past as well as in the present (Richmond, 2002). Consequently, this sort of "multi-ethnic" and "normalization" rhetoric reinforces the idea that people need to overcome rather than confront the real historical and political reasons for these post-conflict realities.

### ***Forced Reconciliation versus Open Dialogue***

"First thing about reconciliation is that it takes time, and it takes much longer than people think. And then it is very important to ask people that were in the conflict, especially the people who

suffered, if they want reconciliation and this is to be respected. Very often reconciliation as an idea starts from the side of perpetrator" (Personal communication, P-6, April 15, 2016)

The process of creating open dialogue between Serbs and Albanians is not arbitrary; it is rooted in a deep need for reconciliation within a post-conflict environment. However, there are many different dimensions to reconciliation that can and should be explored. Researching the potential theater has to transform conflict is thus just as multi-dimensional as the conflict itself. Nonetheless, as Lederach (2007) explains, relationships are the "beginning and end point" for understanding the system that we call reconciliation (p. 26). During my research many participants expressed the need for artists across the former Yugoslavia to come together and reform relationships. One interviewee explained that "it is important to put together those artists and to work together because otherwise they will reduce their identities just to national identity" (Personal communication, P-3, April 20, 2016). What used to be more of a collaborative and fluid artistic process is now limited by post-conflict realities and physical and psychological barriers to correspondence. As the Executive Producer of *Romeo and Juliet* explained,

We came from one country, Yugoslavia, and now we have seven and we are all small. I don't think that any of our region can breathe without each other. I don't think it's fair to speak about theater productions, or art, or culture, in Serbia because it is too small and if Serbia doesn't cooperate with the rest of the region then I don't think we have anything to say about it. I strongly believe that we need to have some cultural policy that is less national oriented and more regional. (Personal communication, P-4, April 22, 2016)

This is an important dimension when evaluating the post-conflict reality currently determining the relationship between official and unofficial institutions of the state. Yet many individuals also expressed the opinion that art was never stopped, not even during the wars of the 1990's. Regardless, "there is still a big community of all those people who are artists or just respect art so much that they don't care. And if they see that co-production in the region is still alive...that means something for everyone" (Personal communication, P-5, April 20, 2016). Reforming this cross-

national collaboration between not just Kosovo and Serbia, but other countries in the region, is thus an integral step in any sort of reconciliation process.

Additionally, during my research I explored what my participants thought about the mechanisms theater should employ in order to reconcile these differences. While opinions varied in terms of what they thought of strictly alternative or institutional theater, a common sentimentality was that "it's definitely necessary" to have these cross-cultural productions because "the more there are these kinds of things, the more people participate and the better the situation gets" (Personal communication, P-1, April 11, 2016). Even though some expressed the thought they "don't think theater, or culture, or art can change the bad political situation here," ultimately they viewed theater as providing the air to breathe within an oppressive societal context (Personal communication, P-4, April 22, 2016). This sentiment reflects Lederach's (2007) concept of reconciliation as a "social space" - it is a locus for people to come together and a place of "creative tension" that deals with certain paradoxes (p. 31). Lederach calls for these sorts of creative responses to be applied because they can reflect upon the real nature of the conflict itself. This process entails three main components - relationships, encounters, and acknowledgment, and asks the fundamental question of "how to create a catalyst for reconciliation and then sustain it in divided societies" (Lederach, 2007, p. 25). Bringing in Bertolt Brecht's theories about theater also helps consolidate these ideas, as he grounds theatrical performance in social change and argues that art and society have a reciprocal relationship (Zazzili, 2013, p. 693). In combining Lederach's theories with a Brechtian concept of a reciprocity, theater can be conceptualized as a space in which all these three components are exercised. Given that theater can harbor this inherently political role within society, its interaction with components of reconciliation has the potential to provide the creative response to conflict that Lederach explicitly calls for.

Furthermore, reconciliation processes solely touted on the state and international level through conferences and formal meetings do not really reflect this creative response that is needed at the moment. Instead, it is this interpersonal reconciliation - or a more cultural approach - that is needed. Ultimately, it is "through this catharsis [of theater] that you are reconciling" because "you touch on the places that are hidden" (Personal communication, P-2, April 18, 2016). This is a necessary form of reconciliation that prioritizes personal interaction directly between individuals "who have fed each other's grievances and who need such interaction to help them define the terms of their future co-existence" (Franović, 2008, p.22). Thus, a common theme that I identified throughout my research was the potential theater has to be a form of catharsis and uncover and negotiate these truths on the individual level. One participant articulated that in this way, "theater has an enormous healing potential and can be a fantastic mediator between the parts in conflict" (Personal communication, P-6, April 15, 2016). Artists and the art they produce therefore have the potential to stay grounded in the present, while still making it possible to simultaneously reflect on the past and imagine a future.

### *Dealing with the Past*

"The trend is to forget everything, but there will not be peace" (Personal communication, P-2, April 18, 2016)

Despite the fact that theater has the power to reconcile differences between individuals, unfortunately that process is not supported on a broader institutional level. For one, Serbia officially does not recognize Kosovo's independence and despite the EU negotiated Brussels Agreement in 2013, those conditions have not been implemented to any serious extent (Ejdus, 2014). Therefore, even if art and culture wishes to engage in this sort of dialogue it is often hindered by the greater sense of denial that exists. As one participant stated,

People need to understand and accept what really happened. And I think that the main problem in the whole of our seven societies is that strong denial process that is the most powerful here. When you have that base, *Romeo and Juliet* looks like an incident, but you cannot expect that one theater performance will change the uncomfortable layers that we need to swallow and accept. I think that when people from here really understand and really accept the role of Serbia in conflict, that in that moment I will be sure that the next generation of my kids will not be living in some sort of war-like environment. (Personal communication, P-4, April 22, 2016)

While my aim here is not to delve into whether *Romeo and Juliet* or *Encyclopedia of the Living* more effectively negotiates this culture of denial, I do explore how theater can help transform this denial into something constructive.

A central component that is often brought in discussions about reconciliation in the Western Balkans, is the framework of Dealing with the Past. This term refers to the process where a society negotiates the multiple narratives that exist in a post-conflict environment (Subotić, 2009). As previously articulated, acknowledgment is an important part of this process. Thus, there can only be real transformation if there is an "acknowledgement of loss and injustices that happened by the side who did it, otherwise there is no reconciliation" (Personal communication, P-6, April 15, 2016). While theater can engage with this field of acknowledgement within certain spaces, without the institutional recognition it is hard for any real revitalization to happen between Kosovo and Serbia because of the competing narratives of victimization and loss in both communities. As the Director of CZKD pointedly stated, "you can't reconcile without truth" (Personal communication, P-2, April 18, 2016). However, the idea that there is a single "truth" to be established does not accurately reflect the post-conflict reality. According to authors such as Franović (2008), "only *our* 'truth' is accepted as *the* 'truth,' while the truth of 'others' is perceived as manipulation and propaganda" (p. 6). Yet, the whole concept of dealing with the past means that there does not need to be a prioritization of one single narrative. Instead, it is "an answer to what has happened...no matter which identity group those who suffered belong to" (Franović,

2008, p. 21). Consequently, theater has the ability to transform relations through its incorporation of dealing with the past processes and allowing individuals to negotiate those conflicts outside an institutional environment.

### *Changing the Culture*

"Many journalists ask me 'do you break borders with cultural exchanges?' but I always say, 'no, culture also makes borders.' And if they participated in that, then theater and other branches of culture and arts can have a very important role in process of reconciliation and deconstruction of those stereotypes which are now very deeply rooted in society. Because nationalism was brought from the top, from cultural and political elites, but now it is deeply rooted and I think that will be also changed from the top." (Personal communication, P-3, April 20, 2016)

Even though reconciliation should not be solely based on an institutional level, all of the participants in my research expressed the need for a change in cultural policies. As the Director of the Helsinki Committee articulated, "one production cannot change much, but if you create that kind of policy to support those productions then there will be real change" (Personal communication, P-3, April 20, 2016). A strictly bottom-up approach therefore may not affect the change in policy that is needed. As the director of Dah also stated, currently "there is nothing that is a clear culture policy" which means that theater companies "are at the mercy of people in commissions" (Personal communication, P-6, April 15, 2016). In order for theater and the arts as a whole to have a greater impact on processes of reconciliation between Kosovo and Serbia, and Serbs and Albanians, these discussions also need to be reflected within the greater society. Otherwise the work that theater can accomplish will always be sidelined, and interpersonal reconciliation will never be truly prioritized. Even though this ideal meeting ground between top-down and bottom-up processes may be hard to achieve in light of conflicting interests, "to be effective it must proceed in both dimensions simultaneously" (Fischer & Petrović-Ziemer, 2013, p.22). The work that theater can accomplish in terms of dealing with the past and creating space to deconstruct notions of "otherness" thus provides the groundwork for larger policy changes as a

whole. One participant explained that "without changing the culture and the policy there is not stability in the region...and if you don't have - this awful word -"normalization" between Serbs and Albanians " there is no way to concretely negotiate a post-conflict environment (Personal communication, P-3, April 20, 2016).

Nevertheless, these individuals and organizations will persevere no matter the context. If a broader cultural policy does not take place anytime soon, art will continue to play an integral role in society and continue to push the boundaries. Through artistic interventions both big and small, artists will reach out to people who are growing tired of endless political talks and realizing that the reality on the ground needs to change. As Lambourne (2009) argues, these processes become transformative "when they emphasize the principles of local participation and empowerment" (p. 35). Thus, these cultural projects have the potential to empower the local communities in both Belgrade and Prishtina through all the mechanisms described above. It is within this relatively stagnant space that culture and theater can and does have a real affect.

## **Conclusions**

Analyzing the role of theater within Kosovo and Serbia's frozen relationship assumes many different dimensions. However, throughout this research I have attempted to specifically focus on the question how theater can aid in processes of reconciliation and revitalization between the two communities. While *Encyclopedia of the Living* and *Romeo and Juliet* are definitely not the first cross-cultural productions of this sort since the conflicts in the 1990's, they offer an insight into the ways in which theater can and does engage with post-conflict realities. During my interviews, I received a number of different opinions about these two productions and how effective or politically engaged they perceived them to be. Nonetheless, a common theme that I extracted was

the necessity for these sorts of cross-cultural productions to continue. The artistic space that these cultural productions provide is invaluable in a society where voices are often stifled by a master narrative. These hegemonic narratives are employed by both sides in an attempt to consolidate the interests of the state amidst frozen conflict. As a result, the way that theater incorporates and fosters relationships is essential in beginning the process of healing within both communities.

Ultimately, the creative space that theater provides allows for individuals and groups of people in conflict to explore the three underlying tenants of reconciliation that Lederach (2007) lays out - relationships, encounters, and acknowledgement. Not only does theater offer an alternative area for those in the community to simply be together, but it exemplifies a forum that is a much more gentle and accommodating process than traditional mechanisms of reconciliation. It opens up questions and possibilities for dialogue that go beyond the state or institutional level to affect the very real roots of the conflict. *Encyclopedia of the Living* and *Romeo and Juliet*, although coming from the same cross-cultural background, offer very different things for the future of the theater community and further joint productions. Yet, this combination of top-down and bottom-up processes is essential not only for revitalizing relations within a post-conflict environment, but also in terms of expanding theater productions and the space they affect. Far beyond any political implications, theater harbors the innate ability to transform relationships and offer a doorway into one another's world - whether that be in Belgrade or Prishtina.

### **Limitations and Further Study**

Given the time constraints of this research period I was unfortunately not able to travel to Prishtina in order to conduct any interviews. Since my research evaluates the Kosovo-Serbia relationship it would have been extremely helpful to have discussed these issues with members of

the Albanian community and garner their perspective. However, because I am evaluating joint productions the information I was able to gather was still fairly nuanced. In addition, the time constraints also limited the number of individuals and organizations that I could interview given complications with scheduling. If this research was conducted over a longer period of time, I would incorporate members of the community in Prishtina as well as more individuals involved in the making of these two productions. This would allow me to present a wider breath of perspectives, especially since the individuals I interviewed are all situated with a specific civil society or cultural lens.

There are also a number of different topics that arose throughout my research which would be interesting avenues to explore in the future. For one, it was impossible within the scope of this research to evaluate the perceptions of audience members who viewed both productions. Gathering these perceptions would add an interesting dimension to discussions about changing perspectives and the deconstruction of stereotypes. Additionally, it would be interesting to evaluate the current cultural policies in both Belgrade and Prishtina as a way to further expound upon the need for stronger cultural infrastructure. In this way the research could offer concrete recommendations for fostering culture and the arts within the community through both bottom-up and top-down processes. As of now there is little information on the Ministries of Culture in both countries and what their relationships are to the state, thus exploring that relationship would be integral for delving into further discussions about changing the cultural policies within the respective communities.

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**Appendix**

Participant	Sex	Occupation/Affiliation	Interview Date
P-1	Female	Translator - Encyclopedia of the Living	April 11, 2016
P-2	Female	Director/Dramaturge - CZKD	April 18, 2016
P-3	Female	Director - Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia	April 20, 2016
P-4	Female	Executive Producer - Romeo and Juliet	April 22, 2016
P-5	Female	Program Coordinator - Heartefact	April 20, 2016
P-6	Female	Director - Dah Theater	April 15, 2016