

★ UNYASCI!

Promoting Gender Justice through Theatre



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Setting the Stage for Change

UNMASC! was a bold, two-year transnational artistic research and theatre project spanning Kosovo, Serbia, and Austria. Its mission was to shine a light on structural violence and challenge misogynist and patriarchal values, norms, and role expectations – all through the power of theatre and artistic collaboration.

The project brought together three main objectives:

- **Transnational artistic research and socially engaged theatre productions**
- **Promoting gender justice with socially engaged theatre**
- **Capacity building and learning opportunities in the field of socially engaged art**

UNMASC! filled a crucial gap on European stages by amplifying diverse and underrepresented perspectives. Personal stories were gathered through research, interviews, and creative workshops, and then reimagined as three theatre productions – each shaped by the unique artistic direction of the partner organisations. These productions went on tour, reaching audiences across the region.

Counter-Images to Dominant Gender Constructs

Collaboration was at the heart of UNMASC!. The three partner organisations worked side by side, co-creating and co-deciding while remaining rooted in their local contexts. Together, they built counter-images to dominant gender constructs, dismantled patriarchal narratives, and gave a platform to voices too often silenced.

The project's legacy lives on in an E-Book, a resource for organisations, theatre-makers, and artists across Europe, capturing its methods, stories, and impact for future generations.

We believe art is not a luxury; it is a necessity for social change. By blending rigorous research with visceral performance, UNMASC! served as a guiding light, challenging misogynist values and role expectations and creating a new story — one rooted in care, solidarity, and justice.



Unmasking the Narrative: Why We Tell This Story

We live in a world shaped by stories. For too long, one story – of patriarchal power, rigid roles, and sanctioned violence – has dominated, silencing others. But what happens when we UNMASC the narrative?

This is the story of a two-year journey across Kosova, Serbia, and Austria. It is the story of artists, activists, and communities using theatre not as an escape, but as a tool to confront, question, and heal. It is about making the invisible structures of power visible and giving voice to the counter-narratives that have always existed, waiting in the wings.

This project emerged from a critical need to challenge the toxic norms that divide us. Through artistic research, raw performance, and courageous conversation, we created spaces where vulnerability became strength, and personal testimony became a catalyst for collective transformation.

This ebook documents that journey. It is a testament to the power of socially engaged art to not only mirror society but to change it. This is not a conclusion, but an invitation – to listen, to engage, and to continue the vital work of building a future defined by equality, dignity, and respect for all.

A Map of Movements: Tracing Our Journey Across Borders

Every project is a journey, and every journey begins with a map. The following timeline unfolds our endeavor like a story showing each activity. The schedule is not merely a sequence of dates and tasks, but a narrative of progress, intention, and vision. It shows how individual efforts weave together into a larger whole.



Transnational residency in Vienna

March 2025
6 days in Vienna

April 2025
3 local shows in Vienna

Theater performances in Vienna

Theater performances in Novi Sad

April/May/June 2025
4 local shows in Novi Sad

July 2025
3 local shows in Prishtina

Theater performances in Prishtina

Open lab day in Vienna

April 2025
1 day in Vienna

April 2025
1 day in Novi Sad

Open lab day in Novi Sad

Open lab day in Prishtina

July 2025
1 day in Prishtina

April & July 2025
5 talks in Vienna, Novi Sad & Prishtina

Artist talks

Tour of performances

April 2025
Viennese production toured to Prishtina

June 2025
Production of Novi Sad toured to Vienna

July 2025
Production of Prishtina toured to Novi Sad

Planning: Imagining the Unmasked Future

The UNMASC! journey wouldn't be the same without transnational meetings, where a shared vision was forged.

In **Vienna (December 2023)**, partners gathered for the first time, introducing their organizations and laying the foundational stones: defining project goals, timelines, and kick-starting the research phase. It was an exercise in shared vision.



In **Novi Sad (June 2024)**, the collaboration deepened. The

team co-created workshop designs, solidified communication strategies, and held a peer review, constantly asking: "How can we further learn from each other?"

In **Prishtina (March 2025)**, the focus shifted to realization. With insights from the ongoing production processes, the partners clarified final details on performances, tours, and capacity-building workshops, ensuring the art would resonate across borders. The blueprint was complete; the creation could begin.

Researching Reality: Where Stories Begin

The stage was set not in theatres, but in the raw material of lived experience. The artistic research phase was the heart from which all performances would beat.

In Vienna, facilitators created a space for individuals to critically reflect on gender roles, identity, and societal expectations as well as to question traditional forms of masculinity. Interviewees shared personal stories, unpacked stereotypes, and challenged social norms. They also reflected on the social construction of masculinity, the privileges associated with it, and their encounters with alternative masculinities.



In Prishtina, Shqipe Malushi conducted 17 profound interviews. The stories were emotionally charged, shaped by war, trauma, and social inequality. Women spoke of resilience against systemic barriers; men shared emotional vulnerabilities and the burden of unhealed trauma. In focus groups, a clear vision emerged: use art and digital advocacy to dismantle patriarchal norms and amplify marginalized voices.



In Novi Sad, researchers gathered voices from sociologists, activists, and LGBTQ+ individuals. They found that inequality is rooted in deep social structures, and that art is a powerful tool to challenge them. The research revealed the urgent need for visibility, support, and systemic reform, transforming personal stories into a platform for solidarity and social change.



*“When I say that I define myself as a woman, I’m not talking about **being in a gender**, I’m talking about **being in a social situation.**”*

Workshops of Truth: Crafting Stories from Silence

The research workshops were the heart of the UNMASC! project, the raw, creative spaces where personal stories were forged into collective art. In each location, the process took on a unique character, shaped by its participants and facilitators.



The Power of the Open Soul

Over six raw sessions, the Vienna workshops became a sanctuary for individuals. Guided by Danilo Jovanović's Open Soul method, participants used their personal stories as the sole material for creation. Through role-play and embodied reflection, they questioned toxic masculinity and power dynamics, transforming vulnerability into strength and storytelling into a profound act of resistance.

“From laughter to tears, from rage to care, the workshops reminded us that healing begins where stories are shared, believed, and transformed into art.”

Building Bridges of Narrative

Across Prishtina, Peja, and Ferizaj, the workshops in Kosovo served as a powerful tool for gender justice and peacebuilding. They uniquely brought together young people, activists, and artists from Albanian, Serbian, and Roma backgrounds. Facilitators Shpëtim Selmani and Attila Antal employed a methodology of “counter-narratives,” using personal storytelling to challenge stereotypes and build unity. These sessions fostered empathetic dialogue, creating the foundational narratives for the collaborative performances to come.



“The workshops merged theater, activism, and social engagement to challenge gender injustices, creating a stage for the stories that are too often unheard.”

Stories in Motion

In Novi Sad, a quiet room was transformed into a laboratory of movement and emotion. Over seven days, a diverse group of young people explored identity through physical theatre. The process began with simple exercises and evolved into powerful scenes built from shared vulnerability, personal letters, and objects heavy with meaning. The workshop became a testament to collective authorship, where every participant's skill contributed to rewriting the rules of self-perception.



*“When **stories** are given space to move, they can rewrite the rules of how we see ourselves, and each other.”*



Masculinities in Flux: Engaging Cis-Heterosexual Men in the Austrian Context

Anmol Yasmin Ahmed

The UNMASC! project, driven by a critical inquiry into the visceral reactions elicited by challenges to traditional gender roles and binaries, sought to dismantle the oppressive structures of patriarchy. Recognizing it as a disruptive and violent system, UNMASC! aimed to deconstruct white-hetero-cis concepts of gender that impede social progress towards justice and equality. This artistic research and theatre initiative challenged narratives that confine individuals, creating spaces for counter-images that celebrate tenderness, vulnerability, and gender diversity. Acknowledging that hate and discrimination transcend national borders, UNMASC! fostered transnational solidarity to address misogyny and patriarchy. Within this chapter, we will briefly explore the historical and theoretical underpinnings of these oppressive systems, examine their manifestations in Austrian society, and reflect on the project's efforts to cultivate inclusive dialogues, acknowledging the limitations of our scope within a condensed format.

In its commitment to deconstructing patriarchal norms, the project incorporated a series of theatre/performance workshops in Vienna, utilizing Danilo Jovanovic's "Open Soul" method, among others.

Theatre as a Space for Transformation

These workshops centered on personal narratives and experiences, fostering a space for participants to critically examine gender roles and power dynamics. Over 31 hours, a total of 27 participants, predominantly young FLINTA* individuals, engaged in exercises designed to deconstruct gender stereotypes, exploring themes of vulnerability, authenticity, and the impact of media on perceptions of masculinity. The workshops aimed to create a safer environment where personal stories could be shared and analyzed, ultimately informing the development of the project's theatrical productions.

Fragility and Power

A significant challenge emerged during these workshops concern-

ing the engagement of cis-heterosexual men. While the “Open Soul” method sought to minimize the reproduction of power dynamics, the presence of some cis-heterosexual men occasionally disrupted the safer space, as their perspectives often reflected hegemonic patriarchal narratives. This highlighted the project’s central argument: the difficulty of engaging men in critical self-reflection on gender roles. Conversely, the presence of gay men in some workshops facilitated a more open exploration of masculinity, demonstrating the potential for diverse perspectives to challenge traditional norms. Furthermore, the workshops revealed the multi-layered nature of gender-based violence, with FLINTA* participants sharing experiences of harassment and discrimination, reinforcing the project’s aim to create counter-narratives and foster transnational solidarity.

Austria’s Postcolonial Context

The project’s context manifested itself in the evolving constructs of masculinity within Austria’s post-colonial and neocolonial frameworks. The discourse surrounding masculinities in Austria reveals how historical narratives, particularly those related to empire and colonialism, continue to influence modern identity, power dynam-

ics, and gender roles, leading to a unique interplay between hegemonic and alternative masculinities (Eck, 2020). The concept of hegemonic masculinity plays a critical role in understanding how Austrian men navigate societal expectations, often seeking refuge in fantasy and evasion when confronted with contemporary challenges.

Escaping the ideal: literary masculinities and cultural reflection

Matthias Eck’s examination of contemporary Austrian literature highlights the notion of “strategic evasion,” as male characters navigate the gap between the ideals of masculinity and the complexities of their realities. Characters often employ two primary strategies: concealing their softer sides and immersing themselves in fantasy worlds to embody hegemonic ideals (Eck, 2020). This duality reflects not only the struggles of contemporary masculinity but also a broader commentary on Austria’s cultural landscape, where traditional notions are being reassessed.

This phenomenon is particularly pertinent in contemporary discussions on gender, as the crisis of masculinity—marked by identity confusion and loss of traditional roles—has emerged in response to

evolving cultural landscapes (Eck, 2020). Furthermore, the intersection of masculinity with issues such as migration and the European refugee “crisis” complicates the understanding of male identities. Male refugees grapple with shifting perceptions that oscillate between victimhood and criminalization, challenging traditional masculine ideals and shaping narratives surrounding their experiences (Scheibelhofer, 2014; Scheibelhofer, 2017). Current discussions on intersectionality often prioritize race and marginalized gender identities, while masculinities remain less scrutinized. The role of media in shaping and reinforcing masculinity cannot be overlooked; traditional portrayals often glorify aggressive and dominant male characters, normalizing toxic behaviors (Yekani, 2011; Rimaitė, 2024; Shim, 2023; Radu, 2024). Debates surrounding masculinity in Austria also confront militarism, backlash against feminist movements, and the reinvention of patriarchal structures, illustrating the ongoing struggles for gender equality (Nicholas & Agius, 2017; Boehringer, 2017). This multifaceted analysis highlights the significant role of history, culture, and social narratives in shaping contemporary understandings of male identity in Austria.

It is noteworthy that controversies surrounding postcolonial mascu-

linities in literature often involve debates about representation and understanding, particularly in colonial contexts. Critics argue for avoiding essentialist notions and including diverse perspectives, especially from women and non-binary individuals, to achieve a comprehensive analysis. The ongoing evolution of this field reflects a growing recognition of the diverse challenges faced by men in a globalized world marked by historical injustices and inequalities.

The Absence of Privilege

These themes emerged as significant during the project for the Kulturhaus. The glaring absence of cis-gendered heterosexual white men from our workshops displayed a distance between them and those directly affected by their privileged position in Austrian society. The workshops and panel discussions, recorded as a podcast, provided crucial platforms for FLINTA* individuals to articulate their experiences with patriarchal violence. This discourse highlighted the vital role of community building and “microactivism.” However, a recurring theme was the profound “disappointment” in cis-heterosexual men’s perceived lack of self-reflection, accountability, and willingness to listen and support. Participants expressed deep frustration with the persistent

"I wish for a society that can accept diversity and engage in dialogue with those who think differently."



burden of educating men on hegemonic norms.

Isolation as a weapon

Reflecting on the isolating effects of societal structures, one participant poignantly observed, “In modern society, it is so hard to even be in a community... You can’t get together and exchange lived experiences or how to fight back in an oppressive system.” This sentiment captured the broader struggle against patriarchal isolation, emphasizing the project’s aim to create spaces for collective empowerment. This “weaponization of isolation,” as seen in patriarchal control, resonates with Alok Menon’s (2020) assertion that systemic blocking of communal spaces is a direct manifestation of such control. Menon’s call to “find our people” and build “chosen families” becomes a radical act of defiance. Menon’s insistence that “we are not alone”

reminds us that our struggles are interconnected, and liberation lies in building communities of care and solidarity.

Gender as a Feeling

Furthermore, Menon’s (2020) argument that “gender is not a fact, it’s a feeling” directly challenges rigid binaries, a sentiment echoed by podcast participants’ frustration with cis-heterosexual men’s resistance to self-reflection. The notion of gender as a lived experience dismantles hegemonic masculinity, which relies on adherence to traditional roles. Thus, while identifying tender areas of lacking and pain, UNMASC! found a path forward. Beginning with the question of fear towards queerness, we learned that isolation affects us all and that coming together is perhaps the answer.

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Through Stages, Crossing Borders

UNMASC! thrived on artistic reciprocity. Through short-term residencies, artists embedded themselves within partner communities, fusing methodologies and creating a shared artistic language.

Vienna Through a Kosovar Lens

Kosovar director Zana Hoxha brought her feminist practice to Vienna, co-facilitating a powerful workshop on gender justice and mental health. It honestly confronted a core dilemma: how to safely include heteronormative men without compromising the safer space for FLINTA* voices. The residency was also a strategic mission, weaving UNMASC! into the fabric of Vienna's cultural institutions through countless meetings and networking events.

"The residency highlighted our shared values, feeling like the beginning of a long-term partnership", Zana Hoxha.



Prishtina's Stage for Dialogue

For Serbian artist Attila Antal, a residency at Prishtina's FemArt Festival was a deep immersion. Co-facilitating a workshop with participants from Kosova, Serbia, and the Roma community, he explored peacebuilding through storytelling. The festival provided a vibrant backdrop for forging future cross-border collaborations.

"We learned how to take space, an essential aspect of gender equality. Attila and Shpëtim introduced us to unique ways of discussing peace, gender, and art, outside of conventional concepts. This approach opened new questions and topics for me. The experience was freeing and different from traditional workshop formats", said Tamara Milanovic from Serbia, participant in the workshop.



Novi Sad's Collective Creation

Viennese artist Danilo Jovanović brought his “Open Soul” method to Novi Sad, seamlessly collaborating with local director Uroš Isak Mladenović. Their workshops fused movement, music, and personal narrative, empowering participants to become true co-authors of the work and fostering a profound sense of community and ownership.

“Feedback on the sessions we did together was very positive and the exploration of my Open Soul method turned out to be a very valuable source of knowledge for the workshop participants”;
Danilo Jovanović.



Performing Resistance: The Birth of Three Plays

From the raw data of research, three distinct and powerful performances were born, each a testament to its local context yet universal in its themes. The additional touring process turned performances into more than artistic events—they became meeting points where dialogue, empathy, and solidarity grew across borders, leaving behind not only impressions but lasting connections among partners and beyond.



“Dream On” (Vienna)

A co-created piece weaving together over 45 personal stories into a powerful critique of toxic masculinity. Directed by Danilo Jovanović and performed by Helena Araújo and Diana Stecker, it used irony, absurdity, and queer perspectives to subvert rigid gender norms. Its central, provocative question—“Who has the right to be a man?”—resonated deeply, from Vienna to a passionate, standing-ovation tour in Prishtina.



Link of the show:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qK8-O6NsYJ4>



“There Are No Trains Today” (Novi Sad)

Born from the personal stories of youth engaged in protests after a local tragedy, this devised piece was intensely intimate and universal.

Directed by Uroš Isak Mladenović, it used movement, original music, and recorded voice-overs from personal letters to explore patriarchal upbringing and gender-based violence with raw honesty. It moved Novi Sad audiences to tears and sparked profound dialogue on its tour to Vienna.

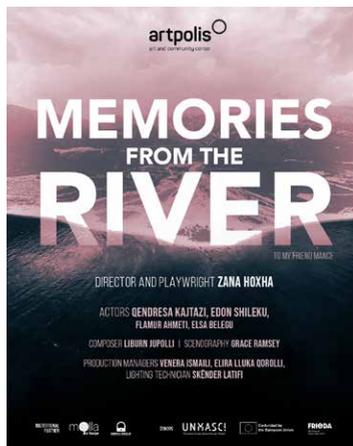
Link of the show:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qK8-O6NsYJ4>



“Memories from the River – for my friend Mance” (Prishtina)

An immersive, site-specific journey into memory, trauma, and healing. Directed by Zana Hoxha, inspired by a childhood friend marginalized for their gender identity, it began at a public fountain and culminated inside “Prison of the Ideal”. This participatory production functioned as communal therapy, guiding the audience to share buried traumas. Its courageous tour to Novi Sad, despite regional tensions, was a potent act of artistic solidarity.



Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/1111328646?share=copy#t=0>



Media Highlights

“Memories from the River” – Zana Hoxha’s play that aims to break the taboos of existential phenomena

<https://www.kultplus.com/teatri/kujtime-nga-lumi-shfaqja-e-zana-hoxhes-qe-synon-te-thej-tabute-e-fenomeneve-ekzistenciale>

“Memories from the River” by Zana Hoxha, premiere in Prishtina on July 27 and 28

<https://www.kultplus.com/teatri/kujtime-nga-lumi-nga-zana-hoxha-premiere-ne-prishtine-me-27-dhe-28-korrik>

“Memories from the River” by Zana Hoxha, premiere in Prishtina

<https://klankosova.tv/kujtime-nga-lumi-nga-zana-hoxha-premiere-ne-prishtine>



Reimagining gender, masculinity and love: Theater as a Site of Social Transformation

Mengya Zhang

*brotherhood, football, beer, teamwork, violence, war,
lie, lie, lie...*

*mother, sister, care, love, nurture, constructed,
non-existed, non-existed...*

 **When we talk about gender
what are we really talking about?**

This chapter draws on both theoretical frameworks and personal experiences from my participation in the **Unmasc! Project**, an interactive theater workshop that confronts gender-based violence and toxic masculinity. It explores how theater can function as a transformative space for imagining, practicing, and building a new politics of care—one that seeks to liberate individuals from the psychological prison of patriarchy and challenge the intersecting systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy from which we all suffer.

The Root of Toxic Masculinity

To understand how toxic masculinity permeates our society, we must begin by addressing the foundational system that enables and perpetuates it: patriarchy.

bell hooks defines patriarchy as “a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak—especially females—and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak, and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence (hooks, 2004b, p38).” Patriarchal thinking shapes the values of our culture. We are socialized, often unconsciously, into internalizing the norms of patriarchy. Its myths persist through silences, collective illusions, and systemic denial, sustained by individuals’ reluctance or inability to speak out against it. Patriarchal value brainwashes men to believe that their domination over women is not only natural but also socially beneficial. The more

a man conforms to patriarchal ideals of masculinity, the closer he becomes to emotional repression and insanity which is promoted by society to send more people join the army and die in the delusion of serving the country. People often defend patriarchy by citing men's participation in the military as an ostensibly inarguable example of the sacrifices and responsibilities men assume for the rest of society.

Rethinking Violence

If we critically examine the military, the nation-state, and the very concept of war, we must ask: Why should militaries exist? Why must borders be defended through violence? Why are we killing each other in the name of patriotism? You are not fighting for the country, you are killing for the country, you are killing for patriarchy.

Living Ethnically in a Divided World

It is time to rethink the concepts, norms, and social institutions we have long accepted without question. In the following section, I reflect on my personal experience in the Unmasc Project as an entry point to reimagine what it means to live ethically and relationally in a world increasingly defined by alienation, rising far-right ideologies, anti-gender campaigns, and political polarization.

Theater as a Space of Making Change

I have participated in the workshop five times, and with each new group, different dynamics emerged. However, what remained constant was the openness of participants and the connections formed through conversation and interaction, connections that created a particular form of intimacy. It is worth recalling that the original meaning of "intimacy" refers to familiarity, rather than romantic or sexual relationships.

Navigating Identity and Belonging Across Borders

As an Asian woman who traveled ten hours by plane to live in a country where the only two things I knew before were Sigmund Freud and Gustav Klimt, I often feel like the Asian-fusion restaurants on the street, offering an oriental exotic vibe, yet far from authentic. I define this experience of living "elsewhere" as a condition of in-betweenness, a state in which one neither fully belongs to their country of origin nor to the place of current residence. Life becomes a series of fluid moments. This can lead to a serious sense of precarity, especially for those from marginalized or socially disadvantaged groups. Yet it also carries with it a sense of possibility.

What remains an urgent question is: how can one cultivate a sense of belonging in an increasingly atomized and polarized world marked by inequality, extraction and marginalization? I believe that theatre offers such a space where people can connect with one another, and through this process, discover a sense of being *at home in the world*, even within a reality that often feels alienating or even threatening. These encounters with others also offer an opportunity for self-exploration, to reach toward those internal, intimate parts of ourselves that are familiar but often obscured or overlooked (Risør & Arteaga Pérez, 2018).

Love and Masculinity

Throughout the workshops, a recurring theme has been toxic masculinity in romantic relationships—a topic often viewed as private or domestic. I do not intend to elaborate here on the public and political dimensions of this issue, since the feminist slogan of the 1970s, *“the personal is political,”* already speaks a lot. Rather, my focus is what conceptions of love are dominant in our language? Contemporary discourses on love tend to reproduce a rigid segregation between the public and the private spheres. This separation obstructs the development of a more revolutionary and care-centered concept of love.

Toward a Political Concept of Love

As Michael Hardt argues in *For Love or Money* (2011), formulating a political concept of love requires not only exposing how power operates in private relationships or how love and intimacy are deployed in public practice, but also dismantling the very divide between the personal and the political. A political concept of love acts through encounters and exchanges across difference. It carries the potential for transformation: through encounters with others, we can become different; through love, we abandon some of our attachments to this world in the hope of creating another, better one (Hardt, 2011).

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I emphasize that theater, as an embodied practice, offers the possibility for transformation. For me, it is not an antidote to the hostile environment in which we live, nor does it provide simple or direct solutions. Rather, it creates a space where stereotypes can be questioned, where alternative masculinities can emerge, and where different futures can be discussed, reimagined, and rehearsed. Addressing gender-based violence involves voicing our stories and engaging with the lived realities that have long

been erased or silenced by dominant patriarchal narratives. Theater, therefore, is more than a stage—it is a site of potential change. Moreover, theater is not merely a static space but a dynamic practice of doing; it holds the promise of becoming.

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The Laboratories of Listening and Dialogue

The Open Lab Days were vital, breathing sessions in the creation of each performance. They transformed the solitary act of rehearsal into a collaborative dialogue, inviting external eyes to shape the art in progress.

A Co-Creation Moment

A diverse group of experts was invited into the rehearsal process for “Dream On” in Vienna. They witnessed the raw, unpolished scenes and participated in a roundtable feedback session. Their insights – calling for sharper physicality, more emotional breathing room, and a careful balance of irony – were meticulously recorded. This direct audience engagement transformed the day from a simple rehearsal into a pivotal co-creation moment, ensuring the final piece would be sharper and more impactful.

Besides answering questions, participants also asked questions, shared their impressions, comments, and constructive feedback. In turn, the creative team listened closely, asking follow-up questions to better understand the suggestions and ideas offered.



Vulnerability as Strength

The Open Lab for “Memories from the River” in Pishtina was an intimate behind-the-scenes look. Director Zana Hoxha shared the deeply personal childhood story that inspired the play, explaining her collaborative process that breaks theatrical convention. For the carefully selected audience of artists and activists, the team’s vulnerability was not a weakness but an invitation, empowering them to share their own stories and engage deeply with the work’s exploration of trauma and identity.



“Our stories may come from pain, but when we share them together, they become a source of collective strength.”

The Power of the Personal

Held right after a final rehearsal, this Open Lab in Novi Sad sparked an immediate and honest dialogue. The audience's feedback was clear: while the abstract, physical first half divided opinion, the second half – built on raw, personal monologues and letters – received unanimous praise for its heartbreaking intimacy and emotional depth. The artists explained their sensitive process, and the exchange provided crucial insights for balancing abstraction with narrative, reaffirming theatre's power as a space for empathy and social reflection.



*“Abstraction may divide us, but **the personal unites** – when stories are laid bare, theatre becomes a mirror for empathy and reflection.”*

Curtain Down, Voices Up

As part of the UNMASC! performances, artist talks were held in all three partner cities — Vienna, Novi Sad, and Prishtina — offering audiences an opportunity to engage deeply with the creative process and themes explored on stage. Moderated by facilitators from Kulturhaus Brotfabrik, Kulturanova, and Artpolis, the talks featured contributions from directors, performers, designers, and other members of the artistic teams.

In Vienna, on April 26, 2025, the conversation focused on the development of the play's themes — such as toxic masculinity, gender justice, and femicide — and how these were translated into physical performance. The performers shared their collaborative process and the evolution of their roles, while the audience asked questions about the multilingual format, stage design, and artistic choices.

In Novi Sad, on April 29, 2025, the talk became a space of open dialogue, with the audience engaging actively through questions and reflections. Discussions centered around the use of movement, the emotional intensity of the work, and the personal stories that shaped the play. Many participants opened up about their own experiences, making the talk a space of empathy and shared vulnerability.

In Prishtina, on July 26th, 27th & 28th, 2025, the audience explored the real-life inspiration behind the play—a story from the director's childhood—and how it evolved into a collective creation. Through workshops and storytelling, actors integrated their personal experiences, creating a powerful and emotional performance. The discussion highlighted the therapeutic nature of the play, described by many as a space of healing and reflection.

These talks reinforced the collective power of storytelling and created spaces of connection, dialogue, and healing beyond the stage.

Seeds of Change: Growing Justice Through Art

UNMASC! invested in the future by equipping artists and producers with new tools for empathy, equity, and ecology.



The Open Soul Method

Danilo Jovanović introduced his participatory Open Soul Method to Viennese artists, centering marginalized voices and personal narrative. Through immersive exercises in music and movement, participants learned to translate raw emotion into theatrical language, sparking strong interest in its focus on authenticity over acting and building early awareness for the project.

“The workshop laid important groundwork for empathy-driven creation and future collaboration.”

Greening the Stage

In Novi Sad this dual workshop blended sustainability with storytelling. Milan Vračar provided a practical roadmap for greener cultural production, from waste reduction to carbon offsetting. Theatre-maker Attila Antal then guided attendees through exercises that transform personal narrative into powerful performance, proving that ecological and ethical thinking can be woven into every facet of art-making.

“This workshop didn’t just share methods—it planted seeds for a more aware and artistically courageous cultural field.”



Staging Equality

In Prishtina Zana Hoxha led a dynamic workshop that deconstructed power dynamics and patriarchal narratives in the arts. Using interactive exercises like “Who Holds the Power?”, participants mapped inequalities and rehearsed new models of feminist production. It was a practical rehearsal for change, equipping attendees with tools to challenge structural barriers and create more equitable creative spaces.



Unwritten Roles: Counter-Narratives of Gender and Power

The UNMASC! project unfolded as a chorus of counter-narratives, threading together lived testimonies, collective exploration, and artistic creation. Against the weight of patriarchal expectations, participants and artists carved out new meanings of gender—fluid, vulnerable, resistant, and tender. What emerged was not one story, but a tapestry of many: voices once silenced rising into song, stories once hidden finding their stage, and futures once denied opening toward possibility.

Vienna

Interviews: Lived Counter-Narratives

In Vienna, personal testimonies cracked open the rigid mold of masculinity.

One voice broke from the family's one-path script—school, marriage, children—to claim queerness as fluidity, not deviation. Another recalled the suffocating air of competition and aggression, only to discover through theatre and feminism that gentleness, creativity, and queerness could also be masculine. Painted nails, playful aesthetics, and feminist politics became his rebellion. A third voice questioned inherited roles of work, family, and vulnerability, daring to speak fragility where silence was demanded.

Together, these interviews offered a mosaic of alternative masculinities—fluid, tender, and alive—resisting the tyranny of one way of being.

Workshops: Collective Counter-Narratives

The Vienna workshops transformed private reflection into collective inquiry. Through the Open Soul method and devised theatre, participants entered safer spaces where wounds could breathe and stereotypes could dissolve.

They named toxic masculinity as danger to men themselves. They questioned the binaries of everyday life—even in something as ordinary as a bicycle.

Survivors of violence refused silence, creating solidarity as their counter-narrative.

And FLINTA participants shifted the burden: “Must we always teach men about feminism?” Instead, responsibility was laid where it belonged—on men themselves.

Here, power flattened, authenticity deepened, and pain became fertile ground for creation.

Performance: Artistic Counter-Narratives

Dream On / das kannst Du Dir abschminken! staged these resistances with irony, tenderness, and provocation.

Two FLINTA performers asked: *Who has the right to be a man?* A question that unraveled masculinity as a fixed truth.

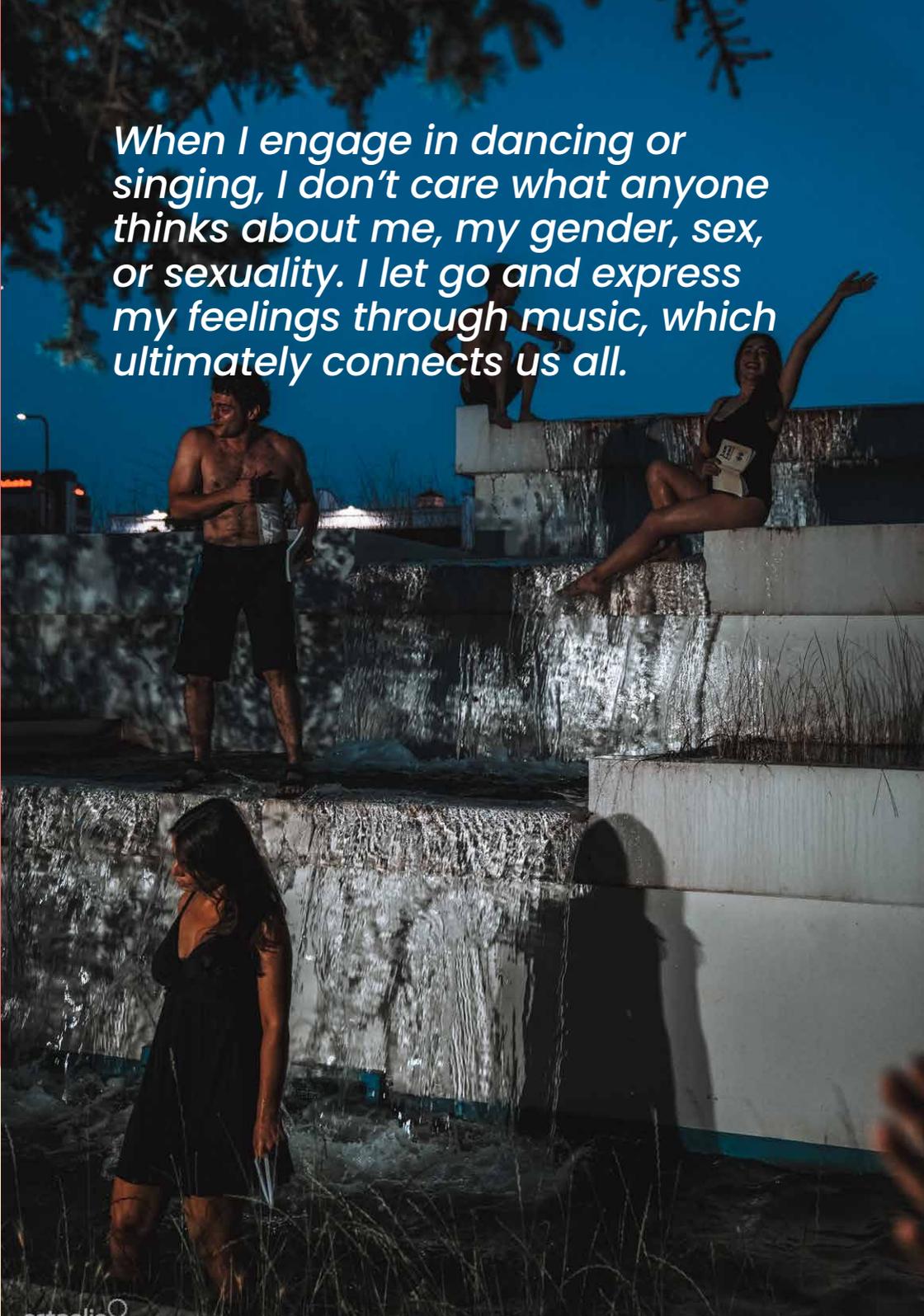
Scenes revealed the hierarchies of workplaces, the dangers of nightlife, the weight of femicide and mental health. Irony mocked contradictions, while restraint gave space for grief. Even the process resisted patriarchy—power was shared, healing prioritized over exploitation.

The audience called it provocative and deeply human. It was both theatre and declaration: masculinity is not destiny.

Synthesis: Counter-Narratives in Practice

Vienna’s voices converged into a practice of refusal and renewal:

When I engage in dancing or singing, I don't care what anyone thinks about me, my gender, sex, or sexuality. I let go and express my feelings through music, which ultimately connects us all.



- Fluidity instead of rigidity.
- Care instead of aggression.
- Community instead of isolation.
- Irony to unmask, tenderness to rebuild.
- Shared power as both method and message.

Here, counter-narratives became not only stories told, but lives lived differently.

Prishtina

Interviews: Lived Counter-Narratives

Beneath war's shadow and the silence of discrimination, voices in Prishtina rose with resilience.

Women spoke of endurance, turning scars into strength. Men, often masked by privilege, revealed fragility: childhoods interrupted, burdens too heavy, fears that lingered. Courage trembled in their tears. These testimonies fractured the myth of fixed identity, replacing it with a mosaic of human complexity.

Workshops: Collective Counter-Narratives

In the workshops, solitude became solidarity. Pain was no longer carried alone but shared, reshaped into dialogue and imagination. Together, participants envisioned new ways of belonging. Exclusion yielded to community, silence gave way to speech, and futures once closed cracked open toward possibility.

Performance: Artistic Counter-Narratives

Memories from the River – For my friend Mance carried these voices to the stage. Memory blurred with present, audience with performer. The river became witness and companion, holding

both loss and love. Through art, trauma became expression, silence became voice, grief became resistance. It was not only performance but living testimony, tender and defiant.

Synthesis: Counter-Narratives in Practice

Prishtina’s counter-narratives revealed themselves as seeds—fragile, yet unstoppable.

- Wounds carried, yet turned into defiance.
- Dreams reaching beyond borders.
- Art as revolution, classrooms as spaces of liberation, digital platforms as amplifiers of justice.

What remains is more than testimony: it is laughter beside tears, solidarity within brokenness, and the unyielding belief that change begins when stories refuse to end in despair.

Novi Sad

Counter-Narratives Across Process and Stage

In Novi Sad, counter-narratives unfolded like ripples across the community. Masculinity shed its armor of dominance and stood instead in care, empathy, accountability. Vulnerability, once shamed, was reclaimed as a form of courage. Testimonies became performance; performance became political gesture.

Theatre itself shifted from entertainment to ritual. Healing was no longer private but collective, shared between stage and audience. Gender identity was lived, relational, ever-changing—queer voices and multilingual aesthetics destabilized the false “neutral” of heteronormativity. Intersectional stories revealed how migration, queerness, and tradition braided into struggles of inequality and resistance.

Even heritage was reframed: a grandmother who “performed as a man” to follow her passion proved that cracks in patriarchy had always existed within culture. Calls for gender equality in early education declared that justice cannot wait until adult-

hood. Men’s self-reflection honored feminist and queer struggles, reversing the usual flow of credit.

Art itself was repositioned as civic practice, dialogue, and social courage. Touring across fraught borders challenged division, while sustainable, gender-aware production declared that care—ethical, ecological, human—is not an afterthought but the very heart of creation.

Here, counter-narratives were not abstract—they were lived, staged, and embodied in the courage to imagine otherwise.

Closing

Across Vienna, Prishtina, and Novi Sad, the UNMASC! project revealed counter-narratives that unmasked patriarchy and offered something else:

Masculinity unbound from dominance.

Femininity unbound from silence.

Gender itself is unbound from certainty.

Through testimony, dialogue, and performance, these voices whispered and shouted the same truth: another way is possible. Fragile, yet unstoppable, these stories germinate in the cracks of patriarchy, promising a future where care, creativity, and justice guide us toward living—together.

Digital Stages: Seeking Justice Online

UNMASC! extended its reach beyond the stage into the digital sphere, launching targeted online campaigns that sparked cross-border dialogue and invited personal reflection on gender norms.

Kulturhaus Brotfabrik: Asking the Necessary Questions

In April 2024, the campaign launched with brave, vulnerable questions in multiple languages: *“Are you comfortable with the perception of your gender? Have you ever been discriminated against?”* These were more than questions — they were invitations to speak, reflect, and connect, using theatre as a fierce force for gender justice and change.

“Because every voice matters. Every story holds power.”



Artpolis: Exploring Culture’s Role in Identity

Artpolis’s “UNMASC Voices” campaign echoed across Kosovo in five languages, posing a central question: “How does culture shape our understanding of gender and sexuality?” It created a bold space for challenging traditional norms and stereotypes, amplifying unheard voices and sparking honest, courageous conversations about identity and self-definition.

“UNMASC the norms. UNMASC the silence. UNMASC yourself.”

Kulturanova: Unmasking Personal Perception

Kulturanova’s campaign cut straight to the heart with one powerful question: “Does the perception of your gender suit you?” This simple yet profound invitation encouraged followers to reflect on and challenge the roles society assigns, using theatre as a means to explore, question, and reimagine gender realities.

“Your identity is yours to define. Your story is ours to share.”



Listening as Resistance: Audio Chronicles

Episode one: Theoretical approaches to deconstructing toxic masculinity through everyday practice

This episode explores theoretical frameworks aimed at deconstructing toxic masculinity within everyday contexts. It highlights narratives centered on queer, non-white feminist perspectives, enriched by the viewpoints and examples provided by Alok – a non-binary, queer BiPoC comedian. The discussion also incorporates migrant perspectives on queerness, solidarity, and community-building.



Episode two: UNMASC! project progress and reflections

During this episode, project partners reviewed the progress made within the UNMASC! initiative, reflecting on the topics addressed through completed activities. The discussion covered challenges encountered during workshop facilitation, key learnings, and solutions implemented. Additionally, partners exchanged ideas for upcoming events and deliberated on the overall trajectory of the project.



Episode three: Artistic exchange on feminism and social change

This episode features a dialogue between Zana Hoxha, an artist based in Prishtina, Kosovo, and Danilo Jovanovic from Vienna, Austria. The exchange focused on their artistic practices, feminist perspectives, shared histories, and narratives surrounding contemporary theater. The conversation further explored the inter



Behind the Mask: Trials of Transformation

Our journey was not without its obstacles. These challenges were our greatest teachers.

Engaging cis-heterosexual men meaningfully and without reinforcing patriarchal behaviors proved difficult. This underscored the necessity for targeted approaches and deeper self-work within this demographic.

The emotional labour of handling traumatic personal stories was immense. Creating a safe, inclusive environment required constant vigilance, care, and internal reflection sessions to protect the well-being of all participants.

Accessibility beyond typical arts audiences (“the bubble”) was a challenge for the Viennese production. While the content of the performances was broadly relatable, venue selection and outreach limited its reach. How do you get people to watch a performance about gender justice who have never engaged with the topic before? What would be the best way to approach them and attract them as an audience?

The transnational tour of the performances, particularly between Kosova and Serbia, faced significant logistical and political hurdles amid regional tensions. The successful, if modest, exchange in Novi Sad was a hard-won victory that proved art’s power to transcend borders, but it required immense courage and flexibility.

Encore: Carrying the Story Forward

UNMASC! was never designed to be a single event. It is a catalyst for ongoing change.

The methodologies developed for interviews and focus groups will live on as guidelines for artists and activists involved in the project, adapted for new contexts and communities.



The transnational network forged between Kulturhaus Brotfabrik, Artpolis and Kulturanova is a powerful platform for future collaboration.

Most importantly, the counter-narratives unleashed by this project continue to circulate. They are in the minds of the 500+ audience members, the transformed participants, and the pages of media reports.

The conversation continues, and we are committed to amplifying it, ensuring the work of unmasking never stops.

*“We work
to reduce
exclusionary
mechanisms
through art.”*

Kulturhaus Brotfabrik (Vienna, Austria):

www.kulturhaus-brotfabrik.at

At Kulturhaus Brotfabrik, art and culture are created by everyone and for everyone. Kulturhaus Brotfabrik is part of the artistic projects taking place in the district and offers opportunities for the neighbourhood to connect with one another and to let new things arise. Kulturhaus Brotfabrik offers a wide range of cultural events making art accessible to all, especially those excluded from mainstream institutions. Its key principles? Participation, volunteerism, and an unwavering belief in art's power to break down exclusion.

kulturhaus
brotfabrik

“Our work is a combination of three main components: art, activism and community.”

Artpolis (Prishtina, Kosova):

<https://artpolis-ks.com/>

For over two decades, Artpolis has been a powerhouse combining art, activism, and community. Founded in 2004, its mission is to use theatre as a tool for social and cultural development, fiercely promoting human rights, feminism, and multi-ethnic co-existence. Through its renowned FemArt Festival, Artpolis doesn't just talk about change—it performs it into being.

“Our work is a combination of three main components: art, activism and community.”

artpolis 

“We develop a culture of dialogue through the joint production of cultural content.”

Association Kulturanova (Novi Sad, Serbia):

<https://kulturanova.org/>

Since 2001, Kulturanova has been initiating vital intercultural and intersectoral dialogue in Serbian society. Focusing on youth creativity, they operate through four dynamic pillars: theatre (Teatranova), music (Muzikanova), media (Medianova), and innovation (Futuranova). Their work actively removes barriers to coexistence, giving a platform to marginalized voices—from migrants and the Roma community to LGBTQ+ individuals—and decentralizing culture to reach every corner of society.



UNMASC!

Promoting Gender Justice through Theatre

UNMASC! was a 2 year transnational artistic research and theatre project (2023-2025) co-funded by the EU Creative Europe programme. It aims to deconstruct white-hetero-cis concepts of gender that conflict with a social development towards more justice and equality. UNMASC! involves the three organizations Artpolis (Kosovo), Kulturhaus Brotfabrik (Austria) and Association Kulturanova (Serbia), which are all active in the field of socially engaged art.

Disclaimer

All of the persons appearing on the pictures of this eBook have given their written consent.

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