

Bard for the Balkans

A south London drama teacher and her multi-ethnic troupe of young actors took their Shakespeare production to the battle-scarred republics of the former Yugoslavia, writes **Phil Groman**

It's a long way from Croydon to Bosnia and Herzegovina. But Emilie Brothers, head of drama at Stanley Technical High School for boys in the south London suburb, isn't fazed. "This is Shakespeare as it was intended," says the 30-year-old, who is part of a four-strong team bringing a touring production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the war-scarred region. "Open air. A little rough and tumble. Lots of movement. And on the road."

The summertime staple stars a mixed cast of Bosnian Muslims, Serbs and Croats aged from 15 to 18, children who spent their childhoods in bomb shelters and refugee camps while their parents were locked in a bitter struggle that saw 100,000 people lose their lives.

Emilie hopes the play will encourage them to take a new look at themselves. "Drama allows you to think as an individual. You can step off the path and explore yourself, and experiment with your own sense of identity," she says.

The production team is led by Dr Andrew Goddard, a drama coach from the United States, and is based in the city of Mostar, an ethnically segregated region that was at the heart of hostilities between Muslims and Croats.

The team is housed in the basement of the Old Gymnasium, the city's main secondary school, which is a majestic example of Austro-Hungarian design, full of Turkish-influenced arches, ornate stucco detail, and lavishly peppered with bullet holes.

The school once stood on the front line of conflicts in the local area, used by snipers and militia to push into the Muslim enclave across the Neretva river. By the end of the war, the city was in ruins and every bridge across the river had been destroyed. Now the bridges have been rebuilt and the school renovated inside, but the two communities remain divided, although Shakespeare is going some way to reuniting them. Dr Garrod recalls a Croat Mercutio from last year's production of *Romeo and Juliet* who crossed the river into the Muslim quarter for the first time in 18 years at the invitation of the cast's Muslim Lady Capulet.

Dr Garrod, director of education at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, US, started producing Shakespeare in the Balkans in 2006. He wanted to bring pupils together on a project to which ethnicity was irrelevant – for them to forge friendships and discard prejudices, a difficult task in the region's strictly segregated education system. ▶



Without prejudice: the production brings together a teenage cast of Muslims, Serbs and Croats, led by Emilie Brothers, right. It aims to bridge an ethnic divide that still exists 10 years after the war in Bosnia ended



The Bosnian war

Bosnia and Herzegovina formerly made up one of the six federal republics of Yugoslavia. It was plunged into war shortly after calls for independence in 1992. Tensions stemmed from ethnic rivalries between the three main groups: Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs, and the perceived political domination of the Christian Orthodox Serbs. The predominantly Serb-controlled Yugoslav army metamorphosed into paramilitary units in an attempt to retain control over the region.

As troops moved into eastern Bosnia, civilian populations were often forced to move from their homes, sent to concentration camps or massacred.

To defend certain areas, a loose alliance formed between Bosnian Muslims and Catholic Bosnian Croats. Research estimates that there were 100,000 deaths, civilian and military, and 1.8 million people displaced.

◀ Muslims, Serbs and Croats still pursue different curricula, take different exams at 18, and attend different universities, although their languages are only marginally dissimilar. As Ivan Rozic, an 18-year-old member of the cast, puts it: "It is just too soon to have mixed classes. These wounds take time to heal. You need small groups with people who are interested in common activities. Stuff you can relate to and where you can disregard your nationality and your religion and prejudices."

Emilie is more used to dealing with gang violence and aggressive behaviour in south London than conflict in the Balkans, but she says there are some similarities between

'All the people here have someone who did something bad to them. It's like that all over Bosnia'

the two jobs. "I found my niche helping young people in challenging circumstances," she says. "Drama allows them to encounter character psychology and understand human beings in a whole new way." She found out about Dr Garrod's work through a family friend in 2006 and gave up her holiday that year to help with rehearsals of *Romeo and Juliet*.

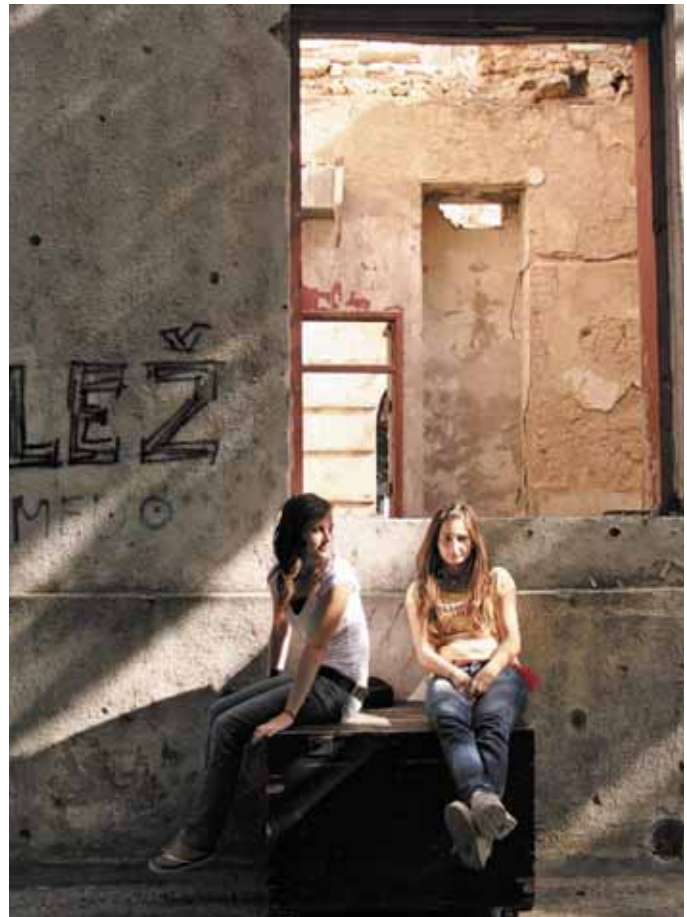
Touring in Bosnia and Herzegovina raises uncomfortable memories for the cast. Its fourth performance is in Trebinje, a predominantly Serb town in the south that was used to launch a series of attacks on neighbouring Croatia during the war. Most of the Croat children would never normally go there. And in their final stop, Stolac, there is a chilling glimpse of life during the conflict too.

Salih Borovan, a 22-year-old of mixed Serb-Muslim parentage, has come to watch the play. His family was one of the few to remain in the town after the Croat army took control. One night, three soldiers broke in and tortured his father while he sat on the sofa with his mother and watched. He points to a middle-aged man in the audience. "He was one of the soldiers," he says. "He lives in Stolac. All the people here have someone who did something bad to them. It's like that all over Bosnia."

Hangovers from the ethnic hatreds of the war exist wherever you go. In Stolac, the main school building houses Muslims and Croats. But they take their lessons at different times, the teachers use different staffrooms, and even visitors must use separate entrances. Moreover, when the Croat headteacher leaves at the end of the morning, he locks his office, obliging the Muslim head to work from a cupboard in the basement. Children are often on the receiving end of nationalist rhetoric at home, and parents aren't keen to bury old grievances. "My mother told me not to tell my father about this show," confides Inez Rezo, a 16-year-old Croat who plays a fairy in the cast.

As the coach carries the teenagers around their fragmented country, they chatter and laugh constantly, often breaking into rousing song or whispering about the evening ahead.

Their wit is sharp and cutting, but never meant in spite, and often delivered with a wisdom way beyond their years. They joke about their nation in a way that only those who have suffered can speak, fiercely proud yet aware of its many ironies ■



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