



*“ The Dictionary of Life ”*

THEATRE AND FREEDOM IN WAR

*There is a long path to wander before we discover who we are. Writing draws the path and the theatre is the light which illuminates it.*

*Zarina Khan*

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## Zarina Khan

A philosopher and a woman of the theatre, Zarina Khan founded her own theatre in 1983. This theatre company produces plays such as *the 7 against Thebes* by Aeschylus, which was performed at the Cartoucherie (Théâtre de la Tempête) in Paris. In 1992 she set up a video department - Volk Productions, and the Volk publishing house, Volk Editions, whose first book was *The 7 against Thebes* by Aeschylus, translated by Zarina Khan, with a foreword by Pierre Vidal-Naquet. This was followed by *The Memories of Missing Tragedies* by Zarina Khan.

A specialist in children's rights, Zarina Khan published in 1991, at Nathan, the book *The Rights of Children* in the "Monde en Poche" collection. She is dedicated to defending the child's right of expression.

From her twin disciplines of philosophy and theatre, she developed a method, which consisted of workshops in writing and theatrical practice. These workshops were relevant to all facets of teaching, from nursery schools to universities. She thus makes space available for questioning and creating, and organises a network of workshops throughout the world with the purpose of encouraging the meeting of cultures. She devotes herself to weaving links between theatres and schools, and likewise between youth from different towns in France and the rest of the world.

In 1993 she set up the operation called **THEATRE AND FREEDOM IN WAR**, and initiated writing and acting workshop in Sarajevo, which led to *The Dictionary of Life*, published in French, English and Bosnian by Volk Editions. Following its creation in Sarajevo, this text has been translated into twelve languages and staged in seventy towns throughout France, as well as in numerous other countries including Tunisia, Germany, Slovakia, Poland.

In 1995, she was invited to participate, on behalf of Unesco, as an expert on the culture of peace, in presenting works relevant to peace education and the peace process throughout the world. That year Zarina Khan started teaching, using her method, training participants coming from such varied backgrounds as psychology, teaching and acting. The Zarina Khan workshops, which centred on the learning of democracy, opened up, similarly, in different European towns.

She prepared a feature film for 1996-1997 which she wrote in collaboration with a team of young people from the town of Blanc-Mesnil, *ADOS AMOR*, the reflections of adolescents in their search for identity, their disarray and their hopes.

*The Dictionary of Life* tour continued throughout Europe thus marking the presence of a theatre intended by Zarina Khan to be "political" in the classical meaning of the word, a theatre that participates in the life of the city at a therapeutic and social level emphasizing the civic responsibilities of everyone.

# *THEATRE AND FREEDOM IN WAR*

## **The genesis**

The play was conceived in Sarajevo on the 5th October 1993 by the pen of thirteen Bosnian high school pupils, who were assembled in the writing and theatrical practice workshop that Zarina Khan has just opened.

Five days later the play was enacted at the Kamerni Theatre in Sarajevo, and the *Le Dictionnaire de la Vie* troupe was promoted to professional status by Ibrahim Spahic, director of the Winter Festival. Founded during the war, it is the youngest troupe of Sarajevo.

## **The play's theme**

These young people are full of (unanswered) questions, avid to find and to define themselves.

*If I die without knowing who I am, no one will die. If I know, I will die.*

- Says Mustafa. *Can theatre help us to understand who we are?*

It was from this fundamental questioning that the play's theme was born: an alien had a mission to go to Earth to observe human behaviour, and compose a dictionary featuring the main definitions of humankind. She landed in Sarajevo!

« Challenged » by the alien's questions, the teenagers unveiled their own vision of Humanity.

## **The « overnight bag »**

*The Dictionary of Life*, in its trilingual version (French, English and Bosnian), First edition, Volk Editions 1993.

*The Dictionary of Life*, in its trilingual version (French, English and Spanish), Third edition, Volk Editions 1997.

The 13 minutes video documentary of the making of *The Dictionary of Life*, directed by François Stuck, Volk Productions 1993.

## *The first two years of* The Dictionary of Life

From November 1993, the words of *The Dictionary of Life* were to become the linkage of a bridge between the Bosnian creators and the youth of the world.

Under Zarina Khan's impulsion, the text travelled, gathering students, teachers, actors, theatres and audiences, creating a European and Mediterranean network of *The Dictionary of Life*.

If such a development were to break the isolation and the feeling of despair of the young people in Sarajevo, it would also provide the occasion for the youth of Europe to start acting and reflecting on peace and war, on their identity, and on their position in this democratisation process.

### The first circle of the network: the schools

Performed for the first time at the Georges Pompidou Centre in November 1993 by a group of Bosnian refugees from the Albertville residence, the play has been staged in numerous French educational establishments. In fact, the schools with which Zarina Khan had her first involvement were to represent, during the years 1994 and 1995, the first energetic step towards solidarity in *The Dictionary of Life*.

### The second circle: the theatres

Touched by the admiration of an already concerned public, theatres opened wide their doors to *The Dictionary of Life*. The play is always an opportunity for a debate, which makes the performance of *The Dictionary of Life* not only the outcome, but also the base of the work on citizenship, solidarity and the value of life.

## The third circle: the encounters

The play, the projections of the video cassette, the workshops that Zarina Khan organised for schools, the training courses, in their various locations, gave rise to the desire to organise encounters between different groups from different backgrounds and nationalities, all moved by the activities of *The Dictionary of Life*.

Hence, during the academia year 1993-1994, youngsters from Paris, from the Parisian suburbs and from the Mayenne area, worked on *The Dictionary of Life* in their classrooms. In May 1994, during the *Youth Festival* in Paris, Zarina Khan organised the gathering of these different groups of young people, who performed together in a huge presentation of *The Dictionary of Life*.

In July 1995, the *Theatre and Youth Encounters Festival* in Grenoble made it possible for several troupes, which had set up *The Dictionary of Life* in their own countries, to unite. Tunisians, Parisians, Bosnians, and young actors and musicians from southern France were to perform together the play in French, English, Bosnian, Arabic, German, Spanish and Norwegian.

Renamed the *Angel of Europe* in Grenoble, the new version of *The Dictionary of Life* made its début in Toulouse on the 26th October 1995. This version integrated the 21 languages, of the countries for which it was deemed that the text was most relevant. It was therefore translated into these languages.

All over the world, theatre companies have been working on the Bosnian tragedy. In August 1995, "the Fringe Festival" of Edinburgh brought them together. Hence actors from Poland, England, France and Bosnia (Tuzla and Sarajevo) experienced a dynamic theatrical exchange. On this occasion, *The Dictionary of Life* was performed mainly in an English version, since the majority of the actors were trilingual.

## The languages of *The Dictionary of Life*: new colours, new music

The words of *The Dictionary of Life* flourish, travelling across the world amidst the colours, music and languages of the various countries and cultures.

In Slovakia Roms from the Romathan Theatre of Kosice encountered *The Dictionary of Life*, which they translated into Slovakian and then into Rom.

In Poland, Anna Dziedic, director of the Cultural Centre of Warsaw, worked on the Polish version and the young people of Poland's answer to *The Dictionary of Life* materialised.

In Germany, after a first tour of Hanover and Garbsen in February 1995, schools and theatres became mobilised. A new tour was organised for the end of November 1995, and the towns of Hanover, Göttingen, Hildesheim, Osnabruck, Magdeburg and Wilhelmshaven united in an action and reflection on the peace process. In 1995, Volk publishing house published *The Dictionary of Life* in German.

## The crossed circle: artistic agreements surrounding the words of *The Dictionary of Life*

Following the setting up of the play in Mayenne by its young people, its staging was repeated in 1995. After training in which Zarina Khan had brought together sixteen directors of district leisure centres for children and adolescents, the young people started working on a visual arts version of *The Dictionary of Life*. They were to transpose the words of *The Dictionary of Life* into forms, shapes and installations.

Some "sculptures" created in the forest translated into visual language the words of Love, Freedom, Death and Theatre. They were in place for the time of the exhibition and then they disappeared in the wind. Others were mobile and were incorporated into a show by a Franco-Bosnian troupe for a performance in Lava, in which the young people of that town also integrated their own musical creations.

In March 1995, in Chambéry, the university dancing troupe wrote their *Dictionary of Life - an Angel on the Roof* in a choreographically way. Their dance show and play were introduced contemporaneously at the Charles Dullin Theatre. The dancers from Chambéry have now joined with the Cultural Centre of Warsaw and they are collaborating on the themes of *The Dictionary of Life*.

## What does the troupe of *The Dictionary of Life* defend?

Within the troupe formed in Sarajevo, the question as to whether they were Muslims, Croats or Serbs was never asked. It was when some of the actors from the Sarajevo troupe arrived in France and were confronted with a public which ignored the multicultural reality of Sarajevo that the composition of Sarajevo's troupe became evocative. Whether they were Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats or Muslims who were united informally around the theatrical workshop project, they were already proponents, even before their message was written, of a Bosnia where they could all live together in harmony.

Invited to come and perform their show in Europe, nine of them were refused authorisation to leave Sarajevo. The four actors who did succeed to leave, individually, became the ambassadors to the troupe and they joined forces with the young French "spokespersons" in the Franco-Bosnian troupe, which had been formed in January 1995 to produce *The Dictionary of Life* at the Cartoucherie de Vincennes Theatre, prior to embarking on a European tour.

The more the war, and the image created by the media, emphasised ethnic separation, the more the message of *The Dictionary of Life* strengthened the will to "live together". That was how it came about that both Serbian and Croatian actors had joined the Franco-Bosnian troupe in order to commit themselves to the peace movement, of which *The Dictionary of Life* had become a symbol.

In an environment that extends beyond the frontiers of Bosnia, *The Dictionary of Life* is a surge of power in the reconstruction and appeasement that brings together those for whom, in this period, disrupted by different nationalisms, civic responsibility and solidarity are priorities.

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