

# DUST TO DUST

By Elizabeth Hess

*DUST TO DUST, written, performed and directed by Elizabeth Hess, digs beneath the devastation of systematic wartime rape to uncover a transcendent inner grace.*

This is the brief synopsis an audience reads before seeing this 'play in e-motion' based on the traumatic events of women during the Balkan War. It took me some time to recognize how the repression of these Muslim women was resonant with my own Mennonite roots, but, by embodying their experience, I came to empathize with their alienation and ostracism in a way that led to a deeply personal and profound recognition.

New York is filled with many outsiders, who, like myself, have sought refuge here for personal and/or political reasons. It was my dear friend and neighbor's story of escape from war-torn Bosnia that became the primary source material for this play, which I then fleshed out with factual accounts of systematic rape during the war and transformed into the fictional story of an Everywoman.

The story begins with the Outsider who wants to go home - to create a safe distance from the witness of the Everywoman who has suffered violent sexual objectification - but finds that shame and humiliation travel with her in her veins. She cannot escape her inner landscape and is compelled to empathize with the traumatic world of the Everywoman who was repeatedly raped as a tactic of war. The recognition of their unspoken bond allows the Outsider to eventually break through the boundaries of the psyche that no longer allow her to view another's human cry from a safe distance.

Through a heartfelt identification with the Everywoman, the Outsider comes to a visceral understanding of their shared humanity, of what it means to move beyond cultural boundaries to encounter the universality of man's inhumanity to man, of how the demonization of the 'other' impacts us individually as well as collectively, of why we need to dispel secrets in order to truly release the bonds of captivity.

In creating a dramatic work based on systematic rape, I wanted to find a way to explore the intertwined complexity of the words *rape* and *rapture*, which share the same root word *rapere*, meaning 'to seize'. To be seized means to be 'taken from oneself' and in rape this is experienced as being split off from the body; in rapture, as being transported by bliss.



*I chose moments throughout the piece where the 'Everywoman' escapes to an idealized inner landscape that conjures up memories of innocence and longing. The language is poetic - crystallized and concrete - as a way of creating something tangible to hang on to in the midst of being ripped apart physically and psychically.*

Trauma research reveals the need for the mind to escape to another realm in order to survive an impossible ordeal. At times, this escape has the feel of ecstasy as it counters the agony from which it seeks release. There is also an attempt to revert to a time of innocence, before the traumatic event changed the psychic landscape forever. One may also try to re-script the devastating story so as to feel empowered rather than helpless, thus trying to turn the tables, psychologically, in order to gain a much needed sense of control.

# THE WORLD AS HOME



By Caridad Svich

With these insights in mind, I chose moments throughout the piece where the Everywoman escapes to an idealized inner landscape that conjures up memories of innocence and longing. The language is poetic - crystallized and concrete - as a way of creating something tangible to hang on to in the midst of being ripped apart physically and psychically.

It is all too easy for those of us who have not sustained a traumatic blow to feel a kind of *shadenfreude* - an almost voyeuristic or pornographic response to another's pain. Through the eyes of the Outsider, I explore the character's attempt to sublimate her own sexual objectification by identifying with the Everywoman. But the Outsider avoids her own painful story at the expense of greater self-awareness and autonomy. The ritualized invocation of innocence and longing eventually penetrates her defenses allowing fragments of her own wounding to resurface. Hers is a subtler invasion and thus one that is much easier to suppress, but with its release comes greater recognition and integration with self and other.

DUST TO DUST addresses its politics obliquely rather than overtly to keep the dialogue alive and the borders open, metaphorically as well as literally. It welcomes the exploration of unknown territory within where one encounters a complex response to terror and tenderness, to cruelty and compassion, to abandonment and acceptance. It attempts to repair borderline behavior by reclaiming one's truth, including one's darkness as well as light, one's woundedness as well as wonder, one's fear as well as love. It seeks to find a liminal space where we, as one, can embrace non-duality with wonder and grace. 

The air is humid as a breeze gently drifts through the trees. I am standing on the balcony of an elegant hotel in the suburb of Pinares in the city of San Jose in Costa Rica. In a few weeks' time, my play *The House of the Spirits* (winner of the 2011 American Theatre Critics Association Primus Prize), based on the novel by Isabel Allende, will receive its area premiere at Teatro Espresso under the direction of Jose Zayas and Jody Steiger. It's not the first time this play has travelled. It's already had productions in New York City, Denver, Minneapolis, Houston, Albuquerque, Tempe, St. Louis, Miami, Washington D.C., and Santiago de Chile (S.A.), and soon it will be seen in Mexico City. Each experience has taught me something about how the play works, the manner in which its politics of power and family strike a chord with audiences, and how its painful lessons of survival and forgiveness offer a healing balm for troubled times. Writ along decidedly classical lines, *The House of the Spirits* has become something of a signature play in my repertoire. This is not something I could have ever predicted when I first started working on it. The fact that it even ran for three consecutive commercial engagements in Chile, the beating heart of its history and Allende's country, was to me a minor miracle in and of itself. That it has travelled at all since then has been a fascinating lesson in what being a writer in this mad business can be like.

*You may think your tribe is here, when actually your theatre tribe is somewhere else. After all, theatrical kinship is about metaphorical blood-lines, not figurative ones.*

Writing the world is what so many of the greatest dramatists have taught us. I cannot think only of my neighborhood when writing without considering the multi-

national stories that live and breathe in my neighborhood, and the multi-national corporate and economic interests that play a sometimes hidden role in many of the transactions of my daily life. It'd be jejune to think that in this day and age, even outside of New York City or Los Angeles (two of my adopted cities), that our lives are not led under a magnified global lens.

'What is American about your work?' is a question asked of me when I am abroad. I am always slightly flummoxed by this question. Should someone's writing bear the burden of representation? Is there, after all, only one way to write from an "American" lens? Wrestling with identity or even, shall we say, nationhood as a playwright has been a constant for me within the US theatre field - US and US Latina - and beyond it.

I like to think my homes as an artist are many and that I can travel to or be inside many of them at once, should I choose. Writing, after all, is about freedom. You can be anything, write any story! I have been, in my plays, queer British filmmaker Derek Jarman, a transsexual Latin American prostitute, a Louisiana fisherman, a soldier from North Carolina, a Quebecois bounty hunter, a Florida Panhandle gambler, a Hungarian mathematician, Shakespeare's Ophelia, a murdered woman from Ciudad Juarez, 19th century's Edwin, Junius and John Wilkes Booth, a West Texas soccer player, a Dominican DJ, a Cuban rafter, a suburban office worker, Medea, Antigone, a ravenous banker in a dystopic metropolis, JFK, Bob Dylan, Salvador Dali, and more. As I stand here overlooking the verdant blossoms outside the balcony in Pinares, Costa Rica, readying for the next rehearsal of *The House of the Spirits*, I wonder how the international - the wondrous, strange, beautiful, complex, multilingual, plurality of the world itself - lives inside all of us and makes of this world: home. 