

Happy medium?

An artful blend of childhood nostalgia, Sanja Mitrović's return to the Hetveem Theater is a homecoming in more ways than one, finds **Maya van den Heuvel-Arad**

For young Serbian director Sanja Mitrović, the stage has always represented a meeting point between cultures and languages. In her work 'Shame' (2006), she invited the Japanese dancer Yurie Umamoto to create a cultural encounter in Japanese and English. 'If you are only trying to understand your own culture, you stay in a narrow field which can bring only one point of view,' Mitrović says.

This time it was German dancer and performer Jochen Stechmann's turn to collaborate on a theatrical ride back to the wonders of childhood innocence. The result is the duo performance 'Will You Ever Be Happy Again?', a humorous yet painful encounter between two young individuals, exchanging childhood experiences: Mitrović, born and raised in Serbia during the tragic years of the war in the 1990s, and Stechmann, a German who grew up in Germany after the fall of the Wall.

Of her choice, she explains: '1989 was the year of reunification in Germany, while in ex-Yugoslavia the country fell apart just a few years later. These two processes that took place more or less in the same time, I found interesting to observe.'

The stage is almost empty: a table, a video camera, a screen and two



Stechmann and Mitrović

The performance is constructed as a montage of separate scenes rather than a linear storyline, combining children's games, folk songs and a joyful investigation of notebooks, pictures and documents the two pulled out of their dusty personal archives. As often happens on the Dutch stage, the action is largely unscripted. The actors don't play characters so much as versions of themselves, and the scenes are developed through intense improvisation.

Mitrović defines the performance as a 'docu-tale', an oxymoron meant to express the combination of genuine documentary material with fictional elements, like songs and children's tales. 'The games we're playing are real games, I'm bringing a real German

boxes full of objects. The camera be-

‘Can we watch the world in black and white as we could when we were children?’

comes a microscope through which the objects are magnified and examined by the two performers in the search for their identities.

Stechmann shows Mitrović a certificate authenticating his grandmother’s pure Arian ancestry. In return, Mitrović shares a drawing from a school booklet in which the name of Yugoslavian dictator Tito is artfully hidden within the shape of the trees. The objects are projected to such an extent on to the big screen that the performers appear tiny next to their history. By creating a sense of disproportion, Mitrović manages to contrast the innocence of childhood with the terrifying truths of war and political upheaval.

into the game, the falling apart of Yugoslavia is an historical fact,’ she says. ‘How do you treat those objective facts in theatre? For me it’s only possible by telling one’s personal story.’

Since its Dutch premiere in Hetveem Theater in 2008, which was warmly received by the press and the audience, Mitrović says ‘Will You Ever Be Happy Again?’ has evolved and matured, and toured through Germany, France, Bosnia and Switzerland. ‘Scenes have been enriched with details,’ she explains. ‘The performance is more compact, the rhythm is better and it’s much more playful.’

Though the piece is very personal, Mitrović says it’s important to emphasise the universal aspects of the drama. ‘It raises the very question of happiness,’ she says. ‘Are we nostalgic about our childhood, can we revert to naiveté and see the world in black and white as we could when we were children?’

Mitrović says that the answer to the performance’s titular question can only be answered by each individual: ‘*I will be happy again*’ is a possible answer but it’s the spectator’s choice whether he or she accepts it or not.’ *‘Will You Ever Be Happy Again?’ is at Hetveem Theater, Fri 26. See listings for details.*