

INTERVIEW WITH LULJETA ÇEKU

Prizren | Date: July 18, 2018

Duration: 67 minutes

Present :

1. Luljeta Çeku (Speaker)
2. Ares Shporta (Interviewer)
3. Elmedina Arapi (Camera)

Symbols in transcription, nonverbal communication:

() - emotional communication

{ } - the interlocutor explains some gestures.

Other rules of transcription:

[] - addition to the text to help understand

Footnotes are add-ons that provide information about places, names or expressions.

Part One

Luljeta Çeku: Luljeta Çeku, born in Prizren, daughter of Emrullah and Nazemina, I have two brothers, Luan, and the late Merdi, I grew up with them. I grew up in this house where we are now, a very old house, and I always feel comfortable in this house. This house had a big yard and I can say I had a very, very nice childhood because in our yard there was a river that passed by there, I remember that until I was 13 years old there was a big river. So Lumbardhi is the biggest river in Prizren, the other one was the second biggest in Prizren, it was called Kasëmbeg.

I say this because all the neighborhoods and all the houses in Prizren that gravitate towards the city in the first zone so to say, they all had a river or a brook. We were lucky enough to swim there, because sometimes the river would rise and it would be two meters deep. I can say that going to the beach in those circumstances was something that we didn't even imagine or just a few people went then, but we had the river and we freshened up in the yard. You can imagine what kind of pleasure it was, and what a happy childhood we had even though material conditions weren't very good, but love and children's games were very big, very different from today.

I finished primary school here, I was lucky to be in the best school back then, in Kosovo, which was called *17 Nëntori*. A new experimental school which for the first time had everything: sport' hall, classrooms for different classes like home economics, basics of technical education and so on. It was a school which I loved because it was different. It was a new building because Prizren is an old city, and it gave it a new beauty and it even had a yard. I started first and second grade in a school which was called *Mësërlë*, a house turned into a school with minimal conditions. That's why I mentioned that the school was different, and I was lucky to be a student there until eighth grade.

Since primary school I had the great craving to learn poetry or recite poetry well, and I was distinguished for those activities at school. So it seems like acting was born in me since that time and those teachers noticed, especially language teachers, Albanian language and we learned other languages back then, Serbian, Russian, and I was very successful in those also. I wrote essays differently from others as well. I had a different imagination. So, I can say that since then I had a liking

for the stage and I wanted to have a different profession, even though my parents at that time were educating me to be a teacher, and that's why they sent me to *Shkolla Normale*.¹ Back then *Shkolla Normale* was a classic school for teachers, and they thought that as a woman it would be better if I become a teacher.

But, I decided differently, I saw that they were looking for an actress in the newspaper, but back then actors started studying in Pristina, in 1968, before it used to be like a drama studio, near the National Theater. Then, High Vocational School created a separate branch of Dramatic Art and since I was still in high school I could still be present there, even though I hadn't finished high school. So, I was very young when I registered at the High Vocational School in Pristina.

Ares Shporta: 16 years old?

Luljeta Çeku: ...17 years old, I was only at *Normale* in my third year, and with the help of finishing additional exams in the High Vocational School there were four subjects: Albanian language, geography, history, and mathematics. It was considered a high school so I could continue my studies at High Vocational School, so I finished school very early, and the day when I got the diploma in dramatic art, the dean of the University, Bardhyl Zajmi, congratulated me and said that I was the youngest student at the University of Prishtina, at that time. So, the criteria was like that...

Ares Shporta: You were the youngest student?

Luljeta Çeku: The youngest, so until that age, you couldn't get a higher education if you didn't finish high school, but it happened like that. But beforehand I wanna tell you one more thing, but when I decided on acting, I wasn't brave enough to tell my parents immediately, even though I grew up with no differentiation as a women in the house, I always had the support of my parents because I was always very active in primary school and in high school, I was a member of the [Literary] Agimi Society, so since I was 15 I was on the stage one way or another with different activities. But I wasn't brave enough because it was taboo back then, and they wanted me to become a teacher, I thought I was breaking their imagination, like...

But I went to Pristina because I had people I could consult, my [paternal] aunt was there and my aunt's husband was an intellectual man, he finished his studies in Zagreb, he passed away. And I consulted him, he then called my parents of course immediately, they consulted and agreed that I study this, this branch and my life orientation will be acting and so it happened. I graduated on time, I showed success in both the first year and the second year. I was the second generation of actors who qualified from school because the National Theater was founded by amateur enthusiasts from different cities,

¹ The *Shkolla Normale* opened in Gjakova in 1948 to train the teachers needed for the newly opened schools. With the exception of a brief interlude during the Italian Fascist occupation of Kosovo during WWII, these were the first schools in the Albanian language that Kosovo ever had. In 1953, the *Shkolla Normale* moved to Pristina.

from Peja, Gjakova, Pristina, Prizren. So they weren't professional actors in terms of education, not as employed actors. They were great actors but now was the need, it was a different time, having qualified cadres.

So I was in the second generation to graduate, I graduated in acting and that's how I oriented myself professionally for life. The first year after I finished my studies in Pristina I was employed at the People's Theater, as it was called back then, Provincial People's Theater. Because at that time, Serbian drama was parallel to Albanian drama. I stayed there for a year, although I wanted to contribute in Prizren from the beginning, even before competing in Prishtina, there was a need for women, and I would be accepted immediately. But I came here to Prizren and right there in the Cultural Center where I continued to work, I asked for a job in the Cultural Center, but at that time, I was told that they don't have a job vacancy for actors, they don't have regulations, so I got the answer that they can't hire me.

Ares Shporta: How did BVI² function at that time for culture?

Luljeta Çeku: BVI...

Ares Shporta: What kind of unit was it?

Luljeta Çeku: What did you say?

Ares Shporta: What kind of unit was BVI for culture, how did it function?

Luljeta Çeku: BVI for culture, that's what they were called, it was an organization which maintained finances. So, BVI, BVI, BVI of culture finances the Cultural Center, about cultural heritage, this community or what is it called now I don't know...

Ares Shporta: It was the office...

Luljeta Çeku: The Office for Preservation of Monuments, fact. Archive also.

Ares Shporta: Archive.

Luljeta Çeku: Yes, like that. Within the Cultural Center there was a library because, at that time, there was only the thea... that is, there was the Amateur Theater that worked from time to time, but not regularly and I am talking about 1971 when I graduated and I looked for a job in Prizren, but I got the answer that they don't have the means to hire me and I went back to the People's Theater and worked there for a year. I can't say that I had great experience because I was a beginner, I only had two or three

² Bureau of Self-Governing Interests, now the Public Housing Enterprise in Pristina.

small episodic roles in some projects in Pristina. But I was not very happy to be there, to be honest, I don't know why, Pristina didn't suit me (laughs) at that time my mind was in Prizren.

But, a miracle happened that the person I had asked for a job come looking for actors in Pristina and they immediately addressed me, because he was my Albanian language professor at *Normale*, Bashkim Qereti was the secretary for BVI of culture and a Montenegrin who was the director of the Cultural Center, Jaksha Shalevic. [They] said, "The Municipality of Prizren has decided to form a professional theater in Prizren," I am talking about 1972. It was a surprise and since I was an actress there in Pristina and Luan Daka from Prizren, he addressed both of us and we decided to come to Prizren. At the same time, they consulted with us who else might be interested.

At that time, Muharrem Qena, our well-known director, had great crises at that time with the People's Theater for reasons that he best knew (smiles). He also decided to come as a director with his wife Igballe Gjurkaj Qena, also a young actress. And we became four, also Sabedin Prekazi, an actor from Mitrovica and Melihate Qena, who was an actress who at the same time graduated from the Academy of Arts in Belgrade. She was the only actress with a finished academy who was not employed at the People's Theater, for reasons she later told me. Due to the conditions they didn't offer there, almost nothing even though she was with an accomplished academy. She was a Russian teacher in Mitrovica and we invited her too, and we became a good team to form the Professional Theater in Prizren.

The first year we completed three very good, very successful projects with Muharrem Qena, an experienced director. For us young actors it was an, an extraordinary experience, the play *Colonel Chabert* by Balzac, and also a children's play by a Spanish writer Artur Foke, *Ambrozio* and a comedy by Joseph Horvat, *Finger in front of the nose*. It was difficult at that time, Prizren had lost the theater audience, it was not formed, because the Amateur Theater only worked from time to time on projects as we were informed. For the last time, for the 500th anniversary of Skanderbeg, I saw a play as a student in 1968 in Prizren, a play about Skanderbeg.

There was a play that I remember and before that, some time in the '60s, '62, '63, '64 if I'm not mistaken, Shemsedin Kijatani was an enthusiastic amateur director, who occasionally did some projects for the theater of Prizren. I have to tell you that the Professional Theater first established in Prizren was, after the war in 1945, so, not only the theater but all professional institutions were established in Prizren, because Prizren was the capital then of Kosovo, as they then called it Kosovo and Metohija. So the radio, the Professional Theater, *Rilindja*, these professional institutions were established in Prizren. But further, with their withdrawal to Prishtina, the cultural gap in Prizren was huge, a very big gap for the city, the way Prizren has always been with tradition and with, with civilization.

But parallelly functioned the *Agimi* [literary] Society, which was founded in 1944 and I can say that it was the only thing that filled the cultural emptiness of this city. I was a member there also since

1965-‘66, from the first year of high school. So we came with enthusiasm, especially me, since I was from Prizren, and Luan, we wanted to strengthen that Professional Theater in Prizren, but again it did not happen unfortunately because the political pressure was too big. There could not be only the Albanian theater, there were these problems back then. Prizren is trilingual and there should be also Serbian and Turkish dramas. They announced a competition for both Serbian and Turkish dramas, but if they weren’t interested, a couple of actors came from Serbia and did not see any prospects, the conditions were very poor to keep three ensembles in one with a budget that the Municipality of Prizren had.

These were the reasons that the problem was not there, it was just that the Albanians didn’t have a theater but at the same time the theater, the Professional Theater was established in Gjakova, it was good. Although Gjakova didn’t have as much tradition as Prizren had in any way, but it was such a time and it was founded in Gjakova. They were successful of course when the conditions were created and they got a building. I am talking about the time of communism, because Gjakova had some advantages (laughs) at that time that our generation knows why and how. And Prizren was left without a professional theater. We only worked for two years as professionals, then as semi-professionals, because we weren’t enough, just five or six actors to play the same repertoire every time, it wasn’t like today, getting different actors, hiring them for a role, it was not like that, you had to have a job, and the problems started.

In 1974, it unfortunately scattered. I wasn’t interested in returning to Pristina, but my colleagues found themselves in Prishtina again, because Muharrem Qena was a name that could be hired wherever he wanted. He initially returned to television and Meli also, Igballja to the theater, Luani went to Moscow to study directing, Sabedin Prekazi to television. So, they found work, I stayed there. Of course not that they immediately wanted to have me there, because we were excluded in one way or another, they made other decisions, even though in the beginning, there were decisions about, the permanent, permanent contract as they called it then. I hired a lawyer and asked for my right to stay in Prizren. I’m from Prizren and I didn’t want to go to Pristina. And somehow it happened that I stayed there.

But after being left alone, it was very difficult now how to act and what to do as a professional. I thought, I said, for a start it would be good to work with children and I made an announcement, a competition for all schools that were in Prizren, primary [schools]. And to my surprise hundreds and hundreds of students showed up. Of course, the criteria were for them to be excellent, not to waste time there and not have time to study, and I had the opportunity to choose the best ones. I have the notes and I still keep the notebooks of all those children who registered for the competition. I even selected them, so I did some auditioning and started working with them. It was 1974, so, ‘75, when I was left alone, so without my professional colleagues, and that’s how I started, and I had no idea what to do now, I had to think.

And it was a very good thing that I did, because with those kids I taught them about the most basic things about theater, about theater. So, to create a dictionary before entering the stage. I also chose some subjects that I practiced with them, so the subject of acting, stage movements, painting with them and more or less the history of theater and diction, speaking. And these were the most beautiful days, not only for me but also for those kids. And so I educated them for a long time and, after they finished the third grade, they grew up, and they could even act in adult plays and so I created a very good cadre of actors both male and female.

Let's not forget to mention that in 1975 for the first time I read the play with the children *Lulja dhe shega* [*The flowers and the pomegranate*] by Vedat Kokona, a very good text for children and that play was shot for the Television of Prishtina and was broadcasted twice. It was shot as a play, but it was broadcasted with three sequels, it was very successful. And whenever journalists came to talk to those children, they were surprised by the way they talked about the theater, they spoke the language of the theater. They knew what the role of the director was, {counts on the fingers} what the director does, what the stage management is, who the playwright is, what stage movements are, and so on. It was a wonderful thing.

After I did that part, now it was my turn to do something with adults and it was a text probably for, for the meanings today, I had never done something like that, a socialist realism text, *Dashuria triumfon* [*Love triumphs*], that dealt with a topic of a marriage between two confessions of a Serb and a Catholic from Prizren. So, a play written by Kole Pjetër Shiroka, a theater enthusiast, he has also been the secretary of BVI in Pristina for a long time. He asked me to do his text and I accepted. It was not a play that I would like today how it was done then, but it was a charming play, liked by the audience. But, that's how I started because I had no experience in directing, I was not a director, I was an actress, it was very difficult for me to take that role, it was a very big responsibility. But gradually I started to test myself.

Ares Shporta: Who worked with you, who was around you?

Luljeta Çeku: Amateur, enthusiastic people...

Ares Shporta: What was their role?

Luljeta Çeku: All of them, I shared the roles with them, someone was in stage management, in the Cultural Center I had only one electrician and one who decorated. It was Hadi Hoda, he was an extraordinary man who understood {shows her head with her hands} and loved the theater (smiles) he also did the scenography. I mean very naively, not to say dilettantes because amateurism is a big thing and for me there is no difference when it is well done. But such were the circumstances, the conditions were like that and the BVI of culture did not have, it didn't have any great material support, in the sense of giving funding for the decoration, for costumes and so on. For the play that I mentioned

Dashuria triumfon [Love triumphs], I borrowed the Catholic or Serbian costumes from societies, cultural and artistic societies and from Uncle Shtjefën Qollaku, who had a fund, costumes at home and together we selected the costumes. I was looking for citizens to collaborate, so those I knew that understood more or less what I was looking for, so I started.

I took on the role of organizer and director and the one who would give the idea of what the scenography looks like, because I didn't have a professional scenographer and so on. It was a very difficult period, but I loved my job (laughs) and it was a kind of survival to stay in that job and be in Prizren, because I didn't want to return to Pristina. Then I achieved the greatest success with *Pushkët e nënës karar* [Mother Courage and Her Children] by Bertolt Brecht³, it was an adventure to make a play of a very great classic by Bertolt Brecht, because he is a theater in himself after Stanislavsky⁴, Brecht has a completely different current in the theater. And surprisingly that show was very successful, I mobilized myself so much that I couldn't believe that I managed to do that part, I was the lead role, others were new amateurs.

But we usually went to the festival in *Kulla*, which is in Vojvodina. So, Kosovo went there, tight Vojvodina and Serbia, that's what they called it. We did our plays there for a few nights, it was a festival with awards, with everything. We got the best critique possible for that play. They were surprised by my dedication and my age and the actors' age, they couldn't believe that such a great play could be realized by such young people and we got almost all the awards and we were especially praised for the most beautiful scenic speech. And they awarded me as the best director, the most successful and of course for the role that I played and for some amateurs for episodic roles.

Ares Shporta: Who acted in that play, who was there?

Luljeta Çeku: Blerim Kastrati acted there, who was also awarded, a rare talent, a very scenic boy, with a beautiful Albanian speech. Zana Gjonbalaj, Deshira Nurkollari, Osman Goranci, Luljeta Çejku, there was another one with similar name as mine (smiles), but her last name was Çejku, not Çeku. Bashkim Ostrozubi, Nuhi Bytyqi, they were high school teachers, Bashkim and Nuhi, the others were younger, all high school students. The play was liked a lot... when we came back to Prizren, the Cultural Center was also pleased with my work, with those awards I got, the BVI of Culture also.

Immediately I wanted to specialize somewhere in directing, to have experience in directing, because I had only studied acting, I was working there as an actress, not as a director. And I applied to Prague in 1979, in '80 was at the Academy of Theater in Prague. Because Prague has FAMU that is for film and

³ Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) German poet, playwright and theatrical performer, whose epic theater departed from the conventions of theatrical illusion and developed drama as a social and ideological forum for leftist causes.

⁴ Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavsky (Born in Moscow, January 17, 1863 - died in Moscow, August 7, 1938), Russian actor, director and teatrologist. He is best known as the creator of the Stanislavsky system, which later influenced the development of methodical acting.

DAMU that is for theater. And I was lucky to be in the city for a year, that's how long the specialization lasted, because Prague is the city of theaters. And I chose that city because I didn't know any foreign languages, let's say that Russian was also a foreign language but it was a city that belonged to the Warsaw Pact, so there was still socialism, you could apply in Russian also. Even though we had to know a second language apart from Czech, I didn't know that language, I knew more or less Russian from school, so I could understand. And my experience in Prague was great.

[The interview cuts here]

Back then the minister or however was it called them for culture at the provincial level... it was very hard for someone who had only finished High Vocational School not some university to compete, but since I was present in newspapers for my successes, for my enthusiasm, for the work I did in Prizren only in the theater, they took that into consideration and gave me permission to go, it was a student exchange that existed back then between the Yugoslav states and Czechoslovakia. And my experience in Prague mobilised me, so it was a great experience. Since there, I have to mention, because I have experience in many famous theaters of Prague, but one that impressed me was a theater in Vinohradec, where our great Aleksander Moisiu also played, the actor with Albanian origin, it was a, it was (smiles) it was a special feeling to be in the theater where he played. And I did my internship with Jaroslav Dvůřek, who was the best director in Prague Television, so the state television.

Part Two

Ares Shporta: Let's continue with Prague.

Luljeta Çeku: Prague {nods}.

Ares Shporta: And then we go back to Yugoslavia or what happened after Prague?

Luljeta Çeku: Yes, yes. Now, I had a very good opportunity in Prague to stay in the Academy, but I still couldn't decide...

Ares Shporta: What year?

Luljeta Çeku: 1980. Because at the same time I went to the theater that I mentioned in Vinohradec for my internship, the theater where the great Aleksander Moisiu played, the actor with Albanian origin I also went to the Academy for Puppetry Theater. I was very interested to intern there also since I worked with children and Kosovo back then didn't have a puppetry theater I wanted to make some experience so I could create the Puppetry Theater in Prizren, but that didn't happen. First I felt like I

wasn't old enough when I was in Prague, and I thought that four years in the Academy would be too much for me.

Back then I was 28 years old, but I still interned there, I got familiar with all kinds of dolls, what they're called, their technique and so on. But when I came back to Prizren I went back working to the Culture Center as an actress. I asked for funds from the Culture Center, they didn't have any, the Puppetry Theater was pricey, because you have to order them and we didn't have that experience in Kosovo. We didn't have people who made them, whatever kind they were, be it puppets or dolls or some other kind that is needed for that theater. It failed, that plan failed, unfortunately. But, in the meantime the Puppetry Theater started in Pristina, I am glad that my colleague Meli Qena achieved it. So, the Puppetry Theater was created in Kosovo and it fulfilled children's requests.

That theater moves and comes to Prizren, Peja and other cities. So that was my goal, to do something in Prague that would be needed in Prizren. I was very interested in pantomime, because Prague is known for that, and I went to that theater that was a special kind of theater because Vladislav Fialka is one of the greatest pantomime actors of the world, after Marsej Marso, who is French. Unfortunately, that kind of theater was never applied in Kosovo by anyone, and another theater that I have to mention in Prague is *Laterna Magica* that is a kind of a special theater that the play with actors on the scene is accompanied by images in the background {points behind her}, which means films or dances and so on.

And this theater was a special experience for me, to go and see something no one else in the world except the Czechs do. So, my experience in Prague is, is excellent, so I was the only one lucky enough that as an actress to be in that city for a period of time and be in contact with the theater every night. There are so many theaters, so many beautiful projects that I will never forget. And something that is documented and maybe one day I can offer you the material of an interview for the Academy of Film in Prague that a student who finished the Academy interviewed me for... it's in their archive. So, where I come from, my experiences, who I am as an Albanian, so they never heard of any Albanian woman who is a director, how I work there and so on. My experience in Prague, my opinion of the theater there, what I liked most, which projects and so on.

If I liked a show, I would go and watch it multiple times, I felt like watching them multiple times. There's a play that I watched four times, *Kočičí hra*, which means "Cat's Game," by a writer who I first heard of there, Istvan Orkeni⁵, Hungarian, who was the laureate in literature, I searched a lot here to find that text in whatever language I knew, so Serbo-Croatian or Croatian, but I haven't found it. A wonderful performance at *Tilovo Divadlo* which is one of the most prestigious theaters in Prague. I mean I went to see it a few times, or Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, I went and saw it a few times because it was a great project.

⁵ István György Örkény (1912-1979) was a Budapest-based Hungarian writer whose plays and novels often featured grotesque situations.

But, another thing I can say about Prague in the theater *Zabradli* that is in the center of Prague, very near the Theater Academy, Vladislav Fialka also functions there, the pantomime. The actors of that theater were Václav Havel's⁶ right hand, I found out later, not then, because it was kept secret and I am glad I was close to those actors. Then I saw some interviews in newspapers of Yugoslavia like *NIN* and others, I don't know if you know those newspapers of Belgrade or Zagreb, there was an actor, Bartoshka, who is one of the best theater actors, he was Havel's best friend. So, I want to say that artists move things forward, so Havel was a playwright, and all these avant-garde theater actors were his supporters of change in Prague because I was there in the dark times of communism, the '80s.

I can say that when I went there from there, for example, from Belgrade to Prague by plane, Belgrade had a metropol with a lot of lights, while Prague was a wonderful city in the dark. I couldn't understand why, what was happening in that country. Because, when I went to the theater late in the evening, as soon as the show was over, I came out of... full, it was always full because they have many beautiful theaters, big with many seats, more than a thousand and, for example, I parallelly went to concerts in *Dvorak Osnin* or *Smetanov*, so classical music concerts, I could hear my footsteps on the street, people disappeared, so it wasn't lively. They were in revolt, but still everything functioned in art, just at the right level {raises her hand}.

I couldn't understand why it was like that. While here {gestures towards herself} in Yugoslavia, as I said in Belgrade, everything was sparkling from advertisements, from lights. And this was my experience, how I saw Prague, even though Prague is a very beautiful city with amazing architecture. It's the only city that includes all the architectural styles, from rococo⁷, baroque⁸, gothic⁹ and so on. I didn't understand the pressure intellectuals had back then. And in the dormitory where I lived, I would meet people from different cities, very talented, but very pessimistic about their future, and this is the story...

Ares Shporta: How did the return from Prague to Prizren happen?

⁶ Václav Havel (1936-2011) writer and political dissident, who served as the last President of Czechoslovakia from 1989 until the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992, and then as the first President of the Czech Republic from 1993 to 2003. As a writer of Czech literature, he is known for his plays, essays and other literary works.

⁷ A style of architecture and decoration that flourished in Western Europe in the eighteenth century and was distinguished by its elaborate variety of strange and exaggerated shapes and lines.

⁸ Baroque is a highly ornate and often extravagant style of architecture, music, painting, sculpture and other arts that flourished in Europe from the early 17th century to the mid-18th century. It followed the Renaissance style and preceded the Rococo style (in the past often referred as the "Late Baroque") and the Neoclassical styles.

⁹ Gothic art is an artistic period which lasted about four hundred years, first beginning to develop in northern France, in the second half of the twelfth century, while in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it dominated the construction of Central Europe. The word Gothic (*arte gotica*) is derived from Giorgio Vasari, who thought that this style had to do with barbarian peoples, although with the Goths this style had nothing in common.

Luljeta Çeku: A professor who I mentioned earlier insisted, “Stay in the academy, I will write the reference that you don’t have a puppetry theater. You can stay, I will help you register.” I didn’t accept, I said, “I’m working with amateurs in the Cultural Center, I love this job and I don’t think I can stay away from my family for four years.” It was the first time that I stayed away from my family for that long, I was very young. So I came back to the Cultural Center and I continued working, so with other projects. But my criteria increased, I wasn’t... before I had more courage to take {gestures drawing something toward herself} in directing. After the experience I had in Prague, I was very skeptical, because theater requires a lot, and I thought about what I could do better. And I wanted to get back to acting, to play, not just direct.

I convinced the staff at the Cultural Center to start collaborating with my other professional director colleagues, so they would come too, so it would not be repetitive or maybe I would not be able to always produce a good play. And we engaged other directors and we always were successful in festivals. One of them is *Sfinga e gjallë* [The living sphinx] with the late Sejfo Beto Krasniqi, a very talented director who studied in Zagreb. He was a graduate at that time and since he was born in Prizren he wanted to do his thesis in Prizren and he chose *Sfinga e gjallë* by Rexhep Qosja. So we mobilized and he wanted to engage other actors who finished acting after me, but that couldn’t get a job in the People’s Theater, and they were staying at home unemployed.

Like Bislim Muqaj {counts on his fingers} in Korisha, unemployed, a qualified actor who finished the High Vocational School, the one I finished before him. Alush Sahitaj also, Samedin Latifi also in Pirane. These were professional actors who were educated but not employed. The theater wasn’t able to hire those who studied acting. So those times were hard for actors. And with the promises they made since the Professional Theater dissolved, as I mentioned earlier, for political reasons, Sejfo Beto Krasniqi tried to raise that debate again since he could be hired as a director and these actors to be hired there. But it wasn’t possible, there was resistance.

[The interview cuts here]

So the theater started after progress in Prizren with *Sfinga e gjallë*. We were part of the republican festival that was held in *Kulla* back then, and in Trebinje, which was a federative festival. People from all the republics and provinces came to that festival, Vojvodina and Kosovo had the biggest competition. But we gained a lot of sympathy, very much because it was a, a wonderful, very powerful play, and that year we won all the possible prizes of the festival, five golden masks. So, I can include myself because it was the first golden mask, because we got it for collective acting as actors, for directing, for scenography, for music, for effects, for everything, so all the awards that existed in that festival *Sfinga e gjallë* won them all.

After that year, our success was repeated several times with *Erveheja* directed by Fetah Mehmeti, where I was the lead role, I won the golden mask and the critics talked highly about my acting and the

play in general. Then followed the play by Maksut Vezgishi, Maks, *Proporcionet Hyjnore* [Divine Proportions] which was different from the plays we had before. Of course, I wasn't part of the project but I was there with them. I supported Maks, because I always approached him and even before he started directing, he did the scenography of the plays that we did there. But I must say one thing, in Prizren, I had very different concepts from the others, maybe I was also avant-garde at that time. The stage of the Cultural Center bothered me, that hall bothered me, it was too big, it was too classic and I was looking for another space. And I thought of the hammam and I asked the director Fetah Mehmeti, my now deceased colleague, to come and direct Anton Pashku's *Gof* and only with women, that was my idea.

We didn't have problems with it, I didn't have problems with women engaging in Prizren. We were among the few who had more women in roles than men, and usually I would pick those parts where women were the main roles. And it was a beautiful play, but my only condition was to do the play in the hammam. And I went to the Institute for the Preservation of Monuments, it was called that then, I also asked the director how we can get the thea... hammam space. Not the first part, {explains with her hands} that second part that is inside {describes the scene with her hands} has a small stage set up, it is used as a tile where they once bathed, because it was a public bathroom for all citizens.

And their answer was that it wasn't under their control, it was property of vakf¹⁰, and so on.

But they agreed that we could perform there and it was a great joy for all of us, it was a good experience, because I was responding to all the festivals in Yugoslavia then. I also went to Bitef in Belgrade, which was an international festival from all over the world where performances took place. I went to Sarajevo on experimental scenes and saw that plays can happen in any space, not just there. I was also in Dubrovnik. That space was also wonderful, meaning we didn't need either scenography or effects, it was the atmosphere itself, especially for an absurd play like *Gof* by Anton Pashku.

And it was an extraordinary production, in public there were some foreigners because back then English lecturers would come to High Vocational School, English Language Department. Even a couple from Turkey were there, I don't know the reason why they came as tourists and they couldn't believe that such a play was happening in Prizren. At the same time, the play was in '86, the police curfew just started in Kosovo, and it was a very close space, very small, two policemen with automatic weapons {presents to be holding an automatic weapon} stood there and controlled the play. So, all of that contributed to the beauty of the play, the repression because the play also talked about something absurd. Because the text says all the time, "Let's get out, let's get out of something..." so on.

¹⁰ *Vakf*, Also known as *Vakıf*, is an institution introduced by the Ottoman Empire which was responsible for keeping the records of the Muslim community of the empire and which generally included a Madrasah within its structure as well. Now this institution is transformed to the Islamic Union [*Bashkësia Islame*].

I will never forget those moments. It was a, a great play. But it wasn't produced because my aim was to have an alternative scene that would be more attractive for tourism and for theater for smaller, roomy play, because we couldn't always have enough audience to fill 424 chairs that were in the Cultural Center back then, it wasn't possible. In a small city, you can't expect the hall to be filled in every replay of the show, it's impossible. They either have to be smaller shows, with a smaller audience which gradually can be built into an proper audience for theater, to have an audience for the whole year, not just for the premiere.

In this aspect, I don't see these changes even today, although this year, since I was a little engaged with the celebration of *Lidhja e Prizrenit*, I tried to make a very small performance at the Stone Bridge, so a show that can take place anywhere in any space in Prizren. Anywhere, small shows, attractive shows because we don't have plenty of space. But going back to the '80s, even though there was some cultural life in the city, not one that was very satisfying, but it still existed. Skopje's theater which was called Theater of Nations back then because it was Albanian and Turkish, they were regular visitors of shows in Prizren, their shows were played there. There were shows from Belgrade, Ljuba Tadić also was there, a great Yugoslav theater actor, Serbian, he played in *Sufokla*, it was an amazing show, a perfect monodrama.

So, time after time, we had shows from the National Theater, both Albanian and Serbian dramas. Even Gjakova's theater, even local theaters if they were amateur, from Peja or from other cities, and so on. Cinema filled this cultural gap, there were two cinemas in Prizren, I was a regular visitor. My parents before me were the same, I was educated in that environment, my parents went to the cinema all the time, we were little they always left us... so, this was the entertainment of people in Prizren, going to the movies, movies were always selected.

The repertoire was excellent for that time, so all those movies that were performed in Hollywood came to Prizren at that time and I was a regular, in the hall that is now called Lumbardhi and in that other center now that became Evropa, or as it was called then *Kino Radnik* [Worker Cinema]. We watched movies regularly and the cinema had an extraordinary audience that the audience was always full, we always had to buy the ticket ahead of time {extends her hand as if she's giving something} we didn't go and go in immediately, no, they were always sold out. There was a lot of interest.

The cultural life was complemented by the arts and culture societies which were based in the city of all nations and nationalities, as we referred to them at the time. Along with the theater, I was also a member of the Agimi Society, and their concerts oftentimes were good, not very often, but they were quite good and successful. Also, the experience I had in that society was grand. Because if today you can travel anywhere, back then, at that time, at that age we didn't have the opportunity to travel much. I was lucky that at the age of 15, 16 to go to Germany with the Agimi Society, for example. That was a great experience, because the city of Prizren and Bingen were twinned and that tradition continues.

So they have the Bingen Fest, they collaborated with Progress, a Prizren-based company and the wine producers of Krusha e Madhe and Rahovec. So, for the first time as a 16-year-old, I flew by plane, at that time, it was rare and out of the ordinary. The same trip we took two years after with the Agimi Society to a festival in Turkey, in Italy, and many other places in Yugoslavia. We also participated in the Olympics in Sarajevo, I led the Society's concert. We were invited to the Olympics in 1984. And if today we talk about the amateur activities without payment, at that time it was better because as much as we gave to the community, voluntarily, free of charge, without compensation, we have also received something from that community because we traveled a lot, and those are the rewards that the amateur has from all these festivals.

If we talk about amateur theater, I couldn't reward them in any way because the BVI for culture at that time or the Municipality budget wasn't enough to even offer them drinks during rehearsals. They wanted to be part of festivals, to travel. That was a very unique experience for all of us, because youth and their parents could not afford it, not all parents could afford to have their children travel to other countries. That was the satisfaction and the reward that you got, of course, you also received a certificate, an acknowledgement for your role that you played, and that was very satisfying for us.

So, I acted in Prizren from 1972 until 1992, when the dismissal of Albanian workers began. So the blow was especially on the intellectuals, and of course I was one of those who didn't sign that worthless document of the Republic of Serbia that I accept it as my state. That's how it was formulated, a small paper {gestures the paper}, which had neither a signature nor a stamp, nor anything. And I said, "I won't sign it because I don't know who sent it to me." But of course the next day I was fired. But with other threats in advance saying I wasn't obedient, I didn't come in time to rehearsals, at work, other things in vain.

So, their goal was to get me out of there. Not just me, but also some other coworkers who didn't sign that document. So we always were under pressure, especially after the demonstrations of '81. It wasn't for Albanians in general in an area we worked on, we were always looked at from another angle. We always had obstacles, but as Albanians, we had a moral and professional obligation to give whatever we can, because this was our country and we wanted to go further, but to forget, to leave some trail for the coming generations and to work as correctly as possible, with the utmost sincerity. Although often we weren't rewarded as much as we deserved, so the salaries weren't much, but those times were like that.

Of course, there are a lot of obstacles even today, especially in culture, there isn't much support, but I see enthusiasm in youngsters who excite me with the dedication and ideas they have. Especially in Prizren, a miracle is happening since the cinema doesn't have that pressure anymore. Now I follow different programs that happen at Lumbardhi apart from Dokufest, which is a great festival, but Lumbardhi is bringing back its charm and we have to work towards picking good, deserving movies.

So that audience comes back, and gradually creates an audience of young people and all ages of course, so this city can function better, because Prizren has turned into a touristic town which is liked by the visitors.

But something more needs to be done in terms of culture, beautiful things have to happen, because we have different environments where a show and a chamber orchestra can perform, and some soloists or some... and painters should be present in the streets, for example painting. Something that would be even more liked by visitors. In this regard, Dokufest took a very big step, which is a very nice thing that happened. I have been following this festival since the beginning of its existence, even though I don't live here all the time. But during the summer I come to this festival. But one genre isn't enough. So this city should function throughout the year and something should happen every month or several times a month, different concerts, different performances.

[The interview cuts here]

Open almost... international... throughout the year, throughout the whole year, in different genres, not just... I'm talking, I mean it should be theater also, performances of different genres, ballet and pantomime or something else that can happen.

Ares Shporta: I want to thank you for the interview, I believe your work will continue.

Luljeta Çeku: I don't know (smiles) {joins hands}.

Ares Shporta: It was a very nice experience, and a journey through time, you reflected in detail around 20 years. You gave many ideas.

Luljeta Çeku: I had many more things... {puts her hands up}

Ares Shporta: We wanted to continue about when people were getting fired, but we concluded that part of the interview in a way.

Luljeta Çeku: Yes.