

## **Return to Yugoslavia: A Post 9/11 Perspective** **by Jill Sigman**

*Less than one week after September 11, I left New York for Beograd, Yugoslavia to perform and lecture on dance theory in conjunction with the Beograd International Theater Festival. My time in Yugoslavia was very intense— full of the ironies of finding myself in such a war-scarred place and seeing the ruins of buildings destroyed by bombs the United States dropped there two years ago. I was thrust unrelentingly into the role of American diplomat, apologist, spokesperson, and foremost, human being. It was difficult, frustrating, enlightening, exhausting, and also very inspiring to grapple with examples not only of prejudice, but of extreme human spirit. What follows is an excerpt from an open letter I wrote on my return:*

From the airfield at JFK I could see the floodlights and smoke rising from where the Trade Center had been. But by the time we landed in Zurich (I flew to Beograd via Switzerland) it all seemed completely remote. Descending over this unreal landscape – tiny meticulous patchwork in shades of green, neat punctual trains and roads cutting through along the seams, everything pretty, orderly, and clean – I found it all incomprehensible. I wandered around an airport full of chocolate, cuckoo clocks, giant cowbells, and stuffed sheep, asking myself why I left New York. Already the feelings of grief and complicated reality of the city were only media images. I got a copy of *Newsweek* in the airport and cried looking at the photos. One picture of National Guard troops was made to look ominous with the caption "a portent of possible military mobilizations ahead." I had seen these guys downtown only the day before. They were directing traffic, chatting with people, and receiving lots of homemade sandwiches.

In the Zurich airport the women's restroom has a real "powder room." There's a floral curtain and a separate room where you can sit down on low stools and in soft ambient light powder your nose. It seems to get a fair bit of use. I had no reason to put on make-up at this ungodly hour of the morning in the middle of Switzerland. I don't even wear make-up when I'm not performing. But I sat down in front of the mirrors, and I found it shockingly, absurdly reassuring. It was the most calming thing I had done in the past week. It felt familiar, second nature – as if I were in a dressing room getting ready for a show – and at that point I realized that in the fear that followed the 11th there had been an unstated doubt that I would ever have that experience again.

Eventually I arrived in Beograd. The reactions to the tragedy in the United States were various and all were offered to me without hesitation; people are opinionated and love to talk politics. But perhaps the most moving reaction was my welcome at the airport. I wasn't sure what to expect carrying a U.S. passport at immigration control, and when I was sent to another line to get some paperwork, I thought the fun was merely beginning. But the tired-looking middle-aged woman looked at my passport and said "Are you coming from New York?" Yes, I said. "Is it bad?" Yes, I said, very bad. "It's terrible," she said shaking her head gravely, "We are very sorry." I was shocked by this show of humanity from a stranger who I had fully expected to give me a hard time.

Many people in Yugoslavia were incredibly sympathetic and went out of their way to tell me how sorry they were or how terrible they found everything that had happened. It was touching and also humbling to have my friends there give me support; I used to think it was a one way street. But it's almost inconceivable to me to get this reaction from strangers who have had more than their share of such events and many of them perpetrated by my own country. I find it mind-boggling that the NATO bombing could lead people to empathize with me in this moment rather than hate me. It gave me faith that sometimes human spirit and empathy are stronger than political memory or resentment. I say these things not to underplay the damage the U.S. government has done there and in other parts of the world, but because I think it is important to see examples of people who hang onto their humanity nonetheless. Much of the mass email I get seems to revel in telling America how we shouldn't be surprised that other people hate us so. True. But I want to tell you that there are also people who don't hate us even when they have reason to do so.

There were inevitably all sorts of reactions. Some people took pleasure in the fact that America had done this kind of thing to them and now was getting it back. Others simply had a satisfaction in the

fact that Americans would no longer feel "invulnerable" or "untouchable." Now Americans will be just like everyone else, they said. They will see that they can be hit, too. Having grown up as a woman in New York City I couldn't remember a time when I had felt untouchable on my own streets, but this was something I would never make them see.

Interestingly, these kinds of comments came more from people who had built up the ideal of America as a kind of paradise – of safety, money, comfort, capitalism, opportunity. They project untouchability onto Americans, but they often hold that view more strongly than many Americans do. These are also often people who have never been to the U.S. Those with myths of America as the promised land are some of the ones who are either most perversely satisfied or most devastated by the attacks. Some feel they have lost their dream-- the dream of a place where one could be utterly safe. I think this kind of dream is very important in a region where there is constant civil war; I don't know if we can understand fully what it means to people there.

Of course, the recent events also fuel existing political agendas and prejudices. The Yugoslav media sported alarmist headlines. One taxi driver gave me a long lecture on how this kind of thing is what the Serbs have known about Muslims all along. They've seen it, they've lived with it, and they tried to stop it. And for that they were punished by the West. But now that the West has a taste, now they will take action... and they won't have their hands slapped for it. Another guy argued with me about retaliation. While many Serbs said they were fearing WW III he said Americans must go to war. "Look, Jill, thousands of innocent people have been killed. Something must be done." I tried to convince him it wouldn't solve any problems but he kept saying that something must be done for so many lives lost. I had the sense that I'd seen that kind of reasoning there before.

Given the whole spectrum of opinion, I have to say that most people went out of their way to be kind to me. I never felt unsafe there. But I did see that under the surface was a web of complex entrenched feelings about America, the "West" (with a capital W), and the Serbs' relation to it. And I realized that as one single person it's very hard to fight or undo all of those assumptions and stereotypes, years of media and indoctrination, and incrustations of anger and resentment that get channeled into certain ways of thinking. Many people crave "westernization" and voraciously consume American culture and yet feel colonized and abused by it. And although their feelings are justified, they often don't come from a real understanding of the egregiousness of American foreign policy but rather from oversimplified cultural stereotypes. It's very difficult to respond to these paradoxical views.

But don't think I didn't try! I was constantly talking: constantly trying to explain to people what the atmosphere had been like in New York; showing verbal pictures of the grief and kindness of a city that was not calling for war but was still digging out pieces of human bodies, still holding itself and nursing its wounds. I told them about the candles and vigils, the hundreds of construction workers in line with their shovels, the extra volunteers who offered water and snacks to waiting would-be volunteers, the people who gave blood and socks and bags of food. I told them how I saw the most cynical New Yorkers singing "Amazing Grace," macho men crying in public, strangers hugging on the street, and people of all races, ages, and economic groups standing side by side in a city that usually finds reasons for division. The day before I left, I went downtown, as close to the Trade Center as possible. I saw hundreds of New Yorkers filing past the cordon, not in a spirit of commercial exploitation, violence, or sensationalizing, but as if paying their respects at a giant funeral.

I tried to explain that there were many people who weren't calling for military action, people who urged caution and thought. I said that the media was insidious and selective, stoking the flames of inevitable anger and grief; that the American flags in New York City did not initially feel like the signs of fascism they appear to be when you see their images in European newspapers; that people in my neighborhood who are immigrants and don't usually identify as Americans were suddenly claiming this identity; and importantly, that governments should not be equated with their people. Much of this they know from their own experience, and people were open and receptive.

But it was exhausting – this wild dance of making apologies for my government, defending well-meaning Americans, trying to fight Yugoslav prejudices, and trying to be seen as an individual. I repeated

over and over that comparing and dividing and prioritizing our wounds as cultures gets us nowhere. What I found most supportive in Beograd was the fact that people could understand what it was like to be in a city that was bombed; they could understand fear and grief and uncertainty. This understanding can help us come together, empathize, fight media oversimplification and power-mongering governments, and see each other as people.

But I was also disheartened by what I eventually saw in many of my colleagues. It had little to do with the recent tragedy in the U.S., and more with their war-torn past and life-long ambivalence toward America. I saw people who were polite, friendly, and intelligent, but also angry and wanting to stay angry. Wanting to have unsolvable problems, wanting to be misunderstood by western artists and theorists, wanting to blame someone, wanting an enemy... I saw people who had protested the policies of the Milosevic regime now factionalizing, "balkanizing," and "cleansing" within the realm of theory. One woman told me that that's how people have always created identity – that it's too difficult and frightening to go on without an enemy, without something to define yourself against.

Things felt somewhat different in Croatia. It had changed a lot since I was there in 1998. Zagreb seems well on its way to becoming like those charming Middle European capitals. Nationalism is less fiery now. Stores are full of luxury goods, facades have been repainted, and rollerbladers and Andean musicians roam the main square. There is suspicion of "the West," but there wasn't the same sense of conflict that I felt so strongly in Serbia.

People in Zagreb were incredibly sympathetic about the World Trade Center disaster. They sent me to see the American Embassy. I think it was the first time I ever felt any emotion on seeing an American flag flying in another country. There was a wall full of flowers and candles – some big floral arrangements (some with red, white, and blue ribbons), some letters and notes. One said "Stand Proud America...Land of the Free, Home of the Brave." Some of the candles were still burning. I left a bouquet of my own with a note of thanks to the people of Zagreb that said I would tell New Yorkers about their kindness.

One interesting incident further illustrated that kindness. A friend in Beograd had asked me to search in Zagreb for a particular medicine for her father. I found a young woman pharmacist who was amused by the fact that an American had appeared out of nowhere to look for a German medicine to take from Croatia to Serbia (not a daily occurrence!). She talked about New York and how affected she was by the tragedy. When I told her how people in New York were trying to help, she said "Yes, I know the feeling; that's why during the war here I stopped my studies and joined the army." She told me how she had this feeling of needing to do something, of needing to be useful in some way, wanting to do something with her hands and wanting to help. I might have questioned the choice to become a soldier (not a medic) as a way to help, but still through my own recent experience in New York I had a sense of insight into her actions that I would not have had before. I knew full well that if she had told me the same thing a year ago I would have immediately classified her as a nationalist fanatic. She sent me off with many good wishes for Americans, my friends in Beograd, and my friend's father.

When I got back to Beograd and proudly presented my parcel, explaining how helpful the pharmacist had been, my friends said "Yes, but did she know you were taking it to Serbia?" I told them yes, and that she wished them well and wished my friend's father recovery. Many people in Zagreb had asked for them (Now Yugoslavs and Croatians can finally travel across the border with visas but not many of them do). People had asked me "What is Beograd like now?" "How does it feel?" One woman said "Say hello to the people of Beograd for me!"

I was happy to give this message to someone, anyone. It struck me that that was the most subversive thing I could do right now-- to carry these underground messages of good will. To tell people it's not as bad as you think, to help them see each others' humanity. I feel so small – like a David fighting the Goliaths of media and opportunism. The only sabotage I could find was to tell people in Zagreb and Beograd about the kindness I saw in New York, to tell Serbs that a Croatian pharmacist sent them good wishes, to tell Americans that the flag is flying at the American Embassy in Beograd, to tell New Yorkers about the notes and flowers in Croatia...

At the end of my performance in Beograd I added my solo "Embers" even though it wasn't officially on the program. I created this dance in the mid-nineties when civil war was intense in the Balkans, and have shown it in the U.S, the Netherlands, Croatia, Hungary, and Poland. Two years ago, when NATO was bombing Yugoslavia, I performed it in this country as a statement of protest at a candlelight vigil. It seemed only appropriate to do it there now, coincidentally finding myself in Yugoslavia in the midst of all this violence in my own city. The audience was surprisingly silent and receptive.

While I was away I was overwhelmed by a sense of the cycles of war. A place that I knew as unsafe, unstable is recovering, rebuilding. I saw that while realizing that my own country is rapidly becoming a shifting ground. I thought of the candles at the Firemen's Memorial in my neighborhood and how my first thought seeing them was, it looks like Eastern Europe. In Beograd, one of my colleagues spoke about map-making as a way of making and re-making identity, a subject not unusual to the Balkans. I came home to find a new subway map marked with the words "World Trade Center" and a lonely blank space where the trains used to run.

One of my Yugoslav friends talks about war as if it were fire or disease or some kind of migratory bird. "It moves," she says. But why does it keep moving? When will it stop moving? How can we stop it? I realized that it's important to remember that each of us is only one but we do what we can. We petition and demonstrate and rally and demand. But we must also remember that we affect things simply by being how we are. *Subversion must first start with being human.*

*Jill Sigman is a New York based performer, choreographer, teacher, and independent art theorist. She creates work that exists at the intersection of dance, theater, and visual installation. Sigman has presented her artistic work at many New York venues, and internationally in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Croatia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Slovenia. In 1998, she founded jill sigman/thinkdance to develop dances that are not just pretty or decorative but encourage people to question and interpret. For more info, see [www.thinkdance.org](http://www.thinkdance.org)*