

Client: Riot Communications
Source: Western Mail (Magazine)
Date: 23 October 2010
Page: 14
Reach: 29567
Size: 524cm2
Value: 3411.24



AUTHOR'S NOTES

Penny Simpson reveals how a chance visit to a country emerging from civil war inspired her novel, *The Deer Wedding*



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When I was asked to write this article about *The Deer Wedding*, I immediately hunted out the journals I kept at the time of my visit to Croatia where the novel is set.

They revealed the start of my journey was straightforward, even if what followed turned into a more complicated adventure.

It was 1998 and I'd been invited by Cardiff-based director Firenza Guidi to join her company ELAN on Hvar, an island off the Croatian coastline, where a production of *The Tempest* was being staged. Beyond that preparations were vague – I was to get a boat to the island, where I was to ring and ask for Igor who would drive me to the company's rehearsal HQ (a room under a very busy fish restaurant).

I scrawled Igor's number on the first page of my journal; I also stuck in a newspaper cutting about Croatia's national football squad who had got through to the semi-final of that year's World Cup.

For a country that lost its independence in the 11th century, shortly after the Battle of Hastings, triumph on the football pitch was always going to be a cause for celebration. A new country – it was formally recognised in 1992 – demanding its voice be heard after years of not officially existing at all, was now confronted with the formidable task of making its

existence felt on a stage already bristling with other contenders from the fallout of communism's collapse.

The new nation state was forging a variety of professional partnerships to help raise its profile in Europe, and a Shakespeare Festival in Hvar was part of its commitment to opening up cultural debate with other countries, including Wales.

And, of course, there was the traumatic fallout of the 1990s Yugoslavian Civil War to take into account.

The war had ended just three years previously, but strangely that wasn't the impetus for making my journey.

In 1998, I was grieving the deaths of several close relatives.

There had been (too) many professional disappointments and I still couldn't pay my phone bill. The idea of taking off to an island, to escape what at the time felt like a complete collapse of my world, was the attraction.

Friends were more cautious. There had been a run on Croatia's Dubrovacka Banka, triggering economic turmoil, and hostilities were mounting in Kosovo on the borders. The political atmosphere in the countries of the former Yugoslavia was once again volatile, but I packed a bag and some notebooks and threw caution to the winds. Few preconceptions, no agenda, although I had organised to write for a number of newspapers and magazines as part of a British Council initiative. Wales was on the verge of setting up its first National Assembly for 600 years, another

nascent state on Europe's newly drawn map, and I thought that might make an interesting parallel for exploration in my journalistic assignments.

There are some places you arrive at and you know instinctively they are going to have an impact beyond anything you may have imagined.

I've always been drawn to places where history is a tangible force; my experience of living in a bi-lingual country has also played its part, leading to an interest in countries where language is a key thread in an intricate cultural and political web.

I'd lost one person in particular who knew me better than anyone else, who could trace my whole history as easily as scrolling a page on a laptop.

In Croatia, I was meeting people who had had that same experience, but amplified by the cruelties of a brutal war; in some cases that experience had been further

complicated by past tragedies and conflicts.

History was a living and unspent force, not something stuck in a textbook; it was multi-layered and it was disputed daily in cafes, in the street, even in church.

There was no choice, but to listen in.

I set off from Zagreb on a rather haphazard road trip down to the island. The surprise I got when I read back through my journals was to realise how my unpremeditated route (and detours) pretty much mapped out the geography of my future novel, as well as provided me



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with starting points for creating specific characters.

An artist's studio, an atmospheric Jewish cemetery, and a street market where my very basic Serbo-Croat resulted in the purchase of the equivalent of a whole rucksack full of peaches for breakfast one morning.

On the island, the play was the thing, performed partly in the sea, partly on land, but its compelling power re-interpreted by a cast, which included local fishermen – as well as one of their fishing boats and a giant fishing net-turned-bridal veil.

I knew it would all add up to more than a few articles, but it has taken me nearly 12 years to realise that in a novel.

In contrast to my earlier book *The Banquet of Esther Rosenbaum*, I was writing about things I knew, as well as imagining the past.

I had a lot to learn. Which is really why I write, I guess, to learn through my imagination. I also have a "day job." Interestingly, having constraints on my time means I've become better disciplined in getting my writing done.

It helps that I work for Welsh National Opera and am inspired daily by people who create small miracles to make performances happen.

I've also discovered I like to re-draft my stories listening to opera. At the moment, Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* is my top editing choice, although *The Coral* occasionally wins out.



The Deer Wedding is published by Alcemi, £9.99