

Mirad, a boy from Bosnia by Ad de Bont
Notes taken from script version published by Longman

'Refugees don't exist. Only blown away people exist, people blown by the wind all over the world.' Set in the indescribably savage Bosnian civil war, this play tells the story of one boy's search for his mother. *Mirad* is a story for our time, and for all times and for people caught up in the desperate tragedies of war.

Background to Mirad

Wilfred Owen, the English soldier-poet of the First World War who was killed just weeks before the end of the hostilities in 1918, wrote in a fragment of verse which he intended as a preface to a book of war poetry:

*My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the Pity.
...All a poet can do today is warn.*

Ad de Bont has expressed similar feelings about his plays. He is interested in the power of theatre to affect young minds. He said in an interview in 1995, *'I believe education has to prepare children for life that is real.'* One of the major themes of the play is realism, and the realistic representation of the horrors of civil war through the stories recounted by its characters.

But the play does not just deal with the events of war. It also presents the experiences of those unwilling escapees from the conflict, the refugees, through the stories of Djuka and Fazila. Djuka says that refugees are never welcome; even that they don't exist as human beings.

As a study of survival against a background of religious conflict, the play has tremendous power. Ad de Bont has said it works equally well with children in a classroom as it does in the commercial theatre. If it has a message, it is probably best summed up by its creator, who said *'it might just help people change the way they think about refugees.'*

Background to the war in Bosnia

The background to the war in Bosnia is complicated. Bosnia-Herzegovina was ruled by Hungary in the twelfth century, became an independent nation in the thirteenth century and was under Turkish control from the fifteenth century until 1878, when it was assigned to Austro-Hungarian rule by the Congress of Berlin.

While under Turkish control many Bosnians became Muslims - by the twentieth century the population was roughly split into three: 44 per cent Muslim, 17 per cent Croatian Catholic and 31 per cent Serbian Christian. The rest of the population were Jews, Albanians and gypsies. It was, and still is, a truly multi-ethnic society. After the First World War, Bosnia became part of the New Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, renamed Yugoslavia in 1929. In 1945 Yugoslavia was reorganised by Marshal Tito on Soviet lines and Bosnia became a republic within the Communist Federation.

In 1989 the countries of Eastern Europe began to emerge from the Communist domination of the USSR, and tension grew between the countries of Yugoslavia. IN 1992 the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina declared their independence, although the referendum was boycotted by the Bosnian Serbs, who immediately seized 70 per cent of the country, killing or expelling Muslims and Croats in a campaign of 'ethnic cleansing' - a euphemism for the mass murder of people of different ethnic backgrounds from the aggressor's own.

The civil war that followed was one of the greatest tragedies of recent times. The death toll was enormous. Thousands of woman and girls were raped; towns and villages were destroyed; churches and mosques were blown apart and many refugees fled to Holland, Britain, Italy, Germany, Hungary or Romania. The savagery and bitterness of the fighting shocked the world. Stories of atrocities carried out by all sides, and evidence of them, are still being discovered.

The United Nations intervened, setting up safe havens for Bosnian Muslims, but it was not until 1995 that an effective ceasefire was agreed. By then, in a country of just over 4 million, 200,000 people had died.

Ad de Bont - the author

'From an early age I was always interested in writing - poems, diaries, songs, anything. Later I discovered I could write for the theatre, but this was not the main idea of my working life - my interest was in children. So I went to be trained as a primary school teacher; then I trained as a drama teacher and later I went to a school for actors. I started working for a theatre company in the late 1970's.

About 12 years ago I was asked to be the artistic director of a company working within schools - and I've done that ever since. Producing theatre in schools is very important. For me, the traditional theatre building in Amsterdam, Paris or

London is a dead building. It stand there, nobody lives there; the majority of people never come near. So it is a kind of a non-place to me. But when I first played in schools, this for me was a vibrating world: people lived there together, working on their own lives and thinking about the future of our world.

People have asked me if the violence of the play, Mirad, makes it unsuitable for a young audience. I believe education has to prepare children for a life that is real, and too often I believe over the past 50 years in Western Europe we have just prepared children for a 'youthland' that adults think is real. And it isn't. What I can say is that children who have seen Mirad say to me that now they understand how people at war can be so terrible to each other. Mirad, a Boy from Bosnia is both theatre and reality.

Adapted from an interview with Roy Blatchford in 1995.