

Qendra Multimedia (Kosovo) in association with Mittelfest & Teatro della Pergola (Italy), Theater Dortmund (Germany), National Theater Sarajevo & International Theater Festival - Scene MESS (Bosnia and Herzegovina) present:

The Handke Project

Or Justice for Peter's Stupidity

A pan-European ensemble navigate the delicate balance between free speech and social responsibility in theatre through the prism of controversial Nobel laureate Peter Handke



Opening night: 3rd of June, 2022, Oda Theatre, Prishtina, Kosovo

European tour from 4 June 2022.

Performed in English | Running Time: 85 min | Suitable for ages: 16+

Written by Jeton Neziraj | **Directed by** Blerta Neziraj

Cast: Arben Bajraktaraj (FR), Ejla Bavicic (BiH), Adrian Morina (KS), Klaus Martini (IT), Verona Koxha (RKS), Anja Drljevic (MNE)

Dramaturg Biljana Srbljanovic (SRB)

Artistic Collaborator Alida Bremer (CRO/DE)

Set design Marija Kalabic (SRB) | **Composer** Gabriele Marangoni (IT) | **Choreographer:** Gjergj Prevazi (AL) | **Costume Designer** Blagoj Micevski (MKN) | **Lighting design** Yann Perregaux (CH) | **Sound design** Leonardo Rubboli (IT) | **Tempo Reale** | **Assistant director:** Sovran

Ndrecaj (KS) | **Production manager:** Aurela Kadriu (KS) | **Assistant costume designer:** Flaka Rustemi (KS).

Upcoming shows:

26 & 28 October, 2022 | Kosovo Theatre Showcase (Kosovo)

14 & 15 November, 2022 | National Theatre of Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

16 & 17 December 2022 | Theatre Dortmund (Germany)

March (tbc) 2023 | ZkM Theatre (Zagreb, Croatia)

April (tbc) 2023 | Vienna – Austria

18 – 22 April | Prishtina (Kosovo) & Tirana (Albania)

5-18 June 2023 | Slovenia tour (Maribor / Festival Borštnikovo srečanje + Nova Gorica + Ptuj)

November 2023 | Teatro della Toscana (Italy)

March – April 2024 | Swedish tour

For an artist, where does freedom of speech end, and the need to be politically conscious begin? Can we create art without being insensitive? Can we separate the art from the artist? These are among the important questions asked in a new production from Kosovan theatre company Qendra Multimedia. *The Handke Project* follows Qendra's recent successful tour of *Balkan Bordello*, which played across South Eastern Europe and at New York's legendary La MaMa theatre.

The Handke Project takes as its central theme the controversial decision to convey the honour of Nobel Laureate for Literature on Austrian writer Peter Handke, in spite of his well-documented support for Slobodan Milosevic - who died while on trial for war crimes at The Hague – a support which extended to speaking at Milosevic's graveside. In *The Handke Project*, Qendra takes this controversy as a jumping off point to explore how art is appreciated and promoted when it crosses the boundaries of basic decency, humanism or ethics.

To create the production, Qendra have assembled a pan-European ensemble of writers, performers and creatives from Kosovo, Italy, Germany, Croatia, Serbia and others, each bringing their own unique perspective to the work. They include the celebrated Serbian playwright Biljana Srbljanovic, and Germany-based Croatian writer Alida Bremer who has written extensively on Handke for the German press.

Handke Project is a theatrical performance about the writer who with his books and opinions has fabricated and overturned facts of the wars in former Yugoslavia; has incited and supported 'the scorched earth' ideology; as well as managed to sing praises to militant poets and filmmakers converted into 'engineers of genocidal projects.' During the funeral of the war criminal Milosevic, Handke said to the blood-thirsty mass of people that he "does not know the truth" and that is why he is, "there close to Milosevic, close to Serbia." Handke compared the suffering of Serbs to the suffering of Jewish people during Nazism!

Artists and scholars from Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Macedonia, France, Montenegro, and Germany will discuss and address "Peter's stupidities," in light of the war in Ukraine and in a time when many cultural institutions in Europe demand from Russian artists to publicly declare their political stance towards the war in Ukraine. A red line is being drawn over all those Russian artists who in one way or another support Putin and the war.

Meanwhile, Handke and the European *handkists* continue to roam freely, even on top of the eight thousand graves of the Srebrenica victims. Thus, as Eric Gordy beautifully put it: Handke is kitsch! But a Nobel Prize for him is also kitsch. Handke's supporters, too, are kitsch. Finally, the European hypocrisy is itself kitsch.

Press clipping:

"The dramaturgy is tight, very strong, it doesn't miss a moment of tension. The rhythm of the scenes rushes feverishly, in a whirling spiral, punctual to perfection. The text is of a rare intensity, it often directly involves the audience, it oscillates between the tragic and the bewildered – as when at Milošević's funeral the actors, dressed in sadomasochistic clothes, get excited at Handke's words. Memorable moments are the nervous waiting, in front of an idyllic picnic with grilled mushrooms, for the long-awaited phone call from Stockholm; or the appearance of a visionary Captain Hook with large angel wings facing a Peter Pan with bat wings."
– **Teatro.it (Italy)**

"An excellently directed play, but with an even better, perhaps the best theater text by Jeton Neziraj so far... this is a play for those who are susceptible to fascism and human misfortune. He [the author] was clearly inspired to write on the subject of intellectual and ideological transformation by one of Europe's most respected writers, behind whom – "quite by chance" – bloodstains still remain. As he walked through the battlefields, he took nothing from them but the questions he capitalized on in Serbia to the point that even ecclesiastical canonization could soon take place, as The Handke Project predicts. [...] Once amazed by Peter Pan, Peter Handke becomes Captain Hook who now uses his lethal prosthesis as a device to create worlds of evil." – **Saša Ilić – Pešcanik (Serbia)**

"The Handke Project is an important, very courageous performance in English, investigating where the limits of political correctness are, and whether theater should deal with this at all. It testifies to the courage of the festival and the performance that at the end of the performance the actors shout not only the slogan Fuck you Handke, Fuck you Swedish Academy, but also the slogan Fuck you Salvini into the theater space as a guideline, asking the audience to repeat it with them, while the sponsor of the festival The Friuli region is governed by a member of Salvini's party, the Italian far-right." – **Index.hu (Hungary)**

"The production that attracted the most attention beyond the Balkans was "Handke Project". The piece, also produced by Qendra Multimedia and written by Neziraj, is dedicated to Peter Handke. [...] A nerve is struck in the audience. This becomes particularly clear in the final sequence. The ensemble, made up of actors from Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Italy and France, chants "Fuck Handke, Fuck Milošević, Fuck Swedish Academy". And half the hall agrees enthusiastically." – **taz (Germany)**

"Two performances of his new play The Handke Project as part of the Hartefakt festival in the Bitef Theater were attended by the Belgrade audience, who stood up to greet the ensemble with a long applause." – **Bojan Tončić – Aljazeera (International)**

"In the center of the room a long gray carpet, a gray bench, a gray sheet in the background, around the three sides the audience waits for the actors to enter the scene. Here they are. Five of them have their faces covered with bandages and they trudge along the frame of the carpet. Peter Handke sits on the bench in front of a barbecue where he is grilling poisonous mushrooms waiting for a phone call from Sweden: a quiet deer passes by, he takes his rifle and shoots it. At Slobodan Milosevic's funeral, BDSM actors get excited at Handke's funeral liturgy. Captain Hook with dove wings faces Peter Pan who has bat wings, wielding a dangerous hook. These are just some of the most intensive moments of the play The Handke Project. Or, Justice for Peter's stupidities, written by the Kosovar author Jeton Neziraj, defined by the German critics as "the Kafka of the Balkans", and directed by Blerta Neziraj. Staged with actors from Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, and Germany, the text refers to the Nobel prize awarded to the Austrian writer Peter Handke (2019), questioning the boundaries between freedom of art and responsibility ethics. And if the applause for the premiere in the Kosovan capital Prishtina was long – something to which I too attend, it is also due to the powerful echoing of the text of the meaning between the not yet forgotten Balkan wars and the current one in Ukraine." – **Corriere della Sera (Italy)**

"Handke needs to be on our radar. [...] Like so many useful idiots, Peter Handke is a lazy apologist who doesn't do the research. [...] Based in Kosovo's capital Prishtina, Qendra Multimedia's writer Jeton Neziraj and director Blerta Neziraj not only have an opinion to share with us about the 'Handke phenomenon' but they also have the lived experience to back it up. The Handke Project is timely in showcasing his Nobel Prize as a launchpad to get us thinking how no one should be exempt from being accountable for their

actions and words, how as we've seen again and again any defence of 'freedom of speech' risks falling into the French/American construct that equates it with 'freedom to speak without responsibility' and 'freedom to hate' (it's significant that the writer has lived in Paris since 1990), how seeking to give both sides equal weight isn't democracy when one side clearly isn't democratic. Dangerous waters sure, but ones we have been forced to plunge into. [...] And so, on our behalf, Kosovo's *The Handke Project* stands up for the freedom to question why we tolerate our useful idiots and enablers (today they number national leaders like France's Emmanuel Macron, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, the UK's own Boris Johnson) and finding an answer to the rising wave of well-connected intellectuals who are now activating against 'anti-Handke propaganda'. - **Nick Awde - deserthearts (United Kingdom)**

"Director Blerta Neziraj, moreover, raises a fundamental postmodern question of Lyotard: who legitimizes legitimizers? The show rejects Nobel's aesthetic authority and humiliates his political legitimacy.[...] Jeton Neziraj is against fascism. He is against literature that pats fascism or gets transformed into a "Troy Horse" for the general public. In an artistic sense, Neziraj has taken a position and – through art – he does not let the public decide or guess about Handke. He is committed to the fight against fascism, despite the fact that this kind of fascism could swiftly legitimize even renowned institutions."- **Latif Mustafa – sbunker (Kosovo)**

"[The Handke Project] was perhaps the most anticipated (or at least "hot") event of Mittelfest, a festival that for more than thirty years has compared cultures, theater and arts of Central Europe in centuries, with the cultural pulse of the continent."– **Il Manifesto (Italy)**

"Most of the audience members would have known why Handke caused a stir when he received the Nobel Prize, but Jeton Neziraj has assembled, in a comprehensive way, an account of Handke's role in genocide denial using words that Handke said or wrote himself. Directed by Blerta Neziraj, the play depicts Handke in a variety of rich and powerful ways. At first, the young Handke takes literature lessons from an ominous older figure. He teaches him to question everything. To use his 'question mark' as a tool. [...] Handke might have gotten accolades from the Nobel Prize Committee, but his name is now synonymous with genocide denial."– **Florida Kastrati - SEEstage (International)**

"Neziraj strips away Handke's artistry to reveal the real man beneath. Scenes are taken from his own work and actors take turns playing Handke. [...] ...the play is a monument to human suffering, particularly that of those caught up in the Srebrenica genocide. the little boy's innocence, his childish joy of skiing and the rush of the landscape seen from his perspective and not Handke's (who at last is no longer centre stage) widens the narrative out, contextualizes it and gives it meaning, depth and humanity. And there is no greater illustration of artistic responsibility than this. " – **Verity Healey – The Theatre Times (International)**

[The Handke Project]... is performed in English by an excellent pan-European ensemble of six. [...] And here, we enter the land of Peter Handke, the Peter Pan-like subject of Kosovar playwright Jeton Neziraj's blistering satire... [...] Neziraj is widely regarded as Kosovo's national playwright, akin to what Vaclav Havel is to Czechoslovakia. And Neziraj shares Havel's innate playfulness and awareness of cruel, bureaucratic absurdities – all serving as a thin mask for the author's fury. All of these qualities emerge in flashes and clashes, like a fireworks display, through Blerta Neziraj's staging. Together, writer and director transform fury into an artistic bullet. = **Steven Leigh Morris – Stage Raw (Los Angeles, USA)**

Previews shows:

03-04 June, 2022 | Opening, ODA Theatre, Prishtina (Kosovo)

06 June, 2022 | Albanian Drama Theater, Skopje (North Macedonia)

07 June, 2022 | Adriana Theatre, Ferizaj (Kosovo)

09-10 June, 2022 | Bitef Theatre, Belgrade (Serbia)
22-24 July, 2022 | Theater Ristori, Mittelfest, Cividale (Italy)