

FOREWORD

IT WAS ONLY WHEN I WAS DEEP INTO WRITING the two plays in this volume, which as it happened I worked on together, that I realized: Both of these plays are about life and death. In theme and character, they are as elemental as Drama can get: A man and a woman, together, on the Road of Life and Death. As such, they are companion pieces. They come from a playwright who tends to write about ultimate things.

In the early 1990s I was working on *Kate and Kafka*, an imagined encounter between Katharine Hepburn the Life Force and Franz Kafka the Death Force, when, at my request, I was put in phone contact with a man under siege in Sarajevo, Vlado Azinović, who was running one of the city's last independent radio stations, Radio Zid. Sarajevo, known as the "Paris of the Balkans," was suffering through the second year of what became a four-year siege, longest of the 20th century.

How could I, an artist, continue working on an abstract Life-and-Death drama when we all could see the real, bloody, medieval thing—the destruction of an entire city—taking place daily on CNN? Vlado thought it "too perfect" that I was working on a play about Franz Kafka. Given his hellish surroundings—running through Sniper's Alley, stepping over human brains on the pavement, enduring a suicide on the station steps—Vlado's response was a hollow laugh: "Kafka would understand this zoo!"

People always ask—it never fails—How did I connect with this particular person in Sarajevo? Answer: It was the logic of fortunate choices.

In September 1994 I had read in *The New York Times* an op-ed co-authored by a Sarajevo journalist, Dzenita Mehić, about how Sarajevo, under a punishing siege, was clinging to survival through its culture—

art, music, theatre. Since Ms. Mehić lived in Washington, D.C., where I lived at the time, I contacted her about how I could help the people of Sarajevo, perhaps with my play *The Altitude of Virtue*, a drama about how good people find good reasons to let a crime go forward, which I felt described the world's reaction to the destruction of Sarajevo. Ms. Mehić read the play and agreed to get it to one of the few theatres still operating in Sarajevo. Because I didn't want Sarajevans to risk further danger going through the streets to attend a play, I suggested a radio broadcast instead, and Ms. Mehić said, "I know the perfect person," Vlado Azinović. For several months I put off making that first call, worried I'd come across as Lady Bountiful, off-key. Finally, on a cold mid-December Sunday, I made the call—and the rest is Drama, of the human and artistic kind.

With Vlado's permission I fashioned our phone calls—every word of which I could recall after putting the phone down—into the dialogue of docudrama. I thank him for his implicit trust as I pressed onward, mining our motivation and need, to develop "our" play into universal drama. My biggest thanks must go to Vlado.

Thanks also to Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater for premiering a full production and to Washington's Studio Theatre for presenting a two-week run of a reader's theatre production of the docudrama version. After I developed it into universal drama at a workshop in New York led by the late Milan Stitt, the play in its present version was given a second full production at Indianapolis' Phoenix Theatre, in its Festival of Emerging American Theatre.

A note about development: This play has been produced as *The Washington-Sarajevo Talks*, but its final title, after years of development and for this volume, has important words appended at the front end—*Who Cares?*

As practiced in present-day theatre, development is the collaborative process, expected to be challenging, of peeling back the script's layers to discover what the play is really about, refine its ultimate truth. To condense five years into a few sentences: In developing this play, the

playwright discovered, to her dismay, that her own culture was in need of rescue, as much as the besieged Sarajevo.

Too many producers and directors could not accept my “high-minded” motives for reaching out to Sarajevo—“This is Mother Teresa meets St. Francis of Assisi, can’t they play with each other?” That my character was a woman “of a certain age” obviously made her all the needier. Now “the problem,” my character needed to be made “more human.” Over time I saw that to make “more human” meant defining humanity downward—to pathology, narcissism, neurosis, sexual fixation. Over time I saw the truth of Edith Wharton’s observation, that: “A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals.” This debasement, represented in the play by the conflict between my “high-minded” character and the offstage “Mr. Producer,” has resulted in the coarsened culture we have today, 15 years later, and the reality, unexpected but broadly acknowledged, of America’s decline in the world. This then—America’s downward path—was the “ultimate truth” the development process revealed, and it was refined with great difficulty and sadness. (More energizing is my belief that America can reverse its decline, but that’s another play.)

Given American theatre’s self-focus, then, to suggest we care for someone suffering “over there,” beyond America’s borders—to act on the empathy one might expect in serious drama—became an increasingly alien proposal. (Emblematic of theatre’s “pushing the edge” in this period, the late 1990s, often deeper into narcissism, was *The Vagina Monologues*, a smash hit in New York and regionally.) Thus the question arose: Does a self-focused theatre care about the world? Can it? Who, in other words, cares?

Conversely, if the reader answers “I care,” this play underscores the power of the human bond amid chaos, even over the phone, and the saving power of normalcy.

Turning to the companion play: *Kate and Kafka* came about because, as I was educating myself in the work of a towering figure of

Modernist literature, Franz Kafka, I couldn't help but note in his diaries how often he spoke of suicide, describing in great specificity the method by which he would commit the act. Finally, when he described his fantasy of being hauled up through the floors of a building by a meat hook, emerging at the top as a mere morsel, dangling, I sighed and thought, "Oh please, just do it!" Interestingly, that voice in my head sounded awfully like Katharine Hepburn, whose spunk has inspired me since childhood, urging me whenever I fell or faltered, "Get up, get up, we all fall down occasionally, the point is to get up."

Instantly I had the delicious thought, the "what if" that writers start with: What if Katharine Hepburn, aka the Life Force, and Franz Kafka, aka the Death Force, met up and contended? What would happen when these two iconic forces clashed? And how would I make that happen? As my Playwright's Note describes, by mining the life and work of both Kafka and Hepburn, I found the ways. For example: For this ultimate drama I needed an end-of-the-world setting. Kafka had tuberculosis for many years before it finally carried him off; he stayed often at sanatoria, starting as early as law school, before he even contracted the tuberculosis. *Voila*, the setting is...the Sanatorium Ultime, where Kafka has come for what is his final stay. But how do I get Kate there? Kate is there because, adoring a swim in the ocean but overdoing it, she has contracted walking pneumonia and come to the Ultime to get well. "To die," "to get well," "to die," "to get well"—we are off!

Most important to note: The Franz Kafka portrayed in this play is the *real* Kafka. The revelation that the death-loving author had the spark of life within him is, to underscore my Playwright's Note, based on his late diaries, written during his last sanatorium stays, and in his letters throughout his life, which reveal a warmer, more loving Kafka than the world knows (or thinks it does).

Readings are the ideal means by which a playwright can hear the script. My thanks go to the artists involved in the many readings of both plays, who brought so much passion to a one-time event. The Sarajevo play benefited from readings at Ensemble Studio Theatre and

The Barrow Group, both in New York. Especially memorable was the reading at New York Theatre Workshop that took place just months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, not far from Ground Zero. Reading there were Jane Alexander and Raul Esparza (Raul had created the role of Vlado at Victory Gardens); directing was the late Lawrence Sacharow, who deemed the play “important.” *Kate and Kafka* benefited especially from readings at Washington Stage Guild and the Last Frontier Theatre Festival, founded by Edward Albee.

Both plays were selected by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival as its entry in the Ashland New Plays Festival. Working for a week on each play with one of the country’s pre-eminent repertory companies moved both scripts to new levels. My thanks to literary manager Lue Douthit for both opportunities.

Of course, production is the ultimate test. My warm thanks to the cast and crew of the three productions of the Sarajevo play, most especially my directors: Sandy Shinner (Victory Gardens), Morey Epstein (Studio), and Martha Jacobs (Phoenix).

The script with the “Mr. Producer” material was the one used in the Phoenix Theatre production and in readings at New York Theatre Workshop, New Theatre (Miami), and Ottawa International Writers Festival—to powerful audience reaction. For their courage in taking up a script critical of their own culture, I thank, respectively, Bryan Fonseca, artistic director, and Toni Press-Coffman, playwright-in-residence, Phoenix Theatre; Linda Chapman, literary manager, New York Theatre Workshop; and Rafael de Acha, founder and artistic director, New Theatre. The director of the Ottawa festival, Neil Wilson, cited the play as “the best portrayal of humanity in wartime I know,” while an audience member commented aloud, “At last, an outward-looking American.” This combined reaction, and the insights I’d gained into the chinks in American culture, propelled me after the 9/11 terrorist attacks away from Drama and into commentary, where I have continued to this date, a decade later. Now returning to Drama, I am at work on a play titled *Prodigal*, with others planned.

One's teachers point the way, provide the toolkit. Outstanding in my journey with both these plays is the aforementioned Milan Stitt, playwright (*The Runner Stumbles*), demanding teacher, complete man of the theatre. I treasure the postcard he sent me of the ancient amphitheatre at Ephesus, with his note: "This awaits you."

And, of course, my everlasting thanks to my husband Larry, without whom....

Finally, a personal note: Choosing this volume's title—*Two Plays of Life and Death*—was not a notional thing. I have been engaged in the misadventure called "living with cancer" for six years, since 2005. Perhaps you have to deal, day in and day out, with a dread disease to feel—deep in your bones—the powerful urge to live. And yet, while I didn't feel it so deeply, I have always known, since a conscious teen, that this grand experiment called Life is pursued within a finite frame, the end-point being Death—and that the pursuit of Life is all the grander and sweeter when the eye is on that end-point, not avoiding it or drowning it out with noise. Living thus, I submit this volume as what Emily Dickinson called "my letter to the World": When Death looms into view, Life becomes ever more radiantly beautiful. To Life!

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