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**Sanja Krsmanović Tasić**  
in conversation with **Mary Kaldi**

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## 2100: Tale about Aska or how we predicted the future

Sanja Krsmanović Tasić  
in conversation with Mary Kaldi



### Introduction

Sanja Krsmanović Tasić is a multitalented artist who has worked tirelessly in the field of theatre in education for many years. She is the President of the Centre for Theatre in Education and Art in Serbia (CE-DEUM) and director of the Hleb Teatar theatre group. She is Elected Officer of the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA), as President of the Accountancy Committee, and member of the Coordination Committee of IDEA Europe regional network. Sanja participated in two International Conferences on Theatre and the Performing Arts in Education, organised by the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr) in Athens, Greece in 2006 and 2008, both times leading workshops on devised theatre, but her collaboration with TENet-Gr became even closer at the 8th International Conference, entitled "Utopia or Necessity?", which was held in Athens in November 2018. Within the framework of the conference, she hosted a workshop, where she proposed a methodology for creating actions based on physical theatre and dance theatre and focused on school bullying. Personally, I got to know her better as a workshop facilitator at the 18th Theatre Summer Camp – "Stories in Motion" that took place in Pelion, Greece in August 2019. There, under the magical shade of plane trees, we worked together using devised theatre techniques in search of personal empowerment.

In this conversation, we have the opportunity to discuss her recent work, a series of workshops with a group of young people from Patos Theatre<sup>1</sup> in Smederevo, Serbia, in collaboration with artists from Hleb Teatar in Belgrade, which was organised during autumn of 2019. The work resulted in the performance *2100: Tale about Aska*, which in a strange way predicted the situation we found ourselves in a few months later due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Sanja talks about the devising techniques, the starting point of the performance which was a story written by Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić, the importance of the performance theme in relation to the pollution in Smederevo, as well as her thoughts on the future of our world.

Mary Kaldi  
July 2020



**Mary Kaldi:** *2020 was a difficult year due to the Covid-19 crisis. Apart from the fear and the unknown, we did not know what to expect not only at the local level of daily life and work, but also at international level. The way we think of the present and the future has changed. The forms of social life are transforming and, most importantly, what is drastically changing is the way we connect to each other. What thoughts and feelings have you experienced during this period?*

**Sanja Krsmanović Tasić:** The year we are in will be remembered as a turning point in the history of mankind. Time will be spoken of and remembered as time before (the pandemic) and time after (the pandemic), and writing right now, during (the pandemic), makes me reflect on a period of normality with nostalgia, longing and a feeling that the time and events I am writing about happened not months, but years ago. A crisis sometimes manipulates our sense of time passing in a strange way.

**M.K.:** *The crisis found us unprepared, as we were innocently wandering through our "normal lives", ignorant of what lied ahead. In what kind of work were you engaged at the time before the pandemic? Would you like to tell us about it?*

**S.K.T.:** Yes, I would like to talk about a process and a journey that a group of young people, my colleague Jugoslav Hadžić, musician and composer in Hleb Teatar, and I undertook in creating the performance *2100: Tale about Aska*, which in a strange way predicted the situation that we found ourselves in a few months after the premiere. Two years ago, I was commissioned by an independent theatre group, Patos Theatre from Smederevo, a town about 80 km from Belgrade, to direct a theatre performance based on the tale *Aska and the Wolf*, written by the only Serbian Nobel Prize winner, Ivo Andrić. In Serbia, it is part of the obligatory reading material (called *lektira*) in the first year of secondary school. The funding for the project came through last year, and it was supported by modest funds by the Ministry of Culture.

**M.K.:** *As we know, you are an author and producer of numerous programmes and projects, both educational and artistic, and you have collaborated with many theatre groups. What do you find significant about the work of Patos Theatre?*

**S.K.T.:** Patos Theatre is a group that is the centre of all drama/theatre activity in this small town. They work in the space of the Cultural Centre of Smederevo and create valuable programmes, for example The Theatre Badge, a kind of medal or recognition awarded to a child that has attended at least four theatre performances every year. All the schools of Smederevo are included in this programme, and hundreds of children come to the cultural centre to watch performances at the town's only theatre stage. They also organise a travelling theatre group to visit remote villages in the area, bringing the joy of the art of theatre to the children that cannot afford to come to town to watch a play. They lead a children's and youth drama group, but they have the misfortune that most of their actors leave for Belgrade to study and they usually stay there for work, or end up in other cities in Serbia.

**M.K.:** *One of the most difficult tasks is to find the right actors to cast for a play. How did you organise the production of the performance?*

**S.K.T.:** The group of actors was chosen during an audition workshop Jugoslav and I conducted in the fall of 2019, forming a cast of eight young people, aged 12 to 18; It consisted of actors from Patos theatre youth group and a couple of dancers from the dance studio. The workshops were organised every weekend for almost two months, followed by a continuous period of everyday work for ten days before the premiere, which took place on December 28, 2019. The production of the performance was of professional level, with a costume designer and other collaborators, including a classic chamber orchestra (two violins, cello, clarinet, and viola) of five professional musicians that played the music scores live during the performance. The music was composed by my colleague, Jugoslav Hadžić, who was present at all the rehearsals to follow our process.

**M.K.:** *As you said, your performance is called 2100: Tale about Aska and it is based on a tale by Ivo Andrić. Who is Aska and what is her story?*

**S.K.T.:** *Aska and the Wolf* is a story of a lamb named Aska, who from an early age showed unique character traits, unlike





any other lamb. "She did not hide under her mother's skirt, she did not listen to her mother's calling or the clanging bell on the lead ram's horn, but she loved to wander on paths that she found for herself and seek out pastures to graze in far-away places." They all lived in the sheep world on the Sloping Meadows, where lambs went to school, and Aska herself went to dance classes, because if there was anything Aska loved was to dance. Her mother was opposed to Aska's decision, stating that "the ways of art were dubious, deceptive, and hard, and dancing was the hardest and most deceptive of arts, even a disreputable and dangerous one." But still Aska succeeded in taking the classes. One day, she wandered away and a wolf saw her, wanting to kill her. She decided to dance, dance for her life. She danced for so long that she completely mesmerised the wolf with her dance. "Over the green meadow, through tight passages, between grey, hard beech trees and above the smooth and brown carpet of leaves that fall year after year in layers, Aska, the lamb, danced, no longer a lamb, not yet a ewe, light and lively, like white milkweed carried by the wind, becoming grayish when she entered a patch of fog, becoming ablaze like a stage show when she entered a meadow covered by sun. The plodding step and fixed gaze of the old wolf, the perpetual, invisible butcher of her flock, followed her." She completely tired out the wolf that was in the end killed by two shepherds who wandered in the woods searching for her. Aska became a famous dancer and created a ballet based on her encounter, which critics and audiences called *The Dance with Death*, but which Aska always called *The Dance for Life*.

**M.K.:** So Aska was a unique character from the beginning –a very different lamb– and managed to learn to dance so well that when she was in danger it was her dance that saved her life. What choices did you make to bring this element on stage? How did you work with the young people to incorporate dancing in your performance?

**S.K.T.:** The working method that we applied was a devising process, which I led, consisting of different tasks and exercises that the actors would work on individually or in groups. Because of our choice to create a choreodrama, we included work for the creation of a "dance for life", trying out different styles and techniques, including elements of African dance, jazz, and contemporary dance interlaced with actions and physical scores that we transformed into dance movements.

**M.K.:** In what ways did you approach the essence of this story in today's strange circumstances? Did you make any changes to the story?

**S.K.T.:** All the time we were analysing the story of *Aska and the Wolf*, we tried to link it with the times we lived in and discover how it resonated with the young people that were involved in the project. *Who is the Aska of today? Who is the wolf? What is the story we want to tell?* I knew from the start we would not make a faithful representation of the story on stage. It has been done many times, also as puppet theatre. I knew the story should at some point take a form, so we started to play with some woollen puffs I had brought. The task

was to create, in groups, a puppet performance based on the story, using just the woollen puffs, representing the sheep, and a black leather glove, representing the wolf. The young participants came up with unexpected and refreshing takes of the story, and the compilation of all three performances they had made was included in the final performance.

**M.K.:** *One of the most revealing moments of theatre is when it touches real life as we find ourselves relating to a story. During the time of analysing the story of Aska, in what ways did you find it affected the young people's everyday lives and the future of our world?*

**S.K.T.:** Talking and commenting about their daily lives and life in Smederevo, we concluded that one of the burning issues was the polluted air.<sup>2</sup> The rundown steel industry of the city was taken over by a Chinese firm, bringing new jobs to the people. On the other hand, there seemed to be a violation of ecological standards in the production process. We also arrived at the conclusion that one of today's Askas is Greta Thunberg. What will the future of Smederevo and towns like that, or the whole world, be if pollution, neglect of nature and climate change persist? There were days in Smederevo when I wished I had a mask, for the air was so polluted. We decided to place our story in the future, in the year 2100, when clean air will be sold in jars, and we will not be able to go anywhere without masks. Doesn't it sound familiar with the Covid-19 situation with the oxygen tanks and the masks we have to wear?

**M.K.:** *So you also needed masks, as well as clean air because of the pollution in this performance. How were these ecological views reflected on your final performance? Can you describe the world created upon the stage?*

**S.K.T.:** In the performance, the entire world that these children are inhabiting is a world where the Caring Ones watch and follow everything that is happening through cameras, thus controlling their life. They have to smile all the time, because the Caring Ones do not want to see sulky faces. They go to a school/factory where they do the same meaningless repetitive movements, wear the same overalls as uniforms and masks when they are outside, and go to the Museum of the Last Things, where they see the last bee, the last tree, the last apple, the last cat – only to find out it is a robot after all. The world as we know it has been destroyed and there are no plants or animals.

**M.K.:** *You mentioned before that your performance somehow visualised a dystopic world. Can you elaborate on that?*

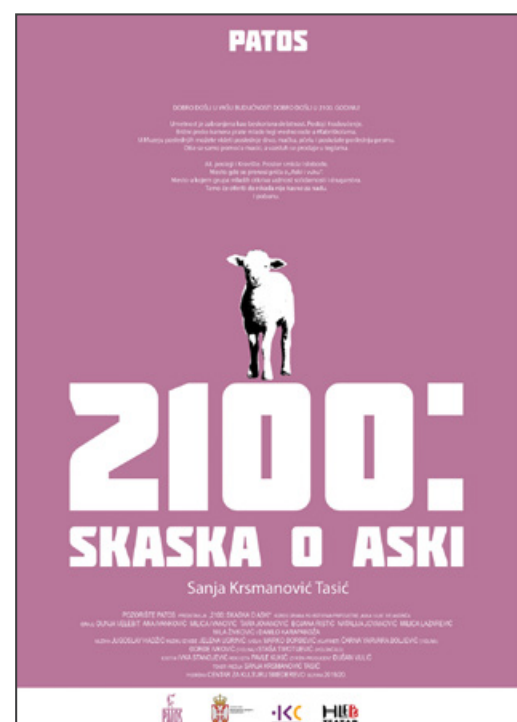
**S.K.T.:** In our performance, the people are not allowed to touch each other. We did not know at the time that in a couple of months physical distancing will be obligatory, with no hugging or kissing upon meeting, or even shaking hands; that masks would have to be worn outdoors, in buses, in the streets, everywhere. The protective uniforms that the medical staff are now wearing remind us a lot of the costumes of the performance.

**M.K.:** *Is there any hope in this future world you created on stage?*

**S.K.T.:** These kids have made their own sanctuary where no cameras exist, a place where they hug and kiss, laugh and cry, and create art; they play theatre, they sing and dance, dance, dance... In this sanctuary, the kids play again and again the puppet performance of *Aska and the Wolf*, calling it *The Story*, passing on the knowledge, and art and stories from generation to generation; preserving for the future the important stories and lessons of life and humanity. In the end, the story was performed in a most unusual and beautiful way at the premiere. One day at the rehearsal we could not find the glove and the woollen puffs, so the actors did the whole "puppet" performance just with their hands. We concluded that this was a wonderful solution, or, as we would call it in theatre, a lucky mistake, and it stayed like this for the premiere. We decided to just keep the black glove for the wolf character, and place a small puff ring on the hand representing Aska. In the sanctuary, they even found an old recording of Greta, calling her one of The Last Prophets that tried to save the world. One of the actresses, Dunja, assumed the role of the girl portraying Aska. She wanted to dance even outside of the sanctuary, and was spotted by the cameras. She got punished, but then the whole group, in the school/factory, one by one, decided to stand by her side and resist. They all end up dancing the dance of resistance, despite the sirens, and the performance ends with hope, as a small plant has grown from the seed of the apple from the Museum of Last Things.

**M.K.:** *How did the audience respond? What are the plans for the future of your performance?*

**S.K.T.:** The premiere was a success, and the after-show talk with the audience was even more successful. The theme of ecology and the situation in Smederevo was the hot subject of the talk, and everybody in the audience reacted, was







inspired and motivated by what they had just watched. With the aroused interest, the performance was supposed to be performed at the schools of Smederevo as part of the Theatre Badge programme. But, the Covid-19 situation prevented the scheduled performances from happening. We hope it will be presented as part of Bitef Polyphony, the side programme of Bitef (Belgrade International Theatre Festival), even though there are signs that the festival will be cancelled. This year's theme would have been, and hopefully will be, "Dance for Life", a phrase taken from *Aska and the Wolf*. We were also hoping to get funding to present it within the framework of the IDEA Congress in Beijing, China, knowing that the theme of pollution is most relevant to that part, as in many others, of the world – unfortunately the congress has been suspended.

**M.K.:** *Do you think there is any hope for the future of our world? Do you believe art creators have a special role in making the world better?*

**S.K.T.:** During the months of quarantine, I was thinking a lot about the wonderful young actors from Smederevo. If anything, I knew they were in a bizarre way prepared for this situation. We worked with masks for a long time, and they got a glimpse of what a strange and horrifying place our world could easily turn into. But there are also always the possibilities of sanctuaries, love, affection, art, hope and last, but not least: rebellion. To end with the words of the great Ivo Andrić: "We do not know what strength or what possibilities lie hidden in any living creature. Nor do we imagine all that we can do. We live and we die, but we do not know all that we could have become or could have done. Such insight is revealed to us only during momentous and exceptional events such as this one in which Aska danced her movements having already lost the life she had."

**M.K.:** *Sanja, thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. I hope you continue working with such dedication and that more people will have the opportunity to meet you and become activated by your inspired work.*

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Photographs by Mirjana Đorđević

**Sanja Krsmanović Tasić** (Belgrade, Serbia) is a theatre director, choreographer, actress, dance and drama teacher. Tours performances and conducts workshops internationally. Author and producer of numerous programmes and projects both educational and artistic, developing also work with disabled dancers. President of CEDEUM (Centre for Drama in Education and Art) and director of Hleb Teatar, a theatre group based on ensemble work fusing theatre, dance and live music, also working with TIE. One of the founders of Association Artistic Utopia and director of the Mater Terra Festival. She is Elected Officer of IDEA, President of the Accountancy Committee of IDEA and one of the coordinators of the IDEA Europe regional network. Selector of INFANT (International Festival of New and Alternative Theatre) Festival in Novi Sad.

**Mary Kaldi** is a Greek Language and Literature teacher. She studied at the Philosophy Department of Ioannina University, Greece and she teaches in Secondary Education. She studied piano in the Hellenic Music School. She played the piano in Nicolas Asimos' band (1983–1986). She has participated in international conferences of Theatre/Drama in Education in Athens, as well as meetings and teacher trainings as a member of Organising Committees. She was Vice-President of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (2008–2011). She is member of the Editing Committee of the *Education & Theatre* journal, and she edits TENet-Gr's Newsletter. She has filmed and edited audiovisual resources from TENet-Gr's projects. She has been involved in extracurricular school programmes coordinated by the Directorate of Secondary Education of Eastern Attica-Cultural Issues: "Literary workshop", "Videomuseums" (2009–2015) and "Youth DOCs" (2014–2016), during which, in cooperation with K. Alexiadis, she created educational video tutorials on *How to create Drama Docs: How to do it for students and How to do it for teachers*.

## Notes

1. <http://www.patos.org.rs/o-nama/o-nama>
2. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/svet-50820609>



