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The Damned Dam : Lala Raščić with Jusuf Brkić



Lala in full flight last Friday night, performing The Damned Dam in Belgrade

Few practices in contemporary BiH are as varied and wide-ranging as that of Lala Raščić. As an artist, she embodies the nomadic rhythms of the twenty first century, based between Sarajevo, Zagreb and New Orleans. In the past month she has been a relentless producer; opening solo shows in Rijeka and Zagreb, performing three nights in a row for the closing of the Oktobarski Salon in Belgrade; then, the week after next, appearing at *Bone 16* in Bern, with a return to the USA planned for early in the New Year- and a series of new exhibitions in New Orleans.

But this is not a practice which privileges production and outputs over research- rather, it is the other way around. A constant and straying curiosity, a core of ideas continually replenished by new reading, has seen three or four strong performance pieces maturing at the same time. Lala's recent research has encompassed a profound study of man's malign effect on his environment, both in the USA and in Europe; the rich visual imagery of her epic *The Damned Dam* derives in part from this work.

It is maybe a surprise that an artist for whom the spoken and written word is so important, is still perhaps better known for her video work rather than performance; films such as *A Load from the Inside-Reviewed* of 2011, set in the Sigmund Freud museum in Vienna, gives strong evidence as to her performative capabilities. In this film, cleverly, she appears as a 1920s-style silent movie slapstick figure; the balance between aestheticisation and comedy is very finely judged.

[Lala's performance of The Damned Dam last Friday night, at the Oktobarski salon](#) accompanied by Jusuf Brkić on the saz, drove home the centrality of performance to her practice, to those who were fortunate enough to witness it. This is a project that the artist has been working on for over four years now; based partly on the Modrac dam in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This dam was the subject of BiH's very own *War of the Worlds* moment some years ago; the broadcast of a radio play, suggesting that the dam was about to

break and give way, caused serious panic amongst listeners in the small town of Lukavac, who took the fictional narrative seriously.



Lala with Jusuf Brkić during “The Damned Dam”

In addition to the environmental agenda running through this performance, there is also a profound awareness of the oral tradition, of the expansion and development of epic narratives passed on from generation to generation. *The Damned Dam*, a mixture of dystopian post-apocalyptic landscape, a narrative of travel, and the unlikely growing together of the two main protagonists- Tarik and Merima- is a performance piece suggesting at an unpleasant future but very firmly rooted in a local past.

This multi-layered piece can be approached in a number of ways. It is possible simply to enjoy the performing of it- concentrating on the artist’s magnetic “stage personality” and the contemplative release offered by the saz interludes. But this would be to pay less attention to the piece’s sumptuous visuality and its deep emotional range. There is every sensation here, from mild embarrassment and laughter at Tarik’s clumsy attempts to woo Merima initially, to terror in the three dam breachings and floods that programmatically break up the narrative; from sadness and pathos at death and the environmental destruction of a whole way of life, to relief at escape from near certain oblivion for our heroes.

Implicit in the declamatory rhythms and the lilting of the saz is a strong critique of our present, in terms of politics and man’s relationship with the environment. We live in an era of worsening environmental disaster; of political impotence and shoulder shrugging in response to those disasters; where recycling a plastic bottle or wearing a wristband endorsed by a celebrity is enough to make us forget the impact of the rest of our actions on the world around us.

This poem, set in the late 2020s, portrays Bosnia as a colonised and devastated land, ruled by remote-control EU commissioners, with the local population reduced to the status of overworked, anonymous vassals, tasked with meeting energy targets set in Brussels. It is a land subject to frequent flooding and turbulence, natural events watched over by a weak and supine administration. Neighbouring Serbia, it seems, has disappeared under successive waves of floodwaters, with all but a tiny part of Belgrade lost forever. Part apocalyptic vision, part conscience pricking, an analysis of the words spoken reveal a subtle

critique of the dehumanising aspects of neoliberalism and a dark imagining of what may lie ahead in the future.

Lala's spoken imagery also relies heavily on a deep knowledge of, and love for, different landscapes and their appearance in all conditions. There is a careful tracing of the contours of BiH in the opening section, and BiH both in winter and early spring; an imagining of the destructive forces of nature on the flat uplands of Serbia, and the people that live there. This passionate engagement with nature is replicated in Lala's research on the landscape of Louisiana, around New Orleans, and her work reading past geographical surveys from the nineteenth century, plus engagement with thinkers critiquing man's use of land in that part of the world, in the present.

This performance of *The Damned Dam* was an unalloyed triumph. Beautifully written, performed tautly, and accompanied by the captivating, plaintive lilt of the saz, it is a piece that fully involves the audience's attention for the forty minutes of its duration. A splicing of slam poetry, Balkan epic storytelling, love and loss, it leaves as big a bruise on the mind, as it does on the senses. If you get the chance to see it anytime soon, take it. In the meantime, there's always soundcloud.

Jon Blackwood

[Lala will next be performing *The Damned Dam*, with Jusuf Brkić, as part of Bone 16 on Friday 6 December in the Stadtgalerie, Bern.](#) Jusuf is currently working on an album and we will keep you posted with details of its release.

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