

## Kosovo Theatre Showcase

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A quick delve into Kosovo's immediate theatrical past before its independence in 2008 explains its theatre scene now. In 1989 Kosovo Albanians began a peaceful protest against ethnic Serbs and Slobodan Milosevic's Serbian regime and the Yugoslavian government in Kosovo. By 1998 this had turned into war, but in the years leading up to it, Albanian culture, including theatre, was "illegal," particularly in Prishtina, the country's capital. Undeterred, theatre makers put on plays in garages, homes, schools and at the Dodona Theatre in Prishtina. It became known as the "muse of resistance" against Serbian rule as Albanians, risking roadblocks, attended shows in their hundreds. It was not without risks for theatre makers either; to survive curfews and Serbian paramilitaries they often slept on Dodona's stage until early morning.

After the country's independence in 2008, theatre has blossomed even if it is underfunded and occasionally mired in controversy. There is a growing independent scene led by prominent playwright Jeton Neziraj and his wife, director Blertha Neziraj. Activist directors such as Kushtrim Koliqi and Florent Mehmeti also contribute to this growing movement. It is little funded by the government, and this problem is an indirect result of Kosovo's lack of EU membership (the country is not recognized by Spain or Greece). The government controls the Kosovo National Theatre, which did not renew Neziraj's contract as its Artistic Director in 2011, possibly because of Neziraj's anti-nationalist stance and refusal to let theater be used as a tool for propaganda. Since 2011 Neziraj's independent company, Qendra Multimedia, has grown to critical acclaim. It produces the annual Kosovo Theatre Showcase, based in Prishtina, with support from Teatri Oda, the only independent theatre with its own building, run by Mehmeti. The shows tackle a wide range of issues from homophobia, to the treatment of sex workers, to government corruption. But the atrocities of the Kosovo war, the war crimes still unacknowledged by Serbia, the hundreds still missing on both sides of the conflict, the need for transitional justice, and the thousands of private traumas, haunt the plays. It is inevitable that as this young country strives forward and tries to modernize its patriarchal society, it must also recognize the trauma of what has happened before.

The annual Kosovo Theatre Showcase includes trailblazing work that subtly usurps traditional theatre norms. The Showcase includes shows made in the independent sector and those from the government-funded National Theatre. The overall aim of the Showcase is to agitate and provoke and to give voice to issues that audiences may have stereotypical attitudes towards. Such shows as *I am my Own Wife*, which was performed at the festival in 2020 and was directed by Koliqi, was acted as a mono drama by the celebrated actor Adrian Morina, and helped champion LGBTQIA voices. Although Kosovo is a young country, with over half of its population being young, it cannot reconcile with its gay communities, which are pushed underground. After the play's first performance, Morina had several LGBTQIA members of the community reach out to him, and he was invited to write a piece for an underground magazine. Another play, *55 Shades of Gay* (published 2020), directed by Blertha Neziraj and written by Neziraj, which was set in a fictional town and which concerned a gay couple applying for a marriage certificate, provoked outrage. Although the Kosovo constitution states that there is equality for all sexes, legal marriage in the country can only exist between a man and a woman

(recently Kurti promised to legalize civil same-sex marriages, however, there are no updates yet - and Kurti faces opposition from many conservative law enforcers in the predominantly Muslim society). But Kosovo theatre can feel proud that it takes a role in shaping civil society; Neziraj firmly believes that theatre should side with the victims and the powerless.

*Stiffler*, written by Kosovo playwright Doruntina Basha in 2021, directed by Koliqi, and produced by Integra, draws on the testimonies of sex workers to explore the institutional and social prejudice and discrimination they face in Kosovo. It features Hava, a sex worker who is literally and metaphorically stabbed in the back by a client and left to die. The testimonies form the basis for the fictional ones which form part of the narrative drive of the show. Koliqi directs with a high degree of theatricality, often breaking the 4th wall. Rebeka Qena also portrays Hava with a degree of distance, enabling the audience to understand in practical terms the extent to which ignorance and abuse from society contributed to her death. The production was selected by the Ministry of Justice to run in Kosovo's 16 days of activism against gender-based violence in 2022.



Fig. 1, *Stiffler* by Doruntina Basha, dir. by Kushtrim Koliqi, and starring Adrian Morina, Rebeka Qena, and Armend Smajli. Photo credit Sovran Nrecaj.

*Father and Father*, presented as part of the Showcase in 2022 and written by Neziraj and directed by Koliqi, took place in a site-specific location at Prishtina's Ethnography Museum. Sara is married to Din and they live with their daughter Lola. Lola and Din argue with each other, but there is no eye contact between the two. Eye contact is continued between Sara and Din, and it soon becomes clear that Din exists in Sara's mind, and that he is in fact part of the 1600 body count estimate still missing from both sides of the Kosovo War. The number of people unaccounted for in the war is ongoing, with criticism pointed at authorities for doing little to find their remains or provide headstones. Presenting the number on a square of fabric and circulating that piece of fabric was less confrontational for the audience than quoting the number from a documented source. It allowed the audience to grieve, which many did openly when the show premiered at the museum in 2022.



Fig. 2. *Father and Father*. Performed by Kosovare Krasniqi, Ilire Vinca and Bujar Ahmeti. Written by Jeton Neziraj and dir. by Kushtrim Neziraj.

*A.Y.L.A.N.*, written by Neziraj (published in 2021) and directed by Blertha Neziraj, is a critique of the international response to refugees. The show explores a fictional town whose inhabitants fabricate the arrival of large numbers of refugees so that they can access EU funding. Blertha Neziraj often uses ironic visual images to expose uncomfortable truths. She does this by usurping the audience from their traditional comfortable auditorium seats and placing them in the spotlight on stage. The action then takes place in and around the vacated seats. This is particularly effective when actors tumble and crawl over the seats as if waves, arriving at the stage as if it is land. The aim of the show was to rehumanize Aylan Kurdi after the image of his death was exploited by the world's media.

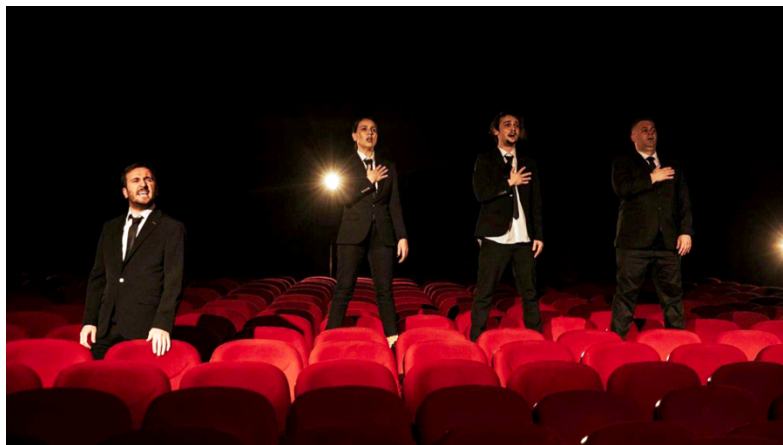


Fig. 3. *A.Y.L.A.N.* by Jeton Neziraj, dir. by Blertha Neziraj. Starring Aurita Agushi, Ernest Zymberi, Kushtrim Qerimi, Tringa Hasani, Gani Rrahmani and Alban Shahiqi.

*Five Seasons: An Enemy of the People* by Neziraj (published in 2021) explores the corrupt building industry that developed in Kosovo, especially in badly destroyed Prishtina, after the war. When architect Rexhep Luci tried to challenge malpractice, he was killed. Neziraj bases his play on Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*. But Blertha Neziraj, directing, turns the play into something absurdist, taking scenes to their extremes and beyond. This is a motif in Blertha Neziraj's work. In this production, she has a French UN official, renowned for working against Luci, take a leak onstage. The urinating goes on and on so that the audience stops laughing and begins to get uncomfortable before the main point starts to set in: several UN officials drafted to help the country from outside also pissed on Kosovar Albanians.

Every year since 2020 Erson Zymberi, the artistic director of Gjilan City Theatre, has reported that the government wants to bring in an Arts Council England-style organization to independently oversee the theatre industry; however, this is still to be seen. Gjilan states that his budget is 380,000 euros per year, which covers salaries and production budgets, but the theatre is left to work to draw from private sources to fund over half of this, even though it is state funded.