

Challenges of Post-Socialist Transformation

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I Am Not Ashamed of My Communist Past, a new project by Sanja Mitrović and Vladimir Aleksić, premiered on the 27th of May at the BITEF Theatre in Belgrade. The show, which is conceived as a singular homage to Yugoslav cinema and an investigative dialogue between theatre and film, travels further to Switzerland, Belgium and France. Combining the performers' personal stories with film clips, it looks at the issues of transition and privatisation.

"When I emigrated to the Netherlands in the early 2000's, I often found myself in position to not only represent my country in front of others, but also to re-define how I relate to it. This was the impetus behind *Will You Ever Be Happy Again?*, my production from 2008 which premiered at the BITEF Festival. In that show I touched upon the history of the former Yugoslavia, to which I returned again in 2010 for *A Short History of Crying*. Living abroad for years, I came to realise that the country in which I grew up and which no longer exists, people mainly associate with 1990's wars. This is why I wanted to show it in another, more complex light, and to bring a part of our cultural heritage closer to international audiences. Despite its rich history, Yugoslav cinema is known abroad only in narrow circles, mainly through the works of authors who had the opportunity to show at international festivals", says Mitrović in an interview with *DANI*.

Thinking about this, a few years ago she came to an idea to make a show in which she would "translate" Yugoslav films to audiences not familiar with them. That was a starting point which, subsequently, changed through research, particularly when she began to develop the project as a duet with actor Vladimir Aleksić.

Mitrović: Vladimir and I are childhood friends, but haven't been in contact for a long time. We grew up together in Zrenjanin, got involved with theatre at a similar age, but when we both emigrated in 2000 our lives went separate ways. Vladimir lived and worked in Italy for years, and then decided to return to Belgrade. After Amsterdam I moved to Brussels, where I still live and work. We met again in 2014 and decided to collaborate. As we both love Yugoslav cinema, the project took shape around this shared passion. But instead of making a show about films themselves, we decided to use them as a framework to talk about our own lives. The stories we tell are personal, autobiographical, and the text came out of analysing our relationship to the society and the country in which we grew up. In that sense, I see this show as continuation of *Will You Ever be Happy Again?* The approach and the themes are similar, but observed from another angle. It seemed logical to continue the collaboration with BITEF, this time with the theatre rather than the festival, since the production is now on repertory. I am also glad, after all these years, to be able to perform in my mother tongue.

DANI: You already mentioned that the show is a homage to Yugoslav cinema, as well as an idiosyncratic mixture of theatre and film. All of this is located in the context of what is generally known as transition and privatisation. How do you see the reality of theatre and cinema in this constellation?

Mitrović: The dialogue between cinema and theatre is achieved through the relationship of projected film clips and the action on stage. In this show, the screen is not only the main element of the set, it is also conceptually crucial because it functions as the third player. In terms of the content, we use excerpts from about fifty films, both by renowned directors such as Aleksandar Petrović, Dušan Makavejev and Goran Marković and less known works. The process of selection was quite complex and long. In the beginning we followed personal tastes and memories, starting from titles which were important personally to me or to Vladimir. Later, we organised the material by themes and aesthetic parameters, while the final selection corresponded to the development of our own stories. The merging of these two narrative levels resulted in the dramaturgical structure.

We use cinema as a framework for the wider context of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Eastern European and the Balkan countries went through immense transformations, accompanied by profound social and economic crises, sectarian violence and civil wars. European integrations and mass migration followed on the heels of transition to capitalism and market economy. All of these issues are still relevant today, not only for our context but also for a wider European community. In the show we intertwine the trajectory of our lives with the destiny of our irretrievably lost homeland and challenges of post-socialist transformation.

As is well known, Yugoslav cinema had a rich history. After the Second World War an extensive programme of cinema development was implemented. Cinema theatres destroyed in the war were repaired, the new ones built, and no other art won over the hearts of people in quite the same way. To large extent this was a result of well-planned and consistently implemented cultural politics. After 50 years, the disintegration of the country and the rise of nationalism and corruption were accompanied by the widespread destruction of the socialist heritage. With chaotic and uncontrolled privatisation, the same like in other areas of production, many of the cinema theatres and film companies went into private hands under suspicious circumstances. Today, most of cinemas are either shut down or repurposed. There are no film studios anymore, and productions on the scale and ambition of those realised in the golden age of Yugoslav cinema are simply inconceivable. Cinema and theatre are no longer considered an expression of the national identity and values with which people or the state identify. Instead, they are treated as something secondary, or at best tolerated only as much as strictly necessary. The same goes for the protection of cultural heritage. According to law, production companies were obliged to deposit a negative of each film they release with the Yugoslav Cinematheque. The Cinematheque preserves films but does not own them. New owners, often buying companies through non-transparent arrangements and without public consultation, thus also receive the rights to what has been produced by the joint investment of all citizens of the former Yugoslavia. In other words, it is permitted to sell off collective property, a shared heritage, and deliver it into private hands. Sadly, this is the reality of the so-called transition, not only in culture but in all areas of industry — the collective spirit which built the country as it once existed is simply no more.

DANI: Judging by the title, your show is unequivocally against historical revisionism of our socialist past. What is your view on the revisionist processes?

Mitrović: Past is a fiction refracted through the prism of personal and collective memory, and filtered by political rituals, ideological narratives and systems of representation. I was born in a country which no longer exists and what is not there could also enter the category of fiction. This is the danger of revisionism. Living in Western Europe I often come across an understanding of the former Yugoslavia's socialist society as a totalitarian system akin to, say, Soviet Union. According to these interpretations, such experience simply has to be forgotten and repressed as something shameful. This point of view, which is either not aware of or consciously ignores progressive achievements, such as the Non-Aligned Movement (of which Yugoslavia was among the founding members), is simplified and false. Yugoslavia is painted as a country led by a "benign" dictator whom the people blindly followed. He was skilled and canny in collaboration with international partners, but merciless towards the internal opposition. However, the experiences of ordinary people are different to what such versions of history choose to highlight. One of the aims of our project was precisely to uncloak the conviction which positions the value system we grew up in as totalitarian. Such conviction is ideal for encouraging the transition to neoliberalism and a crucial change of values: from brotherhood and unity, togetherness and solidarity to self-interest and individualism.

But was it all only an illusion? Or are such values relevant in this day and age as well? I would say that they are, more than ever, and that the revisionist narratives enforced by rampant capitalism serve as a mere excuse to avoid thinking through the possibilities of a different social organisation and to pull a veil over the countless human sacrifices and desolation which this new system brought along.

DANI: In the announcements for the show you state that Yugoslavia exists in imagination and memory. How do you see the idea of Yugoslavia? Do you think that its future lies in the intellectual sphere, outside of strict confines of the state?

Mitrović: In what way and to which ends do certain historical episodes, whether from long ago or quite recent, get fixed in collective memory or, on the contrary, get systematically repressed and forgotten? For me the crucial question is how people raised on certain values deal with a significant change, both political and existential, as they witness how what they believed in loses value and how everything they built by joint effort turns into ruins. What is it that we teach generations which follow, what kind of knowledge do we bestow upon them? I believe that the idea of Yugoslavia can survive in this sense, through transmission and preservation of the values on which it was once based from one generation to another — the values of the collective spirit and of a state which champions solidarity and social justice. As a mother of child who had not lived in Yugoslavia, I try to develop in my son love for such values, behind which I still stand to this day. To be persistent in re-telling of these stories in times of materialistic individuality is an attempt to preserve the idea of Yugoslavia.

DANI: Avala Film was, in the former Yugoslavia, among the biggest state-sponsored projects, with highest level of significance. We are all familiar with the current situation. Why cannot the state today see the same potential in cinema?

Mitrović: Avala Film, founded as one of the first and largest film studios in the former Yugoslavia, was renowned worldwide for its award-winning titles and international co-productions. While we were working on the show, the company was sold, under unclear circumstances and only for fraction of its real value, including land, properties and rights to its complete back catalogue. The fate of the once grand factory of moving images, visions and dreams thus proved to be not all that different from other, less glamorous companies who also disappeared in the transitional hurricane. We take the case of Avala Film as a symbolic framework for the story of our lives and coming to terms with the consequences of transformation from socialist system into neoliberal. Like you say, it is common knowledge that the state today, to put it mildly, sees no potential in cinema. But I am not lamenting only the fate of cinema in a situation in which millions of people barely survive in new political and economic circumstances. The case of Avala Film, and Yugoslav cinema on the whole, stands for destruction of infrastructure in all areas of production, for alienation of social ownership and, in general, for tearing up the fabric of communities and devaluation of the positive achievements of the socialist society and state.