

A LIFE



Ismet Prcic is seen in a 1994 production in Bosnia. The power company was bribed to turn on the electricity for the show.

Courtesy of Ismet Prcic

FILLED WITH DRAMA

Clark teacher credits theater with helping him flee war-torn Bosnia



TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian

"Theater saved my life," said Ismet Prcic, a Clark College adjunct instructor, playing to the camera after a recent Introduction to Theater class. He grew up in Bosnia.

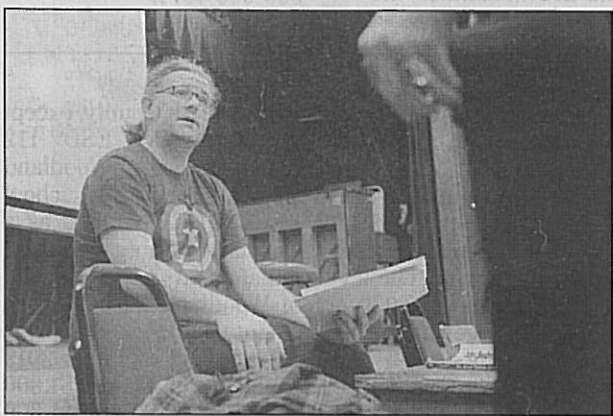
By TOM VOGT
Columbian staff writer

On the first day of winter quarter at Clark College, drama instructor Ismet Prcic welcomed his students with a question: "Is it possible for art to save lives?" It was not a pop quiz, since Prcic immediately provided the answer: Yes. "I'm a living example," he told two dozen students seated in Decker Theatre. Prcic credits theater with saving his life during the Bosnian war, when the average life expectancy of a newly drafted soldier was a week.

Of course, theater also put the Bosnian teen's life at risk, when his acting troupe ignored incoming artillery fire to stage performances in a public square. Drama isn't just a word that defines Prcic's career path. If you wanted to describe his path from the former country of Yugoslavia to Penguin Nation, a great word would be "dramatic." Prcic used those experiences in a fictional account of the Bosnian war, and its aftermath. The novel, "Shards," has received glowing

Did you know?

■ Bosnia-Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia in March 1992. After 3½ years of ethnic warfare that killed 250,000 people, the Dayton Peace Accords were signed on Dec. 14, 1995. The war is the subject of Angelina Jolie's new film, "In the Land of Blood and Honey."



TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian

Ismet Prcic talks to a student after a theater class Jan. 9 at Clark College.

Prcic

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reviews and was included in several "books of the year" lists.

One item in his artistic résumé is illustrated by a black-and-white snapshot showing Prcic in a stage production.

"I was 15 when the war started. I was in youth theater and it kind of went crazy: avant-garde theater in the middle of a war," Prcic said. "Crazy kids dressed in white would go into the middle of the park and do impromptu performances, even if they were being shelled."

That photo was taken during a 1994 production, "Dreams About the Little Prince."

"Tuzla was a city under siege," Prcic, 34, said. "People wanted any sort of entertainment."

Because services like running water and electricity to heat apartments were in very short supply, "People came in wearing three or four jackets, with clouds of steam coming off them."

"We bribed the people in the power company to turn on the power for the play," he said. At the end of the performance, "As we bowed, the lights went out."

Watch your own war

The war itself almost became performance art played for a television audience, Prcic said, like when the city was being shelled by Serbian artillery.

"If you survive, down in a basement where you can't see anything bad, you go home and watch TV and see it all in its gruesome details," Prcic said. "People are watching their own war on TV, and how crazy is that?"

That happened to Prcic and some friends, after an artillery attack killed dozens of Tuzla residents who were hanging out in the city's central square.

"Toward the end, there was not that much shelling going on, and people were used to being there and not being shelled. One day, we were supposed to go." But they changed plans and headed to a friend's house instead of the city square.

"We heard a shell hit, heard sirens and people running. I kind of missed it by chance. I went home and saw it on TV."

As far as televised war coverage went, "There was all kinds of terrible footage," including a scene Prcic says he can't forget.

"It was probably a Croatian town. The Serbs took

all the civilian casualties into a compound and pigs somehow found a way in. The footage I still dream about: A sneaker is moving and I don't know why it's moving. There is a slow camera pan, and the leg is being eaten by a pig."

Finally, the war came for Ismet Prcic. He was drafted when he turned 18.

Not worth knowing

"In what was supposed to be my unit, the expiration date for a new soldier was seven days," Prcic said.

"The other soldiers wouldn't bother to learn your name until you lasted seven days."

But Prcic had a ticket away from combat: His theater group was invited to an avant-garde arts event in Scotland, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

It took him a while, but Prcic eventually was able to get out of Europe in 1996 and move in with an uncle in California.

Prcic learned English — in part by watching a lot of TV — and got a degree in theater from the University of California, San Diego.

Prcic got something else out of his life in drama: "I met my wife, Melissa, in an acting class in 1998."

He also branched into fiction writing and got a master's in fine arts in writing from the University of California, Irvine. That put Prcic on the path to writing "Shards."

"When I finished grad school, we left Southern California. She's a redhead and she burns," Prcic said of his wife. "For her, going to the beach meant a huge umbrella and caking herself in whatever the hell they use, and sitting there in the shade."

They moved to Portland, which is how Prcic wound up teaching at Clark College ... after another unexpected turn.

"There was a job opening in an English class at Clark College. I showed up, and in the interview, the lady said, 'You have extensive experience in the theater; we need someone to teach in the theater department.'"

In addition to a love of theater, Prcic also brings something else to "Introduction to Theater."

It was something Prcic emphasized when he set out the guidelines for an assignment; it seemed to reflect the perspective of a young actor in a city under siege.

"You better have fun," Prcic said. "This is your life: Don't spend it cheaply."

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