

Awarding of the KAIROS Prize 2019 to Nihad Kreševljaković

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Laudation of Chris Keulemans

If the Kairos Prize was meant to award someone with the most irresistible laugh in Europe, Nihad would have won it years ago. The way he laughs is warm, contagious and conspiratory. It gives you the feeling that he's sharing a hilarious secret with you that nobody else knows about. In those moments of laughter, everything else melts away. And the timing of his jokes is completely unpredictable. One second you're engaged in a deeply serious conversation, the next you're cracking up. It's his way of saying: we're friends. It's a token of trust.

But the Kairos Prize, of course, 'aims to honour outstanding individuals working with entrepreneurial spirit, persistence and creativity in the field of European culture and intercultural understanding.' And Nihad, the man with the most irresistible laugh in Europe, is all of that too.

The first time I met him he was a skinny 21 year-old. He didn't look troubled at all by the fact that we were sitting outside a bar, having coffee on a sunny sidewalk in Sarajevo under siege. It was 1994 and he was explaining the war to me. Next to jokes, explaining is something he does really well. And all the time. Because he knows a lot about many things. Like his father and grandfather, he is a historian. In the old family home, he lives among their libraries. The walls are lined with books and more books. But Nihad reads more than words. He reads faces and souls. He reads the world around him. His knowledge is deep and based on real study, but never definite. It is a knowledge that questions. It is always open for new insights and discoveries. So when he's explaining things to you, he doesn't do so as a teacher but as a traveler: he is taking you with him on his never-ending journey to learn more.

The siege of Sarajevo shaped him, of course. But in a different way than it shaped others. For many of his generation, the confrontation with pure and senseless evil – even though they battled it with defiant style and unwavering collectivity – did its inevitable damage later, in the years after the war. It triggered trauma, feelings of revenge, cynicism, despair, opportunism and poisonous groupthink. In the arts field, that had been such an extraordinary force of resistance during the siege, it led to a loss of focus and taste. Slowly but surely, the capacity for creating work of such power and beauty eroded – and today the Sarajevo arts scene has a random feel, a lack of gravity, an absence of solid criteria. Imitation trumps originality, the attention span of

both artists and audience is short, there is a lot of gossip and jealousy and no serious critical discourse.

But who am I to judge. Although I have kept returning to Sarajevo every year, and contributed to numerous events and publications, I remain an outsider. And there are, of course, positive exceptions. Among them, Nihad is one of the brightest.

He is incapable of evil. It just isn't in him. Not that he is naive or innocent. On the contrary: he has dedicated all his work so far to the darkest hours in Sarajevo's history, to the aftermath of war and to the analysis of similar tragedies across the world. In a society where the manipulation of history has become a political tool, he insists on collecting and presenting real stories of real people. Immediately after the war, within the context of the MESS International Theatre Festival, he started an ongoing series of events, exhibitions, screenings, lectures and publications called Memory Module – always related to the war, the aftermath and the art it produces. More than anything else, this project embodies his world view. These past few weeks, the program presented a 1000 children singing a song against war in the renovated old library, Vjesnica, an exhibition curated by Hana Bajrovic about all the theatre performed under the siege, and Nihad's own new film, about Susan Sontag in Sarajevo. In his own words: 'Memory Module, for more than two decades, proves that hard and painful human experiences are actually the reason and motive for all of us to be better and more compassionate as humans.'

What drives Nihad, what keeps him sane, is his firm belief that we can actually become better people if we have the courage to look deeply into the horrors of the past. Not just decent people, okay people, but really: better people.

I witnessed how that works by following the creation of *Do You Remember Sarajevo*, the documentary he made with his twin brother Sead and their friend Nedim Alikadić. When it finally premiered in 2003, it had been years in the making. Both the concept and the production process were unique.

The siege of Sarajevo was the first war that individual people could film. Many residents of the city owned video camera's. They filmed everything from tv-screens with the latest news to hours of boredom and hunger in freezing apartments to massacres in the streets to window views of shells and grenades exploding across the city. During the siege, the Kreševljaković brothers started collecting these home videos of the war. They continued to do so after the siege was finally lifted in 1995. In the end, the basement of their family home was packed with over 20.000 hours of videotape. Nihad and Sead,

not yet 30, had no fixed jobs yet, no wives and kids. Every evening around midnight, they would descend into the basement to view material, select fragments and do rough edits. The only problem was: they never systematically ordered all those tapes, and dreamers as they were, they didn't care. Which meant that they would more or less start all over again every night. At first, I thought this was traumatized madness, even though they approached their work with cheerful, boundless energy. Every time I visited, they would proudly take me down to the basement, tell me that they had – again - barely made any progress – and laugh their irresistible laughs as if this was the best joke in the world.

And yet, when they finally did finish the film, it was an undeniable masterpiece. Never had a war been seen from the inside like this, in all its cruelty, banality and compassion. The editing of sound and images was highly sophisticated. Jean-Luc Godard called it the best documentary he had ever seen. It is available on youtube – and I promise you 50 spellbinding minutes if you go home later and watch it.

Nihad and his brother came out of the whole process with newfound wisdom and gravity. They had grown up in a way the war had never allowed them to. They had spent night after night, year after year, viewing the most heartwrenching images, seeing their fellow citizens curse and cry and collapse. They had looked the horror in the eye. And they came out as better people.

Today, Nihad leads the MESS International Theatre Festival, after having worked there in different capacities ever since the war. Every year, he and his team create a small miracle. The funding is always a problem. It depends on the whims of local, incompetent politicians. Almost every year, nationalist and islamist voices raise a scandal about the immoral quality of certain shows. The facilities in the local theatres rarely match the standards of international productions. And yet, the festival survives. Most performances are sold out. Bosnian actors and directors get the chance to experience the quality and imagination of international productions that otherwise rarely reach Sarajevo. Throughout the crowded program, the memory of war and loss and resilience resonates in all possible shapes and forms. And in the centre of it all, behind the screens, always ready to let others enjoy the spotlights, we find this eternally curious reader of souls, this historian of today, this generous and irresistible human being called Nihad Kreševljaković.