

## Keynote address for ECArTE conference Gent September 2024

### THE RIGHT TO HOPE

**Dijana Milosevic**

More than ever, we need to remember what European values are, and among the first I would single out the right to freedom, to free thought, to freedom of speech and the right to diversity.

However, there is a right that is not talked about so often and that is the right to hope. We live in difficult times, with the shadow of bloody wars taking place in the world. We have to ask ourselves, where is the kernel of hope in the face of tragic events that are changing the image of the world as we know it?

I believe that hope is present exactly in the spark of the human spirit that can be seen in art and culture. As the historian Howard Zinn said: “Having hope in dark times is not just foolishly romantic. Because human history is not only a history of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness...” So, we are not just nostalgically driven to create in the face of tragedy, we are obliged to carry on the spark of hope and spread it throughout the world, especially in times of gloom.

Therefore, our common struggle to maintain human values, despite all those forces in our societies that work against them, is actually a struggle for hope. To cherish hope in dark times is subversive. Hope is a revolutionary act.

Theatre exists only while it is performed. When the theatre performance is over, it is gone; it remains only in the memory of the spectators and the memory of its performers. But the energy of the thoughts and emotions produced by a theatre performance continues to live in us and to transform us. Through theatre and arts we are able to move people intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. While the performance is going on, if it really touches us, we say it moves us – and, in fact, through our mirror neurons, our observing bodies do move, our spines move, and thus theatre leaves a visceral imprint, so we may say that it influences us even physically.

Theatre has the ability to ask difficult questions without taking sides. It creates a space for reflection in a language that transposes censorship. Theatre offers us the possibility to share space, to be together, even if coming from very different, sometimes adversary sides. And the space of coming together becomes invaluable in times of ever-growing divisions, isolation, and solitude.

Theatre and arts have the unique ability to sustain contradiction, without the impulse of giving simple answers and one-dimensional ideas. To quote Howard Zinn again: “Art is eternally disturbing, permanently revolutionary. The artist is what the Germans call ein Rüttler. An upsetter of the established order. This is, rather, recognition that in modern society, there is enormous pressure to create a one dimensional mind among masses of people, and this requires upsetting”.

Our societies need healing by facing the truth. We cannot heal if we do not open the wound to clean it. This is possible to achieve through theatre and arts by addressing unwanted truths, painful memories, and difficult events. The healing process of a society starts at that very moment.

To consciously choose hope over despair, that is the first step towards the transformative action that we need so dearly today.

## **DIJANA MILOŠEVIĆ (1961)**

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Dijana Milošević is an award-winning theater director, activist, writer and lecturer. She co-founded DAH Theater and has been its leading director for over thirty years.

She was the Artistic Director for theater festivals, was the president of the Association of the Independent Theaters and president or member of several boards. Being involved with several peace building initiatives and collaborating with feminists - activists groups she also serves as a member of the Board at IMPACT- a network of arts and conflict transformation.

She has devised and directed theater shows with her company and toured them nationally and internationally as well as directed the work with other companies all over the world.

She is a well-known lecturer and has taught at prestigious Universities, writes articles and essays about theater. She is recipient of prestigious fellowships and awards (Fulbright, Arts Link, Helena Vaz de Silva).