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ALEXANDER MORFOV ON “BLUEBERRY HILL”



Krastyo Lafazanov, Vassil Vassilev – Zueka

It's not your first work in cinema but it's the first time you're a scriptwriter and director. Isn't theatre enough for you and why did you make this change?

Alexander Morfov: Not that it's not enough but this is a new form of expression that I fondly love and I felt like entering into fight with it. Trying to use it to unleash my fantasies. Cinema and TV have a wider range of address and more audience. Possibilities in terms of realisation of my ideas seem to be richer. Although, theatre is a certain provisionality that really attracts me and that is sometimes more influential than the endless possibilities of the realism in cinema. I've tried shooting before, in different projects – we almost finished a TV film “200 Cinema Kings”. Due to some reasons, conflicts between me and the TV channel, it was

cancelled. We aired a pilot show that was supposed to present films, TV series, sitcoms, silent movies – something like a game of all cinema genres. I have enough engagements in theatre but I now start reducing them because I like doing cinema.

In theatre you would usually stage someone else's text, while in the film you are the author of the script.

Alexander Morfov: The idea is an old one and I was on the verge of making it happen more than once. It's a long story – a while ago I was invited to participate in a production as a director, the script was written by Maria Vladova. I started with the condition that I will have the freedom to alter the text. We began working but reached an insurmountable conflict where she insisted on a certain basic line connected with a brigade of hard labourers – an utterly socialistic plot. While I wanted to enrich the film with more fantasy. Later we parted. We agreed on each of us taking on the story and developing one's own ideas. Of course, this didn't stop her from taking everything that I had written, using it and even accusing me of stealing her idea. But it was then when I felt really interested in creating my own stories. In my work for theatre I've always felt restrains because of the cliché, the condition in theatre directing that we must overexploit, to re-chew the same plots over and over. That's why I've always strived to change them, to create new characters and situations and I feel inconsistent and dissatisfied when we repeat words of dead men as one of the characters in the films says, quoting Pirandello. We only think we live, while actually we are repeating the lives of those dead men. That's why I've never set boundaries in my works for theatre. "Decameron" is my first attempt after "Don Quixote", when I completely let myself add dialogues to the story; there is very little from Boccaccio there – maybe the beginning and the ending. All the other stories are mine.

It's an interesting idea – to present our life through the eyes of a foreigner.

Alexander Morfov: Yes, that's the foundation. You can hardly say it's an original idea. This has been used in cinema probably dozens of times. Since Odysseus everything can be interpreted as a journey – the impressions and emotions of the travelling man. Overcoming the road – the metaphor of life. Everyone has eventual stops and there he's given the chance to look around and see a bit more of this world that we rage through – we forget to notice an old woman's hands holding flowers on the street, the eyes of this same woman and the eyes of a child that is watching her hands. Those moments are unforgettable; they probably won't change you but they can make you a bit happier for being alive, for being, for being given by God this happiness to see this world and to feel it. We forget that being alive equals happiness. I call it the "Great Jackpot". Among a few millions of spermatosoids yours is the one to hit the jackpot, you are the one to enjoy this world even if you only inhabit it for ten years – after all, you've been blessed to see it and feel it. Most of us ravage through life as if it is only given to us to have it passed.

That's the way most of the characters seem to live. They are sad most of the time – like the machinist who says that he's travelled 8 million km and hasn't actually been anywhere.

Alexander Morfov: Yes, this is the other side of the same thesis – there are those people who are chained by their destiny, it has limited their emotions, their sight. The idea of this episode was that one day you stop and you pull the handbrake, you spend the New Year's eve – you freeze the moment, stop the time – with people whom you don't know – the same loners as you – amidst a field, in a train. And for a few hours they are actually happy. Each of them has a stopping point at which he can feel life. And then, there are the others – like the characters from the music band – who taste life, non-stop. Our life is given to us to experience it till the end. To have fun, or as it goes in their song “we will uphold this life, we have to uphold this life”... I don't remember the exact words of the song. But that's part of the idea. As for the foreigner, we can only assume that he's also passing through life with confused senses – whether he's living his life or he's simply a part of someone else's plan.

He's constantly recording with his hand camera...

Alexander Morfov: He's trying to register life. At a certain moment he understands that registration, realisation, sensing life has more meaning if it is done with other means – with the innate, spiritual means, with the other set of eyes. I think that... well... I don't, I'll let the audience decide what was I thinking and what I wasn't.

Nevertheless, you meant to say something.

Alexander Morfov: The idea, the attempts were pointing to this last view of the mine workers' house, trying to explain that he felt life, he understood where he made his stop in time, he truly saw this life and this world.

Yes, but in the end he remains speechless and simply goes away.

Alexander Morfov: Yes. But it's the same thing – sometimes you go to the mountain, see a sunrise – is there any point of commenting the sunrise? He warms you for future times. You remember it while not actually being able to visualise it – it has been imprinted in colour somewhere around your subconscious. The story here is like a beautiful, warm sunrise. I think it would be outdated to make general conclusions and produce postulates in the times we live in. There were many ideas and very interesting texts for the ending, commentaries, but it turned out that all of this would actually be unnecessary.

The character is German. Is that by chance?

Alexander Morfov: No, it's on purpose. Sancho Finzy is a German actor. According to the original script he was supposed to be American. I had a friend – Andrew Bailey, whom I met 6 or 7 years ago in Bulgaria. We started working together and it was really interesting because he was this type of person – he travelled a lot – the Balkans, the Near East, he was studying literature somewhere, in Michigan maybe, and belonged to the generation of young people who have clearly set the goal to enrich themselves by exploring the world. He hitchhiked around Bulgarian villages. He was pretty shocked by his meeting with Bulgaria. I was telling him about my ideas while he was telling me his impressions. In some strange way he was actually the prototype of the character. But due to financial reasons finding an American actor and bringing him here was impossible, especially with receiving our subsidy 10 days before shooting began. We were supposed to prepare from June till the end of August and shoot until October and maybe a bit during the winter. We were given the money in the end of November. We had to decide whether to shoot next summer or start and change everything. I made basic alterations to the script. I decided that the action would take place on 31.12.1999. I called Sancho by some chance with the idea that he would be able to make a very plausible role of an average German man, the typical bürger – well paid, happy with the surrounding world, with his faith – taking him out of his monotonous existence and throwing him into a different environment.

This is different from what it would have been with an American. Europeans have a different sense for life.

Alexander Morfov: Yes. Originally, there were also other ideas – the American was called Bigalow, because there was a story at the end, a true one, that I wanted to use – how his forefathers have escaped from the Balkans during the rivalry against Garibaldi in Italy and when his great-grandfather was presenting himself the customs' inspectors he chose to call himself after the region (or the village) with the name Bigla – Bigalow. This story was supposed to be told by the leading character to the Woman at the house in the film and she would answer that Bigla was actually the mountain peak in front of him. It's actually about the return, the tape being rewound back to its beginning. The film had a different message, a deeper thought. But then I freed myself from all those things because the change of the character's nationality made it implausible; also, I decided to concentrate on simple truths, common-day people, rather than searching for pseudointellectual messages that are a preferred plot around here.

And that's why the leading character keeps meeting only those people, the common ones...

Alexander Morfov: Yes, that was my idea and we had great fun in the beginning, trying to formulate the story in the train. Originally, there were only the conductors – Lafazanov and Zueka, but when we decided that the action would take place on 31st Jan questions appeared – who those people are, where they usually celebrate New Year, whether there were other people

in that train and, if yes, then why they don't get together, and then – if they do, what happens. Soon, this story that grew from within this idea became such a colourful one, that it could easily be made into a separate film – the story of some people who travel in an empty train and welcome the new century in the restaurant wagon. It's both a sentimental and sad story with monologues of Sava Hashamov, Zlatina Todeva. Maybe one day I will stage it in theatre because it's very dear to me.

Watching the film and listening to Louise Armstrong's music I did not picture the characters listening to that kind of music.

Alexander Morfov: You find it strange?

Yes.

Alexander Morfov: Well, you don't know life well, in that case. I have friends that have a lifestyle far from their taste in music. I have met people who are bandits and are fond of classical music. When we were shooting "A Day for Forgiveness" I met a guy who was a complete drunk, he used to beat up his wife every evening but he was obsessed with Steinbeck. He could quote him for hours on end – it's a terrifying paradox. I used him as a prototype for those people. In Sliven – where I grew up – I have friends who are construction workers at the railway station and they were crazy about jazz. These are all perfectly natural, living people, unlikely as it may seem.

Why was the title changed from "Sunday" to "Blueberry Hill"?

Alexander Morfov: "Sunday" was the previous title and the story was different. The original title of the film was "The Seventh Day" because there was a biblical story in it that told about the creation of the world – how God decided to take a break, fell asleep and has been sleeping since. He has no idea what is going on down here. He sleeps and dreams and we are all in his nightmare. Someone has to wake him up so that the system is restarted. When he wakes up he will see that everything is as it was originally planned – Adam and Eve are still in Eden... And out of the blue, two years later Jaco Dormael's film "The Eighth Day" is released. Its opening was surprisingly identical with my script – with the story about world's creation, but he is telling about the eighth day through the eyes of a boy who was very strange – not insane but strange, conceited. I was in shock because I saw my script filmed. Then I changed the decision about my film – I decided to entitle it "Sunday" and change the travelling foreigner with a girl. I tried to escape from the first version because coincidences were too much but it sometimes happens – problems, ideas are in the air. Someone, somehow tunes his antennas on the right frequency, catches them and creates them. If I and Jaco Dormael had any common visions then I respect him for making them happen first. After all, he made a great film, thank God, because it would be sad if someone took your idea and failed it. Then we changed the script – we replaced the biblical story with New Year's Eve. While searching for the right title we used to

listen a lot to “Blueberry Hill” because it was part of the soundtrack. The lyrics are as if taken out the script – love, the moon, the blueberry hill where one can still feel happy. Maybe that’s what we all dream about – some blueberry hill, forgotten with the childhood. My blueberry hill is my childhood – left somewhere there but not forgotten.

Samuel Finzy defines the genre as “Balkan magical realism”.

Alexander Morfov: I like this definition.

This immediately sends us to Marquez and Isabel Allende especially with the obvious scene in which a passenger has his head severed while falling from the train.

Alexander Morfov: I don’t think we are a much more rational or ordered country. On the contrary, mystery around these areas is at the same level and has the same dimension as in Latin America but, as I said, we have stopped seeing miracles in life. My grandmother was Christian and kept many icons in the house, she was also an active fighter against fascism with an expired death sentence because she was helping the partisans and, on top of it, she was a magician and fortune teller. I have always accepted her as a collective image of the Bulgarian – pagans, Christians, communists and anticommunists at the same time.

When Kusturica was here he said that the Balkan’s problem is building our houses on the road where Asia enters Europe and Europe enters Asia. Thus you get a mixture of a lot of cultures.

Alexander Morfov: Yes, it’s true, but it’s not only that. I have my own theory that our nations should be paid respect with a monument in Strasbourg, Paris or elsewhere in the real Europe. Because we have always been Europe’s filter, its protective wall, the sacrifice for European culture. Somewhere here Islam and the East is stopped; communism as well. We have always been the wall and the strongest weapon of that wall has been tolerance because things mixed together gradually. There are many villages in Bulgaria whose churches are right next to the mosques. Jews, Turkish men and Bulgarians have always lived together. The transition of East towards West happened somehow gradually.

Yes, but Europeans never think of that.

Alexander Morfov: Yes, they are engulfed by their own magnitude and uniqueness. But they don’t really have to think about that.

The foreigner from the film seems to sense this, though. There is a paradox in the film – his guardian angel dies at the end.

Alexander Morfov: Yes, it’s again the same idea – of the inevitable sacrifice. Maybe that’s our destiny and we have to accept it. There is a theory about territorial karma – we will always

remain as we are, we'll not change, because we bear the karma of the land we live in. Those who manage to drastically escape from here break the connection with this karma and change their destiny. They accept the karma or destiny of the land where they go to live. All of our great artists who could decidedly distance themselves from "here" have had huge success "there", wherever that is. I'm not saying it's a good thing. I can't stand Christo's megalomaniac expressions. My whole theory was, of course, proved by a number of names but we're not talking about that now. At the end of it – that's the land's karma, and the sense of our life, that is the change in our life, in our existence that we are all waiting for, will be possible only after we realise this connection with the land in stead of disregarding or hating the land. We keep cutting the branch we're sitting on pretending to be Europeans or some world nation while the power is just beneath our feet; each hill we dig is full of history and culture. We are walking on world's culture anyway.

We are trampling over our culture.

Alexander Morfov: Yes, that's the point – not trampling over it but walking carefully because we never know what kind of a temple is under our feet now. If you realise this connection maybe it will also ease your soul. Realising the burden, realising your faith, realising that we are after all that connection, that inevitable sacrifice without which the world would not be the same. Because, what would have happened if no one had stopped the Ottoman Empire – we cannot possibly imagine.

Stopping the Ottoman Empire deprived us from many things.

Alexander Morfov: Yes, but on the other hand we preserved Europe. We can be proud of that. The fact that Europe does not admit our contribution is another question. We preserved Europe from communism as well, willfully accepting to be the scapegoat again. This whole overflow, the conflict between Christianity and non-Christianity, communism and non-communism, dictatorship and non-dictatorship – we all carry it within our souls. That's who the Bulgarian is – a bit strange, mean, arrogant, dirty, because he carries too many conflicts within his soul. It's another thing whether he realises that. It's a deep problem. I don't think we'll put things in order soon, or ever. I don't know how much time has to pass until the personality is fully built; how many generations have to pass – because I'm seeing how the people are raising their children. They don't add to the next generation something different, something new, more humane and pure. On the contrary, their previous sloth has now grown to arrogance, avarice and survival at all costs, malice and envy, elbow hits. But that's the country's responsibility. If the country or the government is the head then the head should be moving the body. The head is the conscious. If the intellectuals are the soul and the government is the head – that's the organism. But the head must guide the body while now it's somehow vice versa.

Back to the film – after the accident the foreigner and his angel (Renny Vrangova) find themselves in the house of the fairy. The moment is full of warmth, light, safety, beauty, love, hope – something completely different from the previous scenes.

Alexander Morfov: Yes, that was the point of the episode. Unfortunately we couldn't find but really wished to find a house that looked like a fairy house. In the last moment we had to find any house, make some renovation work and start shooting the following day but I think what we got is enchanting. Inside the house Kolio Karamfilov did a great job. It's his first work as a set designer in cinema as well, not as an actor – he has done roles before.

You also have a role.

Alexander Morfov: Yes, we wondered who would be the one to pull the handbrake of the train for quite long and finally someone randomly proposed – why don't you do it. There is even a joke in this about my importance for the film happening. I now remember that there were all sorts of curves on the road to making it happen.

Isn't this tiring – keeping your balance all the time, fighting all sorts of challenges to make this film reach the theatres?

Alexander Morfov: Of course, that's why I left the script for five or six years. I had quit the idea of shooting it. It was accepted by the Cinema commission on the first stage of an open call, then passed the second stage and on the third stage when they had to transfer the money some nonsense happened and I withdrew my script and threw it away. Then "The Eighth Day" was released, that totally shocked me, and I said to myself – this is a lesson from destiny – you either do a thing when you have to or don't do it at all. The moment you decide to postpone destiny gives you a lesson for not being rigid enough. As with Paulo Coelho – he has a great essay on destiny's signs, on original motivation, on how it helps you in the beginning and after that starts testing you, challenging you, to find out whether you will turn out to be worthy of what you are up to. To see if you can accomplish your personal legend. Maybe it was part of the test – having another film with the same title, having my film refused by the commission, sent to the drawer and then seeing another opportunity, on the road, one day after another, changing the script, searching for exit options.

Don't you worry that the film might be taken literally?

Alexander Morfov: Of course, I'm worried and very excited about that. Because I expect opinions to be in the opposite extremities. Probably there will be people to like it and others to say it's a... but I don't want to foresee. I know my enemies and I know what they will say. As it seems in Bulgaria the quality of what you do is of no importance.

The film's producer Dimitar Gochev said that now the Bulgarian National Television is

producing many films but does not comment their qualities; it's not BNT's fault they are bad. (in a commentary of the film in *Trud* newspaper)

Alexander Morfov: I don't know what he said or whether this is what he wanted to say. It's a fact that many films were released that were actively discussed and as if – not accepted.

Every Bulgarian film at the moment is destined to be actively discussed because there is almost no competition.

Alexander Morfov: I think there is something somber at the moment, something unclear, and it's because of Bulgarian's temper. It's hidden in the old joke that it's impossible for someone to be an astronaut if you've screwed his sister¹. That's the provincial character of our relations because we're a small country and we all know each other and we all question each other's talents. We say – what, him?! He's a total scum, that one! The fact that you live in the same community with someone, that you meet him in the store doesn't make you happy or proud, on the contrary, you try to denigrate his qualities. Because – if he is truly such a great artist, what the hell is he doing in your store, in your bar – you automatically level him to yourself and judge him out of your own obscure perspective. That's why this society is a mess – it has no values. We've had generations of intellectual “elites”, teachers, doctors, who were being produced based on their political affiliations and not on their personal qualities. One of the world's greatest paradoxes is the Labour faculty, the so-called Labfac. How can someone who's only graduated from a Highschool for professional technicians receive a PhD diploma – only because he's a member of the Communist party! This is the point where everything simply starts sinking. Knowing who he is, knowing what he can(not), you suddenly see him Chief of medical ward or managing the whole hospital – of course your self-esteem will take a turn and you'll say to yourself – what, that one?! You can't even see what's real anymore, you've lost your sense for the real. Years on end we've been taught that we are all equal and there are those who are more equal than us and that you can make a manager out of just anyone, deserving or not.

This problem is not seen in the film – it tries to escape from reality, from realism.

Alexander Morfov: Yes, because it's only one out of many examples for reality. I somehow wished to rehabilitate the idea for the Bulgarian and even show a gang of people – the musicians from the wedding, that are monsters on the surface but also easy-going and lively and in some strange way honest. This gives us the hope that not everything is lost and that maybe this person just hasn't found the right person to talk to. In the original script there was a scene where the foreigner would find himself at a gypsy fair with people making cartwheels and suddenly they are all lifted in the air. We even considered “On the Flying People” as a

¹ Two friends meet:

- Hi! What's up? Did you hear that George became an astronaut?
- Really?! Nooo.... That's impossible! I've screwed his sister!

working title. Those in the train would also suddenly start flying and soaring in the black sky in front of the moon. We decided to be less magical.

I wondered what's that train that passed through the characters' house, destroys everything and crashes into them. It could be taken for the state crashing its own citizens but it would be too social, I guess.

Alexander Morfov: I'd rather not explain it. In the beginning we were searching for a very naturalistic effect – with real destruction and a camera raising high above the destruction and following them – the destroyed house, the small train station, the derailed train. Then losing this camera into the clouds until we hear a snoring – of that sleeping God. We couldn't afford shooting such a scene.

Do you have other film ideas?

Alexander Morfov: I have three scripts that are kicking me from the inside and I feel like a pregnant woman. Some of the pregnancies are quite advanced. I think that when I come back from Russia I will finish at least one of them. More or less, I don't care what's being shot, the important thing is in the shooting itself. I'm even thinking of buying a digital camera and just start shooting around. I think that after "Dogma" appeared the aristocratic unreachability of cinema on 35 and on 70 mm was demolished. I'm very happy with the revolution that they triggered because they gave a chance to everybody who wanted to do cinema. Shooting on 35 mm is even considered a somewhat bourgeois choice in Europe already. All eyes are now focused on where work is being done, where something is happening. People armed with a single camera started following their dreams, their nightmares, their ideas in stead of following money or fame's glamour. It's another thing – it's a consequence – and, of course, if it comes, it will be welcome. Just keep running after the shadows. That's why the moment I have advanced with the work on the scripts at, say, 80% I will start shooting – with or without money, with friends, with no fees.

And you'll have to play more roles.

Alexander Morfov: Yes, at a certain point of time I was about to play the role of Roussi Chaney, I was simply unable to find a proper actor to play it. I'm thankful to Roussi that he accepted, after all. The team, the actors, I think they are all great! I don't mean what we see on the screen but their attitude towards the work, towards the film, towards me. I think it's the best team that I've worked with.

I'm now out of questions.

Alexander Morfov: I'm not out of answers, though.