



Interview by Nikolay Yordanov, Homo Ludens, June 2005

ALEXANDER MORFOV:

I WANT TO SCULPT GRANITE IN STEAD OF MERELY DRAWING CARTOONS



Nikolay Yordanov: *Did you even imagine in the end of the '80s when we graduated from the Theatre Academy that you would ever stage Vazov's "Exiles" and that this production will have such an enigmatic success with the audience?*

Alexander Morfov: No. My attitude, well the attitude of my generation as a whole, towards Ivan Vazov and classical Bulgarian literature was somewhat ironic, condescending. The communist educational system levelled its politically-bound literary monsters with the classical authors and the latter suffered from that. With "Exiles" I wanted to change what's been accumulating for so long – the attitude towards Vazov, towards the text itself, towards the stage stereotypes in its interpretations, towards our history if you wish.

NY: *But how does it come that you, namely you – who was recognised in the '90s as a director of the theatrical mixture and postmodern expressions, are now turning to this text – a text which even modern Bulgarian drama from the beginning of XXth century wants to evade as old-fashioned? And you are now using this work to find an analogy with modern social situation and Bulgarian nation's psychology, you even identify yourself with the messages and the intuition that the text holds...*

AM: Maybe the fact that the action takes place outside Bulgaria was crucial to me. This is a situation that brings you to the borders of your capability for endurance as a human being, when the foundations of your personality are questioned. I have experienced that myself, living abroad most of the time lately. Everyone should challenge himself to live abroad, because one must experience the pain of alienation, the pain of loneliness; one must provoke... nostalgia... it's not the right word... maybe experience the pain of a lost paradise. We cannot fully understand a situation from the inside of it, we cannot truly feel the love of our family when we have it on a daily basis. Feeling lonely among people means being in pain. Misery turns pain into desperation. The desperate man is not a noble man. Evolution is not irreversible - millions of years can be erased after a few days of hunger and you turn back into an animal, a much more ferocious animal than any animal we know. Remaining human is an unhuman task. We needed to present the exiles with all of their faces - enjoyable and repulsive, miserable and powerful, not just as single-sided characters. In every situation they are both villains and heroes. It is a difficult dilemma - who is to survive - you or your friend. And a deeply tragical one. This is not a matter of character clash, this is a clash between man and destiny. At the end of it, "Exiles" is about man fighting destiny.

NY: *Bulgarian society is obsessed with Vazov – going from one extremity to another – it both fondly loves him and greatly wishes to differentiate itself from him. Which of the two is the dominating one often corresponds to certain moments of our social growth. How do you think – why Bulgarians want to revise Vazov today?*

AM: Today's Vazov is not the same Vazov from 15 or 20 years ago. Each historical period brings to light only those parts of a work of art that are permissible for the ideological matrix – political or social, and presents them to society's conscience in accordance with the times. The thought that Wagner was the composer of the 3rd Reich or that Shakespeare was the most dissident playwright during communism years is unbearable but this only confirms their genius. Vazov's grandeur has nothing to do with his naive attempts to build a nation's consciousness or to verse a quite confused and shameful historical reality.

NY: *What was new and different to you, as a director, during the work on this production?*

AM: As a director, I'd never before worked for so long with the text. At first, we had to connect to the language that every now and then would sound archaic or naive, even

foolish... Then, we had to cut everything that we knew about this text, everything that made it politically involved. Vazov's political views are clear, he states them explicitly and deliberately – of course, no reprehension meant. His major intention was to relief history from the shameful abjection of Bulgarian reality back then, he deliberately idealised Bulgarian people and Bulgarian culture. This has nothing to do with his true talent, this is merely the icing given his political views and his sense for a mission. We had to cut those. After that unpardonable surgery that removed a lot of original text we were left with the true material for the production. And then, its sense appeared crystal clear. And last, we had to read a lot about the spirit of the era, i.e. about the relations between Botev and Karavelov, about the attitude of Bulgarian emigrants to Rakosvky, about different basic revolution strategies, etc. We faced an ocean of literature, memories, archives that we all wished to swim through. This, I think, was one of the most interesting parts while working on the production because it lead us to unexpected findings, to new relations between distant facts that determined our history.

NY: *What were the foundations of the structure of the show when you first started rehearsing on stage?*

AM: We built our show with our intuition and emotions. Music is the leading element, more or less. For each of my shows I've always sought to find the most appropriate music; the moment I find it is the moment I have built the structure of the show. This production is determined by Gorecki's 3rd Symphony and Vlatko Stefanovsky's song "Bel kon". Gorecki's symphony is inspired by writings on the walls of Gestapo cells, left there by Polishmen and Jews before they were killed. When listening to it, one recognises tragedy as his own destiny. And here we are again – facing the opposition between man and faith... man's choice how to live is greatly important in this fight. Sometimes he chooses to be a scoundrel but always secretly wishes to be hero. The exiles wish to be heroes and die as heroes, regardless of how they lived. The live for the sake of dying – this is a very important string from the production's plot. Death is the composition's overtone.

NY: *Were the actors also infected with their heroes' impulse – to live with the purpose of sacrificing your life?*

AM: The actors' contribution is of such a scale that I would even say it's not a theare production, it's an improvisation of a huge symphony orchestra on a literary work. My task was to inspire the performers as well as to conduct the improvisation, which is, of course, not possible. We had to find each actor's instrument in the beginning, then we had to tune all of them to the same key and after that it was easier. Sometimes I would have to exchange instruments... I tried more than one actor for certain roles – who will be Makedonsky or the Innkeeper? Niki Kostadinov, may he rest in peace, had to play the Ant in the earliest version

– but not Vazov’s character, the Ant, but a different one, one that we made up just for him, because his presence would start some peculiar energy swirl during rehearsals. He would turn into some strange moral centre because that’s who Niki was, so he created his own story within the composition and I chose to use it. We gradually developed different relations between the exiles. The company was then naturally dispersed among several centres: for one, the Ant’s moral centre – Levsky’s follower and passionately noble-minded; then, the brutally active Makedonsky (Chocho Popyordanov) – a drunk, a villain and a terrorist; and also, Strandzhata (Roussi Chanev) – the saint from the holy war, the ultimate unifier... Generally we used the typical characters found in the dramaturgy but every actor created his own image, only reachable through his performance. After Niki Kostadinov passed away, the whole construction was demolished and I had to start all over again and then I nearly quit because it needed new sounding... I saw people walking around the stage, reciting lines but it just didn’t sound as it should. All the instruments were as if incompatible. The sound I was looking for came later when Valery Yordanov tried out as Brachkov and we all felt he was Brachkov... and then Hristo Mutafshiev joined the company – his aggression and his tempo-rhythm were exactly what the whole composition needed. Then we found Zachary Bacharov’s different sounding, Valentin Tanev’s... Finally, three days before the premiere Valentin Ganev broke his leg and this proved to be the missing syncope... We had an orchestra going. While before that everything just seemed to fall apart in silence. We tried different solutions out, we improvised, we argued, we had fun: Strandzhata plays a vinyl during his final monologue, just before he dies, and you hear a song performed by K. Kisimov... we were striving in all ways possible to escape the clichés. All those little things may seem less than important but to me they are the connecting tissue that permits you to reach integrity. Each actor is so important that now, if I have to make a change, I don’t know if I could. Each decision is a perfectly working detail.

NY: *But through the detail you’ve reached a universal sounding because foreign theatre critics saw your production at the “Varna Summer” International Theatre Festival and they, although seeing the show with no subtitles, felt the energy that it emits. They know that each culture needs such spectacular productions – based on curriculum-included texts but at the same time out of the frozen museums of time and articulating the present.*

AM: I find such an assessment very interesting. Some time ago I met two Jewish producers and I jokingly proposed them to stage the “Exiles” but telling them it’s about Israeli revolutionaries... and the action takes place in, say, 1937-1938 and it’s about the establishment of the Israeli state. They were immediately hooked and started insisting on having such a production in Tel Aviv. I still haven’t told them the truth... I mean, this story is a universal one – it can be told as a Jewish story, as an Irish one, also Basque or Kurd... because nations still exist that need their heroes, that need to write and rewrite their own history.

NY: *In general the theatre you make can be described as “spectacular” – a stage tradition that evolved in XXth century with such names as Max Reinhardt, Peter Brook, Robert Wilson. Is this your ideal for theatre – the vast gesture, the large-scale theatre, the picturesque imagery, influencing a huge number of audience?*

AM: I simply have no interest in working with a delicate psychological text... Strindberg or Chekhov would confuse me... Perhaps it's because of what Julia Ognyanova taught us – the diverse approaches to each act and each character – those give you so much potential; you would be simply stupid to only entertain one possible path. I could interpret a dialogue in many ways and still find all of them interesting. That's why I cannot stick to only one choice and make the actor believe these or those relations are the most important and the most meaningful... I let the actor choose. I'd rather search for the bigger truth about human nature instead of deal with psychological analysis. I wish, though, and maybe I should stage a few chamber plays. I need this and feel about this as a challenge that I should take; maybe some day, maybe later in time. I love texts that have clearly implied meaning, texts with vivid and readable deeper message. For instance, I can't imagine another interpretation of Brachkov's monologue about death – that's what it is, desperate and furious, and nothing more... As I mentioned, true provocations for me are hidden in music and visual art while text is a good motive but cannot possibly be the only thing in theatre. If I cling onto the text I feel as if my hands and legs are tied, I lose interest, it gets boring to me seeing the actors speak the same words days on end and searching for a deeper meaning. Reading, for instance, Dodin's analysis on “A Play with no Name” it provokes me to stage it... I know that's not my theatre. The stage taken as a huge canvas is more like me. At the same time I must say that I'm still very dependent on old prejudices. I don't mean some ready-made stamps that I would occasionally use but my aptitude to deal with details, to juggle with particularities, to make up gags, to mock the authors... Maybe that originates in my passion for Chaplin and my obsession with silent movies and Fellini's rich colours.

NY: *Speaking of that, was it on purpose or by chance – the quotation of Chaplin's stage worker in the beginning of your production when Makedonsky takes all the chairs at once?*

AM: Yes, yes, yes... but the genre is different so we had this tragic effect. I find this quotation in the show very organic and at the same time ironic for those who recognise it. Whatever I do I cannot escape irony, it's always been interesting to me. I believe that true art, at least the one that I find pleasing, is ironic. And by ironic I mean, say, James Joyce's “Ulysses” – it's a severely ironic work, writing 800 pages about an event that took place within a single day; Nabokov is painfully ironic, Hermann Hesse is irony itself – that's the irony I mean and not the one found in cheap jokes. Irony must be outrageous. If there is any dissatisfaction with my work in Bulgaria, it would be that I can't reach the magnitude that I

dream of. If there is sand falling from the sky, I want it to keep falling for an hour and all the actors to be up to their knees in sand in the end of the show ... such an effect has a physiological impact. I want to leave the audience panting when seeing my shows. But this is hard to do – it would be either unbearable for the actors or too expensive, or the theatre’s management would reply that it does not live up to its artistic level. I had a similar problem with Brecht’s “Baal” in St. Petersburg. I wanted to provoke and mock what’s taken for “good taste” in Russian state theatres. My decision was to use a very vulgar language in one of the acts – something impermissible for “Stanislavsky’s theatre”. It was charming how those lovely beautiful girls would joyfully talk dirty. The text sounded as if a song, be it one with repelling lyrics. But that’s how you speak in real life – people who enjoy love and enjoy sex, they enjoy life. The audience that was permitted to attend some of the rehearsals could not figure what was going on for some time and then it refused to believe what it had heard. I truly enjoyed this decision but was unable to win this argument with the management. The artistic director came and said: “I cannot allow such a thing on our stage. This is Komissarzhevskaya’s theatre. Some of Russia’s greatest actors have performed here.” I was faced with the choice of either not having a premiere or redacting the text. I redacted. The episode did not suffer tremendously but the irony was lost – the irony towards tradition, towards lie... Plot was the only thing left. Irony must be found in all aspects – in text, in shape, in vision, in scale. I want to stage Iliad where the whole action takes place within the horse’s stomach. To pack the whole epos in the insides of a beast that later became symbolic of irony – the Trojan horse. I’m also considering Ibsen’s “Nora” in an aquarium being filled with water where the actors are up to their necks in water in the end... New radical decisions are needed as old-fashioned as this may sound – even just to try them out and then give them up and return to classical form. The *audience-stage* convention is starting to suffocate me. I’m somewhat tired by the theatre building as a venue.

NY: *Presenting “Exiles” on the stage of the Drama Theatre – Varna took some serious stage adaptation work. Do you have an image of another off-beat venue in, say, Varna?*

AM: I imagine presenting “Exiles” at the seaport. This, of course, would take an insane amount of work, technical equipment and finance, but it would have been a challenge. The Varna theatre festival is a great thing but it should still be working for breaking the stereotypes I mentioned about. Theatre is supposed to occur anywhere, at any time, with all means possible. Installing seats and building a light construction takes no more than half a day. Potential of landscape and architecture should be used and if the festival sets the goal of presenting some of the titles in its programme in off-beat venues gradually this could be accomplished. I do understand, though, that the hardest part is growing an audience for that. The viewers in Varna are a bit sceptical and not very active. If we compare it with the audience at the Avignon festival, or even the one in Ohrid, we’ll see that viewers from Varna have long lost this beautiful naivety and delight with which untraditional theatre

projects are met in Ohrid. During my rehearsals of “Decameron” in Ohrid in the last 20 days I would have approximately a hundred viewers at each rehearsal... like football fans who go to see a training of their favourite team. On the 10th day they already knew some of the lines, they reacted to any change that we’ve made and awarded us with applause. One evening an airplane flew over the venue where we were rehearsing, very low. I stopped rehearsals and told the actresses who were nuns – if this happens during a show I want you to stop acting, look up in the sky and start crossing yourselves, because for a nun in XIVth century that would have been something tremendously frightening, maybe God himself who is flying above you and you have to react like people who live in XIVth century. Here we were once again awarded with applause. And those were more precious to me than the applause at the premiere because they were sincere and born out of love and understanding for art. Things like that are impossible in a theatre building with another audience.

NY: *Your production “Baal” by Brecht will be presented in Ohrid this year. You staged it in St. Petersburg. How do you combine your interest in Vazov and in Brecht – they are so different after all?*

AM: After the “Exiles” I really wish to continue my work in the same direction, with the same company, that is, to continue improvising on the topic with those worthy musicians. Although, after “Exiles” I find it difficult to start working on a material for which I find no inspiration within myself. I keep being more and more astound seeing how theatre productions are made out of purely aesthetical or financial motives. I wonder at myself how I was able to stage plays that deal with ideas not worthy of dying for. At this point, the sense for destiny in the material is what’s most important to me. This, of course, is exhausting, depleting me, while on the other hand it gives me the comfort of knowing I’ve found my way. That’s what I personally learned from the experience with the “Exiles”. As for my works in Russia Brecht’s “Baal” was such an experience for me because there I interpreted the faith of a whole generation that praised Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix... the ‘70s and ‘80s generation who devoted their lives to reaching for freedom, for sense of life and of death. After “Baal” I can’t find anything good enough... I’m forced to flirt with some texts, to make up gags in order to serve one text or another but neither has a touching point with my current state of thought. Maybe the most important thing that I learned is that I don’t want to pretend anymore, I don’t want to be the funny, nice or lovely guy. I’m searching for something that would make me furious and exposed, and totally honest. I want to work on another type of material, I want to sculpt granite and not merely draw cartoons...

NY: *Fury? Fury against what – against a certain evil or any metaphysical evil?*

AM: Fury against what I am and against what I am not, fury against humanity and the state it has brought itself to, fury against our inability to determine our own destiny, even fury

against beauty... I want to somehow change the state that theatre is currently in. I want to break all that is familiar and start exploring the unknown, while at the same time being afraid whether I would have the audience for that. Had he been a theatre artist, Van Gogh would have remained a total stranger... The show is taking place here and now, in front of this audience that visited the hall today. Productions that are 5 years old are now an expired document of our thinking in an era that is already lost. Our ideas grow old faster than we do. That's why educating audience is very important. I wanted to stage this text after I did "Hamlet" but I knew that back then it would be a failure in terms of audience. I had to do "Don Quixote", "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "The Tempest" and only after those I took the liberty to work on "The Lower Depths" because I felt that the audience would not leave me in such a moment, regardless of everyone saying that staging Gorky on Main stage in 1997 is crazy. I don't think we suffered from that. Now I also think we have an audience awaiting this production. That's why I want to start my work here immediately, I want to use the impetus that the "Exiles" gave me to accomplish other goals, different ones... What goals would that be? I'm not really sure... I find it difficult to analyse theatre, I'd rather feel theatre.