

The Balkan Women
A tragedy
By Jules Tasca

Characters:

Samira Jusic - a Muslim Prisoner in a Serbian camp

Amina Jusic - Samira's mother

Colonel Branislav Herak - the camp Commandant

Lieutenant Jovan Vlaco - one of the camp interrogators

Jela Kaljanao - another Muslim prisoner

There is also a polyphonic chorus of four men and four women, adjuncts to the actors. The chorus sometimes speaks with the characters to give emphasis, force or punctuation to a line.

The music of a stringed instrument plays. As the lights come up we can see the chorus dressed in robes; the men sit opposite the women.

The setting is black box.

Downstage is a mirror and a make-up kit on one of the risers. After a beat, a man in his thirties enters wearing trousers and an undershirt. He crosses to the mirror and the make-up kit. He sits and proceeds to apply make-up to his face. The make-up is mostly a deep passion-week purple and a blood red, some black is used to design the pattern. He makes up his face until it is not unlike the stylized face of a Kabuki player of the Japanese theater. When he finishes, he rises and puts on a military jacket. He hands the mirror and make up off. The music fades and the man addresses the audience.

VLACO

I'm Jovan Vlaco. I was a lieutenant in the Serbian army.

(A light comes up on Amina Yasmin and Samira Yasmin, mother and daughter, in a freeze. Their faces are made up in the same colors as Vlaco's but the design varies.)

These women you see are Muslims, mother and daughter, Amina and Samira. We're here in what they call

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Southern Bosnia

VLACO

and we call

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Greater Serbia.

VLACO

All wars begin with the changing of words and phrases.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

And this is war.

VLACO

They stand in the damp yard of our detention camp where the chill reaches past their clothes and skin and fingers their bones.

(Vlaco steps out of the light and crosses to the male chorus. Amina and Samira quicken. They rub their arms to warm themselves.)

SAMIRA

What will they do to us?

AMINA

I don't think they'll do anything to us.

SAMIRA

How can you say that, Mother?

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

You know what these dirty dogs do to Muslim women.

AMINA

Quiet. Don't lose control of your wits.

(Jela Kaljanao, a girl somewhat older than Samira, enters with a large bag. Her face is also done in the purple and red colors but with a unique design. She sidles up to Samira and Amina.)

JELA

God is great.

AMINA

God is great.

JELA

I'm Jela Kaljanao

(She offers them a roll from her bag.)

Take it then. Take it. I deliver the stale bread they give us. Eat whatever they give you.

AMINA

(Taking a roll)

Thank you.

JELA

(As Samira takes a roll)

I counted 125 when they marched you women in. Hardly any space in those cages, and you...

SAMIRA

Me? What?

JELA

I'd mess up your hair and hunch over.

SAMIRA

Why?

JELA

Don't make yourself look attractive.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

The guards are all men. They don't need much incentive to spread your thighs like a wishbone.

AMINA

We'll be all right. We'll be all right, Samira.

JELA

I'm sorry you're in here, but it was glorious for whoever blew up the fuel depot.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

It was frightening.

JELA

You know anything about it?

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

What would we know?

AMINA

We don't know anything at all.

JELA

Hey, I'm one of you. If I knew who blew their depot,

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I'd kiss her and praise her to Allah.

AMINA

We don't know anything.

SAMIRA

When will they let us go?

JELA

Who knows. I've been here for months. They question us over and over. They don't rush anything.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Except

JELA

when they decide to shoot one of us.

JELA

Then. . . then they move with fire flying from their asses. You hear the pop and one of us is gone.

SAMIRA

Who do they shoot?

JELA

You need names? They shoot us. Us. Muslims. How they hate us. How the bastard Serbs hate us. You think they hated you outside. In this place, hate is the ground you stand on. Hate is...

(As Vlaco crosses into the scene)

Here comes Vlaco.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Don't look him in the eye.

(Jela crosses out of the way.)

VLACO

Identification.

AMINA

(Handing him her papers from her dress)

I want to see the officer in charge of the camp. I want to tell him there's some mistake.

VLACO

The commandant's been reassigned. The new commandant arrives tomorrow.

AMINA

Then I want to see the new commandant.

VLACO

I'm tired. I'm very tired.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

I don't give a damn what you want and neither will the new commandant!

VLACO

He'll only care about one thing:

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

answers!

(Vlaco looks at Amina's documents.
He looks at Samira. She hunches
over and turns away.)

AMINA

Answers to what? They came to our village. They pulled us out of
our house. They tore my dress. What answers can we give?

VLACO

Don't play stupid, Amina Jusic.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Answers

VLACO

about the explosion at the fuel depot.

VLACO AND THE MALE CHORUS

Answers

VLACO

about hundreds of thousands of gallons of diesel gone.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Answers

VLACO

About sabotage!

AMINA

We're village people. We know nothing.

VLACO

And you'd tell me if you did know something, wouldn't you? You'd
cooperate in a second, open right up like a dead clam. You'd
tell me everything I asked.

AMINA

We heard the explosion like a thunder too close. Then the sky went black as if the eyes of God closed forever.

AMINA AND THE FEMALE CHORUS

We don't know anymore.

SAMIRA

We don't know how it happened. Leave her alone.

(Vlaco pulls Samira close to him.)

VLACO AND THE MALE CHORUS

Someone knows!

VLACO

A woman was seen walking away from the depot shortly before the explosion. What kind of women live around here? What kind of women would have no qualms about burning Christian flesh?

VLACO

One of you.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

A Muslim woman.

SAMIRA

What Christian flesh?

(Vlaco places her hand on his.)

VLACO AND THE MALE CHORUS

This Christian flesh.

(Samira pulls her hand away.
pause.)

VLACO

(Looking at the documents.)

You're mother and daughter. Amina and Samira Jusic.

AMINA

That's so.

VLACO
Where's your husband?

AMINA
Away.

VLACO
He's fighting.

AMINA
He's in the army.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS
They left. The men all left.

AMINA
You know we don't know where.

VLACO
And your son as well? Also in the army?

SAMIRA
You invaded.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS
Everyone became the army.

AMINA
Samira...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS
Someone had to shoot back.
(Vlaco raises his hand to strike
Samira. Amina comes between them.)

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS
No!

AMINA
Don't. Don't. It's still raw in her mind. The ones from our
village, killed each year. She meant no disrespect. She's just
angry.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

So am I angry!

VLACO

16 soldiers roasted in that depot fire!

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Charcoal men! Unidentifiable!

VLACO

Black sooty charcoal men kissed goodnight by a car load of dynamite!

VLACO

But that means nothing to people like you, does it?

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

They were just Serbs. Weren't they? Yes.

(Vlaco returns Amina's documents
and crosses back to the male
chorus.)

JELA

(crossing back)

I told you about them here.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

They need little cause to lash out.

AMINA

Are you all right, daughter. You're shaking.

JELA

He would've punched you, you know.

AMINA

You can't talk back to them. Keep quiet and we'll come out of this, Samira. I know it.

SAMIRA

16 soldiers were in the depot?

JELA

16 less barbarians in the world. Who'll miss them?

(Lights fade. Sound punctuates.)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

So many times - believe me - so many times, I begged God to forgive me for hating them. I tried to control my anger. It was difficult.

(Lights come up on Amina and Samira in a freeze. The risers are stacked to represent a cell. A single piece of dowel between the stacks represents the locked cell door.)

I knew how easily a man could turn cruel. I saw it in me. Dear Jesus, I prayed to him. Jesus, you understand, I said. This is war and these are the fanatics who deny you, O Lord. Make me strong enough to control my anger at those who deny you.

(Vlaco crosses to the male chorus. Amina and Samira quicken.)

AMINA

This endless waiting, waiting, waiting, what can we tell them?... Sarnira, what's the matter?

SAMIRA

I didn't sleep at all last night. I can't sleep in this cage.

AMINA

Don't worry. Don't be afraid

SAMIRA

I'm not afraid. I spent the whole night thinking of the soldiers in the depot. 16 boys burnt to nothing.

AMINA

God help us all. I prayed myself asleep.

FEMALE CHORUS

Why were soldiers in the depot at that hour.

AMINA

Who knows? War doesn't have a time clock. It was their depot. Why're you surprised that troops were about?

SAMIRA

I thought at that time it would be locked up, closed down...
that it would be...

(Jela enters and crosses to the
cell door. She carries her bread
bag.)

AMINA

It's Jela.

JELA

Sleep at all? It takes a while. Concrete for a mattress, I mean.
(She passes bread to them.)

AMINA

Oh, thank you.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I'm starving.

(Amina eats. Samira does not.)

What're you doing in this place?

JELA

They told me I was a potential danger to their military
operation. That's what they told me when I asked.

AMINA

Why did they think that?

JELA

When they came through my village, they saw a slogan painted on
a wall.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Serbs are shit. Watch where you walk.

JELA

They had no one to blame so they took me and my grandfather,
because the wall was on our street and my grandfather smiled at
their anger when they saw the slogan. I don't know where he
is. Separated. Separated. Everyone in the country is separated.
Everything in the world is separated.

AMINA

And they don't say when you'll get out?

JELA

No. I've been punched, mauled, raped. And now

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I'm a slave

JELA

in this camp.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I don't want to stay here like that. I want to get out.

SAMIRA

Where are they?

JELA

Vlaco and the rest of them are getting ready for the new commandant. That's why they're not sniffing around. You know these army types, always kissing the ass of someone higher up.

AMINA

Samira, eat...

SAMIRA

I can't. My stomach wants nothing.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

(Jela looks around.)

Come close.

JELA

Samira. come close.

(Samira and Amina draw closer.)

It's all right to talk to me. I know.

AMINA

You know what?

JELA

There are two of us in here who get messages in and out. My friend, Nadia, passed the information on to me. I know. I know. It's safe to talk to me.

(She kisses Samira's fingers)

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

God bless you

JELA

for what you did.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

God bless you.

AMINA

What're you talking about? Samira?

(Samira backs away and turns her back)

Samira, what's she saying?

JELA

Keep your voice down.

(To Samira)

Your mother doesn't know.

(Samira turns and nods her head "no")

Why? Why doesn't she...

SAMIRA

Don't you see? I'm a child to her, Jela.

AMINA

Are you saying...

JELA

Yes. Nadia got the word.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

It was your daughter who parked the car that blew the depot.

AMINA

Daughter...

SAMIRA

(Turning)

Daughter, what? They killed my father and brother and they...

AMINA

You don't know that!

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Don't say that!

SAMIRA

After the battle outside Goradze, when we didn't hear from them again, what else could be the reason we hadn't heard from them again. So when these people approached me, I... I joined their group.

AMINA

What group?

SAMIRA

This group of women fighting the Serbs anyway we can.

JELA

I'm proud of you, Samira. Amina, they have no fuel now for their tanks and trucks in this area. Tanks and trucks full of troops that would've killed more Muslims. They're all proud of you, Samira.

AMINA

But you risked your life...

JELA

Might as well risk. I did nothing, but I'm here. Be proud of your daughter. I didn't even write that slogan on the wall. She's a hero, Amina.

(Vlaco steps into the light and crosses to them)

VLACO

Go on. Go on with your bread

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Stop plotting. You'll not escape.

(Jela crosses oft)

AMINA

We weren't plotting. I want to see the commandant. Did you tell him I want to see him?

(Samira turns away. Vlaco opens the cell by moving the dowel to one side)

VLACO

The new commandant rests. He won't see anybody. But I will.

(He puts his hand on Samira's shoulder)

I need to question you both. You first.

AMINA

My daughter's not well. She can't eat or sleep.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Leave her alone.

AMINA

You can talk to me. Whatever she knows, I know. Lieutenant Vlaco,

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

she's ill.

(Long pause. Slowly Vlaco removes his hand from Samira. Then he leads Amina out of the cell and shuts it on Samira. As Amina and Vlaco cross off, Samira turns and moves to the cell door)

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

God

SAMIRA

is great, Mother.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

God be with you.

(Music punctuates as lights fade
on Samira)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

Some of the guards here did rape these women. I know it's wrong. I know. But they didn't consider it a wrong. Enemy women. It seems such a contradiction. A woman is a sister, a wife, a mother. A man's first drink of life is at a woman's breast.

(A light comes up on Amina in a
freeze sitting on a riser)

But enemy women, madonnas, who want to cut your throat. What's a man to make of this contradiction? He uses these women, lying in their soft, moist pouches merely to relieve himself. A perversion of women, of love, of life.

(Vlaco enters the scene as Amina
quickens)

... on Thursday evening, early, say between 6 and 6:30, what were you doing?

AMINA

I was home. Cooking. Rice and a few chicken thighs.

VLACO

On Thursday or the day before, did you hear anyone speak about the fuel depot in anyway, even in a joking way?

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

I want to know everything, woman.

AMINA

I never heard a word. All we women talk about is our families and water and food and if the electric will come back. We did nothing.

VLACO

When the blast went off, where were you?

AMINA

We were eating. My daughter and me. We were eating. The floor shook, the windows rattled. Smoke - foul smelling smoke - seeped into the house. We were scared.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

You were scared?

AMINA

Yes. Scared, that was a shelling.

VLACO

16 men.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

16 men

VLACO

were part of that foul smell.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

16 men rode on that smoke that crept inside your houses to haunt this whole village until justice is done!

AMINA

The whole war ... the whole war's an atrocity. What can I say. You think I gloat over 16 men burnt alive? Well, I don't.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Believe me, I don't.

AMINA

I have

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

family

AMINA

in this war.

(She hands him a picture)

VLACO

About your daughter.

AMINA

She's a child.

VLACO

She doesn't look like a child to me.

AMINA

She is. She's not even 20 years old yet. She ... She was with me. We were eating.

VLACO

What time was that?

AMINA

7:30. I know. I know because we always eat at 7:30. My husband always insisted we eat at 7:30, and we keep that schedule even though he and my son...

VLACO

Are where?

AMINA

I'm hoping to hear from them. I want to go home. I want to take my daughter out of this place. She's getting sick.
(pause)

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I want to speak to the new commandant. I want to tell him my daughter's not well.

VLACO

Colonel Herak is not well himself. He's not seeing anyone.

AMINA

Colonel Herak?

(Pause)

Branislav Herak who taught at the University before the war?

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Branislav Herak ...

VLACO

Forget Colonel Herak. I want to know about your daughter.

AMINA

Why harp on her? What could she know?

VLACO

On Thursday what time did she come home?

AMINA

I don't know exactly.

VLACO

Where was she?

AMINA

She was with friends, young friends. Some of them are in here on the other side of the camp. They sit and giggle and act silly. She was home with me at 7:30.

VLACO

But the explosives were on a timing device. It could've been set a half hour or an hour ahead.

AMINA

Samira's a teen-aged girl. What does she know about timing devices?

VLACO

It's a simple matter to teach a person to set a timing device, Amina Jusic.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Even a child could do it. Even a young teen-aged girl.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

She was home - home with me. How many times do you want me to say it?

AMINA

Why would she do such a thing? Why would she cause such destruction?

VLACO

Why? Why, Amina Jusic, husband of Ekrem Jusic and mother of Vedran Jusic?

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

For the cause.

(Returning the picture of her family)

AMINA

What cause?

VLACO

It's a war.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

The cause of the war.

AMINA

We have no cause. We just want to go back to living in peace the way we did before you came here.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

She has no cause.

VLACO

Then how long had she been home on Thursday? You said she was with her friends.

AMINA

She... she was... she was and then... and then she... she came home.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

What time?

AMINA

I don't know.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

The power was out. The clock stopped.

AMINA

But it was long before we ate at 7:30.

VLACO

How'd you know it was 7:30?

AMINA

By... by the light. . . by the dying light of day that fell in the kitchen.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

She was home.

VLACO

Why wasn't she home earlier to help you cook?

AMINA

She... she can't cook.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

A good Muslim girl of 19 can't cook?

AMINA

I mean she's not a good cook. She came home and... and she went to lie down. I'd... I'd rather cook myself.

VLACO

Amina Jusic, before the war I was a policeman. I've questioned many people. I've sat across the table from countless liars. People who tell the truth bore me. I send them home. Yes, home. My interest is in finding liars, Amina Jusic. Liars. Liars hold a hidden truth. All I have to do is open that little locket of equivocation and I have a picture of the truth.

AMINA

I'm not ly...

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Lying! Lying! Goddamned lying!

VLACO

Lying's an internal struggle for a human being. Most people who aren't psychopaths are not used to lying big. About life and death, I mean. So when people lie big, there's a jet of stress that shoots through them. Their voices. Their hands. Their eyes - do you know even eye blinks, Amina Jusic, give away this little skirmish in one's heart?

AMINA

Think what you like. You're wrong. I know nothing and I have no cause.

(Pause)

VLACO

Amina Jusic, take off your dress.

AMINA

What?

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Your dress! Remove your dress!

AMINA

I will not.

VLACO

Some of the guards here would walk into this room, and, without a word, punch hard your face on the cheek bone. Your face numbs up and stuns you. The rape after that is much easier, Amina Jusic.

AMINA

Don't... don't do this.

VLACO

Remove your dress. Must I tear it off you?!

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

How could you call yourself a Christian and do this? How?

VLACO

What does that have to do with it? What does Christ mean to someone like you? How dare you who don't worship him use him to defend your O so sacred skin?

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Remove your dress!

AMINA

I'll report this to the commandant. Colonel Herak's not a man who'd allow this.

VLACO

You think Colonel Herak gives a damn about you?

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I can't believe such a man wouldn't care.

VLACO

Don't you know what Muslim men do to our women when they get their hands on them. I've seen the results, Amina Jusic.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

It's wrong! It's wrong! Whoever does this! All of it is wrong! Stop it!

VLACO

No one can stop it.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

How many has your husband raped? or even your son? None! None!

AMINA

They would

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

never

AMINA

do this!

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Remove your dress!

VLACO

I could rip it from your body, but I want you to remove it.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

No.

AMINA

In the name of the compassionate merciful God, please, don't.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Please.

AMINA

I can't do such a thing.

VLACO

You can't. You can't. So you can't.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Well, maybe your teen-age daughter will be more forthcoming.

AMINA

Lieutenant, she's my child.

VLACO

She's a child with hips and breasts, a ripe child. Listen to me. I knew some of the men in that depot. Some were combat engineers making repairs on the pipes. Some were guards. Young boys, and they could act silly too and talk about home and think about girls. Now they're dead. So don't tell me how loving and caring your people are. Your child. Your child.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

I'll just go and fetch your child.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

(Stopping him)

No.

AMINA

She's not well. She's... she's sick...

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

let me speak to the Colonel... please.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

I ask you one last time...

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I want to see the colonel.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Remove your dress or I'll remove hers!

(Pause. Vlaco begins to exit.
Amina stops him again. Slowly she
removes her dress. She stands in
her foundation garments.)

VLACO

You see. You see how easy it is? Do you know why you did it? Do you? You did it because you had a cause. Yes. You see how easy it is to sacrifice anything when you have a cause. I want to punch you and rape you, Amina Jusic. But it is a sin and I am a Christian. Unlike some of the others here,

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

My faith in Christ won't let me.

VLACO

Do you understand? Get down on your knees and thank Jesus Christ. You won't be raped today because of Him. Get down!
(She kneels)

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Thank him! Thank Jesus! Thank him!

AMINA

Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you . . .
(Lights fade. Music punctuates)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

Sure. Judge me. Hate me. So easy in peace time, so easy. But I served with some of those in the fuel depot. And anger is a human trait. That I'm not perfect, proves that I need almighty God, the perfection of us all.

(A light comes up on Colonel Branislav Herak. His face is made up in the same colors as the others, but with unique design. He sits frozen in a wheel chair.

Vlaco crosses to the wheel chair)

Colonel Branislav Herak, soon to be General, and who knows, perhaps, even president of Serbia some day. Right now he is recovering from battle wounds.

(Vlaco begins pushing the wheel chair. Herak quickens. Lights come up on Amina and Samira in their cell. Vlaco wheels the chair by and stops)

VLACO

... and in 37 is a mother and daughter,

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

picked up after the depot attack.

AMINA

Colonel?... you're... you're Colonel Herak... Branislav Herak...

HERAK

I am... you look so familiar.

AMINA

I'm Amina. That's why I'm familiar to you. I'm Amina Sacirhev. My married name's now Jusic.

HERAK

Amina Sacirhev. Good God, yes. Yes, your father was Mohammed Sacirhev.

AMINA

Who had the farm.

HERAK

I took training here, Lieutenant, when I was young, a group of us would go down to her father's farm to buy eggs and cheese. Yes. Amina Sacirhev.

AMINA

What happened to you? Is it your legs?

HERAK

No. I can walk. I'm recuperating from an operation.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Samira, he remembers me.

AMINA

This is my daughter, Samira, Colonel. They arrested us both.

HERAK

The destruction of the fuel depot. It's a grave matter. You understand. Everyone has to be questioned.

AMINA

They did question me. But we're still being held.

VLACO

We're not finished with them, Sir. The daughter's been ill. We haven't talked to her yet and...

HERAK

And what?

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

I think this woman knows something.

AMINA

We know nothing. Colonel, you must believe me. You must help us.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Please, we want to go home.

AMINA

Help us.

HERAK

(To Vlaco)

Bring her to my quarters at noon.

VLACO

Yes, Sir.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

(As Vlaco wheels the chair off)

Thank you. Thank you, Colonel.

AMINA

Samira, he'll help us.

SAMIRA

He's a Serb Colonel. Herak. Herak. He's one of the worse butchers in the Serb army.

AMINA

I knew him when he was a boy. He and his friends couldn't stomach army food. Your grandfather sold them milk and cheese and eggs. So many years ago and he remembers.

AMINA

Oh, Samira, he remembers.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

God

AMINA

is great.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

God

AMINA

watches over us.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

God is answering my prayers.

AMINA

Branislav Herak will help us.

SAMIRA

He's the enemy Mother. He's Vlaco with more brass on his uniform. I don't care how much milk he bought from grandfather. He's a Serb.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

But he remembers... don't you understand?

(Lights fade. Sound punctuates.
Music)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

Milk. He bought milk here years and years ago. For centuries cattle grazed the land where we now have this camp. Perhaps some of the cattle that fed here made the milk that rests in the bones of Branislav Herak. There was a small cabin on the spot. When we took this area and fenced in the camp, the cabin became the commandant's billet. It's more comfortable than any place in the camp.

(Lights come up on a freeze of
Herak in his wheelchair and Amina
sitting on a riser)

That day at noon I personally brought Amina Jusic to the Colonel.

AMINA

(As they quicken)

... and even before the fire was put out, they dragged us from our houses. All the women in the area. Pulling us by our hair. Kicking us. Butting us without mercy with their rifles. My daughter and I know nothing. When can we go home?

HERAK

Until we find the women responsible for this, nobody can go anywhere.

AMINA

You're God here. You can do anything.

HERAK

Of course, I can. I could send you through the gate right now. But I won't. Of all the women taken, someone here must know something. Someone will talk soon, and the innocent will be released. Are you being mistreated here?

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS
(As Amina rises)

Mistreated.

AMINA

We get stale bread. No chance to wash up.

AMINA

And I was

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

forced

AMINA

to take my clothes off.

HERAK

Who did that?

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

I want to know. Which of the guards did this?

AMINA

I don't want to say. I didn't even tell my daughter. I just want you to know. This is not just a place to wait for questioning.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

It's a prison.

HERAK

I won't tolerate my soldiers doing this.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Just give me his name.

AMINA

I won't. I won't because I fear for my daughter. She's too young to be in a place like this. It's making her sick.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I'm afraid. I'm afraid, Colonel.

AMINA

What am I going to do?

HERAK

Where's your family? Your husband?

AMINA

(Taking out her picture)

This is my husband. Ekrem, and my son, Vedran. Jusic is the family name. I don't know where they are. If they're being held someplace... if you could find them for me...

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Find out where they are, at least.

HERAK

I'll make some inquiries. I can't guarantee anything.

AMINA

But you'll try to find them.

HERAK

As soon as I feel a little better.

AMINA

What happened to you?

HERAK

Shrapnel. You never think you can be hit. You stand and direct your men and fear for them but never for yourself. Oh, it's not bravery, no. It's arrogance. You just don't ever imagine yourself dying. Life is too rich for one to die. There's yet too much to do to even consider dying. But then when the flying metal opened my stomach, I knew it was one of death's claws tearing at my insides.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Death is real now. He swiped his paws at me.

HERAK

I'm only here in this camp to recuperate. And then back to... to the fight.

AMINA

Why? God, why this fight?

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Why this fight?

HERAK

Why this fight. We've been asking that for thousands of years. Politics. It's always politics. War is politics gone mad. Guns to do what words couldn't. You know what happened in World War II. Your people and the Croats, they teamed with the Nazis. They tried to exterminate us. Serbs and Jews. Us and the Jews.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

They made no distinction, Amina, between Serbs and Jews

HERAK

After that war the peace was... was artificial. But when the country broke up, we couldn't sit still and wait for the massacre to begin again. Why, you ask? Why this fight? Whose version do you want? To you, we're invaders. To us we're defenders.

AMINA

So the World War never ended.

HERAK

Not here.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

And it won't end until all...

AMINA

Go on and say it.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

It won't end until all the Muslims are dead. Say it.

AMINA

That's why I'm afraid for my family. This camp is a field of snakes. There's hate in every glance and stare. Branislav - I want to call you Branislav now.

HERAK

You may go, Lieutenant.

(Vlaco exits.)

AMINA

Please, do me one favor.

HERAK

If I can.

AMINA

If we're going to be held here for a while, please... please, take my daughter on in here with you as a housekeeper during the day.

HERAK

A housekeeper? Why would you want her to...

AMINA

Because, she'll be safe working in here. You have women outside sweeping. I saw the little kitchen in there. She can cook and clean up. She's a good cook, and she'll be away from... I mean... no one would touch your housekeeper...

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Please.

HERAK

I don't think it's such a good idea, Amina.

AMINA

Why not?

(Vlaco enters with a tray of food and puts it down)

HERAK

You see. I have people to look after me. I have a corporal who cooks and a lieutenant who wants to be a captain. Thank you, Lieutenant. And you can have the sergeant at the door escort Amina Jusic back now.

(To Amina)

Don't be afraid. No harm will come to you or your daughter.

(Amina looks at Vlaco)

AMINA

Thank you. Thank you for seeing me. I do feel better now
Vlaco escorts Amina off. Herak rises with a cup of coffee from the tray. Vlaco re-enters)

HERAK

Lieutenant.

VLACO

Yes, Sir.

HERAK

Can't you find some fruit for these women?

VLACO

We're trying, Sir. Since the depot explosion, we're overloaded with prisoners.

HERAK

(Picking up an apple from the tray)

Where did this come from?

VLACO

Our mess.

HERAK

Well, give these women some. And showers. Let them use the showers.

VLACO

We're getting around to arranging a schedule. We don't have much in the way of facilities.

HERAK

So I noticed this morning. By the way, Lieutenant, who interrogated this Jusic woman?

VLACO

I did, Sir.

HERAK

Oh, and what did you find out?

VLACO

She won't say anything, but I have a notion that she's holding back. I can tell. Either she knows something or she knows her daughter knows something.

HERAK

I see. Then we'll eventually have to get around to the daughter, I suppose.

VLACO

Definitely. Colonel. Definitely.

(Lights fade. Sound punctuates)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

The daughter. Samira. The daughter's skin was light brown and always looked moist, as if it had just been rubbed with oil. Her eyes were big almond eyes, and her face gave an instant flush to men's desire.

(Lights come up on Amina and Samira in a freeze standing in their cell)

A priest would say the devil had spoken to these men to jar their lusts. Several of the guards had already heeded the devil and planned to take Samira Jusic.

(Jela enters with the bread bag on her shoulder and a small sack of apples. Amina and Samira quicken. Jela hands them bread and an apple each.)

JELA

It's out.

AMINA

What's out?

JELA

It's out that you know Herak.

AMINA

When he was a boy years ago.

SAMIRA

A lot of good it does us.

JELA

He was civil to her. He ordered the fruit, and you're going to get to use the shower.

AMINA

How'd you find that out?

JELA

The women sweeping outside his cabin. They heard him tell Vlaco.

SAMIRA

So what, Jela?

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

So we got an apple. We're still in this damned cage.

JELA

It seems like nothing to you. But it could be to our advantage that he'll listen to her. It could be that...

(Vlaco enters the scene. Jela looks at him. Then she scurries off. He crosses to the cell and opens it)

AMINA

What is it now?

VLACO

You asked for showers, didn't you? The Colonel said you should have showers...now...

(Amina and Samira start to exit the cell. Vlaco stops Samira)

One at a time. There's only one shower pipe, you're not going to cuddle under it.

(Amina hesitates)

You bitched for showers.

SAMIRA

It's the least you can do. It's not a special favor to be decent.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Samira, be quiet.

SAMIRA

Go ahead, Mother. You go first. You won't be that long.

VLACO

Better take your scarf with you. We have no towels.

(Amina takes her scarf and exits)

It always amuses me how you women seek for decency in a war. War is decency's enemy and blows up with the first shell fired.

SAMIRA

And who started the war? Who fired

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

the first shell

SAMIRA

into the mouth of decency?

VLACO

Muslims always play the innocents. When the country broke up, how many Arab states pissed money to you to attack us?

SAMIRA

Not until you threatened. Someone has to help us.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Not someone. Your own kind. The Islamics. Your brother in Allah.

VLACO

No one else matters.

SAMIRA

And no Christian money paid for the pistol on your belt?

VLACO

And what money paid for the Citroen loaded with explosives that sent up our fuel depot?

(Samira turns away)

Who organized it? Who? Who? What do you know? Who,

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

you little bitch. Tell me what you know!

(He turns her around)

SAMIRA

What? What can I tell you?

VLACO

The names of those responsible. The name of the woman who drove that car.

SAMIRA

I never heard a word. I was at home.

VLACO

What time? Thursday.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Think.

SAMIRA

Early. I was home early. I cooked some... what was it... some chicken bones and rice for supper.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

You cooked?

SAMIRA

Some chicken and rice, yes.

VLACO

Are you a good cook?

SAMIRA

Yes, my grandmother taught me.

VLACO

You and your mother know something.

SAMIRA

Know what?

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

About 16 dead soldiers.

SAMIRA

It's a shame. It's such a shame. I feel so sorry for them. I do. But I don't know... don't know who...

VLACO

You're lying. Muslims lie the way some people breathe, as a matter of life.

(Vlaco takes hold of the hem of her dress)

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Keep away from me!

VLACO

They'll come for you. The guards love the look of you. They take great delight in riding the arrogance out of a young bitch. They'll open that little virgin patch like a ripe peach...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

(As Herak wheels in on his chair)

Let go of my dress! I'll pull one of your eyes out! Let go!

VLACO

Tell me what you know and I'll protect you from them!

SAMIRA

Stop this!

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Lieutenant!

(Vlaco releases her and turns to Herak)

VLACO

Sir, I think these two are hiding information.

(Amina returns drying her hair with her scarf)

HERAK

And you were just gathering that information from her with your hand up her dress.

VLACO

I was trying to get her to talk, Sir.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

What is it? What's the matter? Samira?

SAMIRA

I'm not hurt, Mother. I'm not hurt.

AMINA

(Looking at Vlaco)

Because the Colonel came by.

HERAK

Go about your duties. Lieutenant. I'll lock this cell up. And when you're finished, I'd like to see you.

VLACO

Yes. Sir.

(Vlaco exits)

AMINA

Thank you, Colonel.

SAMIRA

Thank you, Colonel? Why thank him? It's only a matter of time before they rape all of us. All of us.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

You expect him to come by every time one of these animals wants to fight the war with his dick?! Do you?!

SAMIRA

Stop thanking him!

AMINA

Colonel, you see how it is?

HERAK

Go take your shower now.

(Amina hands Samira the scarf.
Samira shakes her head and exits)

HERAK

(To Amina)

I'll speak to the Lieutenant and...

AMINA

It won't matter who you speak to. My daughter's right. This time... this time you came by.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I'm afraid now more than before. I'm afraid.

HERAK

Lieutenant Vlaco's convinced that you and your daughter know something about the depot explosion.

AMINA

Us? Nothing. No. We... we just get so scared when he asks all those questions that we stumble and he thinks we're holding back. It's just fright. That's why I beg you to take Samira on as a housekeeper. If you won't let us go home, do me this kindness.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Please.

HERAK

I don't want anyone as a housekeeper.

AMINA

You see how pretty she is. If you don't help, one of them will get to her. I see the way they look at her.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

They'll get her one day alone.

HERAK

I've given the order that no woman in this camp who's obeying the regulations is to be mistreated.

AMINA

A man who's out to rape doesn't care about orders. And what woman is going to report the man or men? What would happen to her after that?

HERAK

This... this is not an easy command for me. I'm a field officer. But I promise I'll do my best to...

AMINA

Good intentions won't help. Some of those men are vicious... I can see to save my daughter, I must tell you.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Tell me what?

(Amina kneels in front of his chair)

AMINA

I tell you about me only to save my daughter. She would die before she'd let one of you men take her like that...

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

She would die, I tell you.

HERAK

I understand, but...

AMINA

You don't understand. Twenty... twenty years ago when you left this dot on the map of Yugoslavia you...

HERAK

What? What is it?

AMINA

You left me...

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Samira.

HERAK

(Backing up his chair)

What?

AMINA

Yes.

HERAK

I left you... what... what possessed you to make up a story like this? I've heard of people doing anything when desperate, but if you expect me to...

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I tell you the truth.

AMINA

You believe what you will. But before you disbelieve, recall that summer afternoon when two young people in the thick grass of these fields gave love to one another.

(Pause)

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Did I make that up, Colonel? Did I?

HERAK

No. Of course, I remember. The day before my battalion left.

AMINA

Yes, your last day. You told me you'd never forget me and I knew you wouldn't, and I said the same, and I never forgot you. I cried so much when you left...

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Amina . . .

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

How I cried...

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

How beautiful, how sad.

AMINA

Later, when I found out that I carried your child, I panicked. My father would have... I was sure I'd be killed. A strict Muslim... I'm sure he would've found some way to kill me. It's been done in our village before, you know. Girls are killed for such things.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

And with you, a Serb. Even then Father hated the... the...

HERAK

I understand.

AMINA

Ekrem, my husband, always loved me. When I went to him and told him, he married me right away. He saved me. I love him so much. I wish he were here with me...

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

My daughter? This girl? This Samira Jusic?

AMINA

Branislav, how could I invent such a story? Such a lie? You remember the day.

HERAK

I said I did. But you still could've concocted this...

AMINA

(Moving closer to him)

Look at me. Do you think I made it up?

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Look. Look at me.

AMINA

Look past the wrinkled skin. See into my eyes. See back to the young people. Their first love. Their passion that like opium made a pleasure of their short time together.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Remember. Remember.

(Pause)

And now twenty years later, do you think I'd violate all that's holy between me and my husband by giving his daughter to you in a lie?

(Long pause)

Branislav...

HERAK

I search your eyes, but I don't know, Amina. The eyes don't go back to the soul, only back to the optic nerve. You told a lie to your father twenty years ago...

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

A monumental lie, a monumental lie to save your life.

HERAK

Would you tell another now to save your daughter's?

AMINA

Branislav, listen to...

(Samira re-enters the cell, drying her hair.)

Samira...

(Amina rises. Herak regards them both. Then he locks the cell and wheels himself off. Lights fade. Sound punctuates. Music)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

To the great Herak, the sly, brilliant military strategist, this was a temporary assignment. To him it was not part of the war, just an unpleasant duty between campaigns until he recovered.

(Lights come up on Herak in a freeze, standing before his wheel chair)

He'd never been in command of a detention camp like this. A camp for women, no less. A camp where an old love and her daughter turned up. Amina's words struck him like another war wound...

(Herak quickens. He seems to shake his head in disbelief. He steps behind his chair. He shakes his head again. Vlaco crosses into the light. Herak, consumed with thought, does not see him.)

VLACO

Colonel...

HERAK

Oh, yes, come in.

VLACO

About this morning...

HERAK

About this morning. Yes. Yes, this girl... this Jusic girl...

VLACO

I think she knows something. My police dog nose twitches when I see her.

HERAK

More than your nose twitched this morning, Lieutenant.

VLACO

I was merely trying to pressure her, Sir. I was trying to scare her a bit.

HERAK

Be that as it may, we will extract information from these women by interrogation, not by brutality.

HERAK

We'll be

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

methodical but professional, persistent but not inhuman.

HERAK

Do I make myself clear?

VLACO

Yes, Sir. I always thought of our men here as human.

HERAK

Well, perhaps, some of these detained women think of us as inhuman when we remove their clothes...

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Think of us as savages when we rape them.

VLACO

I won't deny it goes on, Sir.

HERAK

I can see it in these women's faces. I can see it goes on here. And I know all sides - The Croats, the Muslims - and, yes, us, we all have these... these lapses in human decency, but...

(He holds his stomach as if a pain comes to him)

VLACO

Are you all right, Sir?

HERAK

I'm all right. It's my wound reminding me of the war.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

The pain of war's inside me now, Lieutenant.

(He sits in his chair)

HERAK

I'll mend. I just wish it didn't take so damned long. Stuck here while my guts mend. In a women's camp... what was I saying?

VLACO

Lapses. Lapses in human decency.

HERAK

Yes. Yes. No more. Lieutenant. No more rape here.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

None.

HERAK

Do you hear me, Lieutenant?

VLACO

I understand, Sir. I understand you're not used to this.

HERAK

Used to what? What is it you want to say? Speak up, Lieutenant.

VLACO

I just... I just want to point out to the Colonel that I can give that order, but no one can oversee what every guard does twenty four hours a day. There's rancor, Sir, in the hearts of these men. Rancor and vengeance are human too. They saw what was done to their own kind.

HERAK

What own kind?

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

These are helpless women. Some of them are still children.

VLACO

All I'm saying is that you can issue an order to hold back the sea, Sir, but the sea might wash right over you...

HERAK

Lieutenant Vlaco...

VLACO

Sir?

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Hold back the sea or it will wash over you.

VLACO

I'll give the order. Sir, but...

HERAK

But what?

(Pause)

Are you afraid to talk to me? What is it?

VLACO

Sir, some of these men served with you in the 9th regiment.

HERAK

As well as you, Lieutenant.

VLACO

Yes, Sir, as well as I. Some of them last night talked about Sonja's Kon-Tiki.

HERAK

The Kon-Tiki... the bar, yes... So?

VLACO

So... well..., it... it was also a brothel, Sir. In the back. The front was a bar, but in the back... anyway, they talked about how you visited Sonja's...

HERAK

(Rising)

Lieutenant...

VLACO

Sir, I have to tell you what they're saying.

HERAK

I hadn't... I hadn't seen my wife in months. I paid... I paid, yes. Yes, I did... I paid.

VLACO

As many of the officers of the 9th did. But those women, Sir, were Croat and Muslim girls.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

I paid those girls.

VLACO

They were forced to perform for us or... or they were shot. The money went to Sonja's... I'm saying this to you, because the men last night were relieved that you were in command here. They said Herak understands how it is. Sir, when I tell them to keep their hands off these women, they'll bring it up. Sonja's, I mean. The girls at Sonja's. I was there when one of them refused to go into the back where those smelly little rooms were, powder and cheap perfume. The next day when we went by in convoy – you remember – we saw her – the one who refused. Her body just off the road. I remember you stopped and looked and...

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

(As Herak turns away)

She was no older than 14.

HERAK

I can still see her.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Legs one way, arms another.

HERAK

An old sweater and skirt thrown with no reverence on the side of a dirt road... Her wide eyes looked shocked...

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Her open mouth

HERAK

trying to shout something... trying to shout something from death.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Trying to call us beasts.

HERAK

Trying to curse us from the here-after for what

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

we -

HERAK

they-

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

did.

HERAK

Savage! Savage!

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

She screamed at me.

HERAK

Savage bastards!

MALE CHORUS

Savage bastards! (Repeat four times.)

HERAK

Was I the only one who heard her?

VLACO

I didn't mean to upset you, Colonel. It's just that the men... the men have seen Serbian women lying in dirt just like that girl. I know it's terrible. I agree. But sometimes in war, men... men lose their senses... It's human to lose your senses. You take that Jusic girl.

(Herak turns to him)

The men look at her.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

A beautiful girl and yet the enemy. A Muslim.

VLACO

They feel they can do anything they want to the enemy. They feel that they...

HERAK

You're not married, Lieutenant, or have a family yet.

VLACO

No, Sir.

HERAK

They might be the enemy, but I see something else in Amina Jusic and her daughter. I see a frightened parent trying to protect her child. I'm not a police officer, Lieutenant, but I'm acute enough to pick up that this Amina and Samira Jusic are two scared rabbits. I interrogated them this morning and I conclude that they don't know anything about the fuel depot explosion.

VLACO

But, Colonel, we must interrogate them under the pressure of...

HERAK

And furthermore... furthermore, I've been thinking, Lieutenant that... That I need a housekeeper in here.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

A housekeeper?

HERAK

Your Corporal's coffee tastes like water through a gravel pit and he burned my eggs.

VLACO

I'm sorry for that, Sir, but...

HERAK

I'll have this - what's her name - Samira Jusic work in here during the day as a housekeeper.

VLACO

Her? You want her in here?

HERAK

Yes.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

In your private quarters?

VLACO

Free to move about the kitchen, the bedroom?

HERAK

If she's going to make up my bed and cook me a bite to eat, I would think so. I'm not going to nail her to the wall.

VLACO

Sir, you don't need me to point out to you that these women are Muslims. The enemy. Pretty face or fawning attitude, they are the other side, Sir. There are knives in the kitchen, and there's a pistol in your belt, and there's...

HERAK

I'm a soldier, Lieutenant, and she's... she's a young village girl.

(He sits again)

I'm sure I can defend myself.

VLACO

Sir...

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

I don't want to discuss it further.

HERAK

See that she's here in the morning.

(Herak turns his wheel chair and moves away from Vlaco. Vlaco stares at him a beat. Then Vlaco exits. Herak drops his chin in his hands. Lights fade. Sound punctuates)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

(As lights slowly come up on
Samira and Amina in a freeze
standing in the exercise yard)

The rules of the camp were clear. The rules of the camp were
strict. All the women here knew the rules of the camp. They all
knew how dangerous it was to break the rules. but some did...

(A shot rings out and quickens
Samira and Amina)

AMINA

Oh, my, God!

SAMIRA

What is it?!

(We hear a scream off)

It's Jela!

(Jela enters crying)

AMINA

Jela . . .

SAMIRA

What happened? Can you speak? In the name of Allah, tell us.

JELA

Nadia. Nadia...

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

They killed her! Shot her! Nadia!

SAMIRA

No.

JELA

One of the truck drivers. . . turned her in to the guard.

AMINA

Turned her in for what?

VLACO

(Entering the scene)

For trying to smuggle out information.

SAMIRA

Information? What information could she have? That the bread is stale? That the showers are a trickle of cold water?

VLACO

You all know the regulations here. It is criminal to...

JELA

You're the damned criminal! This is an atrocity! A war crime!
(Amina pulls Samira away from Vlaco)

JELA

What will they do with her? I want to bury her.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I want to pray over her before those bastards throw her in a hole like a dead dog.

AMINA

Let us all pray for her.

VLACO

Only one of you! Only one! This is not a state funeral! One!

JELA

Then let me go to her.

VLACO

You go ahead then.

(Jela exits. Pause. Then Amina and Samira turn away from Vlaco.)

Don't go away. I have an assignment for your daughter.

SAMIRA

Me? An assignment.

AMINA

What is it now? You're not going to separate us? She's not well.

VLACO

The Colonel. He wants your daughter to... to work as his housekeeper.

(Pause. Amina looks relieved, even smiles slightly)

SAMIRA

Housekeeper?

VLACO

In the cabin. Yes. Housekeeper.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Housekeeper to him?

VLACO

A guard will come in the morning.

VLACO AND FEMALE CHORUS

He'll give you a clean smock.

VLACO

At night you'll be taken back to your cell.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I won't do it.

AMINA

Samira, you'll be out of that cage all day.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I'd rather rot in that cage.

AMINA

You can survive here keeping his house.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

There's no principle to stand on in a nightmare.

AMINA

You just want to wake up safe.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

They just killed Nadia.

SAMIRA

The smoke from the gun hasn't cleared the camp yet. And you want me to work in his house?

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

This is not

VLACO

a mother-daughter decision. One of my duties here is to keep Colonel Herak happy, and I plan to do just that. So clean yourself up in the morning and comb your hair and..

(Samira turns away)

AMINA

She'll be ready, Lieutenant.

SAMIRA

You can drag me across this yard to that cabin, but I won't work. I won't keep house for a man like that.

(Vlaco pushes Armina out of his way and knocks her down. He moves behind Samira)

VLACO

You have no choice here. You'll work. You'll do whatever Herak asks - listen carefully...

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

You'll be his housekeeper or your mother will become housekeeper in the guards barracks!

VLACO

Do you understand what I'm saying?

(Samira turns and nods at him. She looks at her mother on the ground)

Yes. Yes, I can see that you understand perfectly now.

(Lights fade on the three. Music punctuates.)

N.B. If an intermission is desired, this is the end of Act 1

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

I thought - we all thought - that our Colonel had his eye on the prettiest enemy in the camp.

(Lights come up slowly on Herak in a freeze putting on his costume.)

The men who wanted her cursed him for taking her out of their reach. But Herak needed no ordinary barrack's curse. The war, which had been as clear to him as a sailor's star up until now, cursed him with a riddle that squirmed in his brain for an answer: how could this Samira Jusic be his own flesh and blood and yet the enemy?

(Herak quickens and puts on his jacket. Samira enters, dressed in a white smock. For the first time her hair is combed out. She stands motionless. After a beat, Herak sees her.)

VLACO

Colonel...

HERAK

Oh... yes... Samira Jusic... you... you look tired.

(Samira doesn't answer)

Aren't you sleeping?

SAMIRA

I can't sleep. I can't sleep in this place.

HERAK

You have to sleep. That's how we recover from one day to the next... anyway, let me tell you where everything is.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Why do you want me here?

HERAK

Just some light housekeeping. There's a kitchen in there. This morning some coffee. I like it thick and black and hot.

(Pause)

Is something wrong? Didn't Lieutenant Vlaco explain why you were sent here?

SAMIRA

Out of all these women, why... why'd you ask for me?

(Pause)

Well?

(Pause)

Because you bought milk from my grandfather a hundred years ago?

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Or is this the Colonel's genteel way to rape a woman.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

What makes you think that of me?

SAMIRA

It goes on all the time here.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Rape and the threat of rape.

HERAK

But you haven't been... He threatened you?

SAMIRA

You don't think I volunteered to come here to make you -

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

the killer of my people -

SAMIRA

some coffee.

HERAK

Your... your mother asked me to take you on as a housekeeper.

SAMIRA

She asked?

HERAK

Yes. To keep you away from... from everything. In Belgrade I have three daughters. understand. I would never... I mean to say... you'll be safe here.

SAMIRA

How safe can I be with a slaughterer like you?

HERAK

I'm a soldier.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

That girl they shot - Nadia - was 17.

HERAK

In a camp like this...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

A prison.

HERAK

In a prison like this, it's a capital crime to give information to the enemy.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Yes, it's a prison, not a girl's school.

HERAK

That girl knew the chance she took. The message she tried to smuggle out was the fact that I'm here in this camp and which building I'm in. She was a danger. There are terrorists out there...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Freedom fighters.

HERAK

Terrorists who'd like to have that information.

SAMIRA

And your conscience is not bothered that a teenaged girl was shot through the skull?

HERAK

She was warned when she came here. You all were.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

The enemy comes in any gender, any age.

HERAK

In Goradze, where I took shrapnel, high school boys fired the mortar rounds. We returned fire It's our duty. We're soldiers.

SAMIRA

My father and brother fought in Goradze.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

They might have fired on my men.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

And your return fire might have killed them.

(Pause. They regard each other)

SAMIRA

But here I am now, going into your kitchen to make your coffee... thick and black and hot.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Just the way you like it.

(Samira exits. Herak sits in his chair and stares at her as the lights fade. Music punctuates)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience, as lights slowly come up on Amina and Samira)

Now you see Herak's riddle. The dynamic of war is this: the enemy is not just another human being; the enemy is flawed; the enemy is a fascist Croat or a Great Satan or an Arab infidel; and if the enemy's flawed presence in this world is an absolute evil; and your presence here is an absolute good; then you have no choice but to kill him, as if he were a snake at a baby's throat.

(Amina and Samira quicken)

AMINA

And so you made coffee.

SAMIRA

Yes, mother, yes. And he sat there and drank the whole pot. Why must you have every detail? For lunch I cooked him eggs. Then he went out with Vlaco.

AMINA

It's a soft cushion being up there.

SAMIRA

It'd be a softer cushion if they'd let us go.

AMINA

Just don't say anything to anger him.

SAMIRA

(Laughs)

I said everything I could to anger him. I hate him. He was in Goradze. He probably killed Father and Vedran.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Don't say that! We don't know that they're dead.

AMINA

They'll turn up. I know it. I asked Herak to try to find out about them.

SAMIRA

And he said he would?

AMINA

He said he would.

SAMIRA

Why do you trust him? Why'd you beg him to take me on up there? Why are you so sure he's not worse than any other pig in here? He stared at me the whole while he was in the cabin. He's creepy.

(Jela enters with plastic bottles of water.)

JELA

Here's your water.

AMINA

How are you, Jela?

JELA

How can I be? I mean, I buried her. They let me pray over her. The guards tried to stop me. Herak told them to let me pray.

SAMIRA

Here.

(She hands Jela some cheese.)

Take it. You need it to keep up your strength.

JELA

Cheese?

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Fresh cheese?

AMINA

Herak gave it to her.

JELA

Fresh cheese.

SAMIRA

He made me take it with me. I won't eat his cheese.

JELA

We heard. We heard he took you in to work in his place. You could be valuable to everybody.

SAMIRA

How so?

JELA

How so? You're in his quarters. When his wounds heal up he'll be sent somewhere and let fly another shit storm on our towns and villages. It would help if we knew where he's going after here. Any information you dig up. I'll get out.

AMINA

Jela, she's not getting into this.

SAMIRA

Why're you risking your life getting trivial information out of here?

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Trivial? Trivial?

JELA

We have the Great Herak here, and I'll get that out. I'll pick up where poor Nadia left off...

SAMIRA

How do you get information out of here?

JELA

Truck drivers. They haul out garbage and deliver supplies. Truck drivers.

SAMIRA

Why do they take out messages?

JELA

You pay them.

SAMIRA

Pay them? Pay them with what?

JELA

With what? With your mouth, your tongue, anything they want... Don't look at me that way.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

What else does a woman have here to pay with?

JELA

God understands. It's in the service of our people...

AMINA

We're not getting involved in spying. She's just up there to do the housework.

JELA

And she was just at the fuel depot to get a tank of gas.

SAMIRA

I would not have done that if I'd known there were people inside.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

They weren't people. They were Serbs. Serb soldiers.

JELA

Don't want to be involved. The day and hour the Serbs invaded, you were involved, Amina. When your husband and son took up arms, you were involved. When your village emptied of men, you were involved. Every time you shed a tear, you're involved. And when the fuel depot went up, your daughter promoted herself to a defender of Islam. We're all involved. Look around. Think where you are.

SAMIRA

All right. All right, Jela... if I hear anything that might be important, I'll pass it on to you. All right?

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Samira...

SAMIRA

I can at least do that.

JELA

In memory of poor Nadia, Amina. Amina, Samira knows. She knows that even in here, under the thumb of the enemy, we can still fight them. A great battle can go on even in a cesspool like this camp. We keep our dignity when we fight them.

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

They can't rape a woman's soul, Amina. It goes pure to Allah.

(Lights fade. Sound punctuates)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)
(Lights slowly come up on Herak standing in a freeze looking at maps. The wheelchair is now folded up in the background.)

Now Samira saw a purpose in cooking food and cleaning the Colonel's quarters. Over the weeks she became almost civil to him, trying to induce him to talk about everything. And he... he marveled at how bright she was. Almost every day they had a debate about one thing or another...

(Herak quickens looking over the maps. Samira enters with his coffee mug.)

HERAK

Oh... Thank you...

(He hands her the maps)

You can put this over there... There are no markings on them.

SAMIRA

What?

HERAK

On the maps. There are no marks on them. You won't find my military strategy scribbled on them. I saw you looking at them yesterday.

SAMIRA

Only to count all the towns your army's stolen.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

An army doesn't steal. It conquers.

SAMIRA

Words. You're a teacher. You know how to play with words. The truth is you stole our land.

HERAK

What kind of history do they teach in these schools? This land is Serbian land. The Muslims overran it.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

They conquered it. You overran it.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

It was Serb land. We settled it.

SAMIRA

That's ancient history.

HERAK

Medieval, actually. Sultan Murod I took our lands by the sword of Islam. 1389.

SAMIRA

But our whole culture has grown up here since 1389. If we were Christians, you would not have fired a shot.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

But because we're Muslims, you want it cleared of the infidels.

HERAK

I've never called your people infidels.

SAMIRA

But we are to you.

HERAK

I'm a Christian. You're a non-Christian.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Non. Nothing. Nobody.

SAMIRA

What a polite way to dismiss us. What... what would you think if one of your daughters loved a Muslim boy?

HERAK

I... I would... I would discourage such a relationship.

SAMIRA

Why?

HERAK

Because... because a Muslim is of another faith, one in which my daughters don't believe. There are differences in the world.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Like it or not, there are differences between people.

SAMIRA

Yes. Some are good and some are bad.

HERAK

No. Not only good and bad. There are differences, Samira.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

To my daughters, Jesus Christ is the center of their whole lives. The center of my life and my wife's life.

HERAK

Now why would a Muslim boy want to enter a world he doesn't accept.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

But you don't answer my question.

SAMIRA

What would you do if one of your daughters fell in love with a Muslim boy?

HERAK

I said I'd discourage it.

SAMIRA

She already loves him and she ignores you.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Suppose

SAMIRA

she ignored you and ran off. It happens.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Suppose...

SAMIRA

suppose she got pregnant, had a child with that boy?

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Suppose

SAMIRA

your grandson were half a Muslim?

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Just suppose.

SAMIRA

What would you do if you caught up with them? Would you kill them? Would you love them? How would you feel about the baby?

(A beat. Herak doesn't answer.)

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

You can't answer...?

HERAK

It's all suppositions, Samira.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

My daughters are devout.

HERAK

Stop supposing and look at life. Your father would never let you see a Christian boy,

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

a Serbian Christian boy.

SAMIRA

True. That's true. He'd kill me.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

He'd kill both of us.

HERAK

So... so... . . . see how there are differences other than just good and bad? You don't consider your father bad just because he wants you with your own kind. Because his dreams for you would be to marry a Muslim boy. Have you got a boyfriend?

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Boyfriend? Where would any Muslim girl find a boyfriend?

SAMIRA

These women you cage up here are missing husbands, brothers, nephews, uncles, male neighbors.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

All gone. all gone.

SAMIRA

They all ran off when I was still in school. They ran off before they could be taken by your army. Look in the town. No boys. Just women, children and old men. Old men too far gone to do anything but puff on their pipes.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

No, *I* have no boyfriend, Colonel.

HERAK

I know it's horrible to have families split up like this.

SAMIRA

When you leave here will you go home to see your wife and daughters? Or will you go somewhere else?

HERAK

(Smiles)

Where I go when I leave here is classified information.

SAMIRA

That's right. It would be... in your case... since you're to be made general... There'll be some big time battle for you to plan... you couldn't say...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Do your daughters love you?

SAMIRA

I mean to say, you're a career officer. Do they know you well enough to miss you?

HERAK

I think they love me and miss me. I'm very good to them.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

I love them. I'd do anything for my daughters. I love them all.

SAMIRA

(After a pause)

Belgrade.

HERAK

Belgrade?

SAMIRA

They're in Belgrade you said. You wouldn't take another assignment until you saw them again. You'll go to Belgrade after here.

(Pause. Herak regards her. He smiles)

I can see it in your eyes. You do love all your daughters. Oh, don't deny it. You'll go from here to them.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

You're just like Irena, my oldest daughter and... and...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

What is it? What's Irena like? Why am I like her?

HERAK

Irena... She... She's a pryer. She pries at a person until she finds out what she wants. She... she twists our conversations like taffy, this way and that, until she finds out exactly what I didn't want to tell her.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Irena.

SAMIRA

And she's your favorite. I can tell. Your face... when you mentioned her name... your face... it stopped looking like a soldier's face and it looked like a... like a father's face...

HERAK

I always tell them I don't have a favorite.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

You don't have to lie to me.

HERAK

I could never tell anyone in my family but...

SAMIRA

But what?

HERAK

Yes. I was just going to say, yes. Irena is my favorite.

SAMIRA

(Taking his empty coffee cup)

I'm sure the others know.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

The others always know...

SAMIRA

Belgrade...

(Samira exits. Herak sits on a riser. He smiles to himself. Lights fade. Sound punctuates.)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

(As lights slowly come up on Amina and Samira in their cell)

To perceive this as good and that as evil is a satisfying way to look at the world. Good and evil. A single vision etched in clarity. A solid moral ruler to measure human action, to order human thought. Good and evil. That this measure is often too simple does not diminish its appeal in our lives... when Samira Jusic began to see past the hated uniform that Colonel Herak wore, it disturbed her greatly that she glimpsed a human being.

(Samira and Amina quicken)

SAMIRA

It was easier before... it was easier before I got to know him. It was easier when he was just the other side.

AMINA

Oh? And now what is he?

SAMIRA

I don't know. He's somebody's father. He's much like my own father: middle-aged, strong in his religious convictions, doting on his children, and he eats as many fried eggs as my own father.

AMINA

And toward you, I mean, after all this time, does he... does he like you?

SAMIRA

Why should he like me? He knows I wish he loses this war, or even that he loses his life...

AMINA

You do?

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Don't you?

SAMIRA

Don't we all?

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Don't we wish them all dead?

SAMIRA

I mean, he has a family and it'd be unfortunate for them. For his daughters. His eldest, Irena, the one he's closest to. He told me all about her. She'd never get over it. But... but he's a soldier.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

And it's a soldier's job to die, isn't it?

AMINA

The tone of your voice...

SAMIRA

What?

AMINA

The tone of your voice when you speak of him lately is sad or something.

SAMIRA

He's just not what I expected him to be. He's never mistreated me. I have to watch myself, Mother... In a place like this, you become so starved for a crumb of humanity that when you get a crumb... it looks like a whole loaf.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

He's still the other side.

AMINA

But we're going to pull through this because of him. My hopes and prayers are that you and I and your father and brother are together again.

SAMIRA

I miss them so much. Vedran looked like a boy in that uniform, as if he were dressing up in his father's clothes. He should be in his shorts out kicking a soccer ball.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Now he's got a rifle instead, and the world has made him a killer.

SAMIRA

I can't imagine Vedran or father killing anyone.

AMINA

I'm sure Branislav Herak's children can't imagine their father killing anyone.

SAMIRA

Do you think Father or Vedran would... would rape a Serbian woman.

AMINA

Samira...

SAMIRA

I mean, I hear that all sides do it.

AMINA

When your father and brother left our house they never degraded any human being.

SAMIRA

But when they left our house, they left for war, Mother. I think war twists the face of humanity, I do, wrings out the decency...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

That's why everyone now is in some way a monster...

AMINA

We're not monsters. No one in our family is a...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I burned 16 soldiers to death.

AMINA

Shhh..

SAMIRA

I. Samira, who used to go to school with red ribbons in her hair, who couldn't sleep at night unless the cat was in bed with her. I burned 16 people to death. I thought I'd never sleep again when I found out. I thought these lids would stay open forever. It's scary, Mother. Now, only a few weeks later...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I sleep. I sleep soundly.

SAMIRA

I sleep on this cement floor as if it were grandmother's big fluffy mattress. Only when the guard pounds on this cage in the morning do I wake up. It's scary.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

It's scary that we can get over killing people.

SAMIRA

It's scary, Mother...

(Lights fade. Music punctuates.)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

(As lights come up slowly on a freeze of Herak lighting a cigarette.)

I always assumed that a man of Herak's fame knew what he was doing. That he calculated everything, designed before he decided, engineered before he acted. Hence his brilliance in winning battles. But this thing with the Jusic girl, a prisoner, seemed to me an aberration, a lapse in judgement, an error. Sweetcakes. Good Christ, I said. Sweetcakes.

(Herak quickens, lights the cigarette and looks through papers and documents. Samira enters with a tray of food.)

SAMIRA

Where'd you get all this? I haven't seen beef this good in years.

HERAK

Eat some if you like.

(Herak sits and eats)

SAMIRA

I did already... I tasted some

HERAK

You should have something good today... yes. I know today's a special day for you.

(Pause. Samira looks at him)

SAMIRA

She told you. My mother told you.

HERAK

No. Your birthdate is on your identification papers. Twenty years old today.

SAMIRA

Twenty years old.

HERAK

A child no longer

SAMIRA

I haven't been a child since...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Since death wiped the innocence from my eyes.

SAMIRA

I remember the day... coming home from school... they were right in front of me... a man and his wife crossing the street... a sniper's bullet struck him. The crowd ran... the man's blood splattered his wife... a whole-cloud burst of blood... He fell...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Shock froze me.

SAMIRA

I didn't hear the others shouting at me to get down. Someone grabbed at my collar and yanked me into a doorway, but I could still see the wife screaming and holding her hand over the wound, as if her little trembling white hand could stop the giant death that tore up her husband's heart... I never even told my mother I was so close to them when he was hit...

HERAK

I know the shock and numbness you speak of... Believe me. Believe me when I tell you, I pray, I pray the politicians go to the blessed peace table every day.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Believe me, I pray for peace.

HERAK

Look... Samira... may we suspend the war for three minutes so I can give you this.

(He hands her a white box.)

SAMIRA

What's this?

HERAK

I don't know. It's a... a birthday present.

SAMIRA

A birthday... in this place?... a present?
(She opens the box)

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Sweetcakes?

SAMIRA

Sweetcakes.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

How'd you ever get sweetcakes?

HERAK

We have supply routes. No, I won't tell you which roads we use.
Eat.

SAMIRA

(Tasting the cakes)
They're fresh. They're good... Thank you...

HERAK

You're welcome.

SAMIRA

You're leaving here soon, aren't you? I see you've packed some things.

HERAK

Well, I'm feeling better now and...

SAMIRA

And so you go again to fight... the war...
(She puts the cake down)
The sweet taste... it almost made me forget.

HERAK

(rising)

Think what you will of me. But remember this. I don't relish war. My country called on me and I answered. I was a teacher, Samira. I taught all the old wars as if they were all just a long ago history. Then when this business started in our country, I couldn't believe that the people wanted war. They all planned for it. They paid for it. Unfurled flags in war's honor. Cheered for it as if it were a national sporting event. And now we die for it. And children swallow their childhood before their time. I don't want you to think I'm in this to become a General or a hero. I gamble everything I love in this fight...

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

My home. My wife... my daughters.

SAMIRA

Why do you care what I think?

HERAK

A young girl... Samira... has got to know more than hate. I can see it's consuming you, destroying you.

(Vlaco enters with mail.)

VLACO

Colonel...

HERAK

Yes, Lieutenant.

VLACO

Daily dispatches, Sir.

(Herak takes the dispatches and signals Samira to remove the food tray)

HERAK

And Samira, you take these sweetcakes back with you tonight. They go stale fast.

SAMIRA

Yes... yes... thank you...

(Samira removes the food tray and exits. Vlaco looks inside the box. Herak sits and reads)

VLACO

Sweetcakes.

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Good Christ, sweetcakes!

HERAK

What's the matter?

VLACO

I just remarked on the sweetcakes, Sir.

HERAK

Yes. The girl's birthday... she's twenty years old now and she still has a child's face. Don't you think she deserves...

(He stops abruptly at his reading of one of the dispatches and rises)

VLACO

She might have a child's face, but she's got a killer's brain.

HERAK

(Far away in thought for a moment)

Some of the men would shoot them all, line them up and shoot them all, wouldn't they? All these women?

VLACO

Some of them only need the order. Sir. But I...

HERAK

But you... you're not one of them, are you, Lieutenant?

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

You just begrudge a girl a few sweetcakes on her birthday.

VLACO

I remarked on you giving her sweetcakes, because I have news, Sir. I don't give a damn if it's the girl's birthday or not. Three of the women have been broken down and made to spill their insides.

HERAK

And...

VLACO

And, Sir, the three give separate detailed corroborating accounts of how this birthday girl with the child's face and the sweetcakes on her breath...

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Lieutenant!

VLACO

Blew up the fuel depot, Sir.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Her? Samira Jusic. They name her?

VLACO

Samira Jusic drove the Citroen packed with the explosives that did the deed.

(Long pause)

Sir?

HERAK

What did we do to those women to, as you say, break them down?

VLACO

We were firm but not brutal.

(Herak laughs)

HERAK

We play with words, Samira once told me.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Firm but not brutal.

HERAK

What does that mean?

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

You only put your rifle half way up their asses, not all the way?

VLACO

Sir, I don't understand. I thought you'd be pleased to know. How... how do you want to... to proceed?

HERAK

Don't shoot her right now, Lieutenant.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

She's not finished washing the dishes out there.

VLACO

Colonel Herak, what is it? I'm only asking what you want me to do?

HERAK

Yes. Yes, I know. Well, she's here in the kitchen... we've got her... she's not going any place... I'll... I'll... I'll decide what's to be done.

VLACO

Maybe if you read the signed statements of these women...

HERAK

Yes... yes, leave them... leave them and go.

(Pause. Vlaco does not move)

Well?

VLACO

You seem angry, Sir. Oh, I understand the girl kept your quarters clean and that... that you got to know her...

HERAK

What does that mean?

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

I got to know her.

HERAK

Lieutenant, do the men think that I... that this girl and I...

VLACO

Sir, what do you expect the men to think? She's pretty and you... quite frankly, Sir... you seem to... to favor her...

HERAK

Jovan Vlaco, you can inform the men that what they think isn't true. That what they think is through the squalor of their own war-weary minds.

VLACO

Yes, Sir.

HERAK

And if she did destroy the fuel depot, it's because she became a soldier for her people, just as we have for our people.

VLACO

She killed 16 soldiers, Sir.

(Herak hands Vlaco the dispatch he had been reading)

HERAK

And we fucking killed her father and her brother!

VLACO

(Looking at the dispatch)

Shot. Shot trying to escape...

(Samira enters with Herak's coffee. They both turn to look at her. Lights fade. Music punctuates.)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

I couldn't understand at the time why Herak cared if two enemy soldiers were shot escaping. It happened daily all over. I couldn't understand at the time why he didn't shoot this Samira himself now that we had proof against her...

(Lights come up slowly on Amina and Samira frozen in the camp yard. They comfort each other.)

What was wrong with him? Battle fatigue? Had he lost his nerve for what has to be done in war? I was blind to what he thought. To me, Samira Jusic was a saboteur for the Bosnian army. And so should she be to Herak...

(Amina and Samira quicken and begin crying. After a beat, Jela enters and crosses to them)

JELA

I heard... I'm sorry for you both... I'm sorry...

AMINA

He was a boy... Vedran was a boy, Jela... He drank milk from the carton... He threw his clothes on the floor... He kicked his soccer ball in the yard... He loved soccer as only a boy can...

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

They killed a boy. They killed a boy and his father!

JELA

The whole camp mourns with you. Your son and your husband are heroes.

AMINA

They're dead!

AMINA

Calling them heroes doesn't draw out the sting! They're dead!
(Amina falls to her knees crying. Jela puts her arm around Sarina and takes her aside. Amina's sobs punctuate the exchange between Jela and Samira)

JELA

Can you pull yourself together and listen to me?
(Samira nods yes)
I don't have a lot of time. They saw me. They saw.

SAMIRA

Who?

JELA

Listen. I have a message for you.

(She whispers in Samira's ear.
Samira is surprised)

Yes, the leader of your group. They know you work in Herak's place.

SAMIRA

But I refuse to go back there.

JELA

You have to. You told us he'd be leaving soon.

SAMIRA

Who cares? Who cares about any of it now? Passing your information back and forth. Who cares?

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

My family's been butchered!

JELA

Then maybe this is the best time to act.

SAMIRA

On what?

(Jela pulls Samira even further away from Amina)

JELA AND FEMALE CHORUS

They don't want Herak to leave here.

JELA

They don't want him back in the war. They want him killed, Samira.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Killed?

AMINA

(To herself)

Such a good father was he... such a good husband...

SAMIRA

They want me...

JELA

(Handing her a small vial.)

You take it. Take it. There's not much time. They saw me, Samira. They saw them pass this to me...

SAMIRA

What... what is it?

JELA

In strong coffee. He won't taste it.

SAMIRA

Jela... Jela... I... I can't do this...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I never killed anyone.

JELA

You killed 16.

SAMIRA

I can't.

JELA

It's your group leader who orders this.

(She presses Samira's hand.)

It's from them.

(Samira crosses away from Jela)

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

I can't.

(Jela crosses to her. Samira turns to her)

JELA

Don't look at me like that. Don't say you can't. You can't. Why not? You forgot the war? Up in that cabin every day, eating the best foods. Drinking good coffee. Listening to his sweet nothings in your ears.

(Samira grabs Jela)

SAMIRA

You fool! Do you use your mouth for anything that's not foul?!

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Stupid, stupid little fool!

JELA

(Pulling away)

Why a fool?

SAMIRA

It's not true.

JELA

If it's not true then just kill him. Kill him. Kill the bastard.

AMINA

(Again to herself, out of the loop
of Jela and Samira)

We'll never see them again ever.

JELA

Why should your father die and he live?

SAMIRA

Look at my mother. Is any water more bitter than a widow's tear?
Look at her. Where her heart was, there is now nothing but
grief. I'm all she has left.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

What do you think they'll do to me when they find this in the
great Herak's vomit?

(She holds up the vial)

JELA

It'll all turn out the same for you. For me too.

SAMIRA

What'll turn out the same?

JELA

Do you want your short life to matter?

SAMIRA

What're you talking about?

JELA

Some of the others. They talked. From your village. They talked. Torture opens mouths. Electricity they use. Electricity does more than burn the Colonel's toast. They know. The fuel depot. They know you did it.

(Samira looks at her crying mother)

So how long do you have? It's only because of Herak that they haven't put out the back of your head. It's only because you and Herak are... because he's using you...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

He's not! He's not using me! He's not like that! He never touched me! Never once!

MALE CHORUS

It's that one there, Lieutenant! It's her! The one who takes the bread around! She's the one!

(Vlaco enters. Samira and Jela turn to him. Amina crosses to Samira and Jela now)

AMINA

What is it now?

(Vlaco slowly crosses to Jela. He takes her arm and bends it back behind her)

JELA

What? What is it?

SAMIRA

Leave her alone!

VLACO

We know you received something through the fence. They saw you take it and run.

SAMIRA

What did they give you?

JELA

Nothing. I have nothing. Nothing. Search me.

VLACO

(Pushing her off)

You were seen taking something.

JELA

I have nothing!

VLACO

Maybe you swallowed it just now!

VLACO AND MALE CHORUS

Maybe we'll have to hose it out of you!

(Jela screams off. Amina resumes crying. Samira holds her mother and looks at the vial in her hand. Lights fade. Music punctuates)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

Jela Kaljanao was one of the strongest women I've ever encountered. Under torture she revealed nothing. She just cursed the guards through her electric pain.

FEMALE CHORUS

God is great! Soon. Soon I'll be dead, you bastards! God is great! Soon, I'll see God and I'll know why he sent you bastards here! Yes. I'll know. I'LL KNOW WHY HE SENT THIS WAR! AND YOU'LL STILL BE IN THIS DARKNESS. THIS SUFFERING... THIS UNBEARABLE SUFFERING!!

(As lights come up slowly on a freeze of Herak signing papers.)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

Jela now knows why God sent this war and we are still in darkness and suffering and the guilt that debilitates us like an illness...

(Herak quickens, signs some papers. After a beat, Samira enters. Herak sees her. Slowly, he rises)

HERAK

I... I told them... I told them you didn't have to come back here if you didn't want to... It's all right. Nothing will happen to you... Samira? Samira, you want some coffee? *I* made some... I'm... I'm sorry about your father and your brother...

SAMIRA

I always knew they were dead. You know that. It was mother who always had hope. It's Jela. We want to bury her.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

We want to bury her with prayers, not only dirt.

HERAK

Yes. Yes. Look, I said before, these women take their lives in their own hands when they go to the forbidden zones near the fences to smuggle contraband in here.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

The woman knew that.

SAMIRA

Woman. She was not much older than I am. Not much older than your oldest daughter.

HERAK

My daughter wouldn't have...

SAMIRA

If the war were in her backyard, she'd do exactly what we do. Look at us.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

We're all somebody's daughter, you butcher!

SAMIRA

Your daughter would do exactly as we do and hate as savagely as we do.

HERAK

And what exactly did you do in this war?

SAMIRA

Only... only what I had to do.

(Pause)

Only what the war made me do.

(Pause)

Don't toy with me, please. I know you know about me. I know.

Why? Why am I alive and Jela's dead? Why?

(Pause)

Why have you shielded me? Jela only passed information in and out. But me... why?

HERAK

I... I confess, Samira, that getting to know you over the weeks, I've grown fond of you...

HERAK

And now I'm at odds within myself...

SAMIRA

So they'll attach their batteries to my breasts after you leave here.

HERAK

I'm

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

trying

HERAK

to think of a way of saving you and your mother.

SAMIRA

16 soldiers died in that fuel depot. Your soldiers. You must be really fond of me.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

If you're so fond of me, why didn't you just take me?!

HERAK

Samira...

SAMIRA

I would've given myself to you to save Jela. I would not have resisted.

HERAK

Stop this.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Did you know that?

SAMIRA

You looked surprised. You didn't think I'd be so quick to give. But to save her, I'd have let you help yourself.

HERAK

You don't know what you're saying!

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

You don't understand!

HERAK

I'm... I'm trying... I'm trying to help you because there have been so many atrocities in this war that I... I... I just want to... to help a mother and her daughter to...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

No.

SAMIRA

I won't be used for your atonement. You think you're more decent than the others. You want to give us pity now. Pity from a Christian Serb for a Muslim and her mother. The soon to be General Herak who'll go out of this place and kill some more.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

You're nothing but a killer the same as I am!

SAMIRA

The war's made us into freaks. Look at us. If you were decent, you would have done something to save Jela before they...

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Jela Kaljanao chose to be a soldier.

HERAK

She chose to fight. Her silence was her rifle. We all fight in different ways with different weapons.

SAMIRA

And I chose a car full of explosives. When will they come for me? What happens to me?

HERAK

Samira, I'm not going to another detention camp. I can't have you and your mother transferred. But before I leave, I... I can release you both.

SAMIRA

It won't do any good.

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

Samira...

SAMIRA

They'd just pick us up again after your car is out of sight.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

There's no hope. None.

SAMIRA

But I want to bury Jela.

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

We owe the dead a final dignity.

HERAK

Of course... of course, you'll be able to bury her... yes...

SAMIRA

Thank you.

(She begins to cross off)

HERAK

Where are you going?

SAMIRA

It's time... for your coffee.

HERAK

Oh. . . oh, yes. . .

SAMIRA

(Exiting)

Dark, thick and hot. . .

HERAK

(Alone)

I will find a way... I will...

(Lights fade. Music punctuates)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience)

Sandra gave him his coffee and left the cabin through the kitchen door. While Herak drank, he put in a call to the United Nations post in Sarajevo. He requested they send a U.N. vehicle to take Amina and Samira Jusic to the safe haven of the Bosnian capitol.

(Lights come up on Samira and Amina in a freeze: Amina wiping away a tear. Samira tugging at her mother's arm)

I saw Samira leave the cabin. It was unusual to see her leave so early. There was no sign of nervousness or internal calamity. She slowly strolled up to her mother in the yard...

SAMIRA

(Quickening with Amina)

Mother... Mother, stop crying... Mother... There's not a lot of time... Mother, they know.

AMINA

They know?

SAMIRA

About the fuel depot. They know I did it.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Samira, no. Who said so?

SAMIRA

Listen, listen, listen to me. You've got to be stronger now than you've ever been. I don't know how long it'll be before they come for me. And, Mother, I'm scared.

AMINA

Samira...

SAMIRA

It's all over for me and that's why I did this. I did it for Father and Vedran.

AMINA

Did what? Go to Herak. Go back right now...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Mother! Mother! Mother! Listen!

SAMIRA

There's no more Herak.

AMINA

What? What're you saying? What did you do?

SAMIRA

In his coffee... Just now... In his coffee...

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

poison...

SAMIRA

It was one last act for God that I could perform on this earth.
Mother, I love you. Hold me tight.

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

What have you done?!

AMINA

You poisoned Branislav Herak?

SAMIRA

I poisoned Herak the Serb, Mother. Herak the Satan, Christian
jail keeper, Serb invader, killer, butcher...

AMINA AND FEMALE CHORUS

(As she slaps Samira)

He's your father! Branislav Herak is your father!

(Amina starts to run off. Samira
stops her)

SAMIRA

Mother, what is this? Mother!

AMINA

He's your father! Yes!

SAMIRA

My. . . my. . .

AMINA

When he was stationed here many years ago... when we were
young... He and I... He's your father... Let me go to him.
(She runs off)

SAMIRA

My father... So that's why he... that's why...

(Samira puts her hands to her
mouth and cries out. Then she runs
after Amina. Black out. Music
punctuates.)

VLACO

(Addressing the audience as lights slowly come up on Herak in a freeze bent over holding his stomach. His coffee cup lays on the floor)

Amina Jusic bolted across the exercise yard. Samira followed. The other prisoners fell silent. All heads turned like a herd startled at an observed terror in one of their own. I drew my pistol and, at first, tried to stop them from entering...

(Herak quickens with his pain.
Amina, Samira and Vlaco enter)

Sir... Sir... The Jusic woman claims you're in danger... sir... sir, what is it, Colonel? Colonel!

(Amina rushes to him. Vlaco tries to stop her. Herak waves his efforts off. Amina crosses to him and takes his arm and sits him down)

AMINA

Branislav. . . Branislav, she didn't know...

(Samira falls to her knees weeping)

Maybe a doctor...

HERAK

No doctor could stop this...

VLACO

Stop what?! What is it, Sir?

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

He's poisoned. I poisoned him.

VLACO

Poisoned?! Sir, let me get a medic and a...

HERAK

It won't do any good to get anyone...

AMINA

I thought God answered my prayers when he sent you here.

(Vlaco crosses to Samira with a drawn pistol.)

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

No! Don't touch her! Vlaco... don't... don't touch her!

VLACO

Why not? I'll shoot this filthy Muslim bitch!

AMINA

No!

SAMIRA AND FEMALE CHORUS

Shoot! Shoot me! Shoot the life out of me so I won't see any more death!

HERAK

No! Put the pistol down!

HERAK AND MALE CHORUS

She's my daughter, Vlaco! She's my daughter!

VLACO

Your daughter?

(Samira rises and crosses to Herak, her body trembling)

HERAK

My daughter... my daughter whom this war turned into a soldier... damned good soldier...

HERAK

Courage... it took courage... to... to... do this...
(Samina kneels again and cries)

VLACO

Your daughter... your daughter...

HERAK

That I'd never known until now... I grew... grew to love her...

HERAK

Forbid you to... to touch her... Forbid you.

(Herak dies and slumps to the floor. Strong music punctuates. Samira and Amina freeze. Lights dim but do not go down on this tableau. A stark light comes up downstage. Vlaco drops his pistol and races downstage. With some cream and a towel, he tries to wipe the make-up from his face as if it were burning his skin. He seems to choke with pain, until he removes some of the make-up. Then he rises, throws off his military jacket and addresses the audience.)

VLACO

My mouth is dry from the telling. Amina Yasmin sobbed out the whole story while I stood there in shock. I did nothing to the two women... I simply walked out of the Colonel's cabin... after that, I deserted the Serbian army... God help me... I can't sleep anymore... when I witnessed a daughter killing the father - her own father - who was trying to save her...

FEMALE CHORUS

Shoot me! Shoot me! Shoot the life out of me so I won't see anymore death!

MALE CHORUS

No! No, Vlaco. She's my daughter!

VLACO

No more! Please, God, no more!... By the time the U.N. car arrived at the compound to take the two women to a safe city, it was too late. The new commandant had shot both mother and daughter...

(We hear shots. The light now abruptly blacks out on the tableau and the stark light on Vlaco begins to fade.)

I deserted because all I had seen I knew was a sign to me from God almighty... a sign... a sign to stop justifying this... this sin. . . to stop warping life into death... and saying it is good... to stop... to stop... to stop... to just stop...

(The lights are out. Music soft up.)

The End

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