

DAH Theatre's Arts and Human Rights Festival

An Interview with Artistic Co-Director, [Dijana Milošević](#), member of IMPACT's Leadership Circle

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Belgrade, Serbia-based [DAH Theatre](#) is a professional performance troupe and research center. With origins in the early 1990s – formed by Jadranka Anđelić and Dijana Milošević as a response to the Serbian government's acts of aggression -- DAH works at the crossroads of theatre, dance, and the visual arts, creating daring artistic forms that inspire personal and social transformation. DAH has performed on almost every continent and trained hundreds of performers from across the world in its DAH Theatre Institute.



From the DAH Theatre performance of "For Your own Good," featuring Ljubica Damčević, Evgenia Eškina Kovačević, Ivana Milenović Popović, and Ivana Milovanović. Photo by: Una Škandro

In October of 2020, DAH produced and hosted the country's first-ever [Arts and Human Rights Festival](#), conceived of as a platform for ideas and aesthetic approaches that highlight and connect art and human rights. The co-Artistic Directors of the Festival were Ivana Milenović Popović and Dijana Milošević. The program included performances, films, installations, workshops and conversations between artists, activists and broader audiences. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, initial plans for an international in-person event in June were re-worked so that DAH could, instead, hold a hybrid Festival later in the year, with a limited number of programs in person (following strict public health protocols), and many others online.

DAH Co-founder and artistic director Dijana Milošević, in reflecting on this Festival, shares that DAH had previous experience in producing festivals, for their anniversaries and other occasions. But, considering "our turbulent world, what would we want to celebrate? To what do we want to call attention? Human Rights! We are doing theater that is working in the field of human rights. We'd met with many artists in theater and beyond who were doing the same. Some were conscious of working in the field of human rights, and some were not. When we look to our specific society in Serbia, not

only are human rights abused – we don't even have a culture of human rights. The concept of human rights is blurred in people's minds." Another goal was "to make human rights no longer understood as something imposed from the outside." As one step in sparking and nurturing a culture of human rights, meaning that people understand these rights, and understand them as their own, and also take non-violent actions to realize them, the Arts and Human Rights Festival came into being.

Dijana Milošević: One of the numerous exceptional moments of the Festival involved Brazilian film and theater director Eveline Costa, who, for personal reasons, was already planning to be in Serbia around Festival time. We asked her to stay to participate. Completely by chance, in Rio, she had met a woman from Serbia (Nevena Mitić) who was trafficked and now lives in Brazil. Nevena had built a new life, went to psychotherapy and devoted herself to stopping human trafficking. Together, Eveline and Nevena decided to speak through art about the tragedy of this kind of violence. [At the Festival] they presented "Women Trafficking – Art, Violence, and Reality," consisting of a short documentary movie and a short performance by Nevena followed by a discussion moderated by Tanja Nikolić from the Center for Girls based in Niš, Serbia. Nevena, who is not a professional performer, had recognized the power of art in addressing her cause. Her presentation has beauty while also being shocking and heartbreaking. But her message is about encouraging the women to stand up for themselves. She speaks a lot about concrete ways to recognize that you are in that situation. She had been a prostitute in Holland. I feel it is very important that we hear the real story from someone who is not re-traumatized by the re-telling, but who, instead, got back her strength. She was young when it happened. Part of the message is that almost anyone could be a victim. 80 people (all in masks) were in the audience for each of two presentations of this program.

Another highlight – it is hard to pick because everything was excellent – was a [panel discussion](#) on IMPACT/Imagining Together Platform for Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation.

Participants included [Cynthia Cohen](#) and [Polly Walker](#), both from the US, and [Claudia Bernardi](#), from Argentina. Cynthia, Polly and Dijana have been involved with [IMPACT](#) from its inception, and now serve as members of its Leadership Circle. IMPACT's mission is to cultivate, activate, nurture and embody imagination, relationships and processes that strengthen endeavors at the intersection of the arts, other aspects of culture, and conflict transformation among artists, communities, activists, scholars, policy makers, funders, and others across many disciplines. Panelists shared examples of the kinds of ethical work – in research and theoretical approach as well as on-the-ground – that can grow through IMPACT's strengthening of the arts, culture and conflict transformation ecosystem as a whole.

Dijana: Our world needs the kinds of connections in between all these fields that IMPACT fosters. I wanted to present it to Serbian and broader communities. We [in IMPACT] are still of course thinking of how to involve more people and we are absolutely working in the field of arts and human rights. Also, being in IMPACT is part of my professional identity, so I wanted to include this panel.

After the Festival ended in late October, DAH went on to offer a five-part online training program called, "Act Your Right."

Dijana: Our goal was to transmit to participants who are not necessarily artists how to make human rights concerns they are burning about into clear ideas for intervention using the arts. It might end up being an installation, a short outdoor performance or something involving visual arts. My colleagues Jadranka Anđelić, director, Ivana Milenović Popović, actress, and I gave them steps: how to get from the problem they want to address to art that makes something visible. Many people don't know where to start. And there are many ways to go about this. We gave examples of our work and, on the last day, the participants were telling me their ideas and I was trying to work with them to help create these steps. We had between 20 and 50 people join us each day, from all over Europe and the U.S. Most were from Serbia, which is especially exciting to me.