



Interview by Diana Lyubenova, bTV, 3.03.2019

ALEXANDER MORFOV:

**THE EXILES DID NOT BETRAY ME
EVEN IN THE DARKEST TIMES AND THE DEEPEST CRISES**



In the eve of the 300th anniversary performance of the symbolic production “Exiles” staged 15 years ago at the Ivan Vazov National Theatre, Morfov is in an open talk about his hopes, his exiles and his Bulgaria. This interview was aired by bTV on 3rd March – Liberation Day, the National holiday of Bulgaria. See link with the video below.

D.L. When was the last time you said “Long live Bulgaria!”?

A.M. “Long live Bulgaria!” still echoes within me like a cry. Long live the one Bulgaria I dream we had, but not this one – a Bulgaria of robbers and criminals who turned her into a poor, non-democratic and miserable country.

What do you want to liberate Bulgaria from?

From all those who have been lying, deceiving and insolently governing for thirty years now and who are still continuing to oppress the people without any sense of decency or shame.

What is your idea of Bulgaria?

The revolutioners’ idea of Bulgaria. The reviving and thriving Bulgaria that all the exiles dreamed of. We’ve had waves of exaltation, waves of hope. But shortly after, we’ve again seen her murdered, humiliated and devastated. I’m not sure you’ve chosen the right person for this holiday because I can’t say anything in this country is currently happening for the better. I’ve been repeating the same thing for thirty years now and there is no government that I didn’t protest against.

Aren’t we too mighty at the table but when the time comes and someone has to cross the Danube we reside into asking each other who shall do the job?

In fact, our nation’s Danube is its local restaurant. We need to cross it, we need to reach the other shore, we need to save Levsky [*national hero*], to save the revolutionary movement and liberate Bulgaria. All the best wishes, all the excitement and all dreams, enthusiasm and revolutionary inspiration end at about the third glass of alcohol. Then we quietly and meekly go home into our warm beds. And then we pray no one heard what we promised.

Are we a nation?

We are a confused nation. We have the blood of many ethnic groups in our nation. A lot of people have traversed this crossroad, all of them leaving something behind. It’s an unfortunate destiny in which our history has repeatedly submitted us to hardship. We need to bear in mind that we are the distant firewall, the “The Great Wall of China” so to say, it’s also the wall that Trump wants to build now, – we are the wall which protects the West from the dangers of the East. That’s why we’ve built up in our souls so much rage and so much pain, but also so much dreams and hopes that there will come a day when we won’t be just a wall, we’ll be an actual and living part of a community.

Hope for a life in freedom, maybe? Have we ever been free at all?

I think we’ve occasionally gained freedom for about five to ten minutes throughout the ages. Personal freedom, though, is another thing. No one can take away your personal freedom or my personal freedom. I can always escape to the Balkan or to my attic, or hide in foreign countries, preserving my freedom and refusing to become anyone’s slave. What does it mean, being free? It means not being a slave, not allowing anyone to insolently exploit you for his ill ambitions.

Do you feel free?

I feel free. I'm not serving anyone's ambitions or orders. In that sense – I might be humiliated and disgusted, and yet, I'm free.

Isn't this more of an escape? Leaving one reality and escaping to another so that you can feel free there?

Maybe it is, of course it is, in some way. I'm somewhat tired. Tired from my own fights and from my own desires to change something. It's impossible to break the wall alone. So far we've been unable to unite and we always will be.

Why is that?

Why, history brings us memorable lessons. When were we ever able to unite? In 1990 we were one million people at the protests and only two years later there were quarrels and wrangle and they split into thousands of political fractions and everything that they preached – this great idea of democracy, fell apart to their mean filthy interests to parcel and plunder the country. And less than few months later, yet other "saviours" emerged who only quarreled to ravage what's left of it. Even today, they're still sucking the blood of this country that is basically left with nothing, but they still keep taking from it, keep robbing and stealing. It's an insatiable octopus.

Are you an exile?

What does it mean to be an exile, at the end of it? It's a man who would readily suffer all sorts of hardship – hunger, poverty, misery... but who's soul would not give up on the hope that there will come a day when we'll cross the Danube and liberate the country. I just might not be an exile anymore. I might have lost hope that one day we shall cross the Danube and liberate the country from the yoke of avarice and cynicism, the yoke of brutality.

If you had to go back to the times from the novel, who would you be?

I would have probably been killed too soon. I'm not an adaptable person. I have a raging soul to the extent of loosing sense of self-preservation. Probably I would have died in the very beginning, rushing into battle out of hand. Otherwise, if I survived, I would probably continue to believe in freedom up until the end, until death finds me in Serbia. I'm tired of hoping. I'm just tired of hoping. I don't think I have any hope left. On my way here I was thinking about a very stupid TV series, an American one. Well regardless, they are all stupid. Tens of thousands of people die in this country each day from old age or illness. What's worse, is that tens of thousands of hopes are also dying each day and to a certain extent, the people who used to keep those hopes die with them as well. We are turing into the country of the walking dead. Because a man without hope is like a dead man. How are you supposed to live without hope? He goes to work and lends his labor for a miserable salary, he can barely bring food on the table for his family, he is victimised by numerous scammers, until he's able to save some money for Christmas or buy a present for his child. What is this man? Only somewhat alive.

What is the last hope that left you?

All of them. As far as Bulgaria is concerned, its future, its further growth, all of them.

Of course, I'm very pessimistic but this is due to the objective reality and the misery of those people who don't have the strength to fight these battles every day. A lot would object that there

are many successful people, many honest millionaires, prosperous young people... I don't think about those that much because they're only 4% or 6% of our nation. The remaining 94% are people who don't have the stamina to persistently fight the arrogant scams and ruses of the governing mob. They are not as smart or intelligent to prosper, they're just average people with average potential from average families with average children from an average town. My heart goes to those people and their daily struggles, not to the 6%, but to the remaining 94%.

What should be done? Which is the road to making things better?

I couldn't know that. Suppose I have an idea... it would be in vain.

I would like us to talk about the “Exiles” for a while. Did you become friends in the run of the project?

We were together 24-7, so to say, well, so it was. Literally night and day. In the recent years each has become increasingly engaged in other projects, they grew up, gained popularity, the audience wants them. And yet, the check point and the exiles remain the same as before. Everything was being built in the course of rehearsals, new parallels, new episodes, we created many things together. The only thing I consider as my personal success is the fact that I managed to light their fire for this cause. They trusted me. Later on, throughout the darkest times, the deepest crises and the most somber confusions they did not betray me.

In the day of first performance we didn't have an ending. I was walking like a ghost along the corridors because I had to think of an ending! In the last ten minutes I just ordered: you raise this and you raise that, here's the car, you stand still as a monument, you come from here saying this, you – from there, saying that, you push the car back and forth, the car goes over there and there we have it, an ending. All clear? <<No!>> Good! Let's do it!

I had no time to rehearse it, so by the end of the show I was in the stage pocket giving directions, 'say this' or 'do this', or 'come this way'. They are all used to my improvisational manner of working and their ears are always receiving. I would often be hiding behind a curtain, shouting at them what to do next. So the ending was born right here, five minutes before the beginning. There were mainly students in the audience, from the academy and from high schools. They were invited to see a pilot show, before the actual premiere took place. They didn't make a single noise during the whole run. The show ended, the ending passed. And there was a pause. The hall must have been silent for four or five seconds which I felt like three minutes before the explosion of applause. There was this pause when I thought: Game over!

Is it true that there is a vow before each show?

Yes, there is. We never miss. As expected from exiles or Bulgarians at all, it is not exactly refined speech. Our folklore is ample with witty and peppery slogans.

How did you part with Chocho Popyordanov?

Five years before he passed, he would be occasionally absent. In the beginning I would double. When unclear whether he would be able to perform, I would always be here for the show. And if I saw that he was not in condition to hold a show, I would take his part. So the production didn't suffer from his absence since we had been there before. But his absence was no less dramatic. He was always there for us and with us. He was always the biggest and the most fervent fan of the production. He used to be the one to go out in the corridor and shout: “Vows!” He never missed

his favourite moment – calling everyone, when we would gather and put our hands on top of each other's.

Who's the vow-gatherer now?

Deyan Donkov, Valery Jordanov. They are the core of the production from the beginning, the leading characters and the main preservers of the idea. Valentin Ganev, Roussi Chaney. So the vows are still the same.

You are up for a 300th show on 22nd March. Should we expect anything new? I know that there were changes to celebrate the 100th show and then the 250th.

Yes, we should probably think of something. Maybe the children. The exiles have many children now, I'll try to bring them together. Some even have grandchildren. I'll ask Zachary Baharov if he would spare some time in his busy programme but I think if I keep talking like this he might get offended. I think Dimitar Rachkov will join us because he was part of the original cast and he promised to come.

What was his role?

He had a small part, a Romanian waiter. He's a star now and he's beyond playing some small Romanian waiters. But he has always been our friend and he promised to come... if he is not busy with some other stuff, of course.

How many times did you reach the top?

The Great Wall of China reaches unimaginable heights. I'm a smoker and I use alcohol. I'm also not exactly a sports person. But sometimes I can be extremely stubborn. So, we've climbed about 3000 metres, probably, to reach the highest point of the Wall and from that point down every single wall was below us. It was my biggest achievement. The immediate problem was going back down.

What about Shipka*? Have you been there?

As a young pioneer. I think I even received my red scarf there.

What is Shipka to you?

Shipka is a beautiful symbol. Shipka is like the crown of our miserable Bulgaria. Shipka is the crown of this country.

* Shipka is a summit in the Balkan mountain range. It is a key battlefield in the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-78 in which Bulgaria regained freedom. The armed defense of the passage had a decisive significance for the outcome of the war. A historical monument was built there in 1922 to commemorate the feats of the fallen for the freedom of Bulgaria, known as the Monument of Liberty, or simply *Shipka*. You can see video with the whole interview here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e46GM018VTg>