

# A black comic catharsis for Serbia

BY HEDY WEISS  
Theater Critic

**T**he name Slobodan Milosevic — recently deceased former president of Serbia, indicted war criminal and overseer of the fracturing of the former republic of Yugoslavia during the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo — is never uttered in "Huddersfield."

Yet Milosevic's ghost hovers heavily over this play, which is now receiving its U.S. premiere in a sensational production by TUTA Theatre Chicago. The work of a young Serbian dramatist, Ugljesa Sajtinac, this blistering orgy of destruction, rage and grief exposes the truth about the lost generation that grew up in Serbia during the 1990s and is still coming to terms with the fallout of that calamitous period.

The play (whose English title is something of a red herring), might best be described as the Serbian version of Kenneth Lonergan's "This Is Our Youth" — a twentysomething coming-of-age story, but one with a far more toxic than usual mix of psychic wreckage, sexual decadence, self-pity, nihilism, black humor, literary and religious satire, and suppressed longing. Think of it, too, as a more youthful version of some of those bawdy, semi-hallucinatory films made by Emir Kusturica who, though on the other side of the ethnic divide (he is a Bosnian Muslim), also captured the insanity of those times.

## THEATER REVIEW

### 'HUDDERSFIELD'

#### HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

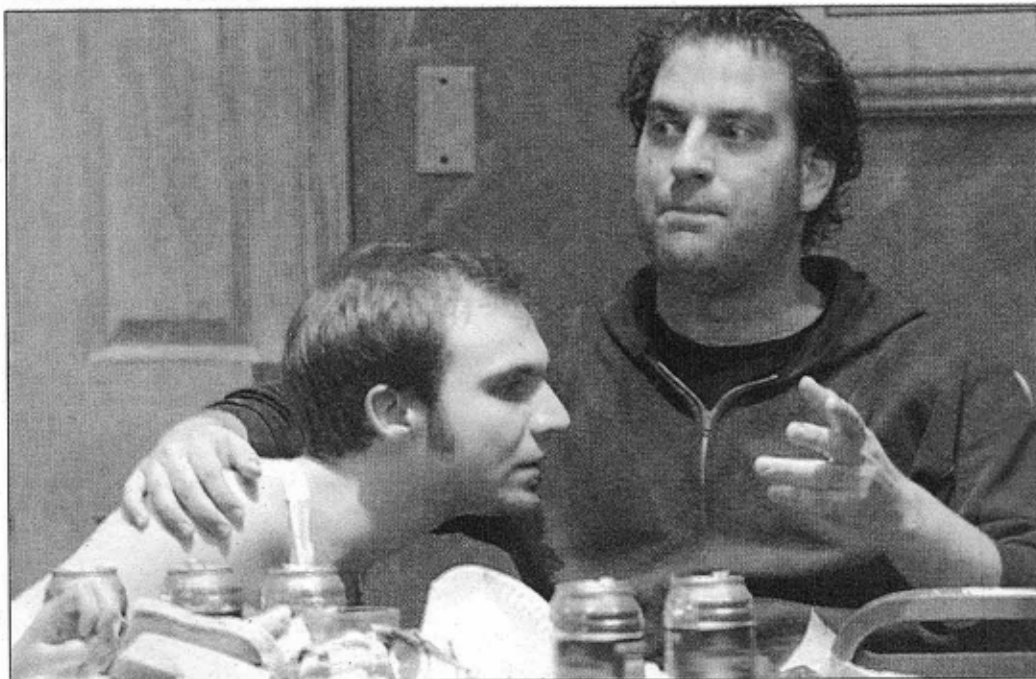
**When:** Through July 8

**Where:** TUTA Theatre Chicago at Victory Gardens Studio, 2257 N. Lincoln

**Tickets:** \$20

**Call:** (773) 871-3000

Either way, the point is this: It would be one thing to ask actors in the Balkans to play the roles created by Sajtinac, and to get to the very core of the matter. But there is something truly uncanny about the way the Chicago cast — a group of seven young actors who probably rarely gave Serbia a thought until they were cast in this show — has captured the essential spirit of this drama. Applause for them, and for the play's superb director, Dado. And heaps of praise, too, for translator Duska Radosavljevic and adapter Caridad Svich, whose script captures the American idiom perfectly yet remains infused with another culture. From the first deep puff on a cigarette (the staff of life in Serbia) to the eating of kabobs and sausage and the knocking back of slugs of slivovitz, the play has the authentic feel of Serbian life.



Rasha (Greg Beam, left) and Ivan (Andy Hager) are neighbors in post-war Serbia in the TUTA Theatre Chicago production of "Huddersfield," playing at Victory Gardens Studio.

At the story's center is Rasha (Greg Beam, who brings a radiant mix of caustic irony and sexy intelligence). Now 30, he is barely surviving cohabitation with his violent, alcoholic father (Peter Defaria, perfect as a pathetic brute) in their tattered apartment. In fact, the father has just pulled the bathroom door off its hinges and carted it away, removing the last shred of civility in the place.

Rasha is a lost soul — a freelance writer and former student of literature and philosophy whose life was interrupted by the war, by the loss of a serious girlfriend, and by his own disaffection with everything, most notably himself. Yet while he is clearly damaged goods, he retains a certain debauched charisma and has easily seduced a 16-year-old girl, Mila (Kim McKean, pale, thin, leggy, blond and spot-on), who has no real memory of or interest in the war, and is simply hot for sex, drugs and coaching for a test on "Hamlet."

Ivan (Andy Hager, hilarious, heart-piercing and brilliant as the tragic clown), is Rasha's neighbor and longtime friend, and is in an even more shattered condition. A gifted poet and gentle soul, he has been in and out of the military, prisons and a mental hospital for years now. He lives with his mother, functions only with the help of psychotropic drugs, and has turned to the occult for sustenance. Rasha pities him and mocks him.

The chaos only escalates when two old friends come around for a party of beer and marijuana. Doole (Dana Wall in a pitch-perfect turn), also 30, has pulled his life together on some level, working as a sales executive in a chocolate company and living not much differently than he might have, had recent Serbian history been different. As for Igor (Matthew Van Colton, wonderful as the not-so-naive fellow with a handle on self-preservation), he fled to England 10 years earlier and created a more produc-

tive life — with a job in a lab in the Yorkshire town of Huddersfield, and plans to marry a Polish-Jewish woman he met there.

This is the new Europe, with Serbia on the distant fringe. And throughout it all, a gypsy musician (inspired improves by Carlos Ricardo Villarreal) enters the action to echo the characters' emotions with his violin.

During a night of wretched excess there are bursts of poisonous but self-aware racism on the part of Rasha, vomiting and rebellion by Mila, humiliation for Ivan and a roll call of the fates of the men's friends and classmates that suggests just how broken many of them became. There also is a morning-after sense of forgiveness, or at least a kind of total exhaustion.

"Huddersfield" is not for the faint of heart or the priggish. But it is one pitch black and rollicking act of catharsis — deathly funny and ferocious, and a real coup for TUTA.

hweiss@suntimes.com