



*Interview by Ojar Ruben, Teatris.zip, LTV1, 2.09.2017*

**ALEXANDER MORFOV:**

**THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT THEATRE IS BEING MORAL**



*Teatris.ZIP aired the first edition of its sixth season with Dailes Teatris' "Finita la Comedia!" on 2nd Sept 2017. Teatris.ZIP is a LTV1 production which aims at building an archive of theatre productions of which 19 are now available online while by the end of theatre season 2017/2018 another 10 will be screened. The show and the discussion are hosted by Ojar Ruben, director of the Latvian National Theatre. Guests in the studio are Alexander Morfov and the actors from the team Artur Skrastin and Ilze Kuzule-Skrastina. Excerpts.*

**Q. R.** Congratulations to all of my guests for your new production which you are doing! The most amazing thing is that today we will discuss your first production in Riga. But you insisted that you come with your actors. Why is that?

**A. M.** Because what is a director without his actors? A windbag, a daydreamer or something?

**This is not as bad, by the way, daydreaming.**

Yes, sometimes, yes. But only if you are sitting at your desk, fantasising, chattering all the time, bullshit eventually. But at the end of it, you see such brilliant people, speaking such enchanting words and suddenly when on stage, you see nothing. I prefer it the other way round – me not saying a word and the actors doing the talking for me. I'm nothing without the actors. At the end of it, theatre – it's the actors. They are the ones on stage, they are doing this tough, nearly unbearable labor. The audience hardly ever imagines the efforts that it costed them. It's a continuous work, 24/7. It's one thing having someone to imagine it, listening to some maniac, the director, let's say, as if he is the centre of the universe, talking words of beauty or wisdom. It's a whole different thing understanding this and bringing it to life on stage.

**There is a saying that if the production is good and the actors are good, then the director has wasted the his actors.**

On the contrary, this makes me very happy. Yes, there are certain colleagues who go crazy, because actors tend to be foppish, especially the not-so-clever ones who love to take the pride: if it wasn't for us, this show could have never happened, we made his show. We performed everything, we conceived everything. Sometimes this infuriates me but then I think to myself – yes, so it should be. They have to feel as co-authors. And if not, then we are left with... you see, in puppet theatre there is this thing: the puppets are communicating the director's idea. But even in puppet theatre there are actors who control the puppets.

**How do you cast your actors? Do you have a method for that? This is interesting because each director has his own method. What is yours? It's the third time you cast Arthur and the second time you cast Ilze.**

It was just the manager of the theatre who said – here are some good actors...

**Yes, please, don't remind of this! I know how complicated this problem is.**

To me, the most difficult part from any work project, regardless where around the world it might occur, is the casting. I spend more time casting than staging because I know that if I make the right choice and find actors who speak the same language in terms of genre or, simply, we are on the same track, I will feel more comfortable then on and will work faster. I will not have to explain too much because we are already thinking the same way. If I say, for instance, this is something to think about, we don't have to invest huge efforts to bring some emotion, forcibly, with tension, digging deeper and deeper... No, we just don't have to. I already trust them. I know that this person whom I chose and who chose me – because I never cast anyone one-sidedly, I want to work with an actor only if the actor wants to work with me. And if the actor has doubts – who is this director, where did he come from, what does he want to do with us, with me... those are replaceable actors whom I uncasted from my first production. They were very good, they were very popular! But I suddenly realised that we don't speak the same language. And then there are those people, who are your second self. I portray myself on stage thanks to them. They are recreating all of my inspirations, all of my thoughts and emotions. This is my second self, on stage. And when we build a trust between each other the working process gets easier.

**Have you been cruel to actors?**

Rarely, but I have.

**What can make you so angry that you would decide not to work with an actor anymore, that you would just throw him out of the cast in the middle of rehearsals?**

When you see that they have more important things than the production and theatre.

**Is this obvious? At first sight, for the director?**

Yes, right away. When it's not "me in theatre" but rather "theatre in me". When they want to use theatre as an instrument to reach the top, to represent themselves – you see me, I'm the actor who is doing this. But when he has the heart of an actor, he doesn't want all of that. He is a living part of our story, of our fantasy, our suffering, our tragedy. He doesn't need to show off, to manifest himself.

**What attracted you to these two actors, Ilze and Arthur? Why them?**

At first, it's about their undeniable and overwhelming qualities as human beings. They are good people. I'm open to a lot of compromises and throw out genius actors...

**But being a good person is not a profession, isn't that so?**

... but when these two come together... To me, in theatre, morals are very important. My productions and what I am trying to work on is always somehow connected to morals, to sacred things. If I want to communicate this to the audience what is in my heart and in my soul, I need people who can understand and feel that. A bad person is recognisable, be it a supremely talented actor. And that's important to me. If I can find those who combine both qualities – human traits and a huge talent, I need nothing more. I have reached the top. They have this. That's why I will never search for other actors, because I know that they have what I need to send my message. In theatre and in directing there are various trends – modernism, postmodernism, conceptualism, Luk Perceval, all you may desire, everything, German theatre that I hate so much! They have long lost that understanding. [Latvian theatre] is not like the Russian theatre of tears and false emotions. But it's not German theatre either. These kids did not cross to its formal, cold, pervert, horrifying stylistics. On one hand it has a very progressive and pleasant form, on the other it has still preserved the heritage of Russian theatre, in the good sense, don't take me wrong. That's why I like working here. I'm tired of false emotions in Russia.

[...]

The play itself was written as a farce. It was a very felicitous and a very adequate farce to those times, the '30s. For those years, for that environment and for that thinking it was a mindblowing work, a shaking and unexpected farce. Of course it would be taken as such a huge provocation that its author would get killed immediately. Reading it in our modernity you find such things that are truly interesting and, at the same time, those things that somehow remain imprisoned within those times. And yet, I really wanted to show them because the tragedy of Semyon Podsekalknikov is the tragedy of the modern lonely weak man. It's a story about a small, weak man. That's why I had to get rid of all those political, communist gags and concentrate myself on the person, on what is absolutely adequate and realistic about the times we live in. You see, when I first decided to stage it, there was a wave of suicides in Bulgaria, in Europe and in Russia. At the end of it, the title of the play "The Suicide" is a metaphor. This play is not about a suicide. And with this title, somehow intuitively or tacitly, you could guide people's thoughts this way while the play is actually about a man who lost sense of life and then found life again. Someone who realised how beautiful life is whatever the obstacles – poverty, misery, illnesses, but life is, in fact, beautiful.