

## **Interrogating the Balkan Manosphere**

### **The polyvocal creation of *Kučka (Bitch)* at Montenegro Royal Theatre Zetski Dom with reference to its striking illumination of “red pill” American masculinity.**

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As a component of the EU Collective Plays Project, the Montenegro Royal Theatre Zetski Dom's 2018 creation and production of *Bitch* primarily explored and exposed prevailing traits and behaviors of the “Balkan male,” as they relate to changing societal constructs, in particular, those involving the relationship between men and women.<sup>1</sup> The play is set in a specific Balkan context with local references, geographical indicators, and cultural norms. The end result is an examination of Balkan mentality in script that is almost cubist in its fragmented, sharp-edged construction. At its core, *Bitch*<sup>2</sup> interrogates androcentric behaviors vis-a-vis the modern independent woman, exposing failures to communicate effectively that foster confusion, alienation, and ultimately violence. The collective process of building the text together sprang from improvisations with actors, independent contributions by the writers Eva Zabezsinszkij and Arpad Schilling,<sup>3</sup> who also directed the workshops and production. Arpad empowered actors to gain confidence and responsibility in their roles. Actors would collectively agree and develop a sense of ownership over the material. In defining his creative role, Schilling served first in developing various scenarios or vignettes with actors, then transcribe ensuing improvisations which would form the basis of the early drafts. In coordination with Eva Zabezsinszkij, they would later refine the improvisational dialogues in creating the working script.<sup>4</sup>

Writer Eva Zabezsinszkij's guiding *principle* was drawn from her minimalist work in contemporary media that “less is more” thus, the goal was to exact a compelling and concise dramaturgy,<sup>5</sup> that built upon the individual stories and experiences of cast members. This defined the polyvocality of the script that was consistent with the unique mission of the EU Collective Plays' Project in its expansion of how multiple voices and dramaturgies can create works of theatre, versus the traditional single-author approach. In its psycho-physical minimalist approach to mine the deepest truths about the questions at hand, *Bitch* recalls the “poor theatre” of Grotowski whereby all non-essentials: scenery, costume and music, are stripped away. Key questions play out in the script. Why do males default to abusive terms like “bitch” when they don't get what they want from a woman? How do we reconcile traditional masculinity tropes with changing gender roles?

After Schilling and his actors firmed up characters and situations, they then moved to the more traditional psychological or method approach of developing motivations and relationships. This would personalize the larger thematic issues underlying the Balkan male with specific and discrete social and psychological perspectives. The outcome was that we discover the larger themes through intensive interactions versus pedantic explaining or proselytizing monologues as is often the case in American docudrama—those that derive from thematically loaded events.

#### **BALKAN CONTEXT**

The Balkan context from which this play emerged provides far greater resonance for the reader, since by design, *Bitch* is directly connected to specific geographical and cultural antecedents. For a Western audience, a play from Montenegro would be rarely if ever seen, especially one that explores current Balkan sensibilities. With a population of under 700,000, Montenegro is a mountainous West Balkan country on the Adriatic coast that had been part of Yugoslavia prior to the latter's dissolution in 1991.

After the breakup, and with the ensuing and interminable Balkan conflicts, Montenegro claimed federation with Serbia a much larger country of about seven million people. The uneasy alliance with Serbia in the 2000s led to political disputes and ultimately, Montenegro's independence in 2006.<sup>6</sup> Most Serbians today recognize Montenegro's independence. They are often described as two countries but one people--as there is a shared language and religious tradition with many Montenegrins' attending universities or working in Serbia.

In relationship to how language defines internal and external space, *Bitch* is very specific. Arpad Schilling used the term "genus loci" in that the venue and community of Cetinje became part of the narrative. This included local news and even gossip, as well as various data about Montenegro and its topography—from its mountains to the coast.

Proper name markers define cities, landscape, topography, the looming Montenegro mountains, the muddy, littered spring, references to Vule's championship water polo team (and his fear of water), Stevan's escaping to Belgrade, his carpark lovemaking with his wife in Budva, Montenegro's favorite beach resort, all combine to create a closely observed "reality" set in dialogic *frisson* to the theatrical ontology of the play where stage directions define actor placements and use.

This dialogic approach engenders "Balkan-ness" devoid of the well-made trappings found in a traditional, single plot narrative. Resisting naturalism, the hybrid structure is marked by synaptic temporal shifts across space and time. Situational and time shifts are immediate: there are no "telegraphed" explanations, none of the traditional solutions that pervade American dramaturgies: the "I remember when" or "do you recall the time" or "I'm misunderstood" monologues. Rather than extrapolatory monologues, further textual compression eliminates situations and scenes which are indulgent or redundant--the final play appears suddenly--"exactly on the day of the premiere." *Bitch*'s ascetic dramaturgy pummels us with the force of a blunt hammer, elevating the thematic content with relentless aggression. Temporal fragmentation exacerbates this clash between present and past merging them in combustible tension.

#### POLYVOCAL APPROACH

*Bitch*'s polyvocality stems from several key factors:

- 1) The formation of the text through multiple voices and inputs versus the single authorial voice.
- 2) The hybrid layering of stories, personal narratives, landscape and indigenous "markers" vs. a plot driven narrative.
- 3) The de-matrixing and multivocality of the actors across multiple personae, including the sole women actor Nada who embodies the equivocal character—one who can switch identities on the spot, transforming across ages and relations to other characters.
- 4) The dialogic juxtaposition of scenes in continual presence creating *frisson* between the present and the past. Internal dialogism between parts of the play defined its structure.
- 5) External dialogism: theatre as a laboratory in juxtaposition to the "real" world; or the "other."
- 6) The use of the *dominant* as an organizing principle versus traditional well-made play orthodoxy.

In *Bitch*, the polyvocal approach was primarily generated from the actors and writers around specific situations that unlocked attitudes and behaviors of Balkan males. About one-third of the language was generated from the actors through improvisations, while the playwright/director Arpad Schilling worked with playwright Eva Zabezsinskij to generate text independently, and devised a working treatment (almost like a jazz lead sheet), against which actors could riff, layering "other" stories upon the actor's own personal accounts. The play de-matrixes the inviolable notion of dramatic character, as actors used their real names imbuing self as "character;" or switched roles (often on a dime) to confront various situations. Further, characters were de-matrixed as commentators or interlocutors directly addressing the audience. Schilling's impetus behind this approach was to build the story on their individual personalities and histories; in effect, the actors became the "heroes" of the story.

Placing the actors within this "matrix" follows Brecht's dictum that, theatre "theatres" everything; as onstage the self or actor is immediately semiotized (i.e. framed) as a character. In *Bitch*, the actor is not "losing himself" in a character, but assiduously, remaining authentic to self. By switching roles actors bundle performative "fronts," executing a specific set of actions or tasks to meet the situational needs of the script. De-matrixing requires the multivocal character to elicit a *frisson* or tension between his or her various personae across the play. This fracturing of the self embeds troubling personality fragments of the "other" into one actor.

For example, when the actor/character Zoran plays his violent abusive father, those traits become embedded in him, thus encoding, almost genetically, this behavioral predilection as a rite of passage to manhood. The sole actress, Nada Vukcevic, plays all the women's roles; becoming an "equivocal character" she alters age, gestures, class, and linguistic levels to "mark" the transitions between multiple female characters in the play. So, while her actor's name and her primary character is Nada, language shifts transform her into a range of characters and situations--from the pop singer--now Vule's girlfriend singing a hit tune--to Sdran's dying mother or his father's mistress. Eva Zabezsinszkij's dramaturgical choice of positioning these scenes as flashbacks foregrounded the theatrical construct while requiring virtuosic performative abilities from Nada. At the 2018 Oslo International Festival of Acting, conference organizer Gianluca Iumiento described this phenomenon as the *polyvocal actor*: one who dialogizes and negotiates across characters and styles altering vocal and stylistic shifts on the spot.<sup>7</sup>

## THE BALKAN MALE

Balkan is used geographically to denote southeastern Europe<sup>8</sup> yet, it is more often considered in the West as cultural term (balkanization—separation into component parts) and as a construct—the Balkan mentality or defining a set of cultural predispositions that distinguish it from prevailing Western European sensibilities, particularly regarding masculinity. This distinction is important because it contextualizes various behaviors in *Bitch* that might otherwise be simply attributed to an individual character's psychology. In *Bitch*, "Balkan-ness," behaviors morph from personal to the archetypal to reveal a phenomenon more sociological than psychological. Through psycho-physical improvisations a collective *gestus* emerges that molds language into discrete markers. For example, a character on all fours represents the eponymous bitch, a small water bottle becomes the "son" who will be beaten by the father. This semiotic ontology applies many of Brecht's epic theatre techniques of defamiliarization and breaking frame; while his use of sonics recalls Joseph Chaikin's pioneering Open Theatre practice: actors created all music and sound effects with stage technologies at a minimum. In homage to Brecht, the Hungarian born Schilling named his theatre Krekator which translates as "chalk circle," after Brecht's masterpiece, *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Arguably, Hungary's most internationally renowned director, Schilling amalgamated the influence of these Brechtian/Grotowski/Chaikin antecedents into a powerfully individualized aesthetic with his almost entirely male cast consisting of Montenegrin actors.

In utilizing theatre as laboratory, *Bitch* grapples at close range with the multi-faceted phenomenon of the Balkan male. Studies on this subject have been widely disseminated in scholarly articles, demographic studies, films, and blogs. Historically, films exploring Balkan life are wrapped in the frequent wars: the dust and death marked by various brutalities that defined the 1990s Balkan conflicts, and the corruption that ensued during the transition to independence. The Balkan male is characterized in most literature and scholarly research as:

...a sort of museum of masculinity: where men, whether revolutionaries, politicians or workers, are depicted as behaving in ways that are seen as almost exaggeratedly masculine... Physical toughness and violence, sexual conquest and the subordination of women, guns, strong drink feature heavily.<sup>9</sup>

Preceding the Balkan conflicts, provocatively comic films from the internationally respected Balkan director Dusan Makavejev's such as his 1981, *Montenegro*, featured the contrast of western European worldviews with Balkan-ness. *Montenegro* depicts a frazzled, repressed Swedish wife and mother thrown inadvertently into a raucous, loud, and violent night club (Zanzi Bar) run by Yugoslavian migrants, a club where excessive drinking, testosterone driven sexuality and a surreal edginess became a marker for Balkan masculinity (as juxtaposed to Western restraint and sterility). In a typical scene, two Balkan men beat other senseless with shovels, another man appears with a knife stuck in his forehead. The "fish out of water" plot does tend to some over the top stereotyping in flaunting the cultural juxtapositions. In more academic study, Andrea Matosevic's article "Hard Men," explores the distinctiveness of the Balkan worker's masculinity. Matosevic cites a "certain fascination, attraction and "theoretical interest" but what is also considered, *a volte un po' troppo grezzo* (sometimes a bit too rough) particularly in regard to "gender relations that in the West had presumably been overcome."<sup>10</sup> In *Bitch*, male characters are bound together by 1) violence, 2) fear of violence, or 3) avoidance of violence; each character's masculinity is challenged, accordingly. Compassion is not evident as it might be construed as weakness. In this portrayal, masculine behavior becomes the organizing principle of *Bitch*, what Russian Formalist critic, Roman Jakobson, has described as the *dominant*. The dominant could be considered the galvanizing force that holds an artistic work together. It opposes the orthodoxy of a trackable narrative or well-made play structure.

The *dominant* may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure.<sup>11</sup>

Schilling's organizing principle of the dominant gives *Bitch* its unwavering power and force, and in itself is a rejection of narrative linearity or the pursuit of closure. This distinguishes *Bitch* from likely antecedents such as the in-*yer-face* movement popularized in Britain during the 1990s which still clung to narrative throughlines and characters, but also employed violence to achieve other objectives, such as confronting audience and industry complacency. For example, Sara Kane's *Blasted* or Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* initially shocked audiences by testing the limits of what could be depicted on stage. *Bitch* conversely doesn't theatricalize or fetishize violence or sex. Sexual situations are explored but mitigated onstage, for example, a fellatio scene is indicated to take place offstage. *Bitch* provides a tactical, demographic exploration of pervasive societal patterns. Unlike in-*yer-face* or Tarantino-esque heightened displays,<sup>12</sup> *Bitch* never exploits, relishes, or wallows in its violence to shock and awe; rather, the grotesque is subsumed as a determinant fact of Balkan life (and death). If the in-*yer-face* movement was more of "a thumb in the eye," testing the limits of violence and anti-social behavior; then, the seminal conflicts in *Bitch* are rooted in persistent frustration (lack of meaningful work, the changing roles of women, sense of a failed life). The most shocking thing about *Bitch* may be its title, although Schilling's image of the barking dogs in heat renders the more putative slight secondary.

Schilling as both director and playwright extolled his actors to explore the gestic language of violence without revealing inner motivations or intentions. Willful aggression becomes a performative antidote to malaise or confusion about how to act. Male characters seem trapped in hostile communication patterns ingrained from birth and doubled-down during childhood development. Anxiety and aggression toward women are refracted through interactions with Nada; or they play out in dominance struggles with other males. Dialogue accelerates to violence as language fails meaningful interactions: the actor Vule Marković reveals this gap between desire and utterance: "The line I remember well, but at the end my character never says it is: "I want my peace."<sup>13</sup>

Readers may note that while violence leads to detrimental outcomes sociologically, and in *Bitch* are psychologically devastating; ironically, the tension, conflicts, and adrenaline rush ensure a dynamic dramaturgy that drives the action of the play. Malevolence on the human level becomes holy grail for the stage. From our current American 2025 perspective this is disturbingly similar to Trump's appeal with male MAGA voters as malevolence, intimidation, cruelty, predatory behavior toward women, and violence hold the attention of media and the electorate. Concomitantly, many young male voters found his posturing of masculinity tropes and images compelling: Trump as the overly muscled Superman, Iron man, etc. As young American men increasingly eschew higher education as unmanly we now find gender reversals similar to those males in *Bitch*—women making higher wages with better jobs, better educated women leading to upper social mobility; we also see impossible right wing throwbacks from vice-president JD Vance and Elon Musk insisting that women carry on traditional housekeeping and child rearing roles.<sup>14</sup> The "red pill" ideology has become a metaphor for rejecting feminist or progressive ideals about gender roles.<sup>15</sup> The term "manosphere" defines a worldview featuring toxic masculinity, anti-feminism, and the kind of alpha hyper-individualism that scorns "beta-men" (i.e. Western Europeans) whom while emotionally supportive are seen as weak. *Bitch*, through the dramaturgical framing of Grotowski's poor theatre, strips away any sense of "red pill" artifice in its sharp exposé of the manosphere's repercussions.

To wit, the first scene in *Bitch* displays male predatory behavior as a local man, Srdan accosts the standoffish traveler, Nada, who waits for a train to the capital Podgorica, Montenegro's largest city; one (reminiscent of Beckett's *Godot*) that never arrives. Srdan's less than subtle attempt at seduction is interrogatory and pushy; lacking charm (*più grezzo*) he pushes her boundaries with impunity. The Balkan sense of the sardonic is evident here as Srdan futilely cajoles her to abandon her plastic water bottle and slip away to the local spring to "drink some fresh water." Nada shrugs off his advances dismissively and in increasing frustration he confronts her "controlling ways" urging her to "surrender" to the moment. This scene explores a traditional Balkan male expectation: not only that single woman must be fair game for male pursuit and conquest, but also, that the woman's lack of consent is largely a non-factor. Several scenes later we discover that rather than an idyllic oasis the spring is a heavily polluted, stagnant pond, only accessed through a muddy, littered path--revealing far more sinister tones to Srdan's attempts at conquest.

Srdan, in reclaiming his virility suddenly transforms to his father; here, he demonstrates how his father would openly seduce a woman at the park when he was a toddler (he goes offstage for a blow job); in multiple scenes, *Bitch* reveals how atavistic parental role models have conditioned the male psyche toward bellicose behaviors. From this perspective, *Bitch* demonstrates the residual hegemony's clash with emergent socio-cultural realities by examining the underlying conditions that perpetuate the behavior.<sup>16</sup>

While *Bitch* positions the 'Balkan' male as "other" in contrast to Western or European versions of manliness,<sup>17</sup> in America it would be criticized by "bro" cohorts as a marker against "woke," that must be resisted. Nevertheless, Western European ideas of masculinity whereby partners share domestic duties and decision making are made more palatable by social programs like extensive maternity leaves for both women and men, whereas the typical Balkan perspective remains patriarchal.

Curiously, the artistic director at Theatre Royal Zetski Dom, Lidija Dedovic, the EU liaison for the Montenegrin project, Natasa Kraljevic, and *Bitch*'s production manager, Idikò Sagidu, are all women, although Schilling recounted that women in leadership roles are quite rare in Eastern Europe. In the traditional hierarchy, the wife covers domestic duties and child rearing; but we see this breaking down in *Bitch*. The character Zoran is coming to grips with a failed marriage, facing a divorce in which he will lose his family, home, etc. His overriding impulse is revenge—to destroy his estranged wife. She makes three times his income, has elevated herself to higher social circles, and in this fit of fury he's been left in the dust (i.e., one of *Bitch*'s barking dogs). Later, Zoran's mother chides him to be violent with his wife, use his fists (as Zoran's father had beaten her) to reassert his role. Zoran, realizing that change is inevitable, accepts that domestic violence will solve nothing. A flashback scene from Zoran's youth shows the Balkan propensity to solve complicated psychological issues like bullying through extreme violence, even between father and son. Zoran's father humiliates his son for being intimidated into giving his new bike to a gang of toughs; eventually, the father goads the son to slap him and a physical fight ensues. The lesson for the son: a Balkan man must never act or show weakness; the legacy of violence is a rite of passage passed on from fathers to sons. Zoran recalls shitting in his bedclothes as his father beat his mother demonstrating that the antidote to fear is the choice between shame and fighting back. The precise dramaturgical layering of these scenes across the play accretes a cycle of violence that is seemingly ineluctable.

This predilection toward violence has created a dilemma for continuing traditional male behavior. One remedy has been the *Young Men's Initiative*, established in 2007) which seeks to mitigate young Balkan male tendencies toward violence, alcohol abuse, through a concerted effort to educate male youth toward shifting stereotypical gender roles.

CARE's gender transformation education, *Young Men Initiative* (YMI) has been a documented success in the Western Balkans... Adolescence represents a pivotal moment in the socialisation process, when attitudes towards violence and gender roles are formulated and solidified...The YMI program [features] internalising new ideas in support of gender-equitable, healthy and non-violent behaviours.<sup>18</sup>

Curiously, the process of unlocking self-awareness utilized by YMI is remarkably similar to the improvisational techniques utilized in *Bitch*. Actor Vule Marković explained that this process was both cathartic and therapeutic since the actor would demonstrate some frustration in a way that their characters were not aware of having that frustration. This complex exploration into the psyche of the actor/character increased the authenticity of their actions by revealing obstacles that they could then explore.

This key point explains how *Bitch* drills down this dichotomy where frustration is acted out without the character aware of the frustrations that triggered it. The therapeutic element emerging from the scene, then brings that frustration to the surface where it becomes palpable, understood, even revelatory.

YMI noted that there still remains a high degree of intolerance toward LGBTQ communities. Historically, feminism has been considered a pejorative term, notably, travel guides warn that in Serbia feminism is equated with lesbianism. So rampant are the needs to exert virility that gay men in the Balkans risk derision and beatings. In *Bitch*, Stevan struggles with coming out through a six-year marriage failing in his "duty" to impregnate his wife; her attempts at seducing him fail as he leaves her for Belgrade to take examinations and change his career. She berates his masculinity. Stevan is treated cruelly by other males in the play, becoming a marker for gay intolerance. When the ensemble forces him "kiss Srdan's ass" or Zoran will break his glasses he truly becomes their "bitch." Humiliation of gay males or berating those not willing to respond violently by calling them "pussies" or "faggots" aligns with authoritarian projects that aim to realign gender stereotyping and violence against gays.

The actor Stevan Radusinovic played a married yet closeted gay man who works as an instructor in the local school. To “get out of the closet” and divorce would be out of the question. *Bitch* portrayed situations drawn from his life, including the worse conflicts from his childhood. The challenge for the actor was to avoid generalization in expressions and to exhibit gestures and movement that exposed the truth.

The Balkan blogger and journalist, Lazar Džamić, now living in the UK has hosted a series of lectures, entitled “*Flowers on the edge of the grave*,”<sup>19</sup> in attempt to inform British society about Balkan characteristics. Lazar explains terms that he thinks define Balkan mentality and several of these terms may provide further insight into *Bitch*.

*Inconsistency; death; surrealism:* Over the past centuries, Montenegro has had multiple configurations, largely defined by a progression of wars. Renowned Serbian author, Dušan Kovačević, makes the ironic point: “There are five seasons in Serbia – winter, spring, summer, autumn, and war.” Recent Montenegrin films seem to bear this out.<sup>20</sup> “When you join death and inconsistency you get surrealism,” Lazar posits, “if Latin America gave magic realism to the world, we gave surrealism. There is no line between the dream and a reality. Your average day in Balkans is either a nightmare or some kind of a dream.” Schilling notes this as part of the process: “we had to think not only about the rational but the irrational as well, since it is important to make the story work in a psycho-realistic way.”<sup>21</sup> In one of the final scenes in *Bitch*, Stevan’s has endured utter humiliation through psychological and physical bullying by his dorm roommates; the scene epitomizes this performance of a nightmare, culminating with Zoran’s commanding him to eat shattered glass. Another frightening scene depicts Nada fighting off an attempted rape. Surrealism is encoded in *Bitch* giving “presence” to the past traumas as actors transmogrify across multiple identities, and where future nightmares lurk in every scene. By continually evoking its characters’ tortured histories, our sense of time is distorted whereby past and present melt--recalling Dali’s clocks in his surrealist masterpiece, *Persistence of Memory*.

In its opening scenes, *Bitch* captures what Lazar calls “*nagon*” an impulse and aggression to the discourse that is unsettling with women and signals confrontation between males. Lazar continues:

Our communication is defined simply as being rude to each other. We act first and then we think. Our impulsiveness and lack of control over said impulsiveness is a vital part of our culture, education, politics, it is part of our communication and conversational discourse. One part of it is complete exasperation with life in general and the general attitude that nobody understands us. On the other side is arrogance, cockiness – with people who absolutely don’t want to listen to the opinion of others and just ignore any questions or comments.<sup>22</sup>

Ironically, this quote perfectly defines Trump’s modus operandi and the state of right-wing social media prevalent in America. There is no civil discourse. Rudeness abounds in *Bitch* and even when a character does another a favor it can backfire into an unexpected altercation. Stevan lends his cellphone to Zoran, and when he asks Zoran how long he expects to use it, Zoran, as if flipping a switch turns on Stevan. Zoran annoyingly prods the aloof water polo celebrity Vule about a car he arranged for him to buy that was in a terrible accident, thus sidelining the star and destroying the vehicle. Vule’s refusal to respond to any of these probings leads to a brawl on the stage floor. When Nada refuses Srdan’s advances or to engage him in direct conversation he accuses her of controlling behaviors. When Sdran asks Zoran for a cigarette, Zoran throws several at him with disdain for acting the part of the mooch. The blunt, sharply honed dialogue of *Bitch* devoids itself of courtesies feigned or otherwise, language annoys, prods, demeans or demands. Schilling’s frequent use of speech acts (commands, threats, digs) anticipates a response and everyone, particularly women are on their guard.

Exasperation with life is displayed through multivocality; either from life’s realities: waiting endlessly for the train, to a lack of understanding between characters. Multivocality equates to radical shifts and extremes in the language levels. Vule’s coach (another father figure) berates him for not wanting to play through his injuries calling him a “pussy,” a “faggot.” In sharp reversal, Vule suddenly agrees to play, the coaches’ language of derision transforms to bravado, powerful slogans, characters’ yelling and ultimately, bellowing the national anthem. Language levels shift from personal confrontation, to heightened bravura, sports lingo amped up in volume, macho hoots and hollers that crescendo into a nationalistic coup du theatre . As Schilling says in his titular inspiration for the play: it’s like barking dogs in heat.

Sometimes, seemingly innocuous actions can hold specific clues about a culture. For example, Džamić elaborates on the fear of drafts as tied to superstitious beliefs that still permeate Balkan society, especially, the older generations. In the play, Srdan's dying mother lies in her stifling bedroom, yet won't let her son open the window as she fears the dreaded draft or *promoja*. Lazar's satirical take is notable:

"Promaja" or the draft is the single most ruthless annihilator of Balkan folk a vicious enemy without a face. Any draft could be lethal, so Slav people are avoiding it in wide circle. You would often hear from Slav babushka not to wear short skirts, not to sit next to the window or stand in the open door, because there is a draft passing by. 23

Suffering from cancer, Srdan's mother lies gasping for breath on her deathbed. She rejects Srdan's offer to drive her to a doctor in Belgrade preferring the folk remedies of the old women, dying she still clings to the old ways. Closely observed behaviors seem to bear out as Balkan markers in the play giving it a truly distinctive sensibility. As Schilling posits:

Our playwriting strategy was based on the question – which is also part of the director's concept - whether we are able to write a play inspired by the actors and local stories, and create a story which is location-specific, unique and unrepeatable.

While *Bitch* explores many of the darker notes of Balkan life it also touts a resilience that can become a creative opportunity for change. As Balkan humor is often deeply satirical in terms of worldview it is important for readers to recognize the humor coming through the darker moments in the play. <sup>24</sup>

What's fascinating about *Bitch* is not only the polyvocal and collective approach that created it; but also, how it underscores and meticulously explores characteristics of the Balkan male and his relation to other men, women, including mothers, and to the landscape and country of Montenegro. Schilling states:

In the case of creating *Bitch/Kučka*, it made a great impact on us when we heard how the actors talked about the situation of men and women in Montenegro. They mentioned specific stories about children "crippled" by their parents or horrible tensions between spouses. I was especially interested to hear about men who I've met in dozens of times, on a daily basis on the streets. Men who are impatient, loud and aggressive, and who, as I suspected, tried to hide something with this spectacular or expressive behaviour. Actors introduced us to a specific world by telling stories and talking about their own experiences. Their influence can be present at every segment --there is no strict rule for that. We always use everything that is strong, dramatic or unique: an expression of speech that someone regularly uses...a complete dialogue or a simple gesture.

Eva notes that Árpád is one of those men "who are extremely reflective about male domination and the criticism of the patriarchal social model is a topic that regularly appears in his plays." To wit: "he is even more severe and strict in that issue than I am as a woman." In a forward-looking sense, the collective discussed a transition phase: "what happens with a community that is much more male-oriented than a Western social model, but which is apparently changing?" *Bitch* reveals the significant tension and anxiety this engenders in men. *Bitch* interrogates a patriarchal model built over several hundreds of years; or as Eva posits: "several thousand years." As she points out: The Balkan male's "suppressed frustration in this context is spectacular and dramatic."<sup>25</sup> Uncannily, while culturally specific and local to Montenegro, *Bitch* today serves as a blunt critique of current American masculinity tropes, the denigration of education and civility, the deepening gender division, and an overall societal toxicity.

## NOTES

<sup>2</sup> Schilling directed a production of *Bitch* at Theatre Royale Zetski Dom on April 28 and 29, 2018. It was later staged in May 2018 at the Slovene Theatre Festival. The quotes from the writer/directors and actors were in response to my questions about the formation and challenges in creating the play.

<sup>3</sup> The Hungarian Director/playwright Arpad Schilling is the founder of the world renowned Krekator theatre in Budapest. Krekator translates as chalk circle and is a tribute to Brecht.

<sup>4</sup> *Kučka (Bitch)* in *Collaborative Playwriting: Polyvocal Approaches from the EU Collective Plays Project* (Routledge, 2020) 102-147

<sup>5</sup> Arpad Schilling is the contemporary Eastern European corollary to these auteur directors. Unfortunately, the far right leadership of prime minister, Victor Orban has targeted and suppressed Hungary's most innovative theatres, like the Krekator.

<sup>6</sup> Barely passed the 55% threshold required by the EU for declarations of sovereignty, by no means an overwhelming majority.

<sup>7</sup> The Polyvocal Actor was the primary topic at the Oslo International Festival of Acting, held at KHiO, Oslo Academy of the Arts for a week in June 2018.

<sup>8</sup> The term would extend to the seven former countries of Yugoslavia but beyond that it would be difficult to get a unified definition of all Balkan countries.

<sup>9</sup> Bracewell, W. (2005). „New Men, Old Europe,” *Journeys*, 6(1), 88-115.

<sup>10</sup> Matosevic, Andrea, “A Lot of Sweat, a Little Bit of Fun, and Not Entirely “Hard Men”: Workers Masculinity in the Uljanik Shipyard.” *In Everyday Life in the Balkans*, ed. David Montgomery (University of Indiana Press) 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Jakobson, Roman. *On Language*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 1995. Jakobson defined the dominant as one of the most crucial, elaborated, and productive concepts in Russian Formalist theory.

<sup>12</sup> Plucking out of eyeballs in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (Methuen 2002), or performed analingus in Mark Ravenhill's, *Shopping and F\*\*\*ing* (Methuen 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Commentaries from *Bitch* actors per questions from this author, summer 2019.

<sup>14</sup> This hypermasculinity vibe in America spread to “tech bro nerds” evidenced at Trump's inauguration: Jeff Bezos (Amazon) and Mark Zuckerberg (Meta) for example were mocked for their sudden attempts to transform from frail nerds into muscled buff dudes. Elon Musk is highly satirized for his chain saw antics and tough guy DOGE takeovers.

<sup>15</sup> Vallergera, M., & Zurbriggen, E. L. (2022). Hegemonic masculinities in the 'Manosphere': A thematic analysis of beliefs about men and women on The Red Pill and Incel. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 22(1), 602-625. <https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12308>

<sup>16</sup> Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (1977). Chapter 6.

Raymond Williams notion of residual hegemonies seems an accurate descriptor of male behavior in the play as it struggles with emergent hegemonies that, for example, now position women in more powerful roles, and as more economically independent—thus, less reliant on the male.

<sup>17</sup> Although the return to these aggressive, violent, and loutish behaviors are resurgent in Trump's America.

<sup>18</sup> <https://youngmeninitiative.net/en/>

<sup>19</sup> Džamić, Lazar.”10 terms that define Serbian (Balkan) mentality.” *Britic*. April 2015

<sup>20</sup> Drasko Djorvic's *Ace of Spades* (2012) is set in the 1990s during the Balkan Conflict: the first film by a Montenegrin director to be nominated for best foreign film in the Academy Awards.

<sup>21</sup> Commentaries from actors, writers, director, see above 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Džamić, Lazar.”10 terms that define Serbian (Balkan) mentality.” *Britic*. April 2015

<sup>23</sup> Dronstad Blog, December 21, 2016

<sup>24</sup> Kronja, Ivana. "The Aesthetics of Violence in Recent Serbian Cinema: Masculinity in Crisis." *Film Criticism* 30, no. 3 (2006): 17-37.

<sup>25</sup> Eva Zabezsinszkij, e-mail interview, March 2019.