

LOUIS NOWRA AND BORIS RADMILOVICH

INTERVIEWED BY MICHAEL DWYER

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You have to laugh, reckons Boris Radmilovich.

One Thursday in early 1992, he was performing in a production of Eugene Ionesco's *Bald Prima Donna* in peaceful downtown Sarajevo. He went home to Belgrade to change his clothes and by Saturday, people were killing each other. For reasons which meant nothing to him and his family, their normal lives would never be the same again.

"It is very weird," he laughs in disbelief, "that at the end of the twentieth century we should once again be talking about war." Sitting in a sunny cafe in Leederville, the actor/director's good humour is perhaps understandable. But it probably has more to do with his heritage and history than his current location.

"Yugoslav people are always creating jokes. After my friend from the Academy (of Performing Arts in Sarajevo) escaped from Bosnia, he talked a lot about the ugly things that he had seen but he had such a sense of humour about it. We were crying with laughter at very ugly things," he shrugs, unable to explain the bizarre contradiction of emotions.

"One of the great challenges in a tragic situation is just to try and remain human, not to let it get on top of you," observes Sydney playwright Louis Nowra. "One of the things you notice when you speak to people from Bosnia is this strange sort of humour there that keeps them going."

Nowra is no stranger to laughter in the face of dire adversity. His comedy hit of 1995, *Cosi*, drew on his own experience as a young stage director working with psychiatric patients. His new play, *Miss Bosnia*, uses a

disaster of greater scale as its backdrop, but the similarities are clear.

The play is set in an underground nightclub at the height of the Sarajevo siege. Six contestants are vying for the title of Miss Bosnia and, moreover, the first prize: a seat on the next UN truck out of the country.

Miss Bosnia was commissioned by Sydney-based Teatar di Migma about six months after the Miss Sarajevo Under Siege competition was actually held in Bosnia in May, 1993. The extraordinary true story was already loaded equally with humour and pathos, a balance which appealed to Nowra immediately.

"I didn't want to write about these people's difficulties, make it an angst-ridden play," Nowra says. "There's something more than that. When you actually saw the pictures of the girls in the Miss Bosnia contest, making sure that their shrapnel scars weren't showing, making sure they didn't look too anorexic because they were actually starving... there was something very funny and moving at the same time.

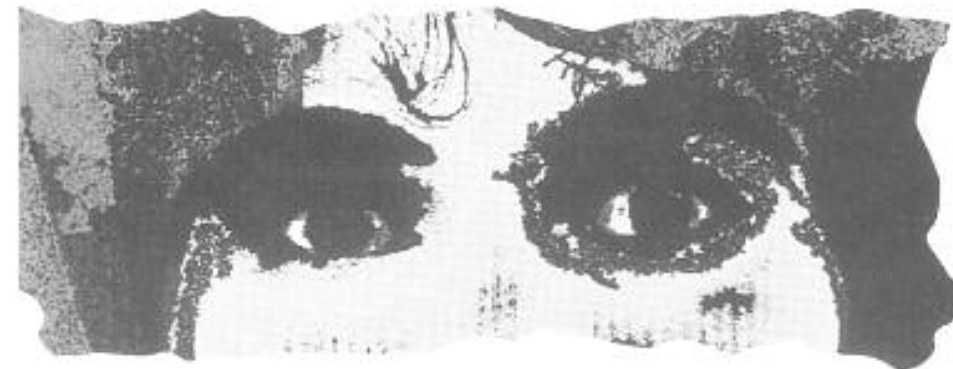
"I think it's perhaps too easy to make people tragic or comic. I'm interested in the fact that we're a mixture of both. Somehow you make people more real that way, more than stereotypes or victims."

Nowra's interest in the Bosnian situation is more than academic. He learned to speak Serbo-Croatian at the age of 19 and developed a fascination with the literature and politics of the region over several visits to Yugoslavia prior to its fragmentation.

"It's always been a place that fascinated me because of that collision of history and tribalism," he says. "To be honest it was no surprise to me that the whole country broke

up after Tito died, but I didn't think it would be this horrendous. I was tempted to keep up with it as much as one can, considering how the press report it."

Boris Radmilovich, who will co-direct *Miss Bosnia* with Black Swan's artistic director Andrew Ross, talks at length of the real motives he sees behind the conflict: the



greed and opportunism of black marketeers, politicians and arms dealers.

The alleged ingrained ethnic tensions are not the foundations of the war, he insists, but merely a smokescreen for the profit and power of a few — "and when mobilisation comes, you have to go and fight or you are called a traitor. The same thing would happen in Australia, anywhere in the world."

Perhaps contrary to the popular media picture, Radmilovich stresses that people in his country don't want to fight each other, that even war cannot rob them of the normal emotional values of any rational human being with a family to support. Which is partly why the script of *Miss Bosnia* appealed to him when he came to live in his mother's home town of Perth with his wife and two children last year.

"I liked it because it is not politically correct, or politically incorrect," he says. "It is just dealing with the destiny of simple people. The news says the ordinary people in Bosnia are tired of war," he chuckles. "They were never for war!"

"The Miss Bosnia contest was put across as national pride, a morale exercise, but it

was only a propaganda exercise. All those women were just trying to get out, because it is an inferno. They just want it to stop. All nations have guilt because they know they are fighting their brother and father and relatives.

"Each character has a lot at stake. They all lived in a peaceful town. They have no racial or religious prejudice, they are trying to reach a point where they can just continue to live. They have their families to care for," he adds with another disbelieving laugh, "they don't care what their country is called!"

"I'm sure with *Miss Bosnia* there will be people who'll say 'How dare you have this comic play set about something that is so terrible?'" Louis Nowra concludes. "It happens with all my plays.

"With *Cosi*, some people complained to me that mental patients would hate the way they were portrayed. In fact, when people came from various institutions they loved the play because they weren't depicted as this cliché of angst-ridden, perpetually screaming people. It was funny and moving.

"Again, my aim with this play is to try and make these women human. I'm not laughing at them, I was hoping the audience would laugh with them and think, well, I really like these people. I hope it works that way."

