

Empathy Through Expression: Actualizing Perpetual Peace in Post-Conflict Societies, Kosovo

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<https://playwriting4peace.wixsite.com/kosovo>

Project Goals: This project aimed to promote empathy through dialogue and storytelling using Applied Theatre in ethnically-diverse populations throughout Kosovo. We hoped to teach students how to use creative expression as an alternative to violence in all its forms, including security force enlargement, armed communal violence, and border disputes.

Other Funds: We received a travel grant from the University of Michigan Honors Program (\$1,200) to help with the costs associated with our personal travel to the host country.

Idea Genesis: As playwrights, we know the theatre to be a place for humanizing and practicing empathy. After studying the Balkans and learning of the still-salient divisions of national identity in the region, we wanted to stage an intervention which would allow young people to envision themselves as part of a shared human community. Given our backgrounds in creative arts education and peace scholarship, we developed a curriculum of Applied Theatre workshops to unite individuals otherwise divided, yet struggling with similar situations, emotions, and relationships. We workshopped the idea with University of Michigan and global scholars to refine our techniques.

Existing Problem: The problems preventing peace in Kosovo include 1) a government plan to arm the country's young people,¹ and 2) lingering ethnic and national identity tensions. The proposed development of a large-scale Kosovar army in 2018 threatened to perpetuate security force violence, while the unhealed tension and trauma from the war creates a risk of return to communal or border conflicts. The Kosovo War (1999) undermined institutions and deepened rifts between ethnic groups in the region. Kosovo declared its independence only a decade ago in 2008, and its sovereign status is still not accepted by nearly half of UN member states nor by neighboring Serbia. This liminality is a risk to the nation's stability. With opportunities to work across cultural borders, peacebuilding efforts in Kosovo can help heal the wounds of the war and continue to unite communities.

Selecting Kosovo: Kosovo was selected as the site given the aforementioned challenges. Its new and still-threatened sovereignty, as well as a population youth bulge (more than half of the population is younger than 25), and the contested border cities within it (namely, Mitrovica) made Kosovo a strong choice for an Applied Theatre intervention. Our partner, *Changing the Story*, is an international civil society organization tasked with leading creative arts interventions in post-conflict countries, including Kosovo.

Working in Kosovo: Working in Kosovo culminated in a rewarding and inspiring summer. We were welcomed into local arts-based organizations and began to feel a deep sense of belonging with our neighbors, café owners, and project-location hosts. After the days' workshops, we attended local events and volunteered with CSOs, both of which connected us and our students with local practitioners. A detailed week-by-week evaluation of our work, experiences, and challenges is available on our website.² A few highlights of our experiences with the project include the following:

Strides for Male Expression: Despite a Kosovar cultural norm, where men have been taught to focus their efforts on "more masculine activities" of which the arts are not part, male students

¹ "Kosovo announces new army, Serbia responds by raising prospect of armed intervention"
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/kosovo-announces-new-army-serbia-responds-raising-armed-intervention-n947901>

² Find our website here: <https://playwriting4peace.wixsite.com/kosovo/the-workshop-1>.

in our program showed growth toward change. By the end of the program, they became comfortable sharing their own work and expressing their vulnerability. These steps are critical for men as they are often responsible for perpetuating armament-based violence.

Cultural Expression: While facilitating the workshop, our status as outsiders offered participants the opportunity to share what was important to them culturally over food, music, and storytelling. This added nuance to our understanding of identity by highlighting that the particularities which make us different can also serve to unite us.

Art and Activism: By putting pressing social justice issues into their scripts, participants embraced the stage as a valid and impactful venue for political and social dialogue on topics such as climate change and domestic violence. We also hosted a Kosovar activist-artist collective (Havelt) to teach a workshop to our students where they learned the local applications and potential impact of their work.

Challenges: During our first week, a major challenge was the program's low turnout. More than 35 students signed up for the program initially, but when it began, many were not able to attend. We adapted our programming to accommodate and bring in new participants, including the use of local networks to publicize our events in many regional languages. Another challenge to participation was that many students coming from border cities needed a travel stipend to reach Pristina each day for workshops. We established a travel stipend in order to preserve this diverse set of students throughout the program.

Communication: Despite English being a widely-spoken language in Kosovo, our program utilized non-verbal activities to facilitate interactions with a large variety of cultures and languages. During a Facilitator Training session in Mitrovica, an ethnically-divided city, we had participants from Albania, Bosnia, Turkey, and Kosovo in the room. Here, our Kosovar co-facilitator translated activity instructions into Turkish and Albanian, and our exercises relied on visual arts and movement as opposed to verbal communication. Activities like these successfully allow many different groups of people to collaborate on storytelling and innovate new ways to converse.

Defining Peace: We define peace as the absence of physical and structural violence. Creating peace involves introducing nonviolent alternatives to violent ones. Peace was not established in Kosovo the day the war ended — it is a practice which requires continuous action. This perpetuation of peace relies on seemingly-different groups being able to envision themselves as part of a shared human community the world over.

Project's Contributions to Peace: This project educated a diverse set of students in creative expression as an alternative to violence. While writing and rehearsing, students were cast in each other's plays, giving them experience in telling each other's stories. This allowed the students to know each other more profoundly and envision themselves as members of the same complex world. Students learned to use theatre in fostering dialogue between individuals and cultures as well as fighting for social justice issues. For long term change, the [Training Manual](#) we created and Facilitator Trainings we hosted in Pristina and Mitrovica were crucial steps in promoting continued cross-cultural communication in Kosovo. We also established a [fund](#) with a local arts organization to provide future facilitators with the necessary funding to run their own workshops.

Personal Impact: We engaged in reciprocal learning alongside our students, observing and respecting their bravery and vulnerability. Their personal and political stories began the process of healing and change — this illuminated the practical power of storytelling and cross-cultural learning. These things can

be studied, but we learned that they, too, can be tangible. In the future, we hope to conduct research into the efficacy of peace-based interventions around the world, and refine our technique as Applied Theatre practitioners.

Personal Statement: “The theatre allows us to radically humanize those who seem different from ourselves. Staging an intervention in Kosovo, where identity-based divisions prevent the full realization of peace, illuminated the practical ways in which this empathy can be created and enacted. Our program facilitated the coming-together of seemingly-different individuals who shared their stories and envisioned themselves as part of a community. This group of former-strangers became friends, collaborators, and confidants, writing with the aim of reflecting on the past to create a better future.”
Emily Russell

Photographs

