

Eugene - Spirit of the Fire Dance. Part One - Roxana Vilk

Sometimes you are lucky enough to meet people who change the course of your life.

It was late November, 1997, in Mostar, Bosnia & Herzegovina when I first met Eugene Skeef. The war that had torn through the country had only recently ended and the town of Mostar lay tattered in ruins. It was in amongst these ruins that the incredible Pavarotti Music Centre was being built on the East side of the city. I had travelled there from London to direct the opening ceremony of the Centre, bringing all the kids together from across the city and close-by villages, in musical performances that would in a few days' time be watched by Pavarotti himself.

The evening I met Eugene was when the first snowflakes started to fall. I remember the moment clearly. I was practicing dancing with lit fire sticks, for the opening performance. I was twirling the fire sticks over and over in my hands, and dancing around in circles in the courtyard, feeling the soft snowflakes falling around me. I was so deep in the trance of the dance and the snow falling that I didn't hear the drummers from Sarajevo come into the space and quietly sit down and start to play. I just remember the feeling of being transported by the sound of these drums and how perfectly they seemed to shape the movement of the fire, the snowflakes and the dance. It felt like I was dreaming.

When I stopped dancing and the drumming stopped, there was a delicious perfect silence. We all met in that silence. I remember Eugene's focused face as he made sure the drummers held that silence, so we could all feel the power and beauty of the echo of movement and sound. It was that night that I met Eugene and unbeknown to me, sitting next to him, drumming alongside Eugene, was my future husband, Peter Vilk.

Myself, Eugene, Peter and a Bosnian dancer Yasmina would then spend the next few days before the opening ceremony rehearsing this 'Fire Dance' that was born that night in the courtyard and eventually perform it at the opening. Eugene composed the Fire Dance drumming piece that fitted so beautifully with the dance. During those rehearsals in the dance studio, I grew to know Eugene more, and what felt so natural is that we met in the act of making and creating new artistic work. I met Eugene in the alchemy of shared co-creating, and so the bond and respect and love for Eugene and his way of nurturing the best creatively out of people was formed very quickly. What I didn't know then, though, was that Eugene was also playing cupid to both Peter and I! Eugene had picked up (in a way that only Eugene can do!) that there was an attraction between Peter and I, but that we were both way too shy to look at each other, let alone speak to each other! So he made sure, in a subtle beautiful way, that both of us knew that there was a mutual attraction. Anyway that is another story!

Over the next year I worked in Bosnia for the British charity War Child, using music, art, dance and drama with traumatised communities, and I was fortunate enough to have Eugene as a creative mentor. I would say that the lessons he taught me then have shaped me deeply to my core as an artist and a human. I feel so incredibly lucky that Eugene encouraged and nurtured my creativity as I am not sure I would have continued without such a great teacher. He exudes positivity, enthusiasm and love for all those he teaches. He is a truly inspirational teacher, leader and human who works from the heart.

As I write, the memories are tumbling out, like notes from the piano. I remember that often Eugene would join Pete and I for our morning runs in Mostar. We would head out early when the town was

quiet, our feet falling into rhythm as the three of us headed out on the dusty roads, towards the open fields and fringe of purple mountains. As we would run Eugene would tell us incredible stories of his time in South Africa. I remember him recounting to us how he would run with his musical collaborators as part of their training and rehearsing. How back in South Africa, they would sing the rhythmic patterns of their compositions over the pounding of their feet, while playing a shaker in their hand. From that moment he encouraged us to always carry a small shaker in our pockets when we ran, so we could be practicing singing and playing while moving our bodies. This kinesthetic relation to music is what Eugene really woke in me. As a dancer I knew how good it felt to move and to move energy through my body, but I had not made that deep connection with how music also moves through the body in a similar way and that we need to move our bodies to make our music too. As he taught us musical concepts, he always taught us to move with the music and let the music move you. This changed how I felt about music on a profound level. It also woke me up to the music inside me which came from moving my body. The songs that I started to sing and music we all started to create came from Eugene guiding, teaching and nurturing us to explore our creativity. He also taught us that to be able to 'give out' energy in terms of running workshops (especially in a challenging post war landscape), we had to look after ourselves as creatives and keep making our own work. That you can't give out if your cup is empty.

I observed how Eugene did this himself by creating really clear boundaries. During that first year of the Pavarotti Centre, with all the busyness of projects and people, everyone at that time wanted a piece of Eugene. Everyone wanted some of his pure positive energy so I am sure his days would be full of demands, but he always made sure to start his day with his own quiet morning rituals. I observed how he would sit in the courtyard, meditate, move his body and then play whichever instrument he was exploring, for himself for a period of quiet reflective time. He was clear that he was not to be disturbed during that time. It always felt from the outside watching that it was his time of prayer.

I learnt to follow that practice in my own life and make sure I start my day with a ritual of reflection.