



*the interview is published in the book “Model of Success 22”

ALEXANDER MORFOV:

SUCCESS IS NOTHING. SUCCESS IS FINDING YOURSELF



Each of his productions is a good enough reason to go to theatre and learn something new each time you do – about the world, about the people or about yourself. Three hours earlier he has arrived from Bucharest and tomorrow he departs for Moscow. This man lives with a suitcase in his hand, constantly looking for something and his rest looks like this – the stage director's office at the 'Ivan Vazov' National Theatre, the hour is a little after 19:30h, performance of “Dom Juan” is running on the screen.

You wanted to become a musician, after that an artist, you became an actor and later – director. Do you believe in destiny or a man is one's own lord?

I do believe in destiny, maybe because every time I denied it, it proved me wrong. Well, maybe it's easier to me that way – I take down the responsibility from myself, I focus on events and situations in which I see a sign from fate and I let myself to the wings of irresponsibility. My desire to do theatre has always been hidden, and encouraged by accidental chances. Maybe I did not believe in myself enough, my family was far away from theatre, my friends and all the people around me... Probably I had this secret hope but someone had to voice it out loud so that I can take this challenge and turn it into my destiny! Before that I was also working in arts – I played in a rock band, I used to draw...

What was the name of the rock band?

“Lex”, it means law. On one hand it's short, on the other – it has a contradiction, a rock band named that way. We played at the happenings in high school, as a matter of fact in a number of high schools because at first I was in the Mathematical high school, then I had to be transferred to an ordinary one and finally I ended in the evening high school.

You changed a few schools? Why is that?

Because I wanted to grow my hair long – I was a “rock musician” after all – and in the times of brutal socialism anything that identifies you as a person was forbidden... I was expelled from the Mathematical school, which was a devastating event for my parents' hopes, because I was gifted – I was enrolled without examination after winning a republican competition. But approximately in 10th grade my interests towards mathematics had vanished and I began doing music, art. I had some friends, artists, and I had the enormous desire to go study in the Arts and Crafts Professional School in Kazanlak. But it so happened that my elder brother and sister both passed away and my parents did not wish me to go anywhere, not for a second... I was understanding about the family pain and I stayed. But with the time I started to rebel against the idea that I'm their salvation, their ideal... It was difficult because my mother was a teacher and my father – an officer. It was such a humiliation that their son is attending the evening school!

What happened to your brother and sister?

My brother Ilia had an accident with my father's car when he was 18 years old... After that my sister – they had one year of age difference, they were almost as twins – she grieved over him and fell ill. After a series of medical mistakes she passed away. She was a student in the Veliko Tarnovo University. Her name was Velichka... It's funny, she's called after our grandmother Velika (*great*) but during communist years no one had the right to be ‘great’ except for Marx, Engels, Lenin and the rest of the psychopaths.

You remained an only child. Did you ever feel that you should do something in the good memory of Ilia and Velichka?

Yes, I remained the only child and I was the only one for quite some time... My sister was very smart and very gifted. Very often she would be pointed as an example. Some deep ambition provoked me to prove that I also deserved this attention and I was also “worthy” of it, according to social norms. *My brother was a thug, a bandit, the ringleader in the neighbourhood – he was the opposite example. I wanted to be a “dude”, like he was...* That’s how I ended up in the epicentre of my own cataclysm that started an unsolvable internal conflict still continuing even today.

Do you remember the first time to get curious about theatre?

It was by accident. I saw on TV “A Comedy of Errors” by Trevor Nunn, a production of the Royal National Theatre. The production was very modern – you are watching Shakespeare while the actors are equipped with photo cameras, panama hats, shades, they talk on the phone, they fight in a cinema hall while others are watching a film... Suddenly I realised that theatre is something very different from the partisan plays and political bullshit that I had seen in our local theatre or every Monday on TV. It was, say, 1977. I was completely obsessed with this production. I felt something new, a feeling close to ecstasy. And suddenly a thought occurred in my mind – that there is something else about this world, something I know nothing about and it’s so interesting! Some other peak, an undiscovered land that is so beautiful... I now had the desire to perform, to create, to be different... This shook me so tremendously that within myself I made a decision, I wanted to do theatre. Of course, I soon forgot that decision. I was 17, playing in this rock band, I had problems with my parents, with school, with militia, with girls, with pimples...

When did you finally decide that you wanted to do theatre?

When I graduated from high school my father insisted that I apply for the Military school but I was not allowed to apply there because of my anti-social behaviour and after a bunch of problems he managed to arrange a place for me in a rocket division because he was certain that I would be able to redeem my social sins. This, thank God, did not happen – due to my unsolvable internal conflict – and I often did time in brig. After you do the job, invented by the cops, they send you to your cell and since the nights are cold and long, we spent our time talking to each other. I loved thinking of stories and telling jokes and always had a great success. I talk all night long, the boys laugh and on the third day my friend and cellmate Joro Hrusanov, holding onto his stomach from laughter, says: “Why don’t you become an artist, this is unbearable!” This stuck in my head, a spark ran back to that forgotten feeling and suddenly in my mind was constructed something like “Why not?” Someone had finally voiced out what I didn’t dare to.

So then, the Theatre Academy?

No, during military training I applied for the Technical University and I was enrolled. I did it for my father. The first day on the registration desk I asked: “Do you have a theatre school at the institute?” holding my documents and not letting them. The lady just sits there and tells: “Let’s now register you.” But I’m insistent: “I asked whether you have a theatre school!”, and she says: “We do have a theatre, one of the best university theatres in Bulgaria.” So I registered myself and on the following day I applied for a place in the theatre. It was managed by Stoyan Alexiev. It was a strange situation for me then. He’s inviting all candidates to perform something – a fairytale, a poem or a monologue... I become more and more nervous because I am beginning to realise the embarrassment that’s to follow... So when my turn came, I said: “Look, I’m quite far away from this stuff. I cannot recite a poem, let alone a monologue...” He answered: “Well then, what are you going to perform?” And I say that I can tell a couple of jokes. So... that’s how I ended up in the theatre. With jokes.

When did you first realise that you have an inspiring imagination and the ability to invent and decorate stories?

I loved telling stories since I was a child. For instance, as a kid I used to live with my parents in buildings for military employees in the centre of Sliven. Those buildings had really deep basements and bomb shelters – it was the children’s terra incognita. One day I told everyone I had seen a shadow of a man with a gun. There was a huge craze about espionage back then and, at first, one kid started listening, then a second one, a third one, then all the kids from the neighbourhood gathered, then grown-ups started listening and finally militia came and this story ended up with a state investigation. They were unable to find the man with the gun but I grew to believe my own made-up story so convincingly that I was afraid to pass by the basements in the evenings coming home from school for a long time, so I would call my father and ask him to come down and take me home.

My imagination has always worked with 100% power in all possible directions. Even when I drive I would see in my mind such terrible accidents with injured people, mutilations, endless versions of who, from where and how would be able to escape, with death and free falling... Quite a painful process, by the way, because you cannot stop it. Even today, driving from Bucharest, I had a number of detailed scripts for accidents and imagined how the car flies out and how I shout to my daughter to lie at the back seat...

Did it ever happen to you to imagine a production or a scene beforehand?

Many times. Some of my productions are entirely based on preliminary visions. I used to see them in my dreams – in details, now I would often go to bed exhausted or drunk and my dreams

in this condition are restless and I cannot remember them. But when I'm in a good condition I happen to have very pleasant dreams, very helpful ones...

How did you break the news of you becoming an actor to your father?

I told him I was leaving the Technical University during my second year of education, but I actually applied for the Theatre Academy during the first one, unsuccessfully. I was eliminated on the first round, the second year I was eliminated on the second round. I had severe speech defects and terrible accent from the Sliven region.

How did you manage the accent?

Going back to this, I do admit that I was pretty ambitious in reaching my goal. When I realised I had that defect I was not insulted, I just decided to overcome it, I entered into a fight with myself. Back then Ivaylo Hristov was at the Sliven theatre and he decided to prepare me for the exams at the Academy. He helped me a lot. But I remember that every day at home I would train with a cork stopper. My parents had gone crazy because I was constantly walking around with this stopper and didn't shut my mouth.

At that time you had already left the Technical University?

Yes, in my second year of study I realised that I was not made for this and decided to escape. My best friend, who was working as a light manager for the Sliven theatre, told me one day: if you don't like it, leave it, come work at the theatre... I quit the university and went back to Sliven where I started working as a stage worker. For two years. I knew that I had found my place on earth – the thing I wanted to do, regardless of what I would be doing there. I knew I would not be a stage worker all my life because in my second year there I was already the manager of the stage workers' team, light manager and also other things. I was writing poems, music, all the artists were respectful of me and what I did. We were friends with many of them.

Do you remember the moment you realised that theatre is your place?

The director Slavi Shkarov came to Sliven to stage "Mata Hari". I must have been 21, a handyman, I joined their company. Later he gave me a couple of roles in the production, including playing on a piano and some other stuff, but I continued to be responsible for the set... What I enjoyed the most were the tours. During the week we would tour at least three times in the near villages and towns and perform. We, the stage team, would start earlier to build the set which could turn out to be quite complicated... The stage in the Sliven theatre is 10 metres wide and 6 metres tall but when you go to the Raykovo village the stage is 5 metres wide and 4 metres tall and you must make a decision – how to build everything that the production needs. This was a pleasure to me, it provoked me to study the world of theatre more seriously, its

functionality, its mechanisms. It was about that time that I felt that theatre is my place and I am happy there.

Yes, but how – as an actor or as a director?

I liked everything – participating in the productions, playing instruments, building set. I had found a place where I could be anything. Of course, after I was enrolled in the Theatre Academy I focused this whole energy that I carried around the theatre, into making productions with my colleagues.

And how did you become a director?

I was not satisfied with being a puppet actor as my grades were not high enough for drama acting. I was the first under the red line and prof. Sasho Stoyanov told me: “You go study the puppets but come and attend the trainings in our class. Next, you will be transferred to join us.” This whole thing I found truly idiotic – a “visiting” student, in both classes. Most of the time we would exercise on bullshit and I had already outgrown that. Then they announced a competition for studying directing abroad – I applied and won a place. But there were two places – one in Prague and the other in, back then, Leningrad. And once again, it was a chance – those had been forming my whole destiny – that decided for me. I had always dreamt of going to Prague – because of Milos Forman and the “czech new wave”, because of theatre and the city that is madly beautiful. But since I was a Russian-manipulated child – my mother was a teacher in Russian language and my father was an officer who praised and blessed the Soviet Union all his life – I chose and I don’t know how, to go to Leningrad. They registered me and I took goodbye with all of my professors the simplest way I could – I told them everything I think about them, burned all bridges and started packing my luggage. Unfortunately, on 15th August, two weeks before I had to leave, I received a note that the place in Leningrad was closed and I had to go back to the Theatre Academy (*laughs*). At that point Julia Ognyanova who was preceding the examining committee, called me and told me she liked my written exam and that, if I wished, I could join her class for directing. I accepted with great pleasure and relief.

It sounds as if destiny reached out to you.

Speaking of destiny, 7 or 8 years after graduating from the Theatre Academy I began working for the “Komissarzhevskaya” theatre in St. Petersburg (*former Leningrad*) not far away from the institute where I was supposed to study. My room was on “Pestl” st. – I still hold a place on this street – and it was exactly opposite to the institute. Somehow – what was supposed to happen, did happen, only years later and in a different way. There is this other fateful event. I was in my fourth year of study and due to some exchange programme I found myself in Moscow. I and another two guys were selling jeans and sneakers that we’ve managed to smuggle from Bulgaria. We ended up millionaires in Moscow – we had 3-4 thousand rubles and back then a

car would cost about 3 thousand. *We were the absolute kings there, in years marked by hunger and poverty. Vodka was sold only by taxi drivers or special people on special places at even more special prices.* One day we go to get some vodka and enter a novoarbatskaya gourmet store where we are told that Vasya is an expert on vodka and we should wait. In a minute Robert De Niro arrives – with four bottles of Stolichnaya, a spitting image – with the mole, with the crooked smile, dressed in a blue apron. It turns out to be Vasya. We gave him the money, started a conversation and Vasya invited us to his place. We sat in a room above the store and drank the bottles. We visited Vasya daily to get drunk and have a chat. Ten years later on this same place was established the theatre of Alexandr Kalyagin where I first started working in Moscow. In this same building, above this same store. What used to be the conference room was emptied and made into a theatre hall and Kalyagin's office was in the same room that we used to meet with Vasya. And so, there are those moments when you think to yourself: maybe there is destiny after all, one that you don't know of, cannot envision, but it gives you hints or sends you somewhere to check something. Like a criminal returning to the crime scene maybe we also visit places that belong to our future without even knowing. Or maybe we feel it deep inside but we've forgotten the ways to bring it up and formulate it, because I'm absolutely confident that man is able to read his internal impulses, to analyse his destiny in the vector of past or future time.

And when did you realise you were a talented director?

I still haven't, but if I do, I will inform you immediately... Sometimes, for some things that I do, I feel entertained watching them. And I like that the audience likes them, too. But I cannot say that I am as good as I want to be.

How come a person with your imagination decides to become a managing director of the National Theatre, that is, an administrator?

When Emma Moskova offered this position to me I told her that I cannot do administrative job, this is not my life, nor my faith and it will never be. She agreed on that and so – we left the administration to Pavel Vasev and I headed the artistic segment. Back then she introduced a new status quo for the National – with an artistic and an administrative director. Until then those two were always in a single position. I knew there was this exceptional theatre equipment and this was an opportunity to fly, me and “my” actors... I agreed. But very soon our wings were cut and we were thrown away, the political cabinet had changed.

Is the ability to make money important for success?

It seems so, because I cannot cope with this. I am not good with money. It gives you some independence. It permits you to guarantee that you will be able to develop the skills you've invested in.

How much money needs a man to feel free?

It depends... (*thinks*). Enough for a pack of cigarettes and a good drink. Things find their own way after that. I have never been arrogant or brutal regarding money. I can fit my imagination even within minimal sums. If you tell me that I have 500 thousand I already know what to do with them. But if I have 5 thousand, I will do, I will fit my imagination within this sum. In a smaller budget I would find my imagination working better, you become more active in the improvisations, you improvise where you normally wouldn't, if not for the circumstances.

How do you know when a production is successful?

The choice of material is really important – I've never simply taken a material, just like that, because it's fashionable or I must stage it. You should only choose problems that you are ready to die for. Only when you find a real problem, you can begin working on it, you become part of it – every moment from your life becomes part of the journey called "Odyssey", say, or "Exiles"...

I am a lazy man and love fiddling. I love spending time with my friends, going to parties, travelling but the moment I realise I've found a problem it becomes part of me, no matter what condition I'm in.

And then, the next stage – music. I always build my productions on music. If I can find the right music which is in perfect harmony with the message, the emotions, the plot, I start feeling that all of it would not be bad, it would not be in vein.

And another thing – maybe even before music and after the problem – is building a team. If there is no team within which every one would readily sacrifice his own freedom in the name of another, you always end up with a compromise. Presently, I am a bit confused because I'm reorganising my thinking, my ambitions, but I do believe that until now I've always managed to create a "soul" for everyone to be involved in. *And I'm a happy man. Because there are 4 or 5 theatres around the world where I can always go back and feel as if at home. There are people there with whom I know I can work forever, and I know that they would like to work with me as well.*

What is the key to managing people?

I motivate them with my weaknesses. I don't pretend to be someone I'm not. I don't pretend to be tough, a dictator. I try to be who I am.

And how do they trust you?

I don't know. Maybe because I'm a cool dude, I have no idea.

Did you have any concerns that you will fail?

Well, of course I have all sorts of concerns... Each production I start is like the first production in my life. This is terrible because I'm 50 now and I should be used to this. Every time it's the same – the same excitement, the same anguish and exultation, that you keep going and you are not alone.

Which are the five most important qualities of a man to be successful, to keep reaching the end result?

Those that I don't have... (*laughs*). It's difficult to put it into a few words – yes, strength, ambition, intelligence and another 5 or 6 things, you will find them in every book with titles such as “How to be successful” or “Changing yourself”, or you can learn them from Antikadzhiev (*an aged frequenter of the theatre's cafe*). I think that the most important thing in theatre is being sensitive, passionate about what you do. To be thoroughgoing. To be ironic, severely ironic about everything and mostly about yourself. And joy from life. I think those are the things that I try to learn.

What sort of compromise are you ready to do?

Any compromise. And by the way ‘sensitive’ contradicts with ‘thoroughgoing’. My being thoroughgoing rapidly disappears when I see a crying child or an actor with shaking hands and it turns out that he can't pay his electricity bill or has no money to reach the centre of the city. I am intransigent only towards myself. I believe that those qualities are compatible. Staging with a whip has never been a means of art to me. You can command a regiment with dictatorship and shouting but you cannot make theatre.

In an interview you say that you are afraid to be happy and it's part of Bulgarian mentality. Why is that?

Because of this constant fear that happiness is followed by misfortune. It is in our genes. In our idioms, in the sayings and proverbs, in our thinking: “A lot of nice things don't lead to a nice thing.”, “Don't laugh a lot because you will later cry.”, “Knock on wood so that the devil doesn't hear.”... We are burdened with this and cannot believe that happiness is outside there. waiting for us to call it... as well as misfortune, of course!

Is Russia your place for theatre?

Yes, in many ways. Because the language I use to communicate with the actors is the most understandable. Their attitude towards theatre is very exquisite. There are still places where theatre is considered as another land, on which land only certain people gather. And it's

wonderful when those certain people are actually a lot of people and you have a common language, regardless of modernity pulling everyone down to the lower land.

Is there a difference between how Russians and Bulgarians treat successful people?

In Russia success is somewhat praised because it brings you certain acquisitions. Here, it has absolutely no meaning whether you have received 15 awards or performed 20 leading roles. This doesn't introduce any change in your life's status quo, nor changes your social level, nor calls for any respect by the people. On the contrary – you are now an object of envy and hate for people that you accepted as your friends. But this is completely normal for small societies where graciousness is a rare event.

Why?

Because we're small, we're all equal, we're all together – you remember this old joke: “Did you hear that Joro became an astronaut? – Impossible! I've slept with his sister!” The scale that the average Bulgarian applies to people is really small. It is only comparable to what his own life is. It is only as high as his own glass. When I drink in the local bar dressed in shorts and singlet, with flip-flops, this immediately levels me down to the local drunk... who is a very charming person, by the way!

Can this ever be changed?

No and that's the beauty about it. It's lovely to have all those diverse societies. The world is a colourful place and that's what makes it a wonderful place.

So, finally, what is success after all?

Success is nothing. Success is finding yourself.