

Between Birth and Death – II

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(Continuation
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The appointment of **Vasil Apostolov** as director of the Puppet Theater in Stara Zagora coincided with the start of my work at the Union of Bulgarian Actors (UBA) CAБ. Vasil and I had already known each other from the Higher Institute for Theatrical Arts (known as VITIZ in Bulgarian). He had quit the Polytechnical Institute and started studying acting for puppet theater. Vasko was a very well-rounded person. He could do many different things, all successfully, because no matter he decided to do, he always put a lot of ambition, persistence and fire into it. At the Center for Literature and Art for Children and Youth, where he worked immediately after graduating from VITIZ, he was actively involved not only in student puppet theater, but also in the founding and publishing of its journal. Without his participation, a run-down community center in Stara Zagora would never have been transformed into a modern building for puppet theater with an attractive facade; he also founded the first exhibit for Bulgarian puppet art in the same city. Vasil Apostolov was also the initiator and organizer of Bulgaria's first "portrait evening" featuring the work of a veteran of the theater. He quietly confided to his friends that "a buzz" needed to be created around puppet art. The simple truth was that he wanted to see puppet artists receive recognition and respect for their work. To achieve these goals, Vasko was tireless and endlessly imaginative. Despite having graduated with a major in acting for puppet theater, he dedicated himself to directing and management. This allowed him to simultaneously be the theater's artistic director as well as its manager, arranging its many international tours. Until the very end of his life, Vasil Apostolov staged and directed plays at his own theater and also as a guest director around the country and abroad. I cannot imagine a single festival of professional or amateur puppet theaters taking place without him. At the same time he sought out and recruited authors and playwrights

to puppetry's cause, personally consulting with them on the specificity of puppet theater.

Vasko was always in motion. There was something untamable in his constant striving for everything to be done as quickly and well as possible. He was always going somewhere or coming back from somewhere or rushing off. He always had some urgent business to attend to – as if he never had enough time to do everything he thought up. I can't remember ever seeing him sitting around chatting with friends. It was as if he wanted to do more than was possible in a single human lifetime. As it turns out, however, like all such people, he overestimated his own strength. His personal health crisis was essentially a workplace accident that was long brought on by Vasko himself, which ended exceptionally tragically.

Very few directors paid tribute to the past, to the theater's memory, despite the fact that they were the only ones capable of creating an archive of the small organism that is puppet theater. Vasil Apostolov was very open to such an idea. In Stara Zagora, he and the scenographer Lyubomir Tsakev gathered puppets and props from all over the country from plays with significant artistic qualities. With material support from the city's cultural council – which Vasil once again secured – they put on an exhibit in two storefronts across from the theater. The exhibit was then displayed at the gallery at 6 Shipka Street in Sofia. The director of the Union of Bulgarian Artists at the time, Svetlin Rusev, personally arranged for this and even opened the exhibit.

Grand plans were afoot – the exhibit was supposed to be included among Balkantourist's attractions, which was the only tour operator in Bulgaria at the time. Yet how many people supported this initiative? Most of the puppet theater managers immediately saw it as an attempt by certain individuals to draw attention to themselves. They parsimoniously calculated the prices of the puppets they would

have to „give away“ to the collection. The Committee for Culture neglected the project, since the Museums Department was more interested in toadying to Ludmila Zhivkova (*daughter of the communist dictator Todor Zhivkov and head of the Committee for Culture – translator's note*) than thinking about the future. I published an open letter in the newspaper *Folk Culture*. Despite the fact that the law at the time required the institution in question to give a written response within a month, no answer was forthcoming. Was this due to negligence or perhaps to the fact that no one from the Museums Department even read the Committee for Art and Culture's own media mouthpiece?

Stara Zagora! I loved that city, especially when the lime trees were blossoming. The whole city smelled fabulous. At the beginning of the 1970s, it was the only place in Bulgaria where horse-drawn carriages waited at the train station. I always took a carriage to the hotel – which was all of 500 meters from the station. Once, when I was traveling with a larger group, while we were still on the train I convinced them that we should take two carriages and thus we arrived at the hotel...

On every holiday I received ironic greetings in verse from the Stara Zagora scenographer **Veselin Nedelchev**. They always contained thinly veiled bitterness over criticism; most likely some misunderstanding had occurred between us at some point, although it is also possible that someone cooked up some intrigue with „puppet-like“ ease. Yet I always imagine Vesko as silent, with his sarcastic smile, carefully watching others' behavior and precisely sizing them up. He was very good at his job, especially plays for the youngest audiences, yet he remained in the shadow of the artistic, noisy and assertive Tsakev. By taking up such a passive position, Veselin Nedelchev harmed himself most of all, voluntarily giving up the public recognition that was his due.

In this city I also became friends with a person who has long since



passed away - the puppeteer **Kosta Vulkov**. He was a kind and delicate person. He had the inborn ability to listen yet not give advice or - God forbid! - formulaic solutions. He radiated a unique atmosphere of gentleness and tolerance. Kosta was a stranger to rumors and malice. He was interested in questions of art, pedagogy and human relations. We frequently talked about the creative process in puppet theater; he confided that he felt the need to go to the workshop and observe the creation of the puppets he would later work with. He loved and very much benefited from individual work with puppets in front of the mirror. When we met, Kosta was already suffering from serious health problems that would send him into early retirement. He quietly, yet very sorrowfully, accepted this professional separation with the theater. For this reason questions of a professional nature were put on the back burner. He hid his pain behind a constant wave of jokes and humor. He clearly needed some new motivation to help him keep going in the face of this great personal tragedy. But what could it be?

At that time I was working at UBA and introduced him to the famous actress and reciter Katya Zehireva, who without reservations immediately supported his aspirations to recite. After that Kosta began to more calmly realize that puppet theater was not the only field in which he could attain professional success. With much patience and sacrifice he continued to shore up his delicate health, which considerable limited his public contacts.

Our friendship lasted as long as he was alive. No year would pass without greetings from him on my birthday, which I myself sometimes forgot. Even now, when Kosta has not been among the living for such a long time, the thought continues to haunt me that I was not kind and attentive enough towards my friends. People like Kosta Vulkov gave me gentle hints about my own carelessness and negligence.

Kosta passed away suddenly on one New Year's Eve. Only a few days after the holiday, I received his greeting card. Even in his final days, he thought about us, the living. And he did something unusual: he managed to be one step ahead of death.

I knew **Tsvyatko Tsvetkov** as scenographer at the Ruse Puppet Theater. I was friends with him and his wife at the time, Emilia. They lived in the attic of a building on the banks of the Danube, which had an incredibly beautiful view. In fact, the attic was divided in two. One half was the family's exceptionally cozy living quarters, while the other half was Tsvyatko's studio. He claimed it was not quite finished, but it seemed wonderful to me as it was. The only thing that threw me for a loop was the chicken in a cage by the dormer window. The explanation, offered with a laugh, was that Tsvyatko didn't like to eat store-bought chicken. To each his own! However, I remembered this anachronism much later when I was forced to ponder - to put it lightly - the oddities of Tsvyatko's character, which were often hard to reconcile into a single personality.

When the family offered to put me up for the night for the first time, I immediately agreed. They put me on the couch in the studio, which was in fact a niche between two of the roof beams. Tsvyatko's portraits of Proto-Bulgarian warriors decorated the walls around me. I had a funny feeling; there was somehow too much expressiveness and power in those pictures. I also saw several of his female portraits, which I later heard had been purchased by art museums around the country. To this day, I still am particularly enchanted by "The Girl with the Marionette," perhaps because Tsvyatko had poured into it part of his love for his wife, Emilia, who had posed for the picture. The painting's light hues radiated grace and poetic delicacy.

What a strange bird that Tsvyatko Tsvetkov was! He was from a village, but didn't like to talk about his childhood. His ties to the earth, to his mother and to his family were all very strong, almost possessive. Perhaps this is why he so strongly reproduced Bulgarian history in his works, feeling himself atavistically to be part of it. Perhaps for that reason he frantically wanted to have a stable family and children. Yet he forced all of this into the only mold he recognized as valid. Any deviation in this respect provoked his wild, uncontrollable fury

and even coarseness. At such moments he became intractable and even nasty.

Once Tsvyatko and I had to wait for someone in front of VITIZ. He suggested we go see an exhibit commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the April Uprising, which was on display at the nearby Slavyanska Beseda hall. While I scurried around trying to read the labels beneath the objects on display, Tsvyatko stood in the middle of the hall, cast a sweeping glance over the exhibit and exclaimed: "Look at what men perished! This is why our nation has become so degenerate!" Only eccentrics have such an odd sensitivity; Tsvyatko was definitely one of them. For that reason I am especially pained by the strange metamorphosis in his personality, which began long before he got sick.

Actually, I met the scenographer Tsvetkov in 1968 at a review at the Puppet Theater in Ruse. He had designed the sets for all four of the performances, which were striking in the unusual way they came together. My impression of him was that of a calm, moderate person. He sat and carefully listened to the comments. Of everything I saw, what most stands out in my memory is the sculptural work in „Chipolina“, which employed a uniquely bold and creative approach to the puppet characters in terms of the materials selected for their construction and their economy of form. The puppet of Mr. Pea was especially notable, having a body made of a can of peas and limbs of freely flopping spiral springs; the head was sculpted like a peapod. In terms of construction, this was a quite elementary puppet on a stick. But in terms of its artistic impact, it was unbelievably rich. In the following years, Tsvyatko designed other performances in his characteristic style in which metaphor was categorical and dense, implemented without reservations or compromises. He never beat around the bush. He was too categorical in his puppet theater imagery to allow accidental elements into his work. Tsvyatko was the only scenographer in Bulgarian puppet theater who worked in such a way. His sets for „The Iron Boy“ by Yordan Radichkov (directed by Veselina Andonova) are especially telling in this regard. Later, irritable and anxious for reasons unknown to me, Tsvyatko ever more frequently made



small „compromises“ in his style, which had once reflected all the brilliance and depth of puppet metaphor. My personal explanation for this is that Tsvetkov was such a unique artist that he did not often meet like-minded colleagues and equal partners. In my mind he stands strangely apart against the backdrop of the Ruse Puppet Theater. His way of thinking about art was fundamentally differed from the others'. It was not merely due to the fact that he has mastered a wider field of creative expression and hence a larger number of skills. Absolutely not! The problem was on the level of creative and artistic potential and maturity. Of course, I don't want to deny Tsvyatko's inability and even lack of desire to work closely with others in the theater and to have more constructive discussions with them. He arrogantly and laconically fired his extreme judgments at them – and I mean extreme! – without caring who they were and why he did not agree. It was as if Tsvyatko was incapable of discussion, of demonstrating the correctness of his views. The same terseness was evident in his art. Furthermore, Tsvyatko was truly dedicated to his painting, as well as to his family life. He rarely went on tours to other theaters. Yet despite this, for more than two decades Tsvyatko Tsvetkov was an authority in Bulgarian puppet theater design, its unanimously acknowledged law-giver – as well as an undeniably emblematic figure of the Ruse Puppet Theater!

While I was working at UBA, a huge event in the world of puppeteering took place. In 1969 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, a meeting of the Union Internationale de la Marionette (UNIMA) was held. A festival of Czechoslovakian puppet theaters also was organized at the same time. After the end of this festival, another festival for amateur puppet theaters was scheduled to take place in the city of Chrudim under the auspices of UNIMA. This organization unites everyone with some connection to puppet art: both professionals in our understanding of the term, as well as amateurs, technical personnel from puppet theaters and even just fans.

Our organizational preparation for the meeting lasted around four or five months. And thus, in July of 1969



a busload of us set out for Prague. Most of the other participants were completely unfamiliar to me, yet little by little we grew quite close. The actor Ivan Sivinov, an emblematic figure from the Plovdiv Puppet Theater, was at the heart of everything. The two days we were on the road were filled with laughter, jokes and the constant sound of Sivinov's wooden flute.

Prague, however, was morose and downcast. It was the first anniversary of the Prague Spring. All the restaurants and stores closed early, even though it was summer and the evenings were long. Only the flowers on the spot where Jan Palach set himself on fire were always fresh. One evening – on the very eve of the anniversary – we passed by a column of tanks.

I remember how enthusiastic we were to see the performances by the Czechoslovakian puppet theaters in the festival. As was to be expected, there were amazing performances as well as rather ordinary ones. I was particularly struck by the seriousness with which these professionals created art for children. Their unbelievably strong creative energy transformed their performances into fun and instructive discussions with children about experiences in life. They carefully yet insistently directed their plays to their young audience members. In the following years while watching performances back in Bulgarian that wavered between addressing children and adults, I always recalled the Czech puppeteers, whose dramaturgy as well as scenography possessed an enviable clarity and freshness with regard to target audience.

Certainly there is no Bulgarian puppeteer who could look back on the numerous reviews and festivals put on here in Bulgaria without a cheerful smile. One was the Golden Dolphin Festival held in Varna. I will not attempt to describe the euphoria that gripped the city during that time. How much joy and excitement it brought! The entire puppetry guild swarmed the city. I ran into old friends and got to know new colleagues. Puppeteers are fun-loving, sincere people – which made communication between the Bulgarians and foreigners much easier. The cafes around the old puppet theater were packed with noisy festival crowds. From

Golden Sands, where the festival guests were usually housed, all the way to the center of Varna, people communicated in all languages, but above all with gestures.

One year the Bulgarian UNIMA center made its own pins in three colors: red, blue and green. Ivan Sivinov, in his capacity as treasurer, was selling them in the lobby of the theater. Our Czech colleague Jan Malik was there – at that time the honorary president of UNIMA. Everyone knew Professor Malik – his large figure, with its white hair and beard and strongly near-sighted eyes behind little glasses, was unmistakable. He always used the intermissions to jot things down in his notebook; legend had it that he had dozens of such notebooks at home.

With his innate sense of politeness, Ivan said: „Comrade Malik, please take a pin from the Bulgarian UNIMA Center“, and handed him a red pin. Then he said quietly to me, „Nadya, that'll be 35 cents.“

Everyone there burst out laughing. But Ivan calmly wrote down a charge of 35 cents after my name.

„May I have another one?“ Jan Malik asked, picking up a blue one.

„Of course, of course,“ Ivan agreed most gladly, again whispering to me: „Nadya, that'll be another 35 cents.“

„And may I have one in the third color?“ Malik asked with a smile, even though he didn't understand what everyone was laughing about.

„Of course, of course,“ Sivinov continued politely. „Nadya, that's another 35 cents.“

Jan Malik was collecting everything connected to puppet theater around the world for a future puppet museum in Prague. If those three pins are there, then I most definitely have made a contribution – since Ivan Sivinov made sure to collect my debt!

The group I went to Prague in 1969 with also included **Nikolay Izvarin**. Despite his readiness to take part in all puppetry celebrations, this delicate young man set himself apart from the others with his especially strict self-control. He had come from opera and reservedly entered the labyrinthine ins-and-outs of puppet theater, without imposing himself. He enjoyed telling stories about his wild

younger days. Unsurprisingly, a few years later he was swept away by ballet. He worked on scenography with obvious satisfaction, as well as on landscape painting.

Izvarin spent only a few seasons with the Varna Puppet Theater. However, their production based on Oscar Wilde's fairytales has gone down in the history of Bulgarian puppet theater, no matter how much many people would like to deny this. Grasping the poetry in a play's dramaturgical foundation and transforming it into a puppet theater performance is a staging company's greatest success. It is once again necessary to repeat the old aesthetic arguments that poetry creates images from sounds, while puppet theater cannot be separated from its material essence. Moreover, the extended dialogical nature of the essential part of the fairytales, in which Wilde's philosophical insights are readily apparent, further complicates the task. However, the staging team made a true artistic discovery precisely with respect to the connection between Oscar Wilde's poetry and puppet theater: they placed the two main actresses, Petya Mandadzhiyska (the Little Swallow) and Sofia Nenova (the Nightingale), on moveable carts/platforms. The movement of these platforms horizontally on stage made the *mise en scene*, creating the illusion of being airborne, of flight, which was so crucial for launching the performance out of the realm of the everyday and into the world of dreams. In my opinion, this alone is enough to guarantee that this performance goes down in history as one of the biggest achievements in Bulgarian puppet theater. Of course, envy and confusion within the puppetry guild have left this artistic success largely underappreciated. More attention was paid to the performers' disheveled leotards during the interludes. While I agree that artistic exactingness is crucial during all moments in a performance, some sort of gradation is nevertheless necessary – otherwise we risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

It cannot be denied that the performance radiated a powerful aesthetic energy. However, would this have been possible without the insightful and refined minds of both the direc-

tor Zlati Zlatev and the scenographer Nikolay Izvarin? This is a rhetorical question. Despite the fact that in certain moments of excessive openness, Nikolay confided to me his opinion about some problems that were not entirely solved, the play was nevertheless deep and unified. Without a doubt, the scenographer made an important contribution.

That same year the Polish Cultural Institute in Sofia held an exhibit of Izvarin's landscapes, which he had painted from life during an artist-in-residency trip to Poland. In the fall, he did not reappear at the theater. He had quietly quit.

During the 1990 Golden Dolphin Festival, I visited him at the City Gallery in Varna, where he had become director. We chatted. Yes, he knew that the Golden Dolphin Festival was taking place, but he hadn't gone to see anything. No, he hadn't seen any performances by the Varna Puppet Theater. This made a strong impression on me, which I shared with someone from the theater – only to be doubly shocked that the latter didn't know anything about Izvarin. (It goes without saying that this representative from the theater was not just any random person.) Even now I cannot forget Nikolay's tone during our chat. Most likely his experience with the theater had been bitter, yet his masculine pride did not allow him to show it at the time. There was something gloomy and fractured in his answers. Was puppetry itself responsible for this, or did the cause lie with certain individuals? Did he receive enough creative satisfaction from his work, or did other, internal drives push him toward new artistic horizons? We can only guess about all this, since Nikolay is no longer with us to tell the truth. But since when? Nobody in the theater even knew the year of his passing. Which means that in certain hearts not a single drop of gratitude has remained for a person who was the co-creator of so much of their joy and success.

The puppet theater in Yambol was nationalized at the end of the 1970s. The theater's working atmosphere and its members' enthusiasm was reminiscent of the Bulgarian Renaissance (*a cultural revival that took place during the*

18th and 19th centuries - translator's note). They were a handful of amateurs who had earlier taken part in operas at the community center. They later got fired up about puppetry and voila: a theater. There is nothing particularly unusual about this. However, in a few short years the director **Marin Edrev** came up with a very interesting artistic idea: to perform theater with puppets and masks. This was not just an off-the-cuff idea, but rather the work of a tireless individual like Marin, who purposefully set out to make it into a reality. I remember their first play, „Puss in Boots,“ which laid the foundations of their work. They had lured Sergey Visonov from the Central Puppet Theater to serve as producer, while Ivan Tsonev was in charge of scenography. The most provocative visual elements were the characters' heads. „Live“ actors were on stage in their full height; however, both their costumes and their movements were stylized, while their heads were emphatically enlarged by big masks. This production was received with exceptional interest, especially for a new theater from a small city. The theater put on a second production in the same style and with the same staging team.

After that, however, as frequently happens, a certain person took a liking to this theater and destroyed what his predecessors had made in order to show off his own cleverness. Yet he even got ahead of his own talent. Relying on his close ties with local party leaders, he succeeded in his nefarious plan to take over the theater. Failing to grasp certain aesthetic parameters, he found himself in conflict with the entire collective, who felt the full weight of the so-called secretary of ideology's stubbornness. As a result, the director Marin Edrev left the theater, but as an actor he played several notable roles in Varna and Shumen. And of course, not a trace remained of the idea of the masks. What then? When the party functionary fell into disfavor, the whole puzzle was rearranged. Another local apparatchik coveted the cushy job of puppet theater director and the scenario repeated itself...

A human life flows like a river between birth and death. Many people swim in its waters. We like and even love some of them, while we part ways with others. I deeply regret some of these splits, while in other cases I am thankful that fate rescued me on time. But all of this and many other things have happened to me, which is why I began to write. These are the kernels of my memories. Thank you for reading them. I hope that these lines turned your thoughts back to the people with whom I swam through life's waves.

Translation by **Angela Rodel**