

Awarding of the KAIROS Prize 2019

Speech of prize winner Nihad Kresevljakovic

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends and family

Thank You!

I suppose that these are the occasions when one can afford to make a retrospective of one's own work, and of all that led to the moment when, I am standing, sincerely proud, in front of you all. I hope it is not pretentious to share with you some things that I consider an acquired knowledge and truths, which I came to believe in in the course of the 46 years of my life.

First of all, I want to say da there is no doubt whatsoever that the merit for me being here in front of you at this moment belongs to a whole army of people who have made it possible, each in his and her own way, for me to be a candidate and then the recipient of this very special award. Just like our body is made of numberless atoms, so is our identity formed of all those people we meet on the paths of our lives, be they the real-world people, or those we meet in book

The only sadness I feel at this moment is related to those to whom I owe this award the most and who are not here any more, but I know with certainty how they would feel today. Thanks God for my parents, for my mother and father, who from our earliest childhood taught me and my brothers that journeys are the most wonderful gift of this world, and that, through journeys, we get to know ourselves, while we are, at the same time, learning how tiny we are in this world, but also how great we are in this world. I thank them for all the love and all the knowledge that can be expressed in a simple truth: In this world, there are only two kinds of people: good people and bad people, and we are on the right path only to the extent we are striving to belong to the group of the good people. I thank them for having taught us about the beauty of the width and the depth of the world, and I thank them for having taught us to love justice and truth and FOR THE FACT THAT they considered that to stray from the beaten track is all right if we do not lose sight of the goal that needs to be reached. This award belongs to them more than to anyone else!

I wish to express my gratitude to my grandpa, who has left a huge library in our home, and to my grandma, who has preserved it after his death and thus made it possible for books to be my good friends from my earliest childhood. I want to mention that, although I belong to the third generation of historians in the Kreševljaković family, none of us has ever dealt with the theme of our family's origin. Neither my father nor my grandma dealt with it, and this lack of interest in their own origin was the result of their conviction that it actually means nothing unless we, ourselves, are not, or at least if we are not trying to be good people. The fact that an ancestor was a good man, and even a bad man, does not mean that we have to be good or bad persons. Ultimately, even the genealogies of kings do not mean much; let alone the origin of an ordinary Bosnian family.

I thank to my older brother who arouse in me and my twin-brother, Sead an interest in arts, (although he is a banker today).

There is something else in my life that has a great significance for the fact that I am standing in front of you today: it is the war and the longest siege in modern history – the siege of Sarajevo! I was a teenager with punk hairstyle and with the rebelliousness that is characteristic for persons of that age when the war broke out!

War, let me share with you my empirical knowledge, is nothing but the state in which we get an opportunity to discover many things about the world and about ourselves. In that period, my brother and I, together with a group of our friends started engaging in arts, having recognised it as the way to continue feeling human! That is when we started making short films; we called our production SAVE THE AMAZON, wishing to emphasize that empathy is the most beautiful human feature and that care for the future of new generations has to be our priority even in such conditions, all in the spirit of the saying that we have inherited the Earth from our ancestors and that we have an obligation to leave it to our descendants in a more beautiful state! The period of the siege of our city, in my personal conviction and in the knowledge I have acquired in the twenty years of research, is one of the brightest moments, not only of Sarajevo and Bosnian, but also of European art!

During the siege, in the existing theatres 57 theatre premieres were held, and God knows how many independent productions. In those 4 years, over 2,000 performances were held, 2 film festivals were organised, numerous exhibitions. However, these facts are not as significant as it is that the houses were full at all those performance, all those exhibitions, all those festivals and film screenings! On their way to a cinema, a theatre or an exhibition, all those people risked their lives thus proving one important thing: that art for them was as important as food, water and air! It is thanks to this that I have learned, through my own experience, about the importance of freedom!

Sarajevo is, as far as I know, the only European city where, in the conditions of war and in the midst of one of the fiercest attacks on the city, a theatre was founded under the name of THE Sarajevo War Theatre! That is why, for me, war is, at the same time, the most horrendous and the most impressive experience! Wars incite the evil side in some people and turn them into monsters. In the case of others, wars and hardships make them better human beings. This was the time of radical ugliness and radical beauty of man. In the founding document of the SARTR theatre company it was written that this institution was being established because it had a special significance for the city's defence. The idea of defending a city as the symbol of cosmopolitan nature of man is equally important today as it was on those years.

In the period of the siege of Sarajevo, I had an opportunity to watch the performance of *Waiting For Godot*, directed by Susan Sontag. The producer was the MESS Festival, and I have the honour of being director of this extraordinary, 60-year old institution. It was not this performance, as much as it was the very act of Susan Sontag and the people like her, one of whom is my friend Chris Keulemans, that taught me another important thing: that we who are engaged in the field of art must advocate the art in which aesthetics is inseparable from ethics. Susan Sontag was the woman who warned the world that artists and intellectuals have an obligation to raise their voices against injustice and to act, in every possible way they could, to prevent genocide that was being committed in Bosnia. Her statement made in the days she spent with us, that

”the 20th century began in Sarajevo and that it is there that the 21st century would begin in Sarajevo”, bears importance for me because I am aware that we, from Sarajevo and from Bosnia, are faced with the task to make sure that, in the context of the world and the time in which we live and the world and the time that lies ahead of us, her statement does not sound pessimistic, but optimistic!

In the programme MODULE FO MEMORY that I have been leading for over a decade together with wonderful people, I am mostly dealing with the past through the prism of art, and I am sure that our past has a meaning only if we learn something from it, if it inspires us to do good things or, in other words, to deal with the past is meaningful only if it helps us to be better human beings.

Journalists often ask me whether art can change the world and our human condition, ignoring the fact that art does not have that function, nor does it have that power... It is a job of politicians, just like it is a job of politicians to secure freedom, which for art serves as oxygen. It is a great question to what extent we are free today, as artists and as human beings. The idea of a normal society seems almost utopian today and Fridrich Nietzsche's thought that "we have art in order not to die from truth" is very true for our time!

Today, we are living in the time marked by the fear from diversity, from those who are different, fear from the alleged attack on our identities, which has xenophobia in its background. Generally, the state of our world is very dramatic, and the people who appear on the scene are those who fare best in crisis and who easily manipulate the lost and frightened masses. I believe that it is an obligation for artistic and intellectual community to call for openness, and not just of borders, but of human mind as well. This is why I am happy that I am still working at the MESS Festival, which is important to All those who feel that openness, love for diversity and cosmopolitanism are the essence not only of Bosnia, and of the Balkans, but also of Europe.

Despite everything we have experienced in Bosnia, left to the mercy of an indifferent world, which, in 1945, said NEVER AGAIN, and despite all the problems we are having today in my country - from corruption to injustice - I still believe that this country, with its multi-religious, multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan character is the idea of the world that is worth fighting for.

I deeply believe that we are created to get to know one another and to learn from one another, and that that is where the greatest beauty of this world lies. In the country I come from, despite the information that is being circulated, our greatest resource are neither water nor wood, but experience and memories. That is a part of something that I want to share with others, while the choice of things we will remember is one of the essential questions we, as civilisation, are faced with.

Tolstoi wrote: "remember all the bad things you did. That will help you not to do evil things. If you remember good things you did, it will prevent you from continuing to do good things". Memory of one's own painful experience without empathy for others, who are experiencing today what we once experienced, definitively seems to be pointless.

In all my work, I am trying to affirm, in all the ways possible, the positive experiences from the period of the siege, when art played a great role, led by the belief that what was created in Sarajevo in that period is an important or rather, a very important part of the cultural and artistic legacy of our shared homeland - Europe.

I want to believe that all of us will live together again in this homeland of ours, believing from the depth of my soul that differences are God's gift, not the punishment. That is why I will close with the words of a wise man from the Middle East, who is very dear to my heart, Abu Hamid El Gazali:

"This earthly world is a caravan-saray on the road toward God: all human beings together are placed there as co-travellers. However, since they are all traveling toward the same goal and, in a way, since they make a caravan, they must join forces to keep peace and harmony and help each other, respecting each other's rights."

With great gratitude to the people from ALFRED TOEPFER Foundation, to those who decided that this year's award would be given to me, to my dear friends and to those who are today here with me, with gratitude to all of you, accepting this award, I want to express my great satisfaction and I promise that I will continue doing the things I have been doing so far with the same love, confident that it is the only way for this world to become a better and more just place, one day!

Peace and love to all of you and thank you.