

Interview with Elizabeta Zemljic

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MALMÖ, 2008 © PIETER TEN HOOPEN/AGENCE VU'



Born in Malmö in 1973 **Elizabeta Zemljić** is a film and theatre director with a special passion for creating stories about interactions between different European cultures. While growing up in Sweden, she returned regularly to Yugoslavia, the home country of her parents. She has also lived for three years in Copenhagen.

In 1996 Elizabeta Zemljić was deemed *Personality of the Year* by a major Malmö newspaper, in recognition of her work with a groundbreaking theatre project in the city. Most of her professional work reflects her attempts to link up identities. *Picnic at the Cemetery* was awarded the prize for 'Best foreign short film' at a 2001 New York film festival. Her documentary film *Gingerbread Land* has been aired on Swedish and Finnish national television. Both these films have also been screened across Serbia. Elizabeta's latest theatre production – *Teenage Club/The truth of growing up* – is a collaborative project between a Serbian and a Swedish theatre company.

Since 2007 she has been living on the small island of Inis Meáin, off Ireland's west coast. In November 2008 a documentary film she directed and produced through the medium of Irish will premiere on the Gaelic language television channel TG4.

Aziliz Gouez met her at her new home on Inis Meáin.

Aziliz Gouez is researcher at *Notre Europe*.

Interview conducted during the course of the '**European Works**' project.

Where are you from?

I was born and raised in Malmö. So I am Swedish but my parents are from the old Yugoslavia. My mother is Serbian, my father is Slovenian, and I have family also in Croatia – so I'm kind of a mix...

My identity is very much related to the old Yugoslavia, I still feel nostalgic for it. As a child, I lived for those summer months when my family travelled to Yugoslavia. The summers we spent there meant a lot to us, it was just a question of surviving the winters in Sweden!

In what circumstances did your parents leave Yugoslavia?

My mother and her first husband left the country in 1963 in a very dramatic way. They had to travel from Voïvodina all the way to Slovenia and walk over the border to Italy. When they arrived eventually in Trieste, they were put in a refugee camp and so commenced a very uncertain life of not knowing where they might end up. They wanted to go to the U.S., or Australia, or New Zealand – far away from Yugoslavia.

My father had a similar journey when he was very young, from Slovenia he fled to Austria – which had camps also. I recently found out that there were similar camps even in Ireland, for Hungarians. Those institutions were meant to provide refuge but they were equally used by wealthy countries to recruit labour. Every country that needed workers sent a delegation, you had to make an appointment with them and go through an interview.

Was Sweden a place your parents could envisage?

Neither of my parents wanted to go to Sweden; the only thing they had heard about it was that there were polar bears walking the streets... But they didn't have a choice. Those stuck in the camps for too long became very fragile and there was a risk that they would be sent back. All refugees therefore wanted to move on fast.

Life was extremely difficult in post-war Yugoslavia. My parents simply had a dream of a better life, but they had to say they were seeking asylum for political reasons. Although in a way it was for political reasons that they escaped because if you didn't conform to communist norms, you became

suspicious – an outsider. My father was a dreamer. He wanted to buy a Mercedes – which he did, later on...

In my mother's case, they would not accept her in to the "more desirable" countries because they had detected something on her lungs. They thought she had tuberculosis, which she didn't, but that little spot on her lungs marked her fate. The Swedish delegation said they could take care of her. Many developed European economies badly needed immigrants at that time and Sweden had difficulties in getting people. So they approached it from a humanitarian angle.

The irony of my mother's story is that when she had just arrived in Sweden, eighteen months after leaving her home, is when Tito opened the country's gates. He was forced to do so to rescue the state, which was in such a disastrous economic situation. He told Yugoslavs: *'Go! Make your money abroad and come back home'*. Many of those who left built houses in Yugoslavia – massive houses – but they never returned permanently. They wanted to work abroad for a couple of years, but those years turned into decades...

As you grew up, how did you relate to that story of emigration?

I cannot remember it ever being brought up in school that Sweden wouldn't have managed to become a welfare state without the immigrants. That's part of *my* Swedish history that is lacking in the Swedish history books. Subsequently I researched and found documentation about the camps in a Swedish archive, so I could follow the history of my family from a Swedish perspective.

On a more general level, the story of these post-WWII camps, full of refugees from Eastern Europe, is a part of European history which is not very well documented. Not much evidence of this has found its way into literature or cinema. I personally believe that it says a great deal about the countries that those people left, and also about the countries they finally arrived in.

Could you describe Malmö – the city where you grew up?

Malmö used to be an industrial city. When that fell apart, people had to create a new identity and they're still working on that. Today it's seen as a place with a cosmopolitan environment, but the multicultural dimension

has been built up only recently. Twenty years ago, the borders were very watertight. I grew up in Rosengård – the immigrants' area, very much separated from the rest of the town. I read in the newspaper the other day that Malmö is going to have the first gated community in Sweden. That's worrying. There's a danger in any phase of identity change, like Malmö has been going through.

I personally feel that the best thing about Malmö is precisely Rosengård. And the bridge to Copenhagen. Maybe it's a forced love affair, an arranged marriage where one partner is lusting more for the other. But still, a bridge that connects two countries is such a romantic thing! The most beautiful moment was when it was coming together, just before the two parts met. That was really poetical. Now it's "only" a bridge. Fifty years from now, people will think it has always existed...

And that bridge changed *me* too. It gave me the courage to emigrate. It opened up the road for me to leave Malmö. My own emigration happened before I reached thirty, but emotionally I had started to move away from Sweden before I had turned twenty.

What made you cross the bridge?

I never felt like I belonged to Sweden. It's a feeling which I find extremely difficult to explain because I am, formally, a Swedish citizen. And I cherish the Swedish language, which is my true connection to Sweden and probably what I will hold on to forever. Swedish was a second language which has become my first language.

Apart from this link, and although I have family there, I don't feel strongly related to Sweden either in a mental or physical way. It's only a connection to a few people and perhaps some food. Not even to its beautiful nature. Now I have adopted another landscape, in another country.

My parents did not have a long-term plan in Sweden and Sweden did not have a long-term plan for us. Coming from an immigrants' family, you don't have connections to the soil where you are born and that's a bigger problem than we usually like to admit. To be rootless makes you restless. For my family, it felt great to have a Yugoslavian passport; it was a link to our roots. But then the country fell apart. I was eighteen at the time. And it took me a year and a half to get my Swedish passport. But I still have a valid

passport that says “Yugoslavia” on it.

What was there in Yugoslavia that you lacked in Sweden?

To me Yugoslavia symbolised freedom. That’s paradoxical because a lack of freedom was the reason why my parents left. But as a child, I felt free every time I would visit. Sweden has so many rules... It’s something that’s built into you. It’s a very well organised, but an emotionally dysfunctional society. Serbia, on the other hand, is a highly emotional but very chaotic country.

I know more profoundly now what I’ve been missing. Some parts of my personality came out in Serbia that I couldn’t use in Sweden. I can express my opinions in Serbia. I can say what I really mean. I can fight with people and still go drink coffee (or something stronger) after an argument. There’s nothing bad with having an argument now and again; it’s good for your integrity to stick up for yourself.

In Sweden, conflict is the worst thing that you can get into. This is, I believe, an issue for the future of democracy. There’s a good Swedish word for that, “*kuvad*” – which means to walk around bent over, as if somebody were going to hit you on the head. You don’t feel that you can stand up for yourself in Sweden. The welfare system was constructed to protect the underdog but it has turned against its own people, who must constantly fight for their individual rights. “Teamwork” is the key word. Swedish people have learnt diplomacy and now they are too diplomatic. But Serbia probably should have more of that...

Has the meaning of “Yugoslavia” changed for you since that country collapsed?

When Yugoslavia split, some families we were friendly with stopped visiting. Our circle of friends in Sweden suddenly started to shrink. When my parents were in the refugee camps, they found many nationalists there – Ustasha, Chetniks, and so on. These people, who had to leave Yugoslavia, are also the ones who influenced its later disintegration. It’s an interesting cycle: it seems like the nationalistic elements were forced out of the country only for nationalism to return like a boomerang.

As for me, I hold on to this Yugoslavian identity. It has nothing to do with socialism or communism. Yugoslavia is not a physical place anymore but it's a beautiful idea. I'm myself a mix so I have to believe in it. And I am happy that more and more people can talk openly about it now, which was not the case in the 90s. I truly believe that ex-Yugoslavian countries do have to interact. They are doing it already through trade and cultural exchanges. It's not something that you can force.

What was your own experience of Serbia in the 90s?

I moved to Belgrade the same year that the Milosević regime fell apart. Before that, I had been going to Serbia regularly during the “troubled years”; I felt I had to go there to see what was really going on. The reports in the Swedish media were so black and white that I found them difficult to believe. I wanted to be an observer inside of Serbia, while everybody was commenting from the outside. It was important for me to be on the same level as the people there.

In those years, around 1995, you could really feel that something extremely heavy was underway. The Serbs were closed in – which they still are. People could hear that I didn't speak the language quite like them so they would ask me: *“How do they look upon us over there? Do they really hate us as we hear?”* They felt like being the troublemakers of Europe. Now you have a whole new generation of Serbs for whom it's normal to be the black sheep of Europe.

I went to Belgrade with a great deal of naivety – believing that something good was bound to happen after the collapse of Milosević. I wanted to be part of the building up of the new country. So I moved there as an optimist and almost came away as a pessimist. The people I mixed with during that year were my age or a little bit older; they were “the war generation”. The men especially had been in the war. It was difficult for them to move on to a new phase. They didn't believe in anything, they were extremely cynical. They wouldn't take my optimism seriously because they couldn't believe that anything good was going to happen...

Then I met with people from the younger generation, who had a different view on things. And I felt I had to come back to capture this. And I did come back and I made a film about it. My goal was to show people in Sweden that Serbs were actually normal, modern people. So I decided to feature

four Belgrade students who were studying Swedish. What better explanatory approach than using the target audience's own language? I just let the Serbian girls talk for themselves in Swedish.

Why were these girls learning Swedish?

I never got a definite answer. One of them said that some people just like to be really eccentric... Another reason they gave in the film is that Sweden is a country one admires. They hoped to create some kind of relation, through work or something else. As a matter of fact, Serbia really looks up to Sweden. And Yugoslavia always did. They put the word "Swedish" before everything that was quality – a "Swedish electrical system", and so on.

The story of these four girls was supposed to be a simple story but it became a very complicated one. It became tangled up with the relations between the two countries. Đinđić was assassinated an hour before his meeting with Anna Lindh and then Anna Lindh herself got murdered by "a young Serb", as he was portrayed in the Swedish media (although he was actually born and raised in Sweden just like me). That event really affected these girls, who were trying hard to build something – an imaginary bridge with Sweden.

What brought you to Inis Meáin, off the West coast of Ireland?

It all started fourteen years ago, when I was in my early twenties. I came across a drama – *Riders to the sea* by John Millington Synge – which I decided to stage in Malmö. By coincidence at that same period I came across a poster for a photography exhibition. It had a picture of a woman and a cow on a beach. The woman was looking up a little bit and the cow was looking in another direction. There was a tear in the woman's eye. She was standing there, in the middle of nowhere, holding this cow by a rope. I was looking at the picture, and it felt very familiar.

So I ran to the exhibition and saw all these black and white pictures featuring a very rough landscape, with no trees... The pictures had been taken on Inis Meáin by a Swedish photographer, during the 70s and 80s. I then discovered that this was the island where Synge had been inspired to write *Riders to the sea*. This picture had spoken to me. So I knew I had

to go there.

I started to research and the first thing I read about the Aran Islands is that they were overcrowded with single men. It became a joke: *would I ever come back?* I first came here for just three weeks. I was very sea-sick when I arrived. But when I got on the island, it was like landing on the moon. It was very quiet, very grey – neither friendly nor unfriendly. It was neutral. And that neutrality hit me. This was a place where I could feel some kind of balance.

You seem to be moving from one periphery to the other – from Scandinavia to the Balkans and eventually to the very western edge of Europe...

Being European gives you a lot of freedom, just in the identity itself. It also gave me the courage to move to this small place off the coast of rural Ireland. I know that I am a stranger out here – an identity I have accepted in this environment. It doesn't bother me. Strangely enough, I am known as "the Swede" on the island. It takes time to settle down but I feel accepted in the community. My biggest challenge is to learn the Irish language. It doesn't remind me of any other I know so I have to use all my language skills to master it.

My two identities – the Swedish and the Balkan – come together here. And that gives me peace. The reason why I feel so complete is perhaps because the Balkan and the Nordic features are meeting up here, on the edge of Europe. Irish people have a lot of passion, like the Serbs, but at the same time they are quiet and private people, like Swedes are.

I feel lucky. I have found the place where I belong.

What does European identity mean to you?

European identity is the one identity which is wide enough to absorb all my identity conflicts.

Europe is what unites me.

That sounds like a happy ending, doesn't it?