Bridging the divide

Idealistic Canadian Andrew Garrod mixes together a play, young actors and a town torn in two

By Maggie Estey-Smith

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* - still standard reading in high school English classes all over North America - is the quintessential companion to adolescence. The romance, betrayal and tragedy resonate to teenaged readers in their own volatile time of seemingly all-important allegiances, heartbreak and treachery.

But Shakespeare himself, wanting to stage today his play of fatal feuds and star cross'd lovers, couldn't have chosen a modern-day Verona more apt, more daring, than the former Yugoslavia.

For North Americans who consumed the Balkan wars of the 1990s on television, a real-life *Romeo and Juliet* became an indelible image of the slaughter in that war.

In 1993, two young lovers – she was Muslim, he Serbian – tried to escape Sarajevo, then in a death grip siege by Serbian soldiers. Admira Ismic and Bosko Brkic were 25 and had been together for nine years. They mistakenly thought they'd arranged safe passage from the city across a certain bridge. In daylight, they walked confidently across. Like Shakespeare's young lovers, they too had been crossed – though not by stars. A sniper shot him, then her. She crawled to his aid, and they died in one another's arms. Their bodies lay unrecovered for days as both sides in the war argued over who was to blame for the shooting and who would risk retrieving them. Meanwhile, their story was told by television networks all over the world.

Fast forward to the city of Mostar, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, August 2006.

Andrew Garrod, who spent 16 years as the drama instructor at Saint John High, describes the narrow and often cobbled streets of the Muslim communities in east Mostar, and the more spacious avenues and boulevards in the Christian west. While there has been a massive rebuilding program funded by the international community since the Bosnian War ended 11 years ago, Garrod says there are still many destroyed buildings littering the landscape on both sides.

Of pre-war Mostar's population of 126,000, about 34 per cent were Croats, 35 per cent were Muslims, and the rest were Serbs.

"Prior to the war, almost 15 years ago, it was the city with the largest number of inter-faith marriages," Garrod says. "Yet, now it is divided by this invisible line."

Now a professor of education at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, Garrod has been visiting Mostar for the last eight years, conducting research on the moral development of teenagers and children in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since his time at Saint John High, he's also directed Shakespearean student theatre at Marshall High School in Majuro in the central Pacific. Given his ambition to bring the Bard's power to young people, a production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* using actors from 10 different segregated schools seemed the perfect project.

"Andrew showed us that if you take the time to study the plays, you soon realize that the problems experienced by people who lived four centuries ago aren't all that different from those we face today," says Saint John-born Wayne Best, a former student of Garrod's who has acted in Shakespearean productions at the Stratford Festival in Ontario.

"After all, men will still do anything to achieve positions of power, and love still conquers all."

Garrod, founder of the non-profit organization Youth Bridge, which works in the areas of education, reconciliation and development, recruited an international team to help him. They include a doctoral student at Harvard University of Croation background, a Canadian graduate of McGill University, and an inner city math teacher in Boston who is making a documentary about the production.



Dzenan Durakovic (16, Romeo) in rehearsal on the set for Romeo and Juliet. In the background is the ruined Old University Library which was bombed and set on fire during th war in Mostar (1992-1995). The play is being performed in the ruins of the library.

The unofficial capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina has had a carefully elaborated policy of national equality ever since the end of the Bosnian war. The Croat and Bosniak ethnic communities occupy different sides of the Neretva river.

The Stari Most, meaning Old Bridge, spans that river, linking the Muslim east side to the Catholic west side. But it wasn't always so.

The Most, already damaged by Serbian bombardment, was destroyed Nov. 9, 1993, by Herzegovinian Croat forces. Both Serb and Croat nationalists saw the bridge and old historic area around it as part of the Bosniak and Islamic culture, and it was often targeted during their attacks.

When the Stari Most was listed as a World Heritage Site and rebuilt in 2004, opening ceremonies were based on the idea of reconciling Bosnian communities.

But Garrod says that although the war has been over for 11 years, bad blood and suspicion remain evident.

"The threat of violence is not great, though there is an undeniable tension in many parts of the country, and hostility on the part of some to reconciliation and integration."

He says doesn't want to be taken for a do-gooder who thinks he understands the situation better than local people do.

"I have come to love this city and its people," he said. "In a way, this play is a present to the city, to thank them for the immense cooperation I have had here over the years."

It is also a gift he hoped could help heal another divide.

Garrod says as you go down a corridor in the Mostar Gymnasium, widely considered the city's premiere school, you pass one classroom, populated entirely with Croat students, taught by a Croat teacher. Another class down the hall is all-Bosnian.

"All other schools in the city are completely divided," Garrod says.

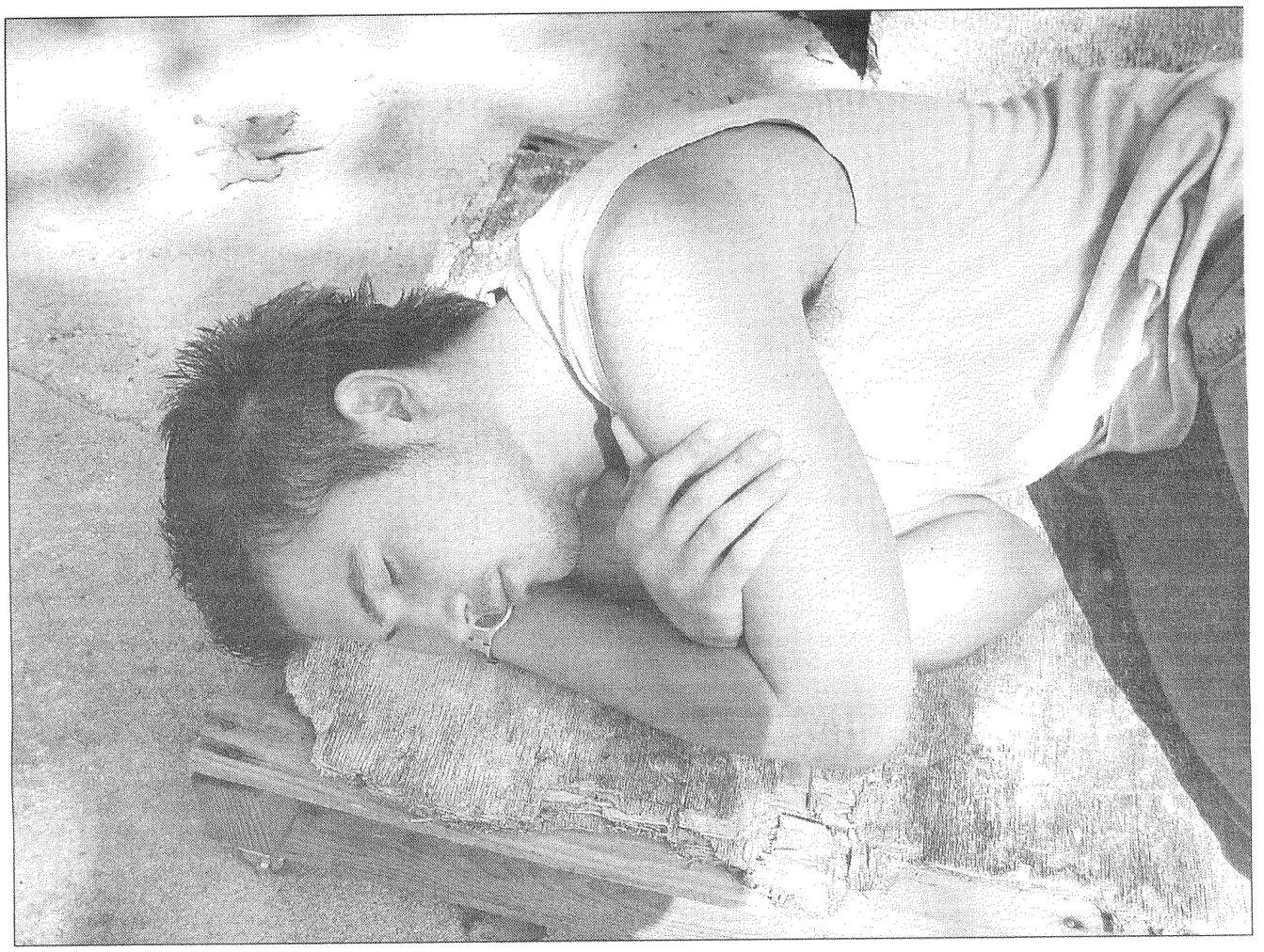
"They are either Croat or Bosniak schools."

As well as being overwhelmingly segregated, few schools have laboratories or libraries, so hands-on learning is difficult, and whole books are often memorized. Half of Mostar's residents are unemployed, and after-school jobs for teens are rare. Few schools offer extracurricular activities.

When Garrod and his team spent two days touring schools in the city, they found no shortage of students willing to help with the production.

To stage *Romeo and Juliet*, "we looked for an austere and evocative setting," Garrod says.

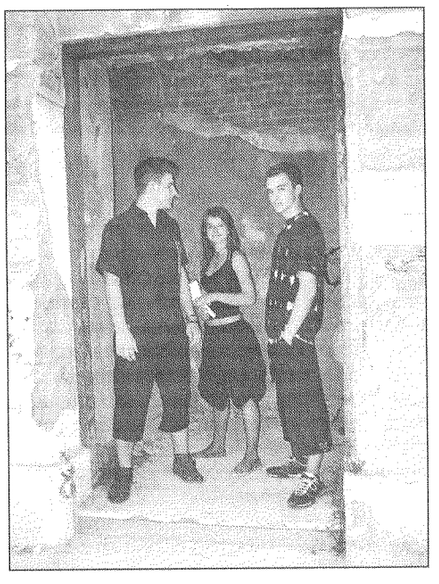
The old University library, one of the many ruins that serve as reminders of wartime violence, was built in the last decade of the 19th century.



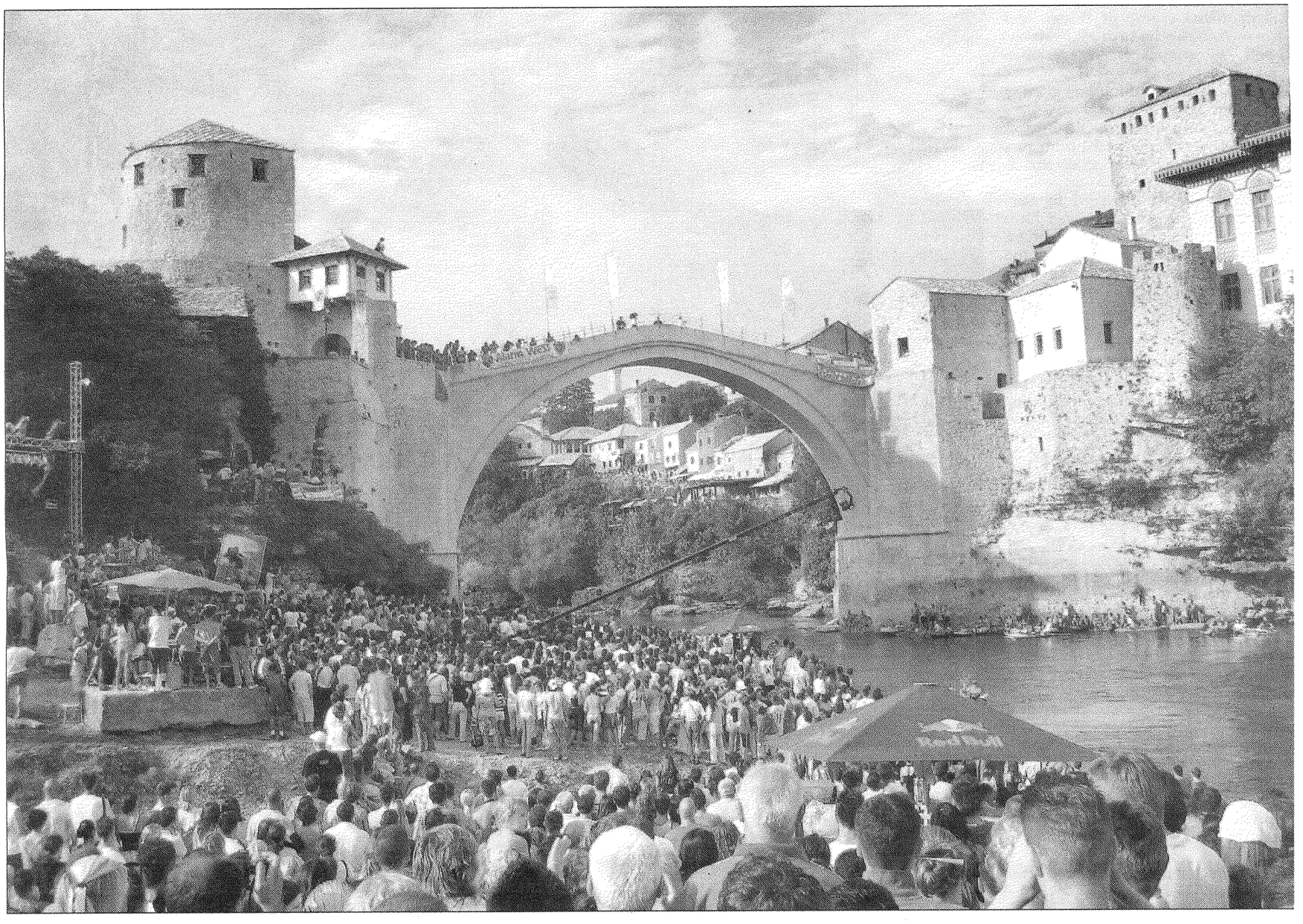
Igor Soldo (17, Tybalt) awaiting burial in the vault of the Capulets, during a rehearsal.



Cast and crew members of Romeo and Juliet enjoy a day on the Croatian coast prior to the opening night of the play in Mostar. Many activities were arranged by the production team to further the likelyhood of friendships across ethnic divisions.



Ivan Rozic (Capulet), Mirha Zuhric (15, Chorus member) and Zeljko Marijanovic (18, Paris) await their entrance on stage at the general dress rehearsal.



The famous Stari Most (Old Bridge) in Mostar. Built in 1556 and linking the muslim, east side of the city, to the catholic west side, it is considered one of the most beautiful bridges in Europ It was destroyed in the recent Balkan wars, rebuilt and opened in 2004. Every year, a diving competition takes place from the bridge. This picture was taken during this summer's diving competition.

"As the light of a warm summer evening dwindles to darkness, casting this beautiful shell of a building into relief, it's easy to undertand why we chose it for the production."

In this production, the well-known scenes Romeo and Juliet appear in were performed in Shakespeare's original English iambic pentametre, and the remaining dialogue was presented in Bosnian, Croat and Serbian.

"Many of the Bosnians in the audience, for example, would not have understood Shakespeare's language, but I am sure they understood what was going on through the expression and emotion of the actors, and from the plot synopsis in the program," said Garrod.

Romeo was played by Dzenan Durakovic, 16, a Bosniak student. Juliet, Klara Markic, 18, is a Croat.

"We have a problem in our city between different cultures, but I am glad that Romeo is a Muslim and I am a Christian. It is good to show the city that different people can work together for this play," Markic says via e-mail.

Garrod recalls the day one actor didn't show up for practice. The cast and crew feared he had dropped out of the production.

"We were concerned until we found out that one of his new friends from the cast had taken him to visit her side of the bridge for the first time in his life."

Mostar's *Romeo and Juliet* opened the evening of Aug. 2, to an attentive, receptive, standing room-only audience. The play ran until Aug. 6, and local newspapers gave the production warm and complimentary reviews.

"There is very little tradition of youth or school theatre in this city, so I think few people in the audience knew what to expect," Garrod says. "I cannot tell you how many people said they were amazed at the quality of the production and the performances of the teenagers."

Garrod says trips to the sea, pizza p ties, seminars, movie screenings and f ball in the park have brought the cast gether in a remarkable way.

Eighteen-year-old Majla Custo, production manager and a recent gra ate of the Mostar Gymnasium, says actors got into a fight about whethe call the local language Bosnian or C tian on the first day of practice.

"Now they all just say 'our languag she writes.

"It's amazing. I never thought I wo hear that."

Maggie Estey-Smith is a Style repo with the Telegraph-Journal.