

Spring 2015

# "Sacred spaces of the stage": Proclaiming Mennonite identity through theatre

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“Sacred Spaces of the Stage”: Proclaiming Mennonite Identity through Theatre

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An Honors Program Project Presented to  
The Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Visual and Performing Arts  
James Madison University

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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by Benjamin John Stoll

May 2015

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of the School of Theatre and Dance, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, as a theatrical reading at Wayland Hall on March 22, 2015.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	4
Abstract.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Literature Review.....	9
Project Design.....	13
Pacifist Identity through the Lens of War.....	14
Creation from the Ashes.....	17
Conclusion.....	21
Appendix A: <i>Sanctuary</i> .....	22
Appendix B: Theatrical Reading Program.....	70
Works Cited.....	71
Works Consulted.....	74

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the following professors and colleagues whose efforts made this thesis possible: Kate Arecchi, Ingrid DeSanctis, Dr. Dennis Beck, Dr. Zachary Dorsey, Vesna Hart, Ted Swartz, Rebecca Lustig, and Dr. Terry Dean.

In addition, I would like to thank the School of Theatre and Dance, the Department of English, and the Honors Program, for their continued financial and academic support during my undergraduate career.

## I. Abstract

The focus of this contextual and reflective essay is to explore the relationship between the medium of theatre and the conveyance of religious tenets, as well as the methods by which to do so in a manner beyond the rhetorical or didactic. By tracing specifically the historical interplay between theatre and the Mennonite denomination of Protestant Christianity, this essay argues for an effective and relevant correlation between the theatre and the church, for the purposes of understanding human nature, giving voice to universal issues of heart and spirit, and demonstrating implicit examples of creed—in this case, the question of peace. The research approach includes an examination of theatre's relationship to religious institutions; a study of Mennonite identity as pacifist or peaceful; documentation of Mennonite scholars of theatre, and their understanding of the crossover between art and faith; and historical accounts of the war in the Balkans, which serves as the basis for the production aspect of the thesis. The creative culmination of this research is an original one-act play entitled *Sanctuary*, which draws from the above explorations and represents a marriage of theatricality and faith that investigates the Mennonite peace identity in the context of the historical siege of Sarajevo.

## II. Introduction

The Mennonite denomination of Protestantism has tended historically to give a less-than-approving eye to many modern occupations, those in theatrical entertainments included; such a view originally stems from desire to remove worldly influences, avoid Catholicism and practices that supported the papacy, and focus on spiritual truths rather than spectacles of deliberate masquerade (Friesen 107). However, the past two decades have seen a surge in efforts to spread the Mennonite creeds of peace and brotherhood beyond the doors of the church, and to further integrate Mennonite culture into mainstream forms of dialogue with the secular world. One such area of that focus involves the creation of works of art that find “fresh approaches to [Mennonite] history”; from poems and paintings to fiction and plays, these artistic representations of Mennonite identity explore everything from central tenets of the denomination to the host of past Anabaptist martyrs slain for their religious adherence (Beachy 11). Despite these efforts, however, widespread recognition of artistic merit continues to remain elusive, and “there are those in the Mennonite faith community who still question the validity of the arts as a legitimate vocation” (Caskey 167).

In addition to bearing the disdain of a judgmental populace, the existing body of Mennonite artistic works—specifically regarding theatrical plays—is also lacking weight beyond the pulpit, beyond thinly veiled attempts of overt moral instruction. “Dramatic realism (theatre as a slice of life) as a playwriting form is nearly absent from Mennonite writing.... [A]ttempts to write in this form have resulted in an emphasis on the rhetorical, the sentimental or the didactic” (Friesen 116). Yet the effort is clearly there, and Mennonites continue to turn to theatre as a vessel for delivering messages of both art and faith, recognizing that “through theater we can learn to listen to and engage ideas different from our own with the ultimate goal of true

dialogical engagement with others” (Caskey 173). Veteran Mennonite actor and celebrated comedian Ted Swartz compares the vulnerability of the stage, and the openness of spirit required to embody a character, with the vulnerability of faith. He calls it “an intriguing and continually fascinating balance of selfishness and selflessness” (Swartz, *Laughter* 191). He furthermore cites the courage it takes to open oneself up to the possibility of change and discovery: “Theatre is the best metaphor for faith there is” (Swartz, Interview).

Thus, if Mennonite artists acknowledge that theatre can be useful for reexamining Mennonite history and creed, but the blatant insertion of doctrine limits such efforts to Mennonites’ own altars, then the question that demands reconciliation is this: what are the merits of using theatre as an artistic tool for distributing Mennonite themes, and how can this goal be achieved with modern relevance beyond the heavy-handed didactic methods of church drama? “Whether there will be a vigorous exploration of contemporary forms and new styles of expression [in Mennonite theatre], waits for an answer” (Friesen 121). I suggest that answer is the creation of theatrical works that marry faith and art with themes of human consideration common to both religious and secular realms; such works must acknowledge the influence of Mennonite creed *implicitly*, as an inward lifeblood instead of an outward livery.

What may seem only a slight religious matter is in fact a larger question of human identity in the face of extreme duality. In a world that constantly presses open-mindedness and coexistence near to the point of conflicting moral perspectives, a sect as small and seemingly narrow as Mennonitism may appear backwards and unwilling to evolve. In reality, however, the perseverance of the Mennonite emphasis of peace and simplicity rather stands as a remarkable example of conviction—especially in face of a decade-long period of wars and tensions between the United States and the Middle East. Mennonite art has dealt with this identity question openly



and undeniably; but what is missing is the acknowledgment that the immediate and severe association of Mennonites with a clear pacifist identity is as narrow a way of thinking as Mennonitism may appear to others. The nature of a peace-based identity is blurred and complicated, especially in a world where war is a reality and a patriotic expectation. These themes of peace and Mennonite identity and theatre's effectiveness at exploring them constitute the focus of this essay and serve as the core observation of the creative one-act, *Sanctuary*.

The trajectory of this essay will follow the same developmental flow of ideas as that which formulated the creative project itself, tracing the progression of the research and the insertion of creative elements as they occurred. After a brief literature review and project design, the analytical discussion will open with an exploration of the similarities between theatre and the church in general, specifically focusing upon the ways in which theatre has mirrored the creative and spiritual aims of the Mennonite church. Following this is an examination of what constitutes Mennonite identity, both within and without the denomination, emphasizing the inherent nature of peace and pacifism, the multiple definition of those terms, and the critical line between courage and cowardice those definitions entail. Finally, the "sacred spaces of the stage" and the conception of the one-act play *Sanctuary* will serve to unite all former efforts, theatrically dramatizing both theatre's effectiveness for subtly delivering religious themes, and investigating the hard question of pacifism, cowardice, and modern Mennonite identity (Swartz, *Laughter* 181).

### III. Literature Review

Though Mennonitism has existed since its inception in the sixteenth century, explicit literature on the subject of Mennonite arts has only become a study of weight in the past several decades. However, a larger body of research exists concerning the crossover between art and faith, as well as the multiple subcategories of peace and pacifism and their relation to Mennonite identity. The majority of articles and scholarly literature written on these subjects infuse an appropriate blend of the political, the philosophical, and the personal (regarding the included testimonies of existing Mennonite artists).

Now that “Mennonite stories have entered the literary mainstream,” critical responses have begun to engage the subject, though these responses are chiefly from members of the denomination as opposed to outside observers (Beachy 13). Many of these articles directly address the question of merging faith and artistry, arguing almost across the board for the effective union of the two. “Theatre helped me see the world of the invisible, showed that forces greater than ourselves are at work and play in the world,” says Ted Swartz, and his spiritual description of theatre is comparable to an understanding of deity (Swartz, *Laughter* 28). Consider also the testimony of Douglas Caskey, a Mennonite professor of theatre: “As a theater artist my Christian faith is so intertwined with my need to create, imagine, dream, prophesy, comment, critique, challenge, and communicate that it is impossible to separate my artistic self from my life in God's kingdom, from my Creator-inspired existence in this world” (Caskey 166). Even non-Mennonite contemporary artists and scholars of the subject use almost spiritual language when talking about theatre: “Interactive theatre requires not just observing the action, but living it, and not just suspending disbelief, but investing in the belief with mind, body, and

spirit” (Howard 219). Essentially, the literature of this area unites theatrical art and faith and labels them as central to the discovery of spiritual and artistic identity.

Furthermore, both practitioners and scholars of Mennonite art often address the religious origins of drama, citing this beginning as a clear precedent for continued use of theatre as a religious tool: “Drama has its origins in religious ritual and the catharsis we experience...is impossible to extricate from” ancient ritualistic occasions (Redekop 20). Theatre serves as an “exploration of the power of religious language, myth, or ritual” (De Groot 460). The majority of related scholarship uses this point as a springboard for examining the purposes of Mennonite art, as a spiritual tool, a measure of catharsis, or a vocational element for spreading both doctrine and affirmation. “Literature can be a valuable form of cultural inquiry and knowledge,” especially in the hands of a Protestant denomination that spans continents and centuries and bears the marks of countless decades of “dissent and persecution” (Beachy 11-13). This tumultuous history is “expansive and enabling,” however, and existing scholarship demonstrates how Mennonite artistic efforts force people to “revisit their own religious and cultural understandings” of faith and identity (Beachy 13).

Another addressed aspect of theatre’s usefulness to both Mennonites and other faith denominations is the stage’s sense of community, which mirrors the congregational element of the church, not “unlike the embodied sacrament of Mennonite congregational singing” (Caskey 173). “Theater allows for collective exploration to take place in a truly communal forum, thus creating a shared experience which can spark discussion and even rigorous debate on issues of importance to the community” (Caskey 173). One such issue worthy of communal debate is the inherent question of cowardice and courage the springs from the nature of pacifism. Literature on that question is extensive, with arguments supporting both sides of this unclear and difficult

aspect of Mennonite identity. If there is a weakness in literature on the subject, it is only the fact that scholars identify no clear solution to the debate (an aspect dealt with later, both in analysis and in the creative development of *Sanctuary*). This lack also highlights the currency of the question at hand and its relevance to the modern era.

The contrast of Mennonites having “dual identities as pacifists and patriots” forms the crux of the peace question, explored by art and critical study alike (Huxman 539). Literature even divides pacifism as a term into two camps, political and personal: “Personal pacifism is opposition to all killing,” and “political pacifism is opposition to all war” (Ryan 980). What, though, is the distinction within those two groups when the question of killing arises *within* war—put another way, where do the personal and political lines diverge? Additionally, concerning individual pacifists themselves, there is often the accusation that peace is never truly at the center of the proposed ideology; rather, what truly exists is a fierce dichotomy between “the warmonger who cynically uses the language of peace to obfuscate his aggression” and “the appeaser who is willing to sacrifice freedom, country and family for peace” (Harold 6). One theory from twentieth-century philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand suggests that a true person of peace assimilates the best parts of pacifist and warmonger; such a person would “confront the evil and seek redress,” instead of hiding from or directly seeking violent ends (Harold 10). Unfortunately, this suggestion is but one of many, none offering a clear path to peace unfettered by politics.

In spite of the proposed solutions and definitions, the unresolved controversy remains both a weakness and a strength for Mennonite artists. On the one hand, the issue is pressing and relevant to the point of demanding clear resolution. On the other hand, the ideological debate fuels powerful artistic examination, allowing creative works to address these political and faith-

based issues in ways that only art and theatre can: “You can’t explain faith with a logical argument,” claims Ted (Swartz, Interview). Furthermore, “in the theatrical world...ideology is always in essence the site of a competition and a struggle in which the sound and fury of humanity’s political and social struggles [are] sharply echoed”; this is a sentiment that *Sanctuary* attempts to replicate (Murray 94). Those echoes are beginning to resound more often from Mennonite voices who long to fill the above gaps and claim a modern identity that pays homage to the peaceful martyrs before them while remaining relevant in a more widespread global context.

#### IV. Project Design

“Mennonite artists have expressed...frustrations regarding the faith community's lack of receptivity, or at least understanding, of the artists it has spawned or adopted” (Caskey 167). It is thus necessary to reinvigorate Mennonite art with new angles to reach a wider, more receptive audience. The above literature review demonstrates the first phase of the creative process, the research and the isolation of an ideological issue; the second phase begins when that issue, the question of using theatre as a device for proclaiming Mennonite identity, becomes a creative prompt for artistic exploration—specifically, through the text of a play. The established inefficiency of scholarship-based discussion demands the need for a deeper, more visceral creative approach, and this reasoning sparks the development of this thesis’ goals.

The following sections of analysis illuminate the creative work’s historical context—the war in the Balkans—and discuss the ways in which the ideology of the research and the questions posed became the framework for the fictional conflict of the play. In essence, the analysis will execute the following goals: extract truths and questions from the aforementioned areas of Mennonite identity, pacifism, and courage versus cowardice; visualize those extracted elements through historical settings and fictional characterizations; and place everything within the wartime context of the historical siege of Sarajevo. These efforts culminate in this thesis’ original contribution: *Sanctuary*, a new piece that transcends didactic Mennonite drama and attempts to demonstrate both the unity of faith and art as well as the ways in which art may explore Mennonite themes with dramatic realism.

## V. Pacifist Identity through the Lens of War

“War is good for Mennonites...it brings out their best” (Huxman 549). This seemingly simple observation holds profound implications for what historical and modern cultures consider the essence of being Mennonite. Nearly all Protestant denominations adhere to the Biblical belief that “behaviour in the community of Christians should differ radically from that in the world,” but the historical extremity of the Mennonite understanding of nonviolence is what mingles courage with madness in the eyes of the world (De Blois 36). The historical development of Mennonitism is full of men and women who upheld nonviolence to the point of martyrdom, and a martyr’s level of dedication became another aspect of Mennonite identity. In the eyes of the modern world, however, nonviolent martyrs once hailed as heroes are now considered “mad” for dying for “one narrow point of view” (Redekop 15). Other approaches go as far as to demonize pacifism in order to rationalize pro-war aggression, devolving pacifism to “the crazy alternative by which just war theorists affirm their own reasonableness” (Ryan 979). How then does one relieve the “tension between martyrdom and survival” that grips the spirit of a pacifist in the face of denigration and death? (Redekop 11) The ultimate answer to that question lies in the ashes of war and violent hate, where aggression negates human agency in a struggle of ideals.

If peace is at the heart of Mennonite identity, then war is by its essence the antagonist of Mennonite ethics. There are clashing views even over the definition of the terms *war* and *peace*: philosopher Thomas Hobbes defines war as “a tract of time wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known,” and peace as “merely a negation, an absence of war” (Harold 8). Other philosophers in the vein of Aquinas claim that peace “is not a mere absence, but rather is something positive in nature” (Harold 8). Regardless of these delineations, most moral and artistic examinations of the subject focus on war and peace as societal states insofar as they relate

to basic human rights of existence—“War is intrinsically unjust: it necessarily involves massive violations of rights on all sides of a conflict” (Ryan 982). “War gets the darkest side of humanity out in everyone,” says Vesna Hart, whose family lived the horrors of war in the province of Vukovar during the war in the Balkans (Hart). Pacifist efforts would then appear to be the noble pursuit of reinstating morality in a time of violent inhumanity: one scholar even calls Mennonites “men, who are the furthest from being bad men” (De Blois 22).

In today’s modern militant age, contention regarding the pacifist side of Mennonite peace creed stems instead from their seeming lack of patriotism, from opponents who “question Mennonite loyalty” when other citizens willingly go to war in defense of God and country (Huxman 548). This viewpoint certainly results in seeds of personal doubt, given that “Mennonites, like many subcultures, have, at times, understood and defined themselves in response to mainstream perceptions about them” (Friesen 109). Choosing nonviolence in wartime, an apparent “do-nothing status,” is a historical source of contention as well, and it is from this surface-level estimation of Mennonites that feelings and accusations of cowardice derive (Huxman 543). In spite of this, “Mennonites [believe] that it is possible, if difficult, to remain loyal to both God and country, by being Good Samaritans instead of good soldiers” (Huxman 542). Consider these excerpted objectives from the mission statement of Christian Peacemaker teams, who make peace a positive action by willingly entering hostile war environments to sow seeds of mediation: to “promote peace, reduce violence, identify with those caught in violence and oppression and foster justice by using the techniques of a nonviolent direct action” (Kern 5). These men and women attempt to become active living embodiments of their peaceful ideology.



However, in both the philosophic and the artistic sense, “ideologies of war have often appealed to war as imagined, rather than war in reality” (Ryan 979). This is yet another fulcrum of the peace debate—ideological words exist differently on the page than they do in the face of realistic wartime situations. However, theatre is a vessel to translate word to action—and while it is certainly a watered-down imitation of true war, it allows the morality of the words to engage a physicalized conflict onstage. Consider the following two statements: “the marginalized voices of Mennonites...use argument and narrative to preserve the delicate balance between consistency with faith values and accommodation to larger social mores when confronted by the hegemony of militarism” (Huxman 540). Second: theatre is able “to give voice to those who have not been able to express,” and “can encourage personal awareness that leads to personal change” (Howard 219-228). Taken together, these ideas argue for theatre’s ability to realize ideological issues in a creative way, by using a dramatized war environment to give a voice to the voiceless and to make an audience “examine [its] values and beliefs... hone [its] ability to empathize, and...understand [its] connections to the larger world” (Howard 220).

The questions this discussion has yet to resolve are as follows: at what specific point does courage and the ideal of pacifism become a façade for cowardice? How does one maintain peace when personal safety and the safety of loved ones is held at gunpoint on a field of war? How can such powerfully overt messages of Mennonite creed become implicit fuel for an artistic work? Finally, how can that artistic work reflect the tension of a modern Mennonite identity in a world engulfed in war? None of these issues has an easy resolution, but answers surface through the medium of theatre, which serves as “violence from within” to defend against “a violence without.... [I]t is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (Redekop 21).

## VI. Creation from the Ashes

The final phase of this creative thesis involves the composition of the dramatic piece itself, a synthesis of research, ideology, and theatrical lifeblood. A modern view of dramatic exploration claims the following: “theatre is often depicted as a contemporary alternative to church...the church has become obsolete, the quest for meaning persists, the theatre deals with this” (De Groot 459). I, however, defy the notion that the church has become obsolete; its quest for meaning is as strong as the theatre’s, and it is through a harmonious union of the two forces that buried truths begin to see light. Existing Mennonite art reflects this notion, since it “provide[s] a sense of affirmation...and a community identity” in the face of “forms of political oppression” that result from choosing pacifism (Friesen 113-114). My endeavor attempts to pay homage to this communal identity while simultaneously facing hard questions on a greater scale than internal denominational instruction and affirmation.

Following the conclusion of the research element, my creative work began initially with a location and a concept—the ruins of a church sanctuary in a war zone, and a tension between a fleeing soldier’s sense of duty and his desire for peace (though this initial idea developed into a much more complex final product). The choice to set the action of the play in a sanctuary represents perhaps the most heavy-handed element of my source material, but the chance for clear juxtaposition made this overt religious nod a second-tier concern. Once I had extrapolated my source questions of pacifist identity, courage versus cowardice, and the sense of oppressed voices (especially in a war-torn country), my next goal was to envision the circumstantial world of the play. I discovered that the 1992 siege of Sarajevo reflected the necessary politics, sense of oppression, and inherent wartime turmoil of my research, and so it now serves as the historical context for *Sanctuary*.

Memoirs and accounts of the siege of Sarajevo all point to the aura of degeneration that engulfed the city: “the power of war destroys everything. Slowly, a city is disappearing” (Naythons 7). The setting of a ruined sanctuary mirrors the physical deterioration of that world; but on equal par with the crumbling city is the shattered psychological aspect of the war in the Balkans. According to Vesna Hart, in the Balkan War one’s identity stems from whatever the driving identity of the conflict is; religious, ethnic, or political, for example—Serb or Croat, Muslim or Christian, and so on. The war engraved these identities in stone, forcing mental consequences from physical violence: “Rounds would fall at any time and in any place throughout the city, and the randomness of the deadly hail drove many Sarajevans to the outer edges of sanity” (Naythons 26).

Taking the physical destruction and the mental trauma together, the siege became a heartbreaking but dramatically effective subject for creative examination of wartime ideologies. I thus began the process of coalescing both my research questions and my Mennonite ideals into specific characters whose interactions in the world of besieged Sarajevo would serve as the testing grounds for all of the above research aims. The ultimate product involves the following: a Serbian soldier-turned-pacifist, an American CPT member, a volatile Croat insurgent, and a young Croat couple fleeing to safety. The task of making these characters sufficiently complex and solving the problem of heavy-handedness became about distorting the identity question itself—diluting or overturning the expectations of the stereotypical stock from which I drew these character types. It is easy enough to put a priest, a soldier, a rebel, and two civilians into a room and watch them clash over politics and ethics, but my aim was to deepen the conflict and force each character to a brink where they could make choices for or against a stock-based expectation.

The conception of one final character was necessary to complete the world of *Sanctuary*—and that is the character of the war itself, an oppressive force whose shells and bullets were as much the antagonist to the psyche as were the clashing ideologies themselves. “To say that war is inhuman is to say that war by its very nature escapes human control, that it acquires a life of its own in ways that undermine and destroy any human purpose. Its moral character is defined by the fact that it negates the human agency that makes talk of morality meaningful” (Ryan 983). Truly, in the text of *Sanctuary* the interruptions of wartime violence often unmask characters for a split second, as they react without façade on a base level. This inhuman war character throws all other discussions of morality and ideals into sharp relief, serving as both a dramatic and a historically accurate background.

Maintaining the accuracy and modern relevance of war within the creative work was a disconcerting task that challenged my own beliefs and pushed my personal doubts as a Mennonite to the fore. “I have always been an avoider of conflict,” says Ted Swartz of his Mennonite upbringing, and I identify with this observation quite strongly; thus for me, given that the theatre is a breeding ground for facing conflict, my artistic endeavor was both a blessing and a challenge (Swartz, *Laughter* 100). “Art should entertain and inspire, but also make you feel uncomfortable—on occasion”; and I found this truth to be all too accurate (Swartz, *Laughter* 194). I had already seen my fears mirrored in my research questions; but rather than allow them to hinder me, I splintered those fears and planted seeds of them in each character—questions of the justness of a cause, the cowardice of pacifism, the right to tell a story of a country not my own, and the all-consuming fear of war.

Additionally, I imbued my play with the essence of martyrdom that is so key to Mennonite history, as both a nod to my heritage and as a source of conflict for the dramatic

narrative. In a world prone to “particular kinds of violence,” I found that the “motivations and complicated legacies” of “the spectacle of martyrdom” opened notable doors in the world of the play (Beachy 11). This tension surfaces in the relationship between the soldier-turned-pacifist, Branimir, and his war-hungry brother in law Luka, who attempts to pull him deeper into the conflict of the siege. Between Luka’s recruiting efforts and Branimir’s divided loyalty between the army and his peace ideals, the action of the play forces both characters to face this fact: “It is one thing to choose for one’s self the path of martyrdom, it is quite another to choose that path for someone else” (Harold 16). I found yet another source of disconcertment in that my use of this historical aspect of Mennonite history placed me on the brink as well, between honoring and manipulating a vital part of Mennonite pacifist creed.

Ultimately, I clung to the fact that “war is both a ‘violent storm’ that threatens the very existence of the church and a ‘day of opportunity to shine for the Master’” (Huxman 545). Though my play ends in an intentional grey area (echoing the nature of pacifism in war), I saw “an opportunity to light a candle instead of cursing the dark,” to plant a final note of hope that offers much-needed relief after the pain and heartbreak of the majority of *Sanctuary* (Kern 421). The testimony of a priest who lived during the siege captures my attempted result better than my fiction ever could: “And what does a priest tell people about God and faith when their lives are being destroyed? I try to tell them something about hope...hope is the last thing to die” (Naythons 59). My research into the world of Sarajevo brought to my attention a beautiful and haunting poem, “Girls in the Mausoleum” by Vesna Parun, and this poem became a source of artistic drive for the text of the play. Its stanzas capture both the darkness of war but the promise of a coming dawn: “Fright troubles our eyes...but the sea brings to the port oranges./ And the skies are covered/with the deep red of spring” (Parun 126).

## VII. Conclusion

All efforts pertaining to this thesis result in an affirmation of art, in a heartfelt and resounding demonstration of the use of creative faculties to delve into and embody religion and philosophy. The use of scholarly research as a springboard for artistic creation shows the wealth of inspiration that conflicts and issues in this world may offer. The darkest and most violent of subjects can in turn become the source of enduring light and hope, a spiritual observation equally applicable to faith and theatre. Time will tell if my attempt has successfully united faith and art with broad relevance to the world; but regardless, the journey has been worth the time, and the play *Sanctuary* may yet prove to accomplish much beyond the page.

Additionally, this thesis demonstrates that a modern Mennonite identity involves faithfulness to the past as well as the need to remain open to ever-changing dialogues with art, ideology, and the modern world at large. The quest for Mennonite identity is a search with an unclear destination, and much more investigation will be required in the time to come. Questions and fears do not easily die, but artistic methods of examination open an avenue for catharsis and community that hums with the vibrant power of the theatre. Artists gravitate to that power as if pulled by a strong current, and the chance to deliver messages of faith and humanity with resounding impact invigorates their creativity. In the words of Ted Swartz, theatre, like faith, is “a stream that is ever-flowing—you can choose to step in or not step in...but why would you ever want to step out?”

**Appendix A**

**S A N C T U A R Y**

A One-Act Play by Benjamin Stoll

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

BRANIMIR (BRANE\*) NOVAK: male, 30s; a soldier in reserve; A Serb.

MARCUS RAYNES: male, 30s; an American priest.

LUKA KASUN: male, 30-40s; BRANE's brother in law; a Croat.

BARTOL: male, early 20s, a Croat civilian, husband to IVONA.

IVONA: female, early 20s; a Croat; the pregnant wife of BARTOL.

ERIKA NOVAC: female, late 20s; a Croat; wife of BRANE.

TIME:

The year is 1992, about a month after the start of the siege of Sarajevo.

PLACE:

The ruined sanctuary of a small cathedral, located at the outskirts of besieged Sarajevo. The effects of the war have taken their toll: windows are shattered and boarded and the floor is strewn with rubble. A heavy ironbound door sits in the back wall. Downstage left is a makeshift firepit, surrounded by stones or chairs for seats. There is a large ornamental stone cross, but one of the horizontal arms has been broken. An altar sits beneath it.

\*Pronounced BRAH-nay



SCENE I

(Lights come up on the sanctuary. It is late evening. The sounds of distant gunfire can be heard at various intervals. IVONA, a pregnant young Croatian woman, sits on a piece of rubble. Her left arm ends at the wrist, and bandages cover the stump where her hand used to be. Her husband BARTOL is kneeling by her, putting fresh bandages on her maimed arm. She recites poetry as he works.)

IVONA

"Who can number the mausoleum's quiet years?  
We are dark, naked.  
Lithe lizards, silenced by love,  
We huddle in the cold oval of the tomb.  
We whisper: ancient marble,  
Are we beautiful?"

(There is the sound of a distant shell. BARTOL sighs.)

BARTOL

Not that, Ivona. It's too sad. Talk to me about something else.  
Your thoughts? The baby? Does this hurt?

(She stares at him silently. He locks eyes with her, and then resumes his task. She waits a moment, then begins again.)

IVONA

"The evening is young and troubled.  
The horizon is heavy with flame."

BARTOL

Stop.

IVONA

"Our hearts are green  
In the moonlight..."

BARTOL

Stop, Ivona.

IVONA

"And the skies are covered  
With the deep red of spring."

BARTOL

(loudly)

Stop it!

(Silence. She looks away, hurt.)

God, I'm sorry...I just...

(He sighs.)

Can't you just talk to me like you used to? Please?

(She looks at him silently.)

Alright. I'm sorry. Let me finish with the-

(The sound of a shell shakes the church, and  
BARTOL starts with fear.)

Goddamn it! Goddamn it...

(Shakily, he tries to finish with the bandages.  
IVONA gently touches his face, and he looks up  
at her.)

It's okay. We're okay. Soon we'll leave this city, and all  
three of us will be safe.

(Finishing his task, he kisses her stomach, then  
her forehead.)

Marcus and the newcomer should be done for the night soon. When  
they come up, I want you to try and get some sleep.

(There is the sound of someone pounding loudly on  
the door. IVONA starts, and BARTOL turns to her  
hastily.)

It could be a patrol. Get below.

(There is the sound of glass being broken and  
wood being splintered offstage left.)

Ivona, go below. Quickly!

(Before she can, BRANE NOVAK stumbles onstage,  
disoriented. He wears the jacket of an officer  
in the Yugoslav National Army; his face and  
torso are covered in blood, and he carries a  
pistol.)

BRANE

(in a harsh whisper)

Luka! Luka!

(BRANE notices the others and aims his pistol,  
balancing himself somewhere between shock and  
heightened clarity.)

Hey! Stop, stay back!

(BARTOL raises his hands and stands protectively  
in front of IVONA.)

BARTOL

We don't have weapons—

BRANE

No, who the fuck are you?

BARTOL

We're no one. Please, my wife--we've no quarrel with the army—

BRANE

(sharply)

I'm not with the army!

BARTOL

But you're wearing—I'm sorry, I didn't mean—

(Pause.)

You're—you're wounded, I could help you, just please—

BRANE

I don't need your help. Stay where you are.

IVONA

(quietly, shaken)

"The evening is young and troubled,  
The horizon..."

BRANE

What's wrong with her?

BARTOL

Nothing. She's fine. We're all fine, please. If you'd just put  
down your—

IVONA

"The horizon is heavy with flame..."

BRANE

Shut your mouth!

BARTOL

She can't help it, don't speak to her like that—

(IVONA continues to speak the poem quietly during  
this confrontation.)

BRANE

I said stay where you are, do you want to die?

(BRANE looks down, seemingly noticing the blood-soaked jacket for the first time.)

BRANE

Oh god, no, no...what is this, what is this...?

IVONA

"Tonight we will walk in the streets, happy, breathless..."

(BRANE hastily strips off the jacket, casting it beneath a fallen pew and kicking debris over it while he speaks. He is wounded in the torso.)

BRANE

So much blood. How much do they need? How much can they want?

IVONA

"We will cover ourselves with shadows...we will cover ourselves with shadows..."

BRANE

Stop it! I said shut your mouth!

(BRANE stumbles, slightly faint.)

BARTOL

You're hurt. We have supplies below, I have training—I could tend to you if you just—

BRANE

If I just what? Hand over the gun so you can shoot me in the back? I'll put a bullet through your fucking heart.

BARTOL

There's no need for violence.

BRANE

Isn't there?

BARTOL

You will not touch my wife.

(A tense and dangerous pause.)

BRANE

Where's Luka? What have you done with him?

BARTOL

Luka?

(He turns to IVONA.)

Wait, is that who—

BRANE

He's supposed to be here, WHERE IS HE?

BARTOL

(to BRANE)

Is the man you're looking for a Croat?

BRANE

How do you know that?

BARTOL

Are you here to kill him?

BRANE

Where is he? If you've harmed him, I swear I'll—

BARTOL

He's here, yes! A few hours ago—he's below with the priest!

BRANE

The priest of this church is dead.

(He advances threateningly towards BARTOL.)

BARTOL

Not Father Laza—a newcomer, an American—he's below with—

BRANE

Below?

BARTOL

(fighting to maintain calm)

Yes, in the basement—

(The sound of approaching footsteps cuts him off. MARCUS and LUKA run onstage, sweaty and dusty. MARCUS runs to BARTOL and IVONA while LUKA faces BRANE, his own pistol drawn.)

MARCUS

Bartol! Ivona! Move away.

(He stands in front of BARTOL and IVONA. LUKA stares down BRANE intensely.)

LUKA

Branimir! Brane. Brother, look at me.

(BRANE stares at him, wide-eyed, still not trusting.)

BRANE

Luka?

LUKA

Yes.

BRANE

It's you? But who are—

LUKA

It's alright, they're fine. BRANE, your gun—

BRANE

No, I can't trust them, why are they here?

LUKA

To find a way out, just—

BRANE

But I don't know them—

LUKA

I do, I've met them.

BRANE

But—

(LUKA trains his gun on BRANE.)

LUKA

Stay calm and lower your gun.

MARCUS

Both of you lower your guns, for God's sake.

LUKA

(sharply)

Quiet, priest. With me, BRANE.

(LUKA lowers his gun, and BRANE follows suit,  
breathing heavily.)  
God—you're covered in blood. What happened?

(Beat. BRANE drops his gun and runs a hand across  
his bloody face. BARTOL and IVONA watch tensely  
as MARCUS moves a step closer to LUKA.)

BRANE  
It's not all mine.

LUKA  
Where's Erika?  
(Beat.)  
Where's my sister?

BRANE  
She's dead.

LUKA  
What?

BRANE  
(quietly)  
I'm so sorry...

MARCUS  
(To BARTOL and IVONA)  
Go below, both of you.

BARTOL  
No, I'll stay—

MARCUS  
Stay with your wife. Do not fight me.

(BARTOL nods, and he and IVONA exit below.)

LUKA  
What did you say?

BRANE  
I said I'm sorry, I—

MARCUS  
Luka, is everything alright—

LUKA

It's fine, priest, go below...

(He bites the word "priest" with disdain. His eyes fill with tears of half-belief. MARCUS exits.)

BRANE

I couldn't stop it.

(A shell detonates nearby and BRANE grows frantic.)

Oh god, we have to go—where is the way out, where?

LUKA

Brane, you're in shock—

BRANE

The way out, we have to leave, we—

LUKA

No! Talk to me. Tell me exactly what happened!

BRANE

We were walking here. Following the plan. We'd gotten out of Dobrinja, made it past the stone bridge—the one where Erika and I met—we were short on time, so we, we cut past the edge of Sniper Alley—no trucks to follow, but it seemed clear so—we made a run for it.

LUKA

(incredulous)

You tried to go through—

BRANE

We didn't have a choice! I can't—there was a shot, I think—I didn't even hear it, and I looked for her, tried to—but she wasn't there, she was in the street, lying there—

LUKA

(intercepting him)

No, that's not true! Where's my sister? Your wife?

BRANE

I said she's—

LUKA

Tell me!



BRANE

She's dead, I-

LUKA

Don't say that again. Don't you fucking say that!

BRANE

Out there—I couldn't bring her body, there were snipers, there was nothing I could...

(Shock begins to give way to cold reality.)

The way out, Luka. That was the plan, yes, we need find the catacomb and get out of the city--

LUKA

Not without her. No. NO! Not without her!

(He shoves BRANE away, bloodying his hand.)

Those bastards, those goddamn sons of whores...

(He notices the blood now on his hand.)

Oh god, the blood...whose...?

BRANE

Luka...

(LUKA turns away, weeping. BRANE, overcome, sinks weakly onto a stone. As the lights dim, BARTOL enters DS left, playing a haunting Croatian piece on a violin as the scene transitions. He exits once the other enter.)

Scene II

(The sanctuary. It is early the next morning. BRANE and MARCUS sit by the firepit. LUKA is just offstage; the following conversation is punctuated by the sound of him swinging a sledgehammer. MARCUS is cleaning blood from the side of BRANE's face with a rag and a bowl of water. He rubs a bit too hard and BRANE recoils.)

BRANE

Don't touch me!

MARCUS

I'm sorry.

(BRANE takes the rag from him.)

BRANE

I thought priests were supposed to have healing hands.

MARCUS

I'm a bit out of practice as far as tenderness. Sorry about that.

BRANE

Just finish what you're doing.

MARCUS

Anyway, the cut on your head is superficial. Most of the blood is from—

(He catches himself.)

But I do want to take a closer look at the gunshot wound, if you'd take off your shirt.

BRANE

It's fine. In and out, I patched it.

MARCUS

Well, unless you want to pass out from blood loss and infection—

BRANE

It's all right.

MARCUS

You should really let me—

BRANE

Damn it, I'm fine!

(He pushes MARCUS away.)

MARCUS

Alright, I'm sorry.

BRANE

What are you even doing here? An American. And does everyone from your country apologize as much as you?

MARCUS

(with a small laugh)

Traditionally, we're apathetic. But as a priest, I'm more...I don't know...conscientious. You got lucky, I think.

BRANE

Yes, luck. That's what it is.

MARCUS

I'm sorry about your...I really am, but-

(LUKA storms in, sweaty, feverish. He picks up a canteen and drinks thirstily.)

LUKA

How much more before this goddamn tunnel is clear? Before we can get out of here?

MARCUS

It depends on how much caved in from the early days of the shelling.

LUKA

You're sure this is a way out? It could be a maze, or a fucking tomb, for all we know-

MARCUS

It's a way out. I'm sure. Father Laza showed me before his death, and he was the most trustworthy man I-

LUKA

(interrupting him)

Are you well, Brane?

BRANE

Well enough.

LUKA

(to MARCUS)

Then maybe you should quit playing the saint and help me.

MARCUS

Luka, your brother is hurt—

LUKA

Brother-in-law.

(Beat. LUKA digs in a nearby satchel.)

BRANE

Maybe you should rest, you've been at it for hours—

LUKA

(to MARCUS)

Where is my gun?

MARCUS

Your—

LUKA

My gun, priest. It was in this bag. And BRANE's, where's his?

MARCUS

Why do you need—

LUKA

(menacingly)

Where are the goddamn guns?

MARCUS

They're safe. They're not needed.

LUKA

Not needed? Is—is that a joke?

MARCUS

I...put them away. After last night—

LUKA

Who do you think you are? You don't know me, how dare you—

MARCUS

I won't let you endanger the others—

LUKA

(in MARCUS' face, shoving him)  
If last night had been a patrol, you'd have been glad of some  
defense—

MARCUS

In Father Laza's absence, I will maintain the sanctity of this  
church.

LUKA

You can try. But if a patrol finds us here you can be damn sure  
they'll break your sanctity.

(BRANE stands unsteadily.)

BRANE

Luka—

LUKA

(sneering)  
Is this part of your goddamn "holy" calling?

BRANE

Just stay calm—

LUKA

Don't tell me what to do!

(LUKA shoves BRANE, who stumbles to one knee,  
wincing in pain.)

MARCUS

Please! Here of all places, we can keep some trace of peace!

(Beat. LUKA turns to him, breathing heavily.)

LUKA

Peace?

(He moves again to face MARCUS.)  
Just a word. To cover up all kinds of cowardice.

BRANE

(trying to stand back up, but wincing)  
Luka, let me talk to him, I'll—

MARCUS

I'll give them back once we're safely out of the city.

(LUKA takes up his hammer and faces MARCUS.)

LUKA

Give me my gun or I'll—

MARCUS

Or you'll kill me?

(He stares LUKA down with matched intensity.  
After a hard moment, LUKA storms angrily  
offstage. MARCUS helps BRANE up.)

Are you all right?

BRANE

In what time I've known him, I don't think I've ever seen Luka  
back down.

MARCUS

I'm surprised he let his sister marry a Serb.

(Beat. BRANE looks at him, seriously.)

God, that's not what I...I shouldn't have—

BRANE

It was before all this began. Not long before, but just long  
enough, I guess. But if this was any indication of what's to  
come—

MARCUS

But you're his family.

BRANE

Erika was the link between us. I wouldn't count on "family"  
anymore.

(Beat.)

MARCUS

This evening's been quieter than most. Fewer shells. Gunshots.

(Beat.)

BRANE

Why did you take the guns?

MARCUS

After what I've just seen, I hold to that decision.

BRANE

But mine as well? He was right—you don't know us, and you'd strip us of our defense in a city where neighbors, old friends, family for Christ's sake—are, are slaughtering one another.

MARCUS

A gun is not one's only defense.

BRANE

If you're about to hand out some religious doctrine—

MARCUS

The point of the matter is—

BRANE

No, the point, priest, is that you've given us even less of a reason to trust you.

MARCUS

I'd rather lose trust than put Bartol and Ivona at the risk of danger.

BRANE

Admirable. But you're a fool.

(MARCUS studies BRANE, curious.)

MARCUS

For what's happened to you, you're...surprisingly level-headed. Compared to Luka, I mean...I haven't even seen you—

(Pause.)

Anyway. You should rest. Try and sleep, and maybe our work clearing the catacomb won't disturb you. For what it's worth, you have sanctuary here. For as long as you need.

(Beat.)

And if you decide to let me check your wound—

BRANE

I won't.

(Beat.)

I'm sorry. I just—

MARCUS

I'm rubbing off on you. You'll be apologizing like a priest if you aren't careful.

(He exits to the catacomb. As the scene transitions, BARTOL again plays a violin concerto until a detonating shell cuts him off.)

Scene III

(An hour later. The sanctuary. IVONA is attempting to write in a journal with her right hand. After a moment, BRANE notices her. His wound is covered, but he is very clearly not healthy. He hesitates, but then approaches.)

BRANE

What are you writing?

(She looks at him, cautiously.)

It's okay, I'm not going to...

(Beat.)

Listen, I wanted to...to say that I'm sorry. Last night, the gun, I...I wasn't myself. I'm still not, but I...

(His voice trails off. BARTOL enters from SR with a hammer.)

I meant you no harm. I mean you no harm.

(IVONA stands abruptly and exits.)

BARTOL

What are you doing?

BRANE

(startled)

I was just—

BARTOL

Stay away from my wife.

BRANE

I didn't mean to—

BARTOL

Just stay away!

(Beat.)

BRANE

I was just trying to apologize, but she wouldn't—

BARTOL

She doesn't speak.

BRANE

What?



BARTOL

She doesn't speak. Not even to me. Only lines from the same poem. The one you heard.

BRANE

What is it?

BARTOL

"Girls in the Mausoleum." Vesna Parun. Ivona always liked it, but...

BRANE

It's all she says? Is it because of...?

(BARTOL is silent for an awkward moment of mistrust. BRANE notices the hammer.)

What is that for?

BARTOL

Boarding up the window you broke yesterday.

BRANE

I had to get in.

BARTOL

I know. Not that a patch job will do much good, if a patrol does decide to try to get in here. If there's a reason they'd be looking...

(Beat. BARTOL stares at BRANE knowingly.)

BRANE

I told you, I'm not with the army.

BARTOL

I don't trust you.

BRANE

I don't expect you to. But I meant what I said--I have no intent to hurt you.

BARTOL

Nor I you.

(A tense pause. BRANE sits, tiredly.)

BRANE

She was a Croat, you know. Erika. My wife.

(BARTOL considers this, hesitantly.)

BARTOL

That doesn't mean I trust you any more than I did.

BRANE

I'm not your enemy. However black and white things may seem to you.

BARTOL

You may not be trying to kill me, but don't pretend to know how things "seem" to me.

(Beat.)

BRANE

You have a lot of hate for being so young.

BARTOL

It was men my age who did that to her. Mutilated her. They weren't too young to hate, so I learned how, too. And before all this, they also probably had "no intent to hurt us."

(Beat.)

BRANE

Are you the one that saved her?

BARTOL

If "saving" is what it was. I got her to Marcus. I'd only met him a couple days before, but he helped me heal her as best we could. And he promised he'd get us out.

BRANE

You got her here.

BARTOL

Not without expense.

BRANE

Count your fucking blessings, boy. At least your wife's alive.

BARTOL

Yes, she is. And I intend to keep her that way. I don't care if you're a pacifist or not—

BRANE

What does that have to do with—

BARTOL

Luka said you wrote antiwar propagandas.

BRANE

I did, for a time, but—

BARTOL

Yeah, I worked for peace too. But the devils who attacked her? I'd kill them again. Every day, as brutally as I could. In as many ways as possible. Peace doesn't mean much once bullets have already started flying, so don't call me "boy" like I haven't seen what you've seen.

(He exits, shoving past MARCUS, who has just entered.)

MARCUS

Everything all right?

(BRANE stares at him, coldly.)

Ah, I guess that question was a bit...

BRANE

What do you want?

MARCUS

We've made decent headway below. I thought I'd come tell you. Check on you.

BRANE

I don't need coddling.

MARCUS

Of course not, I just...

BRANE

What about Luka?

MARCUS

He's...silent. Tense.

(Beat.)

Can you hand me that water? It's hot down there. I'm definitely one for fields, not tunnels.

(BRANE hands MARCUS the canteen. MARCUS sits.)

BRANE

How did you hear about this tunnel, anyway?

MARCUS

The old priest. Father Laza-

BRANE

I know who he was.

MARCUS

He had some contact with my CPT when everything started-

BRANE

I didn't know they'd sent any peace teams.

MARCUS

Just one. We tried to do something. But it didn't-

BRANE

Noble.

(Pause.)

And the rest of your group?

MARCUS

Mortar detonation.

(Pause.)

I got out, but only just...

(Beat.)

BRANE

Aren't there other ways you can get out of Sarajevo?

MARCUS

I'm sure there are. But as far as evading patrols and snipers, this is the best option for three Croats and an American, I think. Especially this close to the edge of the city. But...you could probably-

BRANE

I'm not leaving Luka. He's the only family I have left.

MARCUS

I thought you said family didn't matter anymore. Others seem to feel the same.

BRANE

Things have changed. You're right. But even if Luka were out of the equation, I need to leave this city behind.

MARCUS

You're running from the loss of your wife?

BRANE

(with a dangerous tone)

It's not running. It's moving on.

MARCUS

Listen. A friend of mine told me once that—

BRANE

Save whatever dogma you're about to spout. There's no god in this city, none. And do not visit my intentions. That requires a trust we don't have.

MARCUS

I meant no disrespect.

(Beat. BRANE is silent. MARCUS stands and picks up his sledgehammer.)

So you don't see God in this city. I understand. I've hardly prayed since my team died. It's hard to hear an answer over the gunfire anyway.

(Beat.)

But...

BRANE

But what?

MARCUS

I don't know. Here we are in a church. Looking for our salvation.

(Beat.)

Brane, I have to ask...Bartol said you were wearing an officer's jacket when you arrived.

(BRANE looks at MARCUS tensely.)

Tell me we have nothing to fear from you.

BRANE

I'm not with the army.

MARCUS

How can I be sure—

BRANE

You can't.

(Beat.)

Here's your chance to earn trust by showing some.

(MARCUS nods and turns to leave, but he stops,  
and looks at BRANE.)

MARCUS

I haven't seen you shed a single tear, BRANE. I mean, your wife just...and you're so cold. A ghost. Dust on a stone—

BRANE

(angrily)

Tears? Dust? Both Erika's blood and mine have been spilled in her death. Blood, priest. I'll not give tears to what's already made me, as you say, a "ghost."

(Beat.)

But I have enough left in me to get out of this city.

(MARCUS again turns to leave, but stops.)

MARCUS

Lighting a candle is better than cursing the dark.

BRANE

I told you I don't want—

MARCUS

It's not dogma. My teammate told me that the day before she was killed.

BRANE

(Beat.)

Is that why you're helping Bartol and Ivona?

(MARCUS stops, looks as if he is about to speak more, but he then exits. BRANE sits and winces, touching his wound. The transition occurs in bleak silence.)

SCENE IV

(The sanctuary, an hour or two later. LUKA is seated on a stone, carving a piece of wood with a knife. After a moment, BRANE approaches. He stops when he sees LUKA.)

LUKA

You've been scarce.

BRANE

Thought I'd get out of the way. I don't seem to be wanted.

LUKA

All the same. Better to be unwanted than dead on the ground.

(Beat.)

Listen. I was cruel earlier when I shouldn't have been.

BRANE

It's all right.

(Beat.)

LUKA

I used to be good at carving. Now every half a second I almost carve myself.

(Pause.)

If that priest hadn't taken the fucking guns, I wouldn't have—

BRANE

Marcus means well, even if you don't see it.

LUKA

Means well? You've known him for how long? Let him preach his cowardice somewhere else—

BRANE

Luka.

LUKA

It's just...things have changed.

BRANE

You think I don't understand that?

(LUKA sets down his carving.)

LUKA

I don't know what you understand, BRANE. That's the problem. I never knew you that well, even after you married Erika.

BRANE

We knew each other well enough.

LUKA

No. I only saw you through Erika's eyes. Never had much of a chance to know you as a brother.

BRANE

You weren't around.

LUKA

I was preparing. For this.

BRANE

Developing insurrection groups—

LUKA

(darkly)

We're not insurrectionists, this is not a rebellion.

(Pause.)

This is the goddamn problem. Erika dies, and now...

(He pauses, in pain.)

She's...she's just gone, and now the line is drawn. The labels are out. Serb and Croat. Peacemaker and warmonger. Everything was simpler when she was—

BRANE

Then please, let's just...the moment we're out of the city—

LUKA

I'm not leaving.

(BRANE stares at him, confused.)

BRANE

What?

LUKA

I'm going to stay here. And fight. And I want you to fight with me.

BRANE

Fight with you? But I'm not—



LUKA

You have influence in this city. I know you do.

BRANE

That's not—

LUKA

Come with me, Brane! You have your Serbian contacts, I'm part of the secession network—we can fight back! We could break this siege.

(He is growing heated.)

And just think—if we clear this tunnel, we'll have a way past the enemy lines—

BRANE

What?

LUKA

We could use it for troop movements! To get weapons behind the bastards! Think how it would—

BRANE

Are you mad?

LUKA

It'll change this war—

BRANE

(hushed)

You can't think of using this tunnel for a military purpose! You don't think they'd figure out what you were doing? The second the National Army found out, they'd swarm inside the city like bats to a wound before you could even—

LUKA

Do you have so little faith in my cause?

BRANE

God, Luka! Listen to yourself.

LUKA

You say that you cared for my sister.

BRANE

I did, and I—

LUKA

That you care for me as a brother.

BRANE

Luka, you can't just—

LUKA

Then prove you're above the sides this war has carved. Honor her memory by fighting against the regime—against the monsters—that killed her!

BRANE

I loved Erika—

LUKA

Then prove it.

BRANE

--but this isn't honoring her memory, it's vengeance. It'll get us both killed. Not even she would have me turn on what I believe.

LUKA

(scoffing)

What you believe? What exactly is it you believe?

BRANE

That peace isn't a dream. That war isn't a necessity.

LUKA

Such ideals, coming from a hypocrite who worked for—whichever Branch of the damned government it was—

BRANE

I never hid my time in the Reserve from you or Erika! I made the conscious choice to work for peace, and it's been years since—

LUKA

So you made a choice once. Make another, and fight with me.

BRANE

I won't fight on either side. To do so would be to—

LUKA

(exploding)

How fucking noble. You're starting to sound like the goddamn priest. Both of you are nothing but cowards.

BRANE

What did you say?

LUKA

They shot your wife, Brane. Do you even care?

BRANE

Don't you dare.

LUKA

Fleeing the city together was for the sake of my sister. To get her to safety. But thanks to your incompetence, that's—

BRANE

My incompetence? Is that the point of this? Turn your anger on me? Blame me?

LUKA

You deserve the blame. It was your job to look out for her.

BRANE

Don't you dare!

LUKA

Did you actually love her? Or was marrying a Croat a publicity stunt for your peace movement?

BRANE

(shoving him)

Shut your fucking mouth.

LUKA

And her body?

BRANE

What?

LUKA

Where is her body? You left her. Why? Left her lying in the street in a pool of her own bl—

(BRANE strikes him. Beat.)

There it is!

BRANE

How dare you use her to try and rope me in to your schemes—

LUKA

It's brought out a fire, hasn't it?

BRANE

You are the one poisoning her memory. Turning her into rebel  
propaganda—

LUKA

You left her! I'd have rather died.

BRANE

Then do that, brother. Feel free.

(BRANE stumbles away, weakened. LUKA picks up his  
carving knife and stares at it, hard. He exits  
below to the sound of BARTOL's violin as the  
scene transitions.)

SCENE V

(The next morning. The sounds of clearing the tunnel can be heard, more quietly than before. Seated on a stone, IVONA is trying again to write in her journal. After a moment, a sweaty BARTOL enters with a canteen. He hands it to her.)

BARTOL

Here. Drink this.

(She does.)

Have you eaten?

(She nods. He looks over her shoulder at the journal.)

What's this?

(He scans the page.)

Ivona, are you writing again? That's wonderful! You haven't written a word in weeks!

(He reads from the page.)

"We huddle in the cold oval of the tomb..."

(His face falls.)

Still, Ivona? You have to try writing your own words. You can't stay shut away in this poem...

(Beat. She looks at him.)

I'm sorry, it's...it's all right.

(BARTOL sees BRANE sitting alone.)

You should probably drink something too.

(BRANE walks hesitantly over and accepts the canteen. He sits a safe distance from the BARTOL and IVONA.)

BRANE

Progress on the tunnel?

BARTOL

Marcus says we're close.

BRANE

(tiredly, wincing)

Good. I just wish I could swing a hammer.

BARTOL

You don't look well. You look...terrible, actually.

BRANE

I've felt better. But I'm fine.

BARTOL

You didn't sleep.

BRANE

What do you mean?

BARTOL

Last night. You didn't sleep. I saw you.

BRANE

Why weren't you sleeping?

BARTOL

The gunfire.

BRANE

I didn't hear any-

BARTOL

I hear it in my head. In my sleep.

(Beat.)

It's louder than when I'm awake.

BRANE

I know. I hear it too.

(BARTOL wearily rests his head against IVONA, who kisses the top of his head. BRANE speaks gently to IVONA.)

You remind me so much of Erika.

(Beat.)

I thought I was doing the right thing, trying to get her here. The never-ending sound of trucks on gravel, the endless hail of bullets as deadly as the front. I had to get her out...

(Beat.)

That's why I wore the army jacket, the one you saw, I...I thought my former captaincy would keep her safe from army snipers, they'd see my rank, but it just...what was a known Serbian peacemonger doing in a uniform of the Reserve, with a Croat woman nonetheless? It made them suspicious, and got her...

(Beat. To IVONA)

You have her eyes. Her gentleness. And I see her love in the way you look at your husband. You don't need to speak for me to see that.

(He stops, overcome.)

BARTOL

So you were a soldier.

BRANE

Once upon a time.

(Beat.)

What did you do, Bartol? Before?

(BARTOL is silent for a moment.)

BARTOL

Worked in a music shop. Taught the violin on the side.

(He pulls his violin from a case behind a piece of rubble and plucks at the strings.)

Never made a lot of money, but...sometimes if I focus I can shut out the guns and I'll hear the concertos that I used to play.

(He pulls the bow across the strings, playing a few bars of music.)

God. This thing needs a proper tuning.

(He works at the tuning handles. Beat.)

Can I ask you something?

BRANE

Yes.

BARTOL

Once you're out, what do you plan to do? How do you...I don't know...

BRANE

I don't know either.

(Beat. BARTOL plays a bit more.)

I don't know music like you do. But I do feel like...have you ever had a song stuck in your head, but you can't remember the words? You try to remember but they're stuck on the tip of your tongue and there's that pit in your stomach that's part excitement and part frustration? That's how I feel right now. War and peace, hope and fear, life and death. This whole damn city is caught between. Like an open wound that can't decide if it wants to scab over or keep bleeding.

(He touches his shoulder and winces.)

BARTOL

(coldly)

I think it's settled on bleeding for now.

(A shell detonation shakes the church.)

BRANE

Goddamn it. The city will shake apart before either side gives in. I can't remember the last time I wasn't breathing either dust or smoke when I tried to sleep.

(Beat. He looks back at them.)

Anyway, I left the Reserve a year before I married Erika. And now...

(He stops. BARTOL sets down his violin.)

BARTOL

I understand. "Between." Everything is on the edge of a knife: either you fall one of two ways, or you stand still and the knife slowly severs you.

(They all sit in silence for a moment.)

BRANE

A soldier and a musician. You can write a song about us when all this is over.

(He laughs ironically, but it turns into a cough. He pauses, wincing in pain. Then, indicating IVONA)

What did she do? Before?

BARTOL

(eyeing BRANE)

Why does it matter? Why this interest all of a sudden?

BRANE

I'm just trying to...I told you, she reminds me of-

BARTOL

I don't care who she looks like. What are you trying to find out? To prove?

BRANE

Calm down. I'm not-

BARTOL

Is Croat interrogation part of your training?

BRANE

How many times can I say that I've left the army? You have to understand that-



BARTOL

I don't.

BRANE

If Luka knew that I was wearing the jacket when Erika was--do you know what he would do? Do you have any--

BARTOL

Don't give us a reason to tell him then.

BRANE

(darkly)

Is that a threat?

BARTOL

Take it as you will.

BRANE

Do you think the sanctuary of this church gives you the right to--

BARTOL

The right to what? Watch out for a knife in the back?

BRANE

I know you're trying to protect your wife, but you can't just--

BARTOL

Stop talking about my wife, Serb! I told you to just stay--

IVONA

I was a poet. I-I am a poet.

(Beat. BRANE and BARTOL look at her, shocked.)

Two weeks ago, Bartol left home and went a couple of streets away to try and find a weapon. All we had was a carving knife, with just a small blade, and Bartol said it was idiotic not to have something more by this point. We'd heard from our cousin about a man who would still sell pistols, so Bartol went to see him.

(Pause.)

He'd only been gone about an hour...I was reading the poem, the one that I...two soldiers kicked our door in like it was nothing more than wet paper. They were on top of me before I knew it, one holding me down--he smelled like beer, and his hands were rough, just so rough...the other man started to--

BARTOL

Ivona—

(She talks over him, eyes closed, fiddling with a piece of wood from the ruin.)

IVONA

They were so occupied with getting my dress off they didn't notice when I managed to grab the knife from the counter where I'd been cutting meat.

(She snaps the piece of wood.)

I drove it through the back of the first man's skull and left it there. His eyes didn't even blink, they just went dark, like dying coals. I had no idea it would be that easy. That I was that strong...and I can still smell the blood. You don't always think about how blood smells-like old coins. Warm metal.

(Beat.)

But the second soldier was faster. He struck me in the head with his fist, dizzying me. He took the knife, pulled it straight from his dead friend's brain. It was dripping with blood, blood and...and then he started to...

(Beat.)

Bartol came back and shot him dead before he could manage to rape me. But I wasn't caught "between" anything, and the knife had already severed me. My writing hand. They took my voice—

(BARTOL holds his wife tightly, face buried in her hair, speaking softly.)

BARTOL

Stay here with me, don't go back. You're speaking, you're here, stay with me.

(He kisses her. She leans her head against his chest.)

If I hadn't been such a coward--If I hadn't left—

IVONA

Shh.

BARTOL

But I could've done something, I—

(Placing a finger on his lips, she looks at him without speaking. He embraces her in a moment of tenderness; however, they are startled by MARCUS as he enters the scene.)

MARCUS

Where's Luka?

BRANE

Is he not with you?

MARCUS

I haven't seen him in a while.

(Pause.)

Should we be worried?

BRANE

I hope not.

BARTOL

What is it?

(MARCUS takes a deep breath.)

MARCUS

The catacomb seems to be clear beyond this point.

BARTOL

You mean—

MARCUS

We're through. We have a way out.

(BARTOL and IVONA share a moment of exhausted relief. BRANE sits in thought, worried.)

IVONA

So when do we leave then?

(MARCUS pauses and gives a small smile, surprised and pleased to hear her speak.)

MARCUS

As soon as it's dark. Gather your things. Let's put this place at our backs.

(BARTOL looks BRANE in the eyes, and slowly inclines his head in a small nod before walking past him. BARTOL and IVONA move away to pack their belongings. IVONA pauses, looking at BRANE. They lock eyes for a moment, and she touches him on the shoulder as she follows)

BARTOL. BRANE stands shakily and moves to  
MARCUS.)

I'll leave with you.

BRANE

You've decided?

MARCUS

Yes. I have.

BRANE

You're sure?

MARCUS

Call it running, but there's nothing for me here.

BRANE

And Luka—

MARCUS

He's made his own decision.

BRANE

Well, you know you're welcome to come with us.

MARCUS

And I...I feel compelled to see the others to safety. Bartol  
and Ivona. There's something that—

BRANE

What?

MARCUS

Something that draws me to help them.

BRANE

Yes. What is it?

MARCUS

It's just...them. They have a chance. The possibility of moving  
on from this. A city falling to hell around them, but  
everything they do is for each other. And her. The life growing  
inside her, untouched by all this...

BRANE

(Beat.)

MARCUS

You don't have to say anything else.

(Beat.)

I know I'm not from here. I know this isn't my city. And every day I ask myself what makes me think I have any right to compare my pain to yours.

BRANE

And what's the answer?

MARCUS

Silence.

(Beat.)

But those two, for me, are redemption. For surviving when my team didn't. For being arrogant enough to think I could play a part here. All is on the brink, but what I see in them is the beauty this city once had. And can have, again.

(He stops, and looks up at the broken cross. He walks to the altar.)

This thing is so dusty. You'd think I would've taken better care of it. Father Laza would cane me.

(Beat.)

BRANE

I'll help you. To keep it from fading. We'll get them out. I promise.

(MARCUS nods, and is silent for a moment.)

MARCUS

Thank you, Branimir.

(They both stop suddenly.)

Did you hear that?

BRANE

Someone's outside.

MARCUS

Luka?

BRANE

Not sure. Take Bartol and Ivona, get to the tunnel. I'll stay here and find him.

MARCUS

Brane, you're dead on your feet. Let me—

BRANE

No. I'll find out what's going on and make sure we're clear.

MARCUS

But you're—

BRANE

The sooner you just agree, the sooner we can leave.

(MARCUS nods and starts to exit, but stops.)

MARCUS

Wait.

(BRANE turns back around, and MARCUS produces his pistol from his waistband, considers it for a moment, and then hands it to BRANE.)

I'm sorry. I don't know why I—

BRANE

Stop apologizing for once, Marcus.

(MARCUS exits after BARTOL and IVONA, and BRANE cautiously stands guard, putting the pistol in his waistband as the scene transitions.)

SCENE VII

(LUKA enters from offstage and begins pacing in the rubble. He is holding something, murmuring. BRANE, wearied and pained by his wound, approaches cautiously.)

BRANE

Luka. Christ, where the hell were you—

LUKA

Don't speak in vain, this is a church.

(There is no humor in his voice, only a tinge of dark mockery. He doesn't turn to face BRANE.)

BRANE

Where have you been? We thought you were a patrol, or something worse—

LUKA

Just me. You'll all live another day.

BRANE

The tunnel is clear, Luka.

(LUKA is silent.)

Did you hear? The way is open, and we can finally get out of this city.

LUKA

So that's it then. You're going.

BRANE

Yes. I have to get Bartol and Ivona to safety. I made a promise.

(Beat.)

Come with us. You don't have to stay here, we can leave together. Erika is gone, but you're still my brother.

LUKA

No. Eye to eye, or nothing.

BRANE

Luka. We can part as family.

LUKA

We parted as family the moment she died, BRANE.

BRANE

Can't you see that I'd give anything to have died in her place?

LUKA

You say that now, safe in a church, about to flee the city without a passing thought.

BRANE

What? I told you, I want to—

(LUKA turns partway toward BRANE.)

LUKA

See them to safety, yes. But the priest is doing that already.

BRANE

He's American, he doesn't know the—

LUKA

You're hiding behind them, Brane.

BRANE

I guess this is goodbye, then.

(He turns to head downstairs.)

LUKA

(softly, almost a purr)

It's strange...all your talk of caring for Erika...and yet you failed to mention that you were wearing this when she died...

(BRANE stops. LUKA tosses out the blood-soaked National Reserve jacket that BRANE had buried. BRANE pauses in a wave of panic.)

After you rejected me, I just happened to find this.

BRANE

Luka. That's—

LUKA

A uniform of the National Army. But, you don't take sides, you said...you left the reserve long ago--

BRANE

Luka—

LUKA

I knew there was something about you, Branimir Novak. Something aside from you being a fucking Serb...but like half the people in this city, you're also a traitor to your family.



BRANE

No, Luka, it's not—

LUKA

But now neither side wants you, do they?

BRANE

(with tense calm)

For God's sake, let me explain.

LUKA

Do. Let us hear how the peacemaker lies.

BRANE

I wore it for safer passage through the streets. To get her here safely—

LUKA

And how did that work, Brane?

BRANE

(growing desperate in the face of LUKA's assault)

Something went wrong, I don't know!

LUKA

And fortunately, you didn't have to pay the price.

(In the blink of an eye, LUKA moves to BRANE and drives his fist into his wound. BRANE gasps and falls to his knees.)

Your Croat wife and her sordid ethnicity, cleansed, and your hands free of the blood.

(LUKA kicks BRANE, again in his wound, which is now reopened and bleeding anew. As LUKA bends and picks up a stone, BRANE stumbles to his feet and pulls out his pistol, training it on LUKA.)

BRANE

(gasping)

Don't you dare--!

LUKA

(in disbelief)

He gave you a gun?

BRANE

I'll drop you, I swear, I'll—

LUKA

What is this? What, have you all conspired to force me out? How many lies have you spun in the last two days?

BRANE

Luka, you don't understand any of this—

LUKA

(tears in his eyes)

Yes, tell me! Tell me how wrong I am. Tell me her death wasn't your fault!

BRANE

It was! I know it was! I should have kept her safe, but I—

LUKA

But you were a goddamn fucking COWARD.

(Beat.)

Shoot me, then. Brother.

(BRANE hesitates a second too long. LUKA hurls his stone at BRANE and is on him in a flash, knocking the pistol away. They struggle, and BRANE manages to wind LUKA and back away.)

BRANE

Leave this, Luka! Please, come with us, if not for me than for the other two—

LUKA

So the peacemonger has fight in him after all!

(He lunges at BRANE, and they grapple. In the end, LUKA tosses the weakened BRANE aside and picks up a hefty stick of broken wood.)

BRANE

For God's sake—

LUKA

Yes, call out to God. I'm sure he's supporting your army's crusade, isn't he?

BRANE

Luka—

(LUKA strikes him, tosses aside the piece of wood, and picks up the fallen pistol.)

LUKA

You fucking traitor. She didn't leave this city, and neither will you.

(MARCUS, having heard the commotion, enters from below. He takes in the scene in a single glance. Without a thought, MARCUS pulls the other pistol from the back of his waistband.)

MARCUS

Luka, no!

(MARCUS raises the weapon on instinct and fires twice. Both shots punch through LUKA's chest, and he collapses, dead. A fading BRANE crawls toward the body but MARCUS intercepts him.)

Brane, what happened—oh god, what have I done?

(He manages to lean BRANE against some rubble.)

Your wound is torn, you're bleeding...god, Branimir, stay with me. Oh god...

(MARCUS looks at BRANE's wound, scrounging for something to staunch the flow of blood.)

BRANE

(weakly)

Leave it.

MARCUS

You'll bleed out, it's bad—

BRANE

Luka...

MARCUS

Stop. Stop, just stop! I just need a rag, or something to stop the blood and then—

(BRANE weakly pushes MARCUS' hands away.)

BRANE

There's nothing.

MARCUS

No! It's all I need, a bandage, and you'll be fine—keep pressure there, you can't just, you can't leave now when—

BRANE

Marcus—

MARCUS  
(exploding, breaking down)  
Just let me help you! Why can't you just—

BRANE  
You can't save everyone.

MARCUS  
(softly)  
Why not?

BRANE  
Someone could have heard the shots, Marcus. Soldiers could be on their way here.

MARCUS  
We'll leave, then. All of us, just get up, and we can—

BRANE  
Stop. Leave me the gun, and take Bartol and Ivona out of here. Take them somewhere safe. Cover your tracks as best you can.

MARCUS  
This is not how—

BRANE  
We don't have time to argue. Give me the gun.  
(MARCUS, beginning to shake, slowly hands BRANE the pistol. He sees LUKA and stops.)

MARCUS  
Look at him...look at what I've done. I never meant to—  
(BRANE grabs his arm, cutting him off.)

BRANE  
Remember what you said about lighting candles?  
(MARCUS nods.)  
Let me try. Let us both try. Please. Bartol and Ivona—take them and go.

MARCUS  
But—

BRANE  
For the last time, Marcus, go.

(There is the sound of a distant shell, and gunfire. MARCUS exits. BRANE sits against the rubble, breathing raggedly. Suddenly, the sounds of war cease, and BRANE looks up, an expression of wonder on his face.)

Erika?

(ERIKA enters. She is clad in a simple, pale white slip, free of blood or blemish—halfway between ghost and angel. She walks forward and kneels before BRANE, kissing his forehead.)

ERIKA

You're hurt.

BRANE

I don't feel it.

(She offers her hand, which he takes. She pulls him up to stand next to her. She places her hand on his face.)

ERIKA

Can you feel me?

BRANE

With every breath.

ERIKA

What happened? You look different. Sadder.

BRANE

I'm all right now. I feel better. And I'm—

(Beat.)

Erika, I'm so sorry that I couldn't—

(She places her finger on his lips, stopping him. She embraces him and begins to hum a lullaby to him amid the gunfire; she looks up at the sky, and the gunfire dies off.)

ERIKA

Look at the moonlight, Brane.

BRANE

I don't see—

ERIKA

Just open your eyes. Look up and see it.

BRANE

I'm not sure it's there.

ERIKA

It's there. Above the smoke. Past the darkness. And the  
skies...the skies are covered with the deep red of spring.

(The sounds of war begin anew, but ERIKA draws  
him in and kisses him. Their kiss is the  
antithesis of war and they embrace, holding the  
kiss as the sounds of war and the lights fade to  
a blackout.)

END OF PLAY

**Appendix B: Theatrical Reading Program**

# SANCTUARY

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A One-Act Play by Benjamin Stoll

HON 499 Creative Thesis Project\*

Wayland Hall--March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015

Cast:

BRAN.....Dillon Stewart  
LUKA.....Brendan Gaffey  
MARCUS.....Ricky Drummond  
BARTOL.....Logan Brown  
IVONA.....Amy Slothower  
  
Stage Directions.....Kerry Scannell

Special Thanks to Ingrid DeSanctis, Kate Arcchi, Dr. Dennis Beck,  
Vesna Hart, Dr. Terry Dean, Ted Swartz, Rebecca Klein, and Bea Owens.

\*Please do note that this play is still a work in progress.  
There will be a brief talkback afterwards and your feedback is appreciated!

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