

Interview by Atis Rosenthal, Diena newspaper, 19.03.2015

ALEXANDER MORFOV:

MY DREAM IS THE THOUGHTFUL ACTOR



“As far as “One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest” is concerned, I don’t think that the whole world is a madhouse, I find a different sense in this. There are not positive or negative characters because nurse Ratched and the doctors also work humanely and according to rules”, said the Bulgarian director Alexander Morfov who is staging at the “Dailes” theatre for a second time.

He staged his original dramatization of Kesey’s novel. This text history on Latvian stage is short but memorable – it was staged by Mara Chimelle in the Valmiera theatre and also by Semyon Lossev at the Russian theatre in Riga (1984).

Another production of Morfov is still on the repertory of Dailes – the play “Finita la Commedia” after Nikolai Erdman’s “The Suicide”.

You've worked in many countries. Does it take a different approach to the actors from different nationalities and how is it different working with the actors at *Dailes*?

Adapting to the actors is inevitable because they have a different sense for this world, different thinking and different dynamics. When I first staged here I understood that they need the director's analysis, that I need to work with them in the relation actor-director, and not as their partner – the way I'm used to working with the actors in Bulgaria. Our relation there is different, everyone knows I don't impose my opinion, I'm not strict and don't assign acting tasks, we relax together, sometimes days on end, we would simply watch movies as if we don't have anything else to do. Actors know that those hours – that on the surface of it seem lost, build an energy that erupts in the next shows. We see films, we go to galleries, to museums. This model doesn't work here. I tried in the beginning, I screened a film, but the actors lost interest within 15 min. and started whispering. I had to find another approach. It's easier now because a lot of the actors from "Finita la Commedia" have roles in this production. In Sweden, for instance, or in the USA the director is always free to demonstrate how witty he is, even if sometimes pretending. Thank God, my expression is usually somber and strict (*laughs*) so this called for their respect. Thus, even if I'm talking mumbo jumbo, it sounds wise. To me, it's very important each time I start rehearsing, to destroy the wall that normally exists between director and actors, they are originally enemies. The sooner they are confident that I'm not their enemy but the person who will help them perform better and accomplish more, the sooner the work takes off.

What do you expect from the actors – emotional involvement or intellectual reactions?

Those two are inseparable. To me, the best actor is Homo ludens – the one that performs but also analyses. The intelligent, thinking actor is a dream of mine. Nobody likes pointless questions, such as: How many steps do I have to make, to go left or right?, this I find infuriating. Go left, then right, jump from the top if you wish, the important thing is to use it successfully for what you are performing. If the actor is talented and has a sense of humor, all scene are successful – colourful, different, dramatic, fun, witty or stupid.

You've said in earlier interviews that you like to follow your productions and witness them developing. "Finita la Commedia!" has long been in the repertory and is presented at least once a week. Did you have the chance to see where is this show going?

We even rehearsed a couple of shows. With the time actors tend to forget certain scenes – what motivates them, they simply repeat mechanically the same model, but the depth, the sense is somewhat lost. From time to time I try to remind where it all comes from, what's the original idea. Of course, the repertory engages an actors of the grandeur of Arthur Skrastins in many roles per month, all of them leading. But he works well because he always wants to learn something new. In his last performance that I saw the first scene of second act made me sad because he takes another risk – the actor reveals himself to the audience while the audience wants to have fun, it wants to be entertained. The play is not just a mere superficial comedy.

Do you believe that audience should be educated?

Yes. The audience must appreciate and respect you especially when you work on Main stage. If there are a thousand people in the hall you simply cannot behave as a ostrich and claim that this is your conceptual view but it's only for those who understand it. The production must reach everyone – fro the vast majorities to scientists and lecturers, so that everyone is able to find something to himself. You can pretend you've has a success only if the production is multileveled and educational, it has bright and dark moment, as well as moments that are sad, even if being colourful and motley.

[...]

This year in Latvia there was another title that comments the same problem – George Orwell’s “1984” was staged at the Liepaja theatre. Do you think that relations between people and power have worsened since such titles are appearing?

Back in the times this text was regarded as a hint against the socialist system and later this disappears as an understanding. Now it’s in harmony with the brutal capitalism – banks, debts, new governments – one becomes a consumer, we’ve turned into pawns in the hands of the system without being part of the system. We are not entitled to rest, all the time we must do something and, at some point, you just break. This is taken for weakness, it’s treated as a diagnosis, you’re only salvation is simply hiding. Some people become beggars. The system is cruel. It’s impossible to regain your strength, to firmly step back on your feet. A couple of days ago we rehearsed the text where McMurphy says “Come with me, chief!” while the Chief answers that he has nothing to do out there, he doesn’t wish to be out there. This production is about the people who are left alone with their weaknesses. Terror is other people. I hope I’m not being a dark prophet but I do think that in a while this social system will cause a serious conflict.

You still have the novel on your desk. Are you reading or thinking of changing something?

Yes, sometimes you find new meanings or senses even minutes before the opening. I never copy word by word. Every new staging takes new relations, new scenes, new words. That’s why I read the novel – to find an answer in some sentence of some line. Regardless of how many times I’ve staged a text, half of the material is always new to me. You have to be crazy to repeat what you’ve already done with another actor, for example Arthur did something completely different from what Abdulov did.

[...]

Do you have new working proposals from Russia?

Yes, but I’m somewhat tired of Russia. I decided to take tasks a bit to the south – three years in Israel, a country I really like, and also at the National Theatre – Bucharest. Being away from home has its problems. My wife once said that her husband was a sailor on a transatlantic boat who comes home every three months.

Is your work in Bulgaria going well?

(a fact from Morfov’s biography is that while being a managing director of the National Theatre in Bulgaria he took off the repertory all of his titles because of a scandal with Ministry of Culture)

There have been some conflicts but everything is in the past. Currently I’m an acting managing director until the appointment of a full-term manager. Before I left for rehearsals in Riga I cancelled my rehearsals in Sofia due to delayed set but I will continue on 25th March.

What do you find most interesting to interpret?

I cannot work on imposed material. But once I’ve chosen the material it gets more and more difficult. I love paradox, humor. If we go back to earlier productions – say, Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” where I was fascinated by Prospero, or “Don Quixote”, “Dom Juan”, “Hamlet” and the suicides. The only production I’ve staged for the theatre itself and not for a certain character is “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”. I’ve long wanted to rehearse Steinbeck, also the American writer William Whorton, but I’m still unable to find the exact key to their dramatisation. I’m not a big fan of modern dramaturgy. I tried to force myself into it but as soon as I started reading, I gave up. Currently in Bulgaria, I’m working on a show with series of improvisations – people’s escape from the country as an endangering factor for the whole nation. People’s traditions, the knowledge of the people is disappearing, it’s turning into a folklore programme or a topic of a TV show. People are more and more searching for happiness in united Europe. This will continue for years and everyone

speaks English. I still can't decide if this is good or bad. If this is the road of social development probably there must be something positive about that. But I still originate from a generation that still bears the pride and joy of being part of a certain nation.

You also work in other countries. Do you consider yourself to be a Bulgarian director?

Of course, I am perceived as Bulgarian director. I never thought about that. I am presented as Bulgarian director but in my life I've only staged three Bulgarian playwrights. Of course, it is a bit contradictory, but I tend to contradict myself 24/7, so can't be sure about that. This is a thesis one can support only with emotional arguments and in half an hour it turns into a challenge. There are those things, on the other hand, which I would never question – moral, humaneness, relations, love. I have a clear position on that.

As a director do you think that European, world context is important for your work?

I'm constantly interested in what's going on around the world, but I don't go to theatre just for the sake of it, I usually go to see certain productions that have been recommended to me. If I don't like it, I leave, as impolite it might be. I surf the web and inform myself about the work of directors I like but they are so different from me that I can hardly say they have any influence. I've been influenced by Charlie Chaplin, Federico Fellini, the art from the Baroque era, photography – I find a lot of ideas there. German theatre, for instance, is very specific – even without listening to the language for 30 seconds you will understand you are watching a German show. I'm more interested in English theatre, though, because it has traditions for vision, depth of meanings, purity of language. French theatre has never impressed me, I'm partially acquainted with Italian theatre. I know the provocative Castellucci but, honestly, it's not my theatre.

How about Latvian theatre?

After my work with Alvis Hermanis I saw Serebrennikova's "Dream of Rainis" at the National Theatre and "Wojtek" before that. I also saw a lot of Dailes' productions. I'm trying to answer the question without feeling uncomfortable.

Famous directors as Alvis Hermanis also stage operas. Are you tempted by this idea?

I've often had it myself. This situation, though, would permit me little improvisation because the music, the rhythm, the lyrics they all follow each other and they don't let you improvise. I suppose I would try it out if I can change the music, the tempo, if I can use different music to express my own idea and not just offer another point of view to the same old material. I admit that I've seen genial opera interpretations that I've nobly envied.

[...]

What is a leader of a society suppose to be?

An altruist. Let alone wise and a person who loves people. Everywhere around the world all governments are busy with their own interests and it is unclear whom their decisions serve. The society is only a cynical and hypocritical excuse while their motivation is their personal profit. Unfortunately, the impartial leader has a short life, he's usually crushed within a couple of months.

Does this mean that it's impossible for the leader to a positive figure?

The most important thing is to think about the people, how to make the comfortable. There are many intelligent people among the younger generations, not speaking of those who are only obsessed with fashion and drugs. They work impartially for important causes. If we permit them to grow, they can be our new leaders.