



Interview by Livija Dumina, nra.lv, 4.09.2012

ALEXANDER MORFOV:

I'VE ALWAYS FOUND EXTREMITIES INTERESTING



Alexander Morfov's father was an officer and expected his son to follow his steps. But the son decided to devote himself to art. He says theatre is his wife and cinema is his mistress. The Bulgarian director Alexander Morfov is currently working in Dailes theatre staging Nikolai Erdman's "The Suicide" ("Finita la Comedia!"). Dailes is opening its new season with the premiere on 14th September.

L. D. What did You know of Latvia and Latvian theatre before coming to work here?

A. M. The first time I came to Latvia was five years ago when the Moscow *Lenkom* theatre was collaborating with two famous and very talented Latvian artists – Andri Freiberg and Kristin Pasternak. I came here to attend an opera show. I fell in love with this city immediately. I really like Riga. I think there are actually more people here, more than those who can be met in the street. Of course, I knew your famous Alvis Hermanis whom I had met at a festival. I had seen two of his productions. When I was invited to *Dailes* theatre I also came here to see some of the productions. This information was perfectly enough for me. I liked the theatre, I liked the actors.

You have worked in many countries around the world. Have You already noticed what makes Latvian actors and Latvian theatre different?

My earliest impressions from watching the shows were that the actors here were very serious. And I liked it. Serious in the sense of professionalism, they liked what they were doing and they were emotionally and professionally responsible. That's something I occasionally miss in Russian actors. They tend to... The Stanislavski's system which is proclaimed all around the world is now somewhat outdated with its excessive use of psychology. The system has become deformed. The Russian actor easily starts crying. Just tell him about children in Somalia and he is already weeping and it's actually an acting technique which in 90% of cases is falsely used. It is starting to annoy me because the deep emotional understanding of a situation is an elaborate and complicated experience. This is, of course, a work of mind and imagination. A process which leads you to understanding the situation. It makes no difference for the Russian actor whether he understands or not. He's crying within a moment. Of course, by this I don't mean all Russian actors. There are very good actors there as well, after all Russia has started a great school in theatre.

What I've noticed here is that in order to bring the actor to a real understanding and real experience, he needs more attention and more information, he needs to fully understand the nature of the situation and how it can be solved. And towards the end of this process he can do his job perfectly, he feels at place.

There is one problem, though, that I've encountered here – Latvian actors are quite confident. Working around the Balkans – Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, – I would build a connection with the actors faster than here. At the second meeting you could invite them to your place or go to the restaurant together, or just any informal environment where you could discuss ideas about the essence of the production at a different level. In the beginning I was unable to determine whether they understand me or not, whether they accept what I'm saying or not. Professionally-wise they are very disciplined and they do whatever told to do very precisely, but human contact that I'm used to building right away, is harder to reach here. But it's not the first time for me to encounter this problem and it's not a shock. I've

worked in Sweden before and I just returned from Tel Aviv. Jewish people are known to be very temperamental but, in fact, modern Jews are quite reticent. Their reasons are different – they are afraid of showing their true emotions as it might cost them their freedom. The northern people here won't accept a new person immediately. They need to get to know him first. But I readily obey the rules of the game and the rules in our realtions, I'm working on making it better. I'm trying to convince them that we need a shared space where everyone comes together in order to make a good production. Sometimes I feel like walking on thin ice. Sometimes it's slippery, sometimes you fall, but it's only for a short while. And yet, there is this feeling that the ice is going to break any time now. It's a healthy feeling, though, because one must always be prepared for such a thing to happen.

Did You choose Erdman's play?

Yes. I offered a couple of plays to the theatre and the theatre selected this one. This text has been on my mind for a long time and I feel that it's a very topic problem nowadays. Of course, I've changed a lot in it, I've cut the ideological layer due to which, as we know, Erdman was expelled from Moscow, and never wrote anything else but "The Suicide" and "The Mandate". After everything connected with totalitarian regime, communism or Stalin is cut, we are left with a very sad and very funny human story. It's a story about the common man in search of himself, his happiness, his destiny, etc. It's a story about a man who rediscovers life after he's been through hell. Like Orpheus, he went down to hell but not in search of Eurydice, but in search of himself, of his own freedom. He enters hell just to confirm that life is worth living. That life is beautiful. Come to think of it – if you are not terminally ill and if there is no family drama – life is actually wonderful, however difficult. Of course, social pressure and status, making money, surviving the day, bringing food on the table, it's a mess! The point is having a loved woman looking at you when you wake up, holding the hand of your son, watching the sun in the day and the stars at night. Is there anything more wonderful than that? People have turned into slaves of their own expectations, slaves of their everyday life. We have become unable to see life as it is as we have begun to measure life by the valuables we own. We describe life by the price of our car or by the square footage of our flat. If I drive a lousy Zhiguli and don't wear Paco Rabanne then I must be leading a poor life. No, in fact, my life is not so poor as those things do not determine the actual quality of my life. That's also one of the ideas in the play. We should look at life from another angle. As Monty Python went, "Always look at the bright side of life". Nice car? That's bullshit to me. What's important to me is going for a walk, lying on the grass, breathing the air, watching children play around. Those things mean much more than just sitting in a huge mansion and watching TV shows about how poorly people are living.

That is the problem of one's freedom.

Yes, it is. Finding it, grasping it and recovering. It is very difficult, especially in our reality of the common man who has almost no hope left. His only hope is a decent job and a reasonable salary. That's all he dreams of. And then, it turns out that this is not all there is about life, that this is not even the most important thing about life – not having a job or money. Having someone who loves you and whom you love is more important. This play is actually about love. That's what I want to make out of it. That's what I find interesting at this stage of my life. I used to be different. I used to assess and analyse the world through my anger.

Why anger though?

I was angry at the world because it was not ordered as I expected it to be. I wanted to make everything right, to revenge. I thought that the answer to evil was even more evil. Maybe I've become foolish rather than wiser but my understanding of the world changed. That's why I found this play interesting.

I figure that freedom of mind is among Your preferred problems. Your “One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest” (“Eclipse”) at the Moscow *Lenkom* theatre starring Alexandr Abdulov – which is among the few theatre experiences that have shaken me – was also about freedom.

I've always found extremities interesting. The lives of “special” people. Our world was built and prospered namely thanks to such people. They are the ones who dare to take the unimaginable step into future. Maybe there is a hidden desire to even them out. I enjoy analysing what makes those people special, what is their extremity or their unusuality. Yes, this always gets me into thinking.

What more could I say? The biggest problem of the modern man is lack of freedom. In the past we were deprived of freedom by the ideological system and now we are victims of the social and financial systems. Could anyone nowadays say that he is free? I have loans, credits, taxes, utilities to pay... We have been driven crazy by this spider net but is there anyone who could tear it and free himself out? The only people who are fully free are the outcasts in the streets. They are completely free and this brings this uncanny feeling that being free is actually a terrifying idea. Do you really want to be free if that means you would end up in the streets? But they can't help themselves, those lost, hopeless, stupid people. And suddenly freedom is no longer a goal, it's a curse, it's the end. That's just how the system is changing our thinking! If you are doing well in life, if you are successful you

are coming to realise the price you've paid. The system keeps holding you with hands and feet tied. Children need to go to school, you pay huge educational taxes, then to university. Some prefer England but life is expensive there, you have to get a second job or sell your car, keep working 24/7 and still need another job... It takes more and more to prove you are an actual person. But who is that person, in fact? As Podsekalnikov [in the play] says – just a number for statistic purposes. Nothing depends on you. Your task is to submit to laws, to submit to the bank system and to earn money. We'll give you anything you want and we will own you. The ideological repression was simply replaced by financial slavery. All values were replaced from the human mind. If you want to understand what freedom is, you do as our character did – you reach the doors of hell, you peer into hell and, only then, realise that life is beautiful.

You said this play sounds very modern but it wasn't the only one You offered the theatre. An old one...

Gogol's "The Inspector General", it's an ingenious play...

... which feels as if written yesterday. Does this mean the road of progress is spiral or circle shaped?

Yes, it's circle shaped, the cycle keeps repeating itself.

We keep making the same mistakes. Why can't we change, haven't we learned anything?

If you want to understand the sense of existence you always need to start from the beginning. Many philosophers have pondered on this question – why do we exist, what is the meaning of life as such, they never came to an answer for three thousand years. But that's a long conversation.

My own simple explanation is that we are still on an evolutionary level where our mind and consciousness are restricted within certain limits and we are still unable to move to the next level. Until that point we will be repeatedly going down the same spiral. Even if technologies have developed we still have the same joys and troubles, just read Shakespeare. Nothing about the human being has changed. Reaching a higher level of consciousness which will permit us to understand what freedom truly is, rendering the human mind completely free, will only be possible when humanity has balanced its clear concepts of good and evil. As long as extreme fanaticism, radicalism, all the -isms exist, as long as people keep killing people in the streets due to religious or ideological

disagreements, humanity is stuck at this level. Before that happens, people will not be able to reach a higher consciousness.

If our civilization is actually frozen in its evolution, maybe it does need to be fully ruined before a restart.

Still, I'd like to believe that we will grow to a higher level but it won't be easy. Not in this life, for sure, or in the next one, or in the one that follows the next one, either. I find it unbelievable that the whole history of civilization is only destined to destruction, that the whole world with all its cultures is destined to extinction. That the essence of it all was destruction. The meaning of life, the purpose of it all is hidden with the one who created it.

Let's go back to the actors. I understand that for You it's important to work with like-minded people. Why is that?

I believe in creative teamwork. I believe that when people have shared ideas their work will prove to be much more successful and interesting. I can even say that personal artistic achievement is not as important to me as the whole production. My priority task is to build a team of like-minded people. I've always dreamt of creating an orchestra that could improvise and reach a point where it no longer needs the author, where they are the author themselves. I've managed in the past, time is getting shorter now. If we go back to the actors, it's risky, because one day an actor could perform extremely well and fail on the other. That's bad for you [the director]. But I'm trying to be a team supporter, giving the actors freedom, leading them in one direction, helping them reach the emotional and mind state, and still, letting them grow into it. Those are the happiest moments in my work – seeing how something I have done has grown into something bigger because the actor has added-up to it. Real art is when the actors are developing your ideas, when it starts living its own life on stage. It's not an easy process, especially in this case when we still don't know each other. We are very tentative, like blindfolded. I keep trying to impress them, to win them over and I hope to do so. It is a complicated psychological game. My personal victory will come when all of them together start believing and create a production. I've never liked calling it "my" production, I prefer "our" production. I believe in the actors because theatre is a living art. And that's why it will always exist – because it offers an immediate human contact between audience and actors. It's a much needed contact that we are day by day losing to technology.

Do You think repertory theatre has a future?

It will persist as long as the state has a concept for theatre development. There are a number of bad examples – Greece, Italy. Theatre exists in those countries but it is unclear how and where.

Does the state need to realise that repertory theatre is a cultural asset which needs state support?

Every government has the task to decide what it wants its citizens to be like. The Latvian government should decide what it would like Latvians to be. Should they have clothes? Yes, they should. Should they be good people? Yes, they should. Should they know and love their culture? Once you have set it as a priority, you can't do without it. For each government it's important to have educated citizens with potential for growth.

But an uneducated people is easier to manipulate.

If so, the government is doomed. It's a pity if they don't realise that.

Tell us about Bulgarian theatre. It's unfamiliar to the Latvian audience.

There are about ten repertory theatres in Sofia, another fifteen in the country. We have a National Theatre and Film Academy and a couple of alternative theatre schools.

Do people love theatre? In Russia, for instance, people are fond of theatre!

Theatre is a cult in Russia. There were a couple of critical points for theatre in the post-totalitarian period, but the audience has now returned to the hall. The actors are also regaining their status. The prestige of the profession is not what it should be but it is certainly better than what it was five years ago. Cinema and TV series are produced. Being an actor is not humiliating anymore, because there were those times when it was a synonym of failure. There would be about three thousand applications at the Academy compared to today's barely 150. The choice is limited. But now the interest is returning. The only problem is lack of alternative theatre, there is no competition in that field. The state is not supporting a good environment for alternative theatre to develop, either. People are coming together, trying to do something, but it's difficult without state support. Of course, alternative theatre does not target mass audience, while funding is calculated on the basis of number of viewers. The more viewers you have, the bigger the funding. It is channelled towards entertaining repertoires. Although, the system is still not completely disbalanced, the percentage of serious projects, which is about 30%, is decreasing.

You are Artistic director of the *Ivan Vazov* National Theatre of Bulgaria. How many of Your projects are there and how many of them are abroad?

In my theatre I would stage about once a year and work abroad in the remaining time. I can't live without travelling anymore. I stayed in Bulgaria for three months now and one day I just went to the airport to look at the departures, as if I'm being pulled away.

Why don't you want to stay home?

I'm very curious. I want to see new places, meet new people. In my theatre everything is alright – good actors, good company, I always work with them. We have a truly good company and it's not just my opinion, it's confirmed by the directors that I invite to stage at the theatre. They say that there are a lot of good actors in our country, but they've never seen so many in one place. Even Andrey Konchalovsky said this when I invited him to work with us a couple of years ago, but he is too expensive. That would have shut down the whole system of Bulgarian theatre for three months.

It's a peculiar feeling, being 10,000 meters above the ground, as if between heaven and earth, even forgetting where and why you are flying. As if you are the one flying. Maybe it gives me the freedom and independence that I'm always searching for. All these projects abroad do give me sense of independence. When I don't owe anything to anyone, when it's just me and my skills. For now, it's only been bad for my family. But they are always with me. They are here during the holidays now, as well.