

# Colonnades Theatre Lab, Inc.

## Related Program: Western Balkans



"Forty-three wounds on his body. Acid in his face. Chopped off his right hand. Then he was blown up. His pieces were splattered all over the floor...All over the wall...All over the ceiling." These horrific words are the opening lines to the critically acclaimed ["Truth in Translation,"](#) a multimedia production that tells the story of South Africa's search for post-Apartheid reconciliation, rehabilitation, truth, and justice. "Truth in Translation" is the brainchild of Michael Lessac, artistic director of Colonnades Theatre Lab, Inc., who spent six years researching and developing the project.

Told through the young interpreters who became the "voice" of both victims and perpetrators alike, the actual stories of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) interpreters are merged with the memories and personal, improvised life stories of the actors themselves. In order to keep the play relevant to its audiences, "the script has shifted in little ways, taking on different connections and people's feelings and incorporating them subtly into the piece-like gathering memories as one's traveling," said South African Producer, Yvette Hardie. "The play developed organically. It gets to the core of humanity and the way people deal with painful memories and move forward."

The project includes workshops and talkback sessions with audiences, exhibitions, filming of the interaction between audiences and the company, and dialogue sessions around the concepts of healing and reconciliation. Hardie credits the actors for creating a safe space for dialogue, and giving audiences an accessible way in to the discussion. "Actors aren't like politicians or psychologists or people with academic degrees. They are very average people, nonthreatening, but on stage they are showing their truths."

When Colonnades Theatre Lab, Inc. began touring in 2006, it made a conscious decision not to perform the play first in South Africa, due to the contested nature of the TRC process. Since then, the play has toured three continents with diverse and far-reaching audiences in stable countries, as well as in international conflict zones. Targeted audiences have ranged from political prisoners from both sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland; young juveniles up for rehabilitation from Dallas, Texas, victims who testified at TRC hearings in South Africa, and orphaned Rwandan school girls who lost most of their family to the wave of genocide in 1994.

In 2008, "Truth in Translation" made its debut in Kosovo following performances in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. This marked the first time the play was translated into two languages, with subtitles being shown in both Serbian and Albanian. Theater organizers and partner national nongovernmental organizations were nervous about the reaction from the crowds: Would potential audiences get upset and boycott the production? Would there be protests, or even riots, if both languages were shown to largely Albanian audiences in the capitol of Priština, or in northern parts of the country that are majority Serbian? Contrary to their fears, the house was packed, time and time again. "It was powerful to have both languages available in the same space. The public didn't protest in the end, but they did speak about it in the post-play workshops. People would be quoting lines verbatim, because they were able to both hear and read them," Hardie recalled.

The organizers' fears were not completely unfounded. Jeta Xharra, journalist and executive director of the [Balkans Investigative Reporting Network](#), moderated some workshops in Priština, but was prevented from attending those in the Serbian enclave of Zvecan, due to safety concerns and existing social tensions. Yet the response from audiences was positive. In some instances the audience, including some victims of torture from the war, used the workshops as their own personal TRC, sharing photographs and stories that they wanted people to hear and acknowledge. "This was a powerful aspect of the Balkans tour. Audiences realized that someone else had been through it too, and that people from the other side had suffered, when they listened to others in audience, or what the actors were talking about in the workshops."

The play has already spawned several related activities. In Zenica, Bosnia, young people who participated in the workshop are in the process of producing their own personal theater piece about living in a racially segregated city ("Me in a Divided City, and the Divided City in Me"). In the meantime, Colonnades Theatre Lab is carefully considering its strategy for following up on the work already done. A documentary based on the progressive filming of post-performance workshops is scheduled to be released in 2010. Tools like the documentary will be useful for continuing the conversation, which, in Hardie's words, "empowers people on the ground to do their work as well."

**Related Grants**

Organization	Amount	Awarded Date	Program
<a href="#">Colonnades Theatre Lab, Inc.</a>	\$50,000	08/18/2008	Pivotal Place: Western Balkans