**The Balkan Closed Circle**

**Tim Prentki**

**Inspired by Bertolt Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle***

**Prologue: Raspberry Jam**

[*The whole company walks into the acting area and takes up positions around a discussion circle. The representative from the UK supermarket Fresco and his Belgrade lawyer are dressed in sharp suits. The villagers are casually dressed or in work clothes.*]

**Village Elder:** So, now you’ve seen over our plantations, what do you think? A decent crop, no?

**Fresco Rep:** More than decent, I’d say. You certainly know how to grow raspberries.

**Villager:** We should. Been doing it long enough. My great-grandfather was harvesting them on the same patch of land.

**Villager:** You won’t taste better anywhere in Serbia.

**Villager:** Or anywhere else in the world for that matter.

**Fresco Rep:** You’re rightly proud of what you do here.

**Village Elder:** I hope that means you’ll be giving us a good price.

**Lawyer:** Wait a minute. There’s a lot to consider before we get to the cash.

**Villager:** What’s to think about? We’ve got the fruit. You want the fruit. So, what’ll you pay for it?

**Fresco Rep:** Hold on a moment. I think there’s been a slight misunderstanding. We are indeed interested in your raspberries but Fresco is looking at your whole operation and what we can learn from it and how we can develop it.

**Villager:** ‘Whole operation’? What does that mean?

**Lawyer:** It means that Fresco might be able to help you with the costs and risks of production.

**Villager:** Paying us a fair price, year on year, will do that.

**Lawyer:** Not necessarily. What if production falls one year?

**Villager:** Why should it? The land’s always here. The canes are always here. The sun rises and the rain falls.

**Villager:** On the just and the unjust alike, as the Good Book says.

**Lawyer:** And if it doesn’t?

**Villager:** Doesn’t what?

**Lawyer:** The rain. Fall anymore. Global warming. Climate change. You need insurance.

**Villager Elder:** And why would you want to offer a safety net?

**Fresco Rep:** Because you grow the best raspberries.

**Villager:** And we can grow more of them. Provided the meddling bureaucrats from Brussels keep out of our business.

**Lawyer:** Yes. We heard about your problems last year. Something about non-organic fertiliser, wasn’t it?

**Villager:** Nothing wrong with it. Produced bigger, redder raspberries and more of them. Just didn’t meet some silly health and safety regulation.

**Fresco Rep:** That’s part of the beauty of our offer. We don’t need to follow EU rules after Brexit.

**Lawyer:** It’s the perfect situation, you see. Serbia is permanently in a process of accession without ever joining. All the benefits without the legal responsibilities.

**Fresco Rep:** And the United Kingdom will be permanently in a process of exiting without ever leaving. Benefits without constraints. As we say, a win-win situation.

**Villager:** So our raspberries are especially attractive.

**Lawyer:** They could be. But right now there’s one major problem.

**Villager:** There’s no problem with our raspberries. You’ve just tasted them.

**Fresco Rep:** Delicious indeed.

**Villager:** So what’s the problem?

**Fresco Rep:** They’re delicious because they’re fresh. But how long do they stay fresh?

**Villager:** They should be good for two or three days.

**Fresco Rep:** And how long does it take to get them onto our supermarket shelves?

**Villager:** That’s your business.

**Fresco Rep:** It takes a week.

**Villager:** So you’re selling bad fruit?

**Fresco Rep:** No. We’re selling frozen fruit from Serbia. Fresh is from Scotland where supplies are limited.

**Lawyer:** Fresh raspberries command almost double the price of frozen ones.

**Villager:** So speed up the supply from here and offer us more for them.

**Lawyer:** You’ve got it. That’s exactly what we want to do.

**Villager:** We’re agreed then, What’s your price?

**Lawyer:** Not so fast. What’s slowing distribution?

**Villager:** Well, the main issue is the local roads. Most are unmade and we have to use tractors and trailers; then transfer the punnets to trucks at Arilje so they can go to Belgrade airport. Every year we complain to the government.

**Villager:** In an election year some official promises a new road.

**Villager:** Trucks can’t run on promises.

**Fresco Rep:** Belgrade’s the nearest airport?

**Villager:** Nearest with a runway to take a big cargo plane.

**Lawyer:** So you’re stuck; stuck in a raspberry jam.

**Villager:** Tell us something we don’t know.

**Lawyer:** Fresco can ‘persuade’ the government to build the road and expand the airport at Kraljevo.

**Villager:** That’ll take millions.

**Lawyer:** EU infrastructure development funds – with a little pump-priming from Fresco.

**Villager:** Problem solved.

**Fresco Rep:** Not quite. For such a huge investment Fresco will need some guarantees over many years.

**Villager:** What sort of guarantees?

**Fresco Rep:** Guarantees about price, quality, quantity and sole rights to the product.

**Villager:** Impossible. Even God can’t guarantee nature.

**Fresco Rep:** Fresco can take the risk away from the growers.

**Villager:** How?

**Fresco Rep:** We’ll buy out your entire operation.

**Villager:** Leaving us with nothing?

**Lawyer:** On the contrary. Leaving you with a secure income come rain or shine. If the bottom falls out of the raspberry market, it won’t fall out of your lives. You’ll be trading uncertainty for security.

**Village Elder:** And the price is our land.

**Lawyer:** What do you say?

**Village Elder:** I say there’s a lot to take in here. Let’s take this decision in our own time. Today is Lazareva Subota, a day for feasting and joy when we count our blessings. So it’s time to gather round the *Zapis* – the sacred oak – for a fable from that renowned poet and story-teller Zoran Zdravković.

[*The Singer steps out of the crowd and takes over the stage-management, calling up characters for the story from the assembled villagers*.]

**Scene 1: The Unkindness of Strangers**

**Singer:** For better or worse Yugoslavia is now ‘the former Yugoslavia’. The land of Tito is no more.

When angry nations fall to war

Great ones remake themselves;

Of that you can be sure.

The small survive by luck or wit.

The mighty use cash to escape from it.

[*The company engage in a violent dance centred on tearing a Yugoslav flag into many pieces. Throughout there are increasingly loud sounds of a bombardment: machine-guns; mortars; automatic rifle fire; etc*.]

Krajina, 1995. To be a Serb is dangerous. To be a poor Serb, lethal. The rich and powerful are the first out.

Ana Kasun, proud wife of the President

Of Krajina’s Serbs, seeing which way the waters flow,

Flees with her cash, child and servant in tow.

In the bloody confusion which matters the most?

Give up the baby, the cash or the ghost?

[*Ana Kasun struggles on stage dragging a heavy carpet-bag. She is followed by Sasha, carrying a baby in her arms. Ana puts down the bag. Sasha sits down with the baby*.]

**Ana Kasun:** Quickly. There’s not a second to lose. Get a move on, Sasha. This is no time to dawdle. The village is on fire.

**Sasha:** Madam, I must stop. Your daughter needs feeding. The poor mite’s thirsty.

**Ana Kasun:** Too bad. We can’t stop. There’ll be time for that once we cross the river.

**Singer:** And her stolen assets are safe from thieving hands.

[*Ana Kasun recrosses the stage to pick up the carpet-bag and drag it off with her. Sasha speaks while this action happens*.]

**Sasha:** You carry on, Madam. I’ll stay and feed Nadica, then catch you up.

**Ana Kasun:** I must get out. I’m strategically important. You understand?

**Sasha:** Of course, Madam. We’ll be alright. Who’ll notice us?

**Ana Kasun:** You take care of my child or there’ll be hell to pay. [*She exits with the bag.*]

**Sasha:** Yes, Madam. Of course, Madam. Three bags full, Madam.

[*Sasha sits. She places the baby on a changing-mat and prepares a bottle of milk. Vera and Radovan run onstage, not noticing Sasha or the baby*.]

**Singer:** Good-hearted Vera, the district nurse

And bold Radovan, her boyfriend, enter our story;

Unwilling victims of hate’s eternal curse;

Neither are seekers after death or glory.

Bodies will be broken. Vera’s skills in demand.

Fork turns to rifle in Radovan’s hand.

**Vera:** My darling, what do you know of fighting? You’re a farmer, not a soldier.

**Radovan:** You don’t understand. All Serbian men in Krajina are soldiers now. There’ll be no farming done here for many a long year.

**Vera:** There must be another way. You know how to make things grow, not to kill. It’s not in your nature.

**Radovan:** War is not natural. But when it sweeps you up, you fight or die.

**Vera:** I can’t bear to hear you talk of death.

**Radovan:** Hush, sweetheart. I’m no hero. I’ll play my part and then come back safe to you. You are my life, my future.

**Vera:** You must. Promise me. There’s no living without you.

**Radovan:** There’ll be no living for either of us, if we don’t leave now.

**Vera:** Must you go? Hundreds are volunteering to fight. They don’t need you but I do. We could run. We could hide.

**Radovan:** Hush, my darling. If I don’t stand and fight, there’ll be nowhere to run to. There’s no more Yugoslavia; only Serbia. You and I are Serbs.

**Vera:** Serb. Croat. Bosnik. It’s all so stupid. Radovan, I love you because you’re you, not because you’re Serb.

**Radovan:** If only it was so simple. Maybe one day it will be. Till then I’ll be a soldier. Come. Kiss me. I must be gone.

[*They embrace while the Singer speaks*.]

**Singer:** The girl clung to the soldier as to the last piece of driftwood in a storm-tossed ocean. Hear what she thought but did not say:

‘I don’t want a hero. I want a living man.

I don’t care if the report declares

He was a coward and ran.

Living, not brave, will be all my prayers.’

Love’s soldier locked in her arms like last warmth of a dying year. Hear what he thought but did not say:

‘War, dear girl, must not tear us apart,

Nor Bosnian winter freeze

Blood pumped through my heart,

Till Serb spring heat the Danube’s breeze.’

[*Noise of gun-fire increases. Voices off urge Radovan to hurry. He pulls himself away from Vera who stands motionless, looking after him for a long time*.]

**Sasha:** Don’t hang around here, love. It’s not safe. Croat militia’s on the rampage.

**Vera:** Oh. I didn’t see you there. Are you trying to get away with your baby?

**Sasha:** My baby? You must be joking. This is the Governor’s brat. Mother’s just up sticks and buggered off with the dosh, leaving me stuck here with this lump.

**Vera:** Is it a boy or a girl?

**Sasha:** Does it matter? All I know is, it’s a pain in the arse for me. I’m landed with it in the middle of nowhere about to get my brains blown out.

**Vera:** Try to be calm. Let’s get out of here together.

[*Unseen by the women a Croat militiaman has entered and points his automatic rifle at them*.]

**Militiaman:** Don’t move, ladies. [*He advances on them and pushes Vera to one side.*] Let’s see what you’re hiding there, you Serb thieves. Oh, baby is it? Smart clothes; expensive shawl. Looks too good to be yours, love.

**Sasha:** It ain’t mine. And I didn’t steal it. [*Militiaman puts down his weapon and takes the child from Sasha.*]

**Militiaman:** Then you won’t care if I squash its brains out with my boot. Can’t have any more Serb maggots breeding in Croat soil.

[*He puts the baby on the ground and goes to stamp on it. Sasha is frozen in horror. Vera picks up the rifle and hits the militiaman over the head with it. He collapses unconscious*.]

**Sasha:** You stupid cow. Why did you do that? We’ll have the lot of them after us now.

**Vera:** Why? What do you mean, why? You saw. He was about to slaughter an innocent child.

**Sasha:** So what? It’s not mine or yours.

**Vera:** It’s human. It’s alive.

**Sasha:** We won’t be much longer if we stay here. I’m off.

[*Sasha exits. Vera slowly approaches he baby and examines it before cradling it in her arms*.]

**Vera:** I would like to help you but I’m no mother. I wouldn’t know how. Someone will find you. Someone who won’t care if you’re Serb or Croat. Don’t look at me like that. Why me? I’m just a poor girl. I’ve trouble enough looking after myself. A little girl. Poor mite. I don’t even know your name. Well, you can’t be ‘it’ or ‘she’, so I’ll call you Bojana – battle – ‘cos you and I will be in a battle to survive in this world.

**Singer:** So the foolish girl flung herself, unwilling

Into the maelstrom of history.

No time to think what hopes she’d be killing,

Navigating humanity’s treacherous sea.

Vera’s entrapped by the helpless stranger

Though every dimple and gurgle spell danger.

She’d rather leave her to face down her fate,

But that’s a death sentence in a world of hate.

[*Shouting and gunfire from off stage. Vera packs the baby’s things on her back and exits with the child*.]

**Scene 2: Searching for Heroes**

**Singer:** Scene Two in which Vera saves a life and risks two others.

[*Vera re-enters with the baby crying.*]

**Vera:** Hush, little one. It’s too dangerous to cry. Don’t you know there’s a war on? All you know is that you’re hungry. All I know is that if you don’t stop crying, we’re both dead.

[*Members of the cast form a screen of rocks behind which Vera goes to hide.*]

Here. Suck my thumb. Try to pretend there’s milk in it.

[*Two militiamen enter; the one whom Vera hit and another.*]

**1st Militiaman:** When I get my hands on that Serb bitch, we’ll have some fun, don’t you worry.

**2nd Militiaman:** I don’t. You’ve always known how to enjoy yourself with women.

**1st Militiaman:** That’s not a woman. That’s a she-devil. We’ll do for her, anyway.

**2nd Militiaman:** Never mind her. The Commander will do for us if we don’t get hold of the brat.

**1st Militiaman:** Listen. If we get the woman, we get the kid. She won’t leave it to us.

**2nd Militiaman:** Let’s get a move on then. Night’s coming on.

[*The militiamen exit. Pause. Vera comes from behind the rocks. Slowly she removes her thumb and the baby cries. She hastily returns her thumb to her mouth.*]

**Singer:** She carries the President’s babe on her back,

On and on through Krajina’s night;

Darkness her shield from militia’s attack.

At every sound she freezes in fright.

Dawn draws near. The Drina’s in flood.

Vera must risk the kindness of strangers.

Road to the bridge is drenched in blood.

What choice but the gauntlet of Croat dangers?

[*Blackout followed by the very loud sound of a mine exploding. When lights come up a mother is holding her son/daughter who is bleeding profusely. The mother cradles his/her head in her arms, sobbing helplessly. Villagers gather round*.]

**Villager:** What happened?

**Villager:** S/he stepped on a mine. Those Serb swine are murdering our kids.

**Villagers:** What sort of monsters put down mines where children play?

**Villager:** Do we know it’s a Serb mine?

**Villager:** I’m not getting close enough to examine it. There’s probably more.

**Villager:** What’s mine is yours.

**Villager:** What you on about, you daft sod?

**Villager:** Just that it might be a Croat mine. They know Serbs are trying to escape this way.

**Villager:** What’s it matter? Serb, Croat. It’s done for the child.

[*Vera hurries on with the baby, hardly aware of the incident*.]

**Villager:** Hey, you! Yes, you. I’m talking to you.

**Vera:** What do you want? I can’t stop.

**Villager:** Are you a nurse?

**Vera:** Yes. But not here.

**Villager:** You’re here now. Here’s where we need you.

**Villager:** What’s your hurry then?

**Vera:** I’ve got to cross the river. Our lives are in danger.

**Villager:** Why? What’s so special about you?

**Vera:** Nothing. I’m a mother with a child and I’ve got to cross the river.

**Villager:** Here’s another mother. Her child’s been blown up by you murdering Serbs.

**Vera:** Oh no. That’s terrible. Let me see.

**Villager:** Why? So you can finish her/him off?

**Vera:** Don’t be so stupid. I’m a nurse. I might be able to help.

**Villager:** Help? How can a Serb help?

**Villager:** Serb or Croat, a nurse is a nurse. Let her try.

[*The villagers move back to let Vera in. She examines the child tenderly*.]

**Vera:** Get me boiling water and something I can use for a bandage, quickly. [*To the mother*] Lay your child softly on the ground, on her/his back. That’s right. [*To the child*] Don’t close your eyes, sweetheart. Look at me. Keep breathing steadily. Deep breaths. That’s it.

**Mother:** Will s/he live? Please, tell me.

**Vera:** I don’t know. Maybe. The pulse is getting steadier. Keep her/him still and hold her/his hand.

[*Water and cloth are brought in. Vera sterilises a piece of cloth and cleans up the wound on the child’s leg. She takes another cloth and applies it as a tourniquet above the wound*.]

**Singer:** Croat or Serb, the blood’s still red.

Without Vera’s skill this girl will be dead.

So war gives this nurse nowhere to hide.

All self-centred desire she casts aside.

**Vera:** There. That’s all I can do. I think s/he’ll live but you must get her/him to hospital to have any chance of saving the leg.

[*The mother embraces Vera, sobbing with gratitude*.]

I’m sorry. I must go before the militia get here.

**Villager:** Where are you going?

**Vera:** I must cross the river with my child.

**Villager:** Out of the question. The Drina’s in flood.

**Vera:** But isn’t there a bridge?

**Villager:** It’s not safe. The militia tried to blow it up.

**Villager:** Made a mess of it. Like everything else.

**Vera:** Safe or not. I’ve got to try.

**Villager:** Then you mustn’t risk the child.

**Vera:** I have to. You see, the militia will kill me and the… my baby, if they catch us.

**Villager:** Why should they bother about a slip of a girl like you?

**Vera:** I hit one, over the head. Knocked him out.

**Villager:** She’s a terrorist. We should have nothing to do with her.

**Vera:** Listen. You don’t understand. I had to. He was taking my child. He was going to kill her.

**Villager:** Alright. Calm down. Let’s think about this.

**Vera:** There’s no time. I have to cross that bridge.

**Villager:** No. It’s impossible.

**Vera:** It must be made possible. [*Long silence*]

**Villager:** O.K. We’ll help. We’ll put you on the bridge with your child. Then it’s up to you.

[*The villagers form a human bridge. Vera walks the length of it, unsteadily. As she reaches the far end, it collapses but she scrambles safely away. In that moment a militiaman enters, trying to shoot her. The villagers ‘accidentally’ obstruct him and Vera escapes with the baby.*]

**Singer:** In the chaos of war

Can I trust my friend?

In the chaos of war

I must trust my foe.

Once war’s unloosed

No one knows its end.

Truth’s collateral damage

When to force it must bend.

**Scene 3: Opportunity Knocks**

**Singer:** Now Yugoslavia’s gone.

Tito’s vision’s but a dream.

In rural Serbia seasons roll on:

Sun rises; snow fills the stream.

[*During the Singer’s words Vera journeys round the stage, at one point exiting with the baby and reappearing with a girl.*]

Vera hauls her precious treasure

Through the seasons, hot and cold,

In search of shelter, safety, kindness;

Somewhere for the child to grow.

The front-line has moved to Bosnia,

Dragging off beloved Radovan.

So she comes to Tara’s valleys

To be as close as she can.

In the village of Still Waters [in Serb perhaps?]

She’s made welcome with a home.

Though they whisper ‘unmarried mother’,

In troubled times a nurse is gold.

From police to priest all adore her

For she holds this tiny world

Safe within her gentle hands,

While every second thought

Travels, anxious, to bloody lands. `

Baby Bojana’s grown to a girl.

Vera’s care gives the village health.

But when the city comes a-calling,

Turbulent winds swirl

And rattle the rusty scales

That weigh maternity’s wealth.

[*While the Singer speaks, the village policewoman enters and sits behind her desk. The Priest also enters and sits beside the desk.*]

**Priest:** And you’re sure the call wasn’t a hoax?

**Policewoman:** How can I be sure? They said they were phoning from Belgrade with good news for our community.

**Priest:** Nothing else? No clue?

**Policewoman:** Just that someone from the organisation was coming to explain everything and I should be sure to be in the office at such and such a time on such and such a day, and here I am, keeping the appointment.

**Priest:** How long should we give them?

**Policewoman:** I don’t know about you but I wasn’t going anywhere. I’ll stay here all day.

**Priest:** I’ve got to prepare for evening service soon.

**Policewoman:** That’s fine. They only said they wanted to meet me.

**Priest:** But I’m curious. Besides, it’s only proper that I should know about anything that affects our community.

[*There is a knock, shortly followed by the entrance of the flamboyantly dressed Kadza.*]

**Kadza:** Hello. Sorry to disturb you.

**Policewoman:** Not at all. We were expecting you.

**Kadza:** I’m hoping you can help me.

**Policewoman:** Don’t I know you from somewhere? Your face….It’s familiar.

**Kadza:** Not from police files, I hope. Perhaps you’ve seen me on T.V.?

**Policewoman:** That’s it! My God! You’re off the telly. Kadza as I live and breathe.

**Kadza:** You’re right. I’m Kadza. That’s me.

**Policeman:** So, how can we help you?

**Kadza:** We’re, that’s the BBC – the Belgrade Broadcasting Conscience – are researching for a programme on the heroism and resilience of rural Serbia through the war years.

**Priest:** Sounds most patriotic and uplifting. But where do we come in?

**Kadza:** This beautiful, (dare I say?) timeless village with its close-knit community and rich tapestry of folklore and tradition looks like the ideal setting.

**Policewoman:** Steady on. Don’t use up all your script yet. If you want permission to film, I’m sure that can be arranged. Of course, there’ll be a fee involved to cover disruption, road closures; that sort of thing.

**Priest:** And don’t forget the church.

**Policewoman:** As if we could.

**Priest:** It’ll have to look its best as the centre-piece of the village. That means a new roof.

**Policewoman:** When it comes to infrastructure, the school’s in urgent need of a make-over.

**Kadza:** Hold on. Don’t worry about the details now. If this village is chosen, you’ll hit the jackpot. Overnight you’ll be a tourist destination and with the right marketing, I’m not just talking about Balkan tourism. Serbia can be the next big thing and you’d be the jewel in the Serbian crown.

**Policewoman:** Fantastic. I’m offering full co-operation. When do we get this show on the road?

**Kadza:** Once the choice is made, they’ll move fast. But there’s something else.

**Priest:** What’s that?

**Kadza:** I’m looking for more than a place. I need a person too.

**Priest:** What person?

**Kadza:** A heroine who embodies the spirit of Serbia: tough, heroic, resilient, to be the focus, the subject for the film.

**Policewoman:** I know just the person you’re after. Vera.

**Priest:** Who?

**Policewoman:** You know. Nurse Vera.

**Priest:** You can’t be serious.

**Policewoman:** Why ever not? After her heroics crossing the bridge and then all she’s done for the health of our children.

**Priest:** But… but she’s an unmarried mother. What would that say about us? It’s impossible.

**Policewoman:** There’s no one better.

**Kadza:** Is there no chance of her marrying? I mean, if that would get round the problem.

**Policewoman:** Now there’s a thought. I just might have the perfect husband for her.

**Scene 4: Air Brush**

**Singer:** Meanwhile Ana’s remade her life:

Populist politician floats Serbia’s boat;

The people’s choice in times of strife;

Mother’s grief brings out the vote.

[*Ana Kasun and Kadza sit opposite each other. Two camerapersons represent the space as a TV studio*.]

**Kadza:** [*turns to the audience as if it is the camera*] Good evening and welcome to the BBC’s weekly political interview. Tonight we are pleased and privileged to host the rising star of Serbian politics, a woman whose own turbulent history – some say – uniquely qualifies her for high office. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Ana Kasun.

**Ana Kasun:** Thank you, Kadza. It’s a pleasure to be with you this evening.

**Kadza:** Ms. Kasun, I’d like to begin by asking…

**Ana Kasun:** Please. Call me Ana.

**Kadza:** Ana, I’d like to start with that history and take you back, if I may, to that fateful day in 1995 when, as a Croatian Serb, you, along with 500,000 others, were forced to flee your home.

**Ana Kasun:** It was a truly terrible time. Chaos and violence stalked the land. Yesterday’s neighbours and friends, today our deadly enemies.

**Kadza:** I believe you were with a group of refugees fleeing towards the Drina, pursued by Croat militia?

**Ana Kasun:** That’s right. I was with my baby daughter and personal assistant.

**Kadza:** Then what happened?

**Ana Kasun:** As we neared the river, we came under fire and took cover behind some rocks.

**Kadza:** How did you become separated from your child?

**Ana Kasun:** My PA, Sasha, was holding my beloved Nadica [*she starts to sob gently*]. I thought she’d be safer with her. You know, someone younger, stronger who could run faster.

**Kadza:** I realise this is very difficult for you but is that what happened? Did Sasha get away with your Nadia?

**Ana Kasun:** I think so. I hope so. I’ve lived every day since that moment trying to believe she might still be alive.

**Kadza:** But you’ve not tried to find her?

**Ana Kasun:** On the contrary. I’ve tried everything but it was impossible. If she stayed in Croatia, she’ll have changed her identity. If she got out, who knows where she might be now. Perhaps Sasha has passed her off as her own for all I know.

**Kadza:** And you? How did you manage to escape?

**Ana Kasun:** By the grace of God. The Good Lord smiled upon me that day. First I made sure Nadica and my servant, I mean PA, had got away.

**Kadza:** How did you manage that?

**Ana Kasun:** By keeping the attention of those Croat devils on me so Sasha could creep away. Once they were clear I surrendered to the militia.

**Kadza:** Why did they spare you when so many others weren’t so lucky?

**Ana Kasun:** I don’t know anything about luck. I had a little cash with me – my life savings from hard work. I distracted them with that. Bought myself a few, precious minutes and set off on my long, lonely walk to freedom through the pitch-black Croat night.

**Kadza:** That must have been a terrifying, low moment for you.

**Ana Kasun:** It was. But what kept me strong was my faith in Serbia.

**Kadza:** And your hope as a mother?

**Ana Kasun:** Of course. That one day we would be reunited, just as Serbia will one day be back on the road to greatness.

**Kadza:** Do you feel you can bring that day closer?

**Ana Kasun:** That is my dream. But there are doubters and anti-social forces who will try to thwart us.

**Kadza:** Do you mean liberal opposition groups who will sell our country short?

**Ana Kasun:** You said it. I couldn’t possibly comment. Let the good people of our great country decide.

**Kadza:** Well, that’s all we’ve time for tonight. Ana Kasun, thank you for your time and sharing your inspiring story with us.

**Ana Kasun:** Thank you.

**Scene 5: Finding Mr Right**

[*The house of the widow Višnja and her son Zdravko Vuković. Zdravko is lying on a mattress, groaning while his mother tries to administer a broth to him. A knock, followed by the entrance of the Policewoman and the Priest.*]

**Višnja:** Ah, Father, have you come to give Zdravko the last rites? I didn’t send for you. But now you’re here, you may as well.

**Priest:** Are things that bad? I thought his condition was stable.

**Policewoman:** There’s obviously no time to lose.

**Višnja:** For what?

**Policewoman:** Er, well, you see… we’ve got a proposition to put to you Mrs Vuković.

**Višnja:** Involving my Zdravko? You can see he’s not up to anything.

**Priest:** He won’t actually have to *do* anything.

**Policewoman:** It’s just a matter of changing status – for the good of the community. Becoming a husband.

**Višnja:** I’m part of the community. What good will it do me?

**Policewoman:** There will be some funds available to support the, er, transaction.

**Višnja:** Funds? That bears thinking about. A poor widow woman and a feeble son, not long for this world. I’ve got to make provision for my future.

**Priest:** One understands, Mrs Vuković. In addition, I’m sure your son’s funeral [*Zdravko groans*] expenses can be overlooked – as a community service.

**Višnja:** And who is the lucky bride?

**Policewoman:** Vera. Nurse Vera. Though she doesn’t know it yet.

**Višnja:** Why would she agree? Not that my son’s not a fine catch, of course.

**Priest:** As an unmarried woman with a child, she attracts a degree of opprobrium in such a small, shall we say, conservative community.

**Višnja:** She’s lived here a while with no problem. Why does it matter all of a sudden?

**Policewoman:** You see, Mrs Vuković, the situation has changed. The BBC wants to make a film about our village with Vera as the star.

**Priest:** But she needs a husband. It wouldn’t do to present Still Waters as a hotbed of immorality.

**Policewoman:** A temporary husband is all that’s necessary. Your son seems ideal for the role.

**Višnja:** Fair enough. But I’ll need something in writing. A contract for services rendered.

**Singer:** Once more Serbia needed a hero:

A simple girl who stands for all that’s best;

Dogged, resilient and, of course, pure.

A living example to inspire the rest.

Pity the land that needs heroes

As that other old poet once wrote.

**Scene 6: The Price of Love**

[*Vera is at work in her make-shift clinic. As the scene opens she is giving an injection to a patient.*]

**Vera:** There, my dear, all done. Now just go home and lie down for a bit. It would be good to rest here but I’ve no space and patients coming all the time.

**Patient:** Thank you nurse Vera. Bless you.

[*As the Patient leaves the Policewoman and Priest enter.*]

**Priest:** Sorry to disturb you but can we have a quick word?

**Vera:** It’ll have to be quick. You’ve seen the queue in the waiting-room.

**Policewoman:** We wouldn’t normally intrude, except it’s quite urgent.

**Vera:** Alright. Please get to the point.

**Priest:** How can I put this? Your presence, no, your status in the village is a matter of some concern to us.

**Vera:** What status?

**Priest:** As an unmarried mother. People talk. Word spreads.

**Vera:** It’s nobody’s business but mine.

**Policewoman:** That’s not quite true anymore, Vera. Circumstances have made it a lot of people’s business.

**Vera:** Circumstances? What circumstances? What are you on about?

**Policewoman:** I’ll come to the point.

**Vera:** I wish you would.

**Policewoman:** The BBC has chosen our village to make a documentary film about Serb resilience.

**Vera:** Splendid. What’s that to do with me?

**Priest:** They want a heroine to epitomise that spirit. We’ve chosen you.

**Vera:** Really? What an honour. I accept, if that’s what you came to ask.

**Priest:** It’s not quite that simple. You are indeed a heroine but you are also without a husband and with a child.

**Vera:** Joan of Arc didn’t have a husband.

**Policewoman:** She didn’t have a child either.

**Priest:** You see, my dear, the eyes of the nation, who knows?, perhaps the world, will be upon us. We can’t afford to present ourselves as morally suspect.

**Policewoman:** Afford is the word. There’s a lot of money riding on this. Not just the television fees. All the tourism that’ll follow. So we need you to get married, fast.

**Priest:** And we’ve got a wounded war hero all set to oblige.

**Vera:** What? Who are you talking about?

**Policewoman:** Zdravko Vuković.

**Vera:** The bed-ridden invalid?

**Policewoman:** The same.

**Vera:** They say he’s at death’s door.

**Priest:** Exactly. He only needs to last through the filming.

**Vera:** Do you know what’s wrong with him?

**Policewoman:** Don’t you?

**Vera:** His mother won’t let me near him.

**Priest:** He’s not moved off his bed in months. Since he struggled back from Sarajevo.

**Vera:** Why’s he agreed to marry me?

**Priest:** Why not. You’re a catch.

**Vera:** Of course. Now the truth, please, Father.

**Policewoman:** Some money will change hands. A poor widow. I’m sure you understand.

**Vera:** Oh yes. I understand. So what about a poor wife with a husband who can’t work and a child to support?

**Policewoman:** What’s your price?

**Vera:** A new clinic.

**Policewoman:** Be reasonable.

**Vera:** I am. If this TV business is to improve the village, a clinic that operates properly is the top priority. Children are ill that don’t need to be. People are dying before they’re old.

**Policewoman:** Those are your terms for agreeing?

**Vera:** Yes. A clinic or nothing.

[*Policewoman and Priest exchange glances.*]

**Priest:** Very well. A clinic it shall be.

**Scene 7: Telling Tales**

**Singer:** So all is set for the happy day;

A union of battered war heroes.

Let none Still Waters’ hopes betray.

Candle flickers amid gathering woes.

To Sasha Kovač who fled our scene,

The long years have not been kind.

In Novi Beograd’s streets so mean

A living she tried to find.

A girl alone’s an easy prey.

Don’t blame her when she took her chance.

Wealth keeps you on the narrow way.

Poor girls it leads a merry dance.

[*During the Singer’s second verse Sasha has entered, looking bruised and dishevelled*]

**Sasha:** [*to the audience*] I’d got nothing to lose, ‘cos I got nothing. Scumbag boy-friend trying to pimp me, when he wasn’t beating me up. No job. No place of my own. So, there I am, sitting all alone in his flea-pit. Vodka bottle empty. Last fag smoked when who should I see on the telly but that bitch Kasun, my dearly beloved former employer. She’s banging on about her long-lost daughter or some such bullshit. So, what price a little information? Well, I phone the BBC and they take my contact details and say they’ll pass them on. Next thing I know there’s these two goons at the door threatening that if I don’t tell them everything I know about baby Nadia, they’ll rearrange my bone structure, permanently. Boy-friend’s nowhere to be seen, of course, and I’m terrified. I mean, like, really shitting myself. So I tell them what I know – describe the girl who took her; where; when; what clothes the baby had on; even the bit about the militiaman. One of them drops a thousand dinars on the floor. The other smashes his foot into my face as I pick up the notes. Then they’re gone and I’m nobody again. Nobody with a thousand dinars stuffed into her bra.

**Scene 8: The Miracle Cure**

**Singer:** The village puts on its Sunday best,

Plants fresh flowers in every pot.

Spring birds sing from the cosy nest.

Viewers admire the idyllic spot.

[*The company crowd onto the stage to greet Vera and her bride-groom, Sdravko, as they emerge from church. Sdravko is leaning heavily on Vera who has Bojana on her other side. He hobbles with the aid of a stick. The event is being filmed by the BBC.*]

**Singer:** Queen Vera wears the bridal crown.

A husband recruited, double-quick.

Sdravko, wounded hero, was dusted down,

Dragged into the sunlight, given a stick.

Some dinars set the wheels in motion

[*Policewoman stuffs money into Mrs Vuković’s pocket*]

Camera, lights, action.

**Kadza:** Vera, how does it feel to be the toast of Serbia?

**Vera:** I’m sure I don’t deserve such an honour.

**Kadza:** No one is more deserving. You embody the spirit of the nation.

**Vera:** That’s an awful responsibility. How can I live up to it?

**Kadza:** If anyone can, you can. We all need hope and your heroic deeds have planted the seeds of that hope.

**Vera:** I don’t know anything about ‘heroic’. I’ve just tried to help those who needed me.

**Kadza:** An example and an inspiration. You must be very proud, Sdravko, to have been chosen by such a woman.

**Sdravko:** It’s a joy I never expected, certainly. I’m sure she’ll bring great comfort to my last moments.

**Kadza:** Last moments? She’ll revitalise you.

**Sdravko:** Some things are even beyond heroism. My war wound will see me out.

**Kadza:** Would you like to share with the viewers how you came to be injured?

**Sdravko:** Not really. This is an occasion for happiness. Let’s just say, I’ve done my bit, too, for the nation in my own small way. We can’t all be heroes but we can do the right thing.

**Kadza:** Well spoken. And today you’re certainly doing the right thing by marrying this wonderful woman – the beating heart of Serbia. Let’s hear it for the happy couple.

[*The cast sings a well-known wedding song in Serb until Kadza signals them to stop.*]

Hold it. Hold it there, ladies and gentlemen. You won’t believe this. Our glorious day has just been made perfect. I’m getting breaking news that the war is over. Peace has broken out throughout the Balkans.

**Sdravko:** You’re sure? You’re not kidding? No media stunt?

**Kadza:** Here. See for yourself. [*He shows Sdravko his phone*.]

**Sdravko:** Yipee!! [*He jumps in the air, throwing his stick away.*]

**Singer:** Behold, the age of miracles is not yet past.

The lame shall walk; perhaps the first be last.

[*As he speaks, Vera, holding Bojana tightly, moves away from the celebrating crowd.*]

Hear what our heroine thought but did not say:

‘Dear God, they promised me a husband who would not stay

Long upon our perilous earth.

But peace is the tonic to preserve the scared.

Now I’ve got this useless lump in tow,

While my only love, my darling Radovan

Hot-foots it from the dragon’s mouth

As all my hopes and dreams,

In the blink of an eye, flee south.’

High summer spins to smoky autumn.

Soldiers straggle home to loving hearths.

Vera’s man no longer knows his place.

A child seems to proclaim his love’s disgrace.

Meanwhile, when power’s at stake, money talks.

Sasha squawked on promise of reward.

Vultures circle to feed on motherhood;

A test of truth to filter mother from fraud?

**Scene 9: Tug of Love**

[*A circle is drawn centre stage. Bojana is placed in the middle. She wears a dress in the design of the former Yugoslavia. On one side are Ana Kasun and her supporters wearing smart, urban clothes. On the other is Vera with her supporters dressed as rural peasants. Kadza is the host or M.C. for the unfolding scene.*]

**Kadza:** Hello and welcome to the BBC’s ever-popular game show, Mum’s the Word. Today you’ll be the first to know whether the woman who’s brought up the lovely Bojana…

**Ana Kasun:** No. Her name’s Nadia.

**Kadza:** Alright Nadia (or Bojana), nurse Vera Dragić or Presidential Candidate Ana Kasun is the real mother.

**Radovan:** Vera, tell me, is the child yours?

[*All eyes are on Vera. Slowly she nods to Radovan.*]

And that man [*points at Sdravko*] is the father?

**Vera:** Good lord, no. He’s nothing to me.

**Radovan:** Just your husband.

**Vera:** I couldn’t help that.

**Radovan:** You got married by accident?

**Vera:** No. For the child.

**Radovan:** So who’s the father?

**Vera:** Please, Radovan. I can’t say. All I can say is, I love you.

**Radovan:** What use is that to me?

**Vera:** No use at all. Love’s not a matter of use.

**Kadza:** Sorry to break up this tender scene but the viewers are waiting for action.

**Ana Kasun:** Yes. Let’s get on with it. I can’t wait to have my little girl back.

**Vera:** Your little girl? What do you know of being a mother?

**Ana Kasun:** I know I can give Nadia whatever she wants.

**Vera:** Except love. Bojana’s never lacked for love.

**Kadza:** Ladies, please. The circle will determine this argument. The true mother is the one who can pull the child out of the circle according to the ancient wisdom of the Chinese who now export all things, even their wisdom.

[*Two lines form either side of Bojana/Nadia as in a tug-of-war. Ana and Vera grip either side of her dress which splits in two to reveal another dress made in the pattern of all the flags of the countries comprising the former Yugoslavia. All freeze except the Singer.*]

**Singer:** Hear what the girl thought but did not speak:

**‘**You fight to claim me as your own,

Though I belong to no one but myself.

Does the eagle that soars over your lands

Become Bosnian west of the Drina?

Are the fishes in Lake Zvornik

Bosnian or Serb?

My thoughts fly wild and free as birds.

My DNA’s human; my heart bare as bone.’

[*The company unfreezes and returns to their positions for the Prologue.*]

**Epilogue: The Jam Sets**

**Lawyer:** You’ve heard our generous offer and you’ve had time to think about it. What do you say to it?

**Village Elder:** I say we don’t do things in a hurry here. Time doesn’t run like in the city. Here it ambles.

**Fresco Rep:** I’m afraid out in the big world time is money. Either I take a deal back to London today or Fresco will look elsewhere for its raspberries.

**Villager:** And deny her Majesty’s loyal subjects the best taste in the world.

**Lawyer:** They won’t know what they’re missing but you will soon enough.

**Villager:** What’s that?

**Lawyer:** Roads, water, steady incomes. All the security of the Fresco brand.

**Villager:** But we’d still have our land, our fruit, our homes. Just like always.

**Fresco Rep:** Always? I doubt it. What if the crop fails? What if the water supply fails? What if people don’t want raspberries? How will you survive?

**Villager:** How will you? You live on the same planet.

**Fresco Rep:** Fresco’s big enough to adapt. People will always need food. We’re offering you the chance to be part of that; to share the benefits of our total operation.

**Villager:** At a price.

**Lawyer:** Of course. There’s always a price.

**Villager:** What’s the price of identity? Self-respect? Dignity?

**Lawyer:** We’re not buying those, so you don’t have to sell them.

**Villager:** You don’t begin to understand. We’re farmers. That’s all we know.

**Fresco Rep:** You’ll still be farmers under this scheme. It’s your experience as farmers that we’re buying.

**Villager:** Tenants. Landless peasants.

**Lawyer:** Secure, well-paid, care-free.

**Village Elder:** Enough. Today is Vidovdan, the day of decision. We’ve heard the offer. We understand the terms. [*to the audience*] How would you choose the future?

**End**