



Interview by Vanya Shekerova, EVA magazine, 28.12.2004

ALEXANDER MORFOV: THE BAD BOY OF BULGARIAN THEATRE



He staged at the National Theatre “Don Quixote”, “Midsummernight’s Dream”, “The Lower Depths” and received the Askeer award for directing. He is experienced as a cinema director with “Blueberry Hill” (2002), he starred in the films “The Love Summer of a Schlep”, “Emilia’s Friends”, “The Last Sunday”, “After the End of the World”, the remake of “The Goat Horn”, “Fatal Tenderness”, “1952: Ivan and Alexandra”, “Hourney to Jerusalem”... He’s married to the actress Renny Vrangova, a father of two daughters – Neda and Sara.

Born on 9th Nov 1960 in Yambol. A third child in the family of a teacher and an officer. After he’s born his elder brother and sister pass away.

Well, he departed for Russia. A few days after the premiere of “Exiles” – the latest production that he staged at the National Theatre. And a few days before turning 44. He left in the repertory of “Ivan Vazov”, besides “Exiles”, also “The Tempest”, “Decameron”... and a bitter taste in your mouth. As if after an immemorial drinking.

I will try to enlist the reasons I like Alexander Morfov not simply as a director but also as a person: talented, ambitious, emotional, manly, deep.

There is pride in him and also festive levity, and conformism. But I’m ready to forgive him because of what he did in Bulgarian theatre – he made the young people enter the hall more than once and, silent and openmouthed, watch on stage Shakespeare, Gorky, Vazov... and love

them and want to read them in stead of listening to chalgа or watching, say, Big Brother each night until completely brutalising themselves.

I know some people hate Morfov and are happy that he is finally out of their way, out their little path for survival or their narrow horizon. I personally don't care – since the dawn of men the faith of the talented has been to be regarded as disputable, the least, not to say be denied or reprobated.

Well then, Sasho is the bad boy of Bulgarian theatre, and it is one really bad boy. Except that I feel really bad for letting the Russians take him away – they can acknowledge the badness of the talented and that's why they've reached unmatched heights in art.

After the premiere of "Exiles" at the National the musical consultant Mihail Shishkov said about Morfov: "I am happy to have worked with him. If God has given His appreciation to someone, no one else has the right to deny God's goodness."

His last interview on a Bulgarian land Alexander Morfov promised to give for EVA magazine. I warned him that we would not be talking about theatre but about himself. Alas, this was not the case. When you live with theatre, you sleep with theatre, apart from your wife.

Why are you leaving, Sasho?

I was hoping for a change long enough. I was waiting for a sign. In the first years at the theatre everything was beautiful, a company was gradually forming. More and more friendships were being created, but also I kept finding more and more people who share my ideas. We had the chance to work, to travel. My biggest mistake was that I accepted the managing post of this theatre. It all started there...

I thought you were over this by now...

It still continues, even after five years...

Who are your enemies?

A huge number of people cannot accept the thought that anyone could take their place. Maybe my mistake was that I didn't clean this place as if it were the Augean stables. The whole time I was hoping for some swift transition, some continuity. I believe that theatre should be diverse and colorful as life is, but it turned out there were people who are not intelligent enough to take their place without messing with the rest. Many of them are carrying the burden of a false past and a false present and have completely lost orientation about themselves. Nevertheless, those people have control over the National theatre. Although many of them haven't had a single role for years, they continue to believe that time doesn't apply to them. They do everything they can to destroy anything new, anything different that appears because it would endanger them. One day they might be left without a job, remain outside the National Theatre. The theatre is so deep

in their personality that they simply cannot imagine their life without it. The knights of non-talent have undertaken another crusade against talent.

Sasho, a few years ago you were harsh on yourself, proclaiming that you belong to the group of the superficial, and claimed that superficiality is the new religion.

I did not mean myself, what I meant was a global tendency that threatens all the people on earth. Society has turned into a compact mass of consumers, the thinking person has no place in it because he cannot make a choice and say “Enough!”. Superficiality is the new religion in that sense – many people need it to gain their millions while turning men into an eating, chewing, posh beasts – dressed in expensive rags, always agreeable and ready to pay for anything. But unfortunately, no one can understand when he has been infected, it’s like a virus.

How do you protect your children?

By talking to them. I try to inspire them for my understanding of beauty and my intolerance for ungainly and evil. I don’t praise myself but as far as my consciousness is concerned, I live well with myself and this gives me confidence. I’m not a thief, I’m not a traitor, I’m not a sneak...

That is, you never broke any of God’s 10 commandments?

I live by my own moral code that I follow and that I hope my children will follow too. Our elder daughter is 14 years old and certainly has a problem with her classmates – for example for not listening to chalga. That’s not good. Thank God, she has many friends with similar interests. This is the recipe – joining companies of people like you. There is no other way. Everyone has the right to think of himself as something worthy and try to safeguard himself for contacts with other people. By this I don’t mean a sect. This is the only way to the future and we should permit it to gain strength. Everyone has to be shown what’s good and what’s bad, what’s beautiful and what’s ugly.

Don’t you have the feeling that there is a bigger plan for our turning into illiterates who are easy to manipulate?

I would sound paranoic if I say that there is some secret plan leading to the final victory of ignorance but the situation is truly worrying. Now, with the “Exiles” I started reading analyses of the Balkan societies during the Turkish slavery. There are some traits that the Bulgarians have and no one else from the enslaved nations has. In 19th century the Serbs were famous for their agriculture, the Albanians – with their warriors, the Greeks – with their sailing traditions, the Jews – with trade and making money, and in this allocation of roles and professions the Bulgarians were left with nothing. The Bulgarian, then, finds his own place – it’s education. In the middle of 19th century there is no other nation that made such efforts to educate itself.

Speaking of education how did you decide to study at the Technical University? Your mother was a teacher in Bulgarian language and music...

My father was an officer, the pillar of the family, with a serious career and ambitions. He wanted me to become an officer as well, while to me, unfortunately, mathematics was interesting, the technical sciences. This somehow predestined my future. Adding to this my father's constant insisting, and trust me he was insistent...

When were you finally able to reconcile with your father?

Me and my father finally reconciled two months before he passed away. He was already suffering from cancer. I was 30 years old. He must have had his problems. He was a communist, a hereditary communist at that. After 1989 he fell silent, he retrieved into his own world, while before that he did not accept what I was doing. After I left the Technical University, he simply gave me up. I applied for the Theatre Academy and was enrolled. He asked what sum I would need per month, we agreed on the sum and he told me not to expect anything else from him apart from that. That was our conversation. Much later, when I had already graduated he came to see "The Tempest". That same evening the performance was a great success. He was happy, he cried all the time.

Well – good that this scene finally happened?

I think dad really loved me but it was just his character. And I wasn't with the mildest character myself, either. The problems with me started because he couldn't accept my performances – I played in a rock band – Purple, Uriah, Beatles... those were my idols and left high school because I wanted to grow my hair long, I started attending evening school. I would often find myself in correctional facilities or at the militia... It must have been difficult for him. Watching my children now, the only thing I pray for is that they haven't inherited this behaviour from me.

Have you ever wished to have a son?

Every man, when expecting a child, secretly hopes for a son. This is a natural thing. But I am so happy with my girls that it is even hard for me to imagine what it would be like, having a son. The girls are lovely.

How many times a day do you kiss them?

When I'm home and I don't rehearse, we are hugging all the time. After the premiere the four of us were lying in bed, clinging into each other for probably three hours. You know, I am afraid to be happy... And I think that this is encoded in the soul of all Bulgarians.

Please, tell us something more about the romantic relation with Renny, your wife...

She is among the moments that are predestined. I do believe in destiny. There is this moment when a friend of yours comes out of nowhere – out of time, out of space – and says: do you want to meet the woman of your life? Of course, he doesn't use these words, he says: "You wanna go to a birthday party?" I remember that it took me a lot of time to decide, something very untypical for me, because this was all we would do at the Academy – hearing that there is a party somewhere and going there, better uninvited. When you are uninvited something

interesting happens – we drive someone crazy or start a fight. I was in depression at that time, just wasn't in the mood of going anywhere or doing anything. I remember how time stretched, he left and said – well, make a decision, coming or not.

I joined him and met Renny. We were somewhat acquainted before that but I suddenly fell in love. This love endured a lot of turbulence because I'm not an easy person, I'm capable of a lot of bullshit, my friends are a nightmare for every normal wife, while Renny is stunningly honest, very tenacious and unrelenting with irresponsibility, that me and my friends love, we had severe fights more than once or twice and we both have started packing our things, pottery has been flying around the house... But maybe that's why we continue to love each other – because we have this frantic need for each other.

How many times have you fallen in love after first grade?

Many times. There were girls that I was ready to die for but they paid no attention to me whatsoever. I've always lacked confidence with women. Some complexes have made me stutter and have tied my tongue and hands. The way I am perfectly free around my friends, it's normal to behave like an idiot with them and make them laugh... It was namely my friends who gave me the idea to do theatre. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to do music but my parents stopped me. I wanted to attend the Arts High School and they stopped me again. After my brother and sister died they wouldn't let me go anywhere by myself. I was not allowed to play in the band, I had to escape at night time to go to rehearsals. Once, during my military training, after another case of mischief, we were sent to do brig time and I was entertaining the guys. Suddenly one of my friends says: "Man, you should become an artist!" This worm stuck in my heart, it gave me a new perspective. I was already a student at the Technical University, I even began studying but deep inside I had already taken this decision. Luckily, there was a theatre school at the university, Stoyan Alexiev was its manager and stage director. Now, I don't know whether my final aim was to become an actor. In our neighbourhood we've always had this gang where we would invent and tell stories – our most favourite game, it was like a cult. We were unbeaten, especially in horror and suspense.

How many of those friends are telling stories now?

No one. Life broke them. We don't meet anymore.

How often do you visit your mother?

She lives in Sliven with my sister Vili, they are in a difficult situation. She graduated from the University and is currently jobless, she's selling newspapers. Unfortunately, I'm one of those people who cannot overcome themselves in finding connections, helping someone the second way. I feel guilt because of this. I would advise her on something or help her with whatever I can... I've always hated this way of prospering in society. I think I would gladly do it for anyone else, if I'm certain that they have the needed qualities. But I can't do it for my relatives. And I think that they are silently upbraiding me for this.

Do you believe that one should not be doing an unsolicited good?

No! The more important thing is not to take pride in yourself afterwards.

How do you talk to God?

It depends. With my intuition. All my life I've always crossed myself as a catholic – from left to right. Renny has noticed. But my hand never starts the right way. Even though there are priests in my mother's family. My grandmother was a religious woman, she stole me to baptise me in a church and my father, on learning that, was chasing her with a gun around Yambol. In spite of the fact that I never learned to cross myself the right way, I communicate with God without following any rules. I don't feel guilt for that because I do it with my heart. I hate rituals. I hate the church and its ritualistic manias, its false hierarchy, the orders, the rites.

Do you have your own religious rituals?

No. Every time I make up new superstitions – like, not paying my taxes for example. People who truly believe in God are rare. We Bulgarians believe because we are afraid. And not because we want to believe.

Have you experienced miracles?

Those that are devastating or shaking, or changing – no. Only once I saw an alien stealing gasoline from a “Lada” and I stopped stuttering. One other time I saw Archangel Michael coming out of the ladies restroom at Chrystal and then we spent the night flying to Tibet and back, and then the parrot that was incurably ill regained its health.

Did you really stutter?

Only when singing.

Do you believe in energy exchange?

I can feel when there is bad energy, even without realising it. And good one, as well. What we, people, lack is a good knowledge of ourselves. We try to explain our illnesses only with the postulates of western medicine and the cause and effect relation. It is a very precious skill to be able to grasp the causes and the effects in another sequence – an illogical one. Why, for example, I was happy or felt strange. Days later it may occur to me that it happened because I was among good people.

If we could only control and use this energy... but this will lead to other people wanting to use their energy to control and manipulate us. The world is as it is, and thank God for that. We should accept it and try to be positive about it, not changing the others, but changing ourselves.

Have you ever decided that you want to change and be a new person but you have lacked the will to do it?

It's the same thing. I want to make a better production, be smarter, more intelligent. I know a terrible lot of things but I am uncomfortable to use them. I don't love people who take pride in

themselves, who show off with knowledge or erudition. On the other hand, my ideal for knowledge is so high that, realising the scale of my own knowledge, makes me feel pitty, makes me detest myself and feel ignorant.

Do you still think you are an alien from the past?

I feel this way because I cannot reconcile with the times we live in. I hate ambition, the imbecilic passion over becoming rich and famous at all costs. This still doesn't mean that I should quit life.

Have you had in your life moments when you would rather be dead?

Yes, those have occurred.

And how do you break through those moments?

Renny, the kids, my friends, Mozart, Louis Armstrong, Chaplin, Marquez, the birds... so many, many things worth living for.

Have you ever felt underloved?

A couple of times, severely. Back in high school I had a tremendous need to love and to be loved. I told you, I was quite unsuccessful with women back then, with men as well. Then I had this unfortunate marriage, really short – a few months. A girl that left me when I was 21. At that time I was in a very poor condition – unloved and unwanted. I was ready to love a frog, just to know that someone likes me, someone needs me.

Do you like yourself?

There is no one single answer to that question. There are contradictions intervowen into my soul, sometimes I like myself, sometimes I hate myself. The thing I always look for in the mirror is the strive for reaching perfection, the person I want to be, and after not finding him, I gradually start to accept myself as I am. Or I change the mirror.

How much money do you need to live the life you want?

I want to have a different life – in a different place with a lot of trees and birds, where children play on the street, where people don't care if you're dressed in Cavalli or Hugo Boss. For such a society I don't need a lot of money, or need very little money. In this society here I need a lot of money to be able to isolate myself from it.

When you leave will you miss a certain place in Bulgaria?

I really liked a place by the seaside next to Oasis – with a river. Unfortunately it is now taken by the rich and they're building on it. I like empty beaches, music – often depressive, reading books. Music is my shortest path to imagination. I rest on music, I work on music, I create my scenes on music.

What musical trend is your current trend?

German, from the '30s. I started working on a Brecht's play. During the '30s Berlin was an authentic Babylon. Gradually the intellectual elites and the bohemians moved from Paris to Berlin.

When do you listen to Balkan music?

When having a good time with friends, when getting drunk, when being emotional.

The choice of the song "Bel kon" for "Exiles" is a really good one. Did you make it?

This song was a hit five years ago in Macedonia. I had infected all of my friends with it, we used to listen to it dozens of times. I played it to the actors and on the next rehearsal everyone knew it by heart, it had to become the anthem of "Exiles". It is as simple as that: "Each of us has a loadstar that follows him until his death. When the star is brightly shining the man is happy, and when it dims – it's faith." And then it goes: "I wish I had what I don't have, and buy a white horse. To ride it day and night, in my dreams and in my life." This is a dream. That's why it's so shaking, because it reveals the mad desire for freedom. Vladko Stefanovsky had a genial feeling for this. This is not complicated poetry, it doesn't bear deep message... I'm so happy he agreed to let us use his song.

What are your dreams like?

While rehearsing I have nightmares all the time. Scenes that are a total failure. Then I dream about some incredible decisions but in the morning when I wake up, I don't remember them. And I go to rehearsals even more depressed. I never rehearse the ending, I let it find its own way, I don't even think about it – I dream about it. This time with "Exiles" I was dreaming of staging it days on end and nothing – no ideas, no details, nothing in particular, not even a hint... I had to stage it. I staged it on 19th, one day before the premiere.

Sometimes I would also have complicated dreams, inexplicable. For instance – a pack of white dogs with six legs each and sagging breasts like those of the she-wolf who nursed Romulus and Remus. Above them a dirigible is flying, I am on it and then fall onto the dog that gives birth to me...

Which book do you always go back to?

I prefer Emil Cioran. When I am in a particularly good mood I would open "The Master and Margarita". When in bad – "Schweik" or "The Twelve Chairs".

What are you taking with you now in Russia?

Photos of my children, Yann Tiersen's music, albums with the works of the Florentinian manierista, analgin, bowler and another two suitcases full of useless stuff...