

# OF RAVENS, AMÉLIE POULAIN, AND OUR SADNESS

Anna Topaldjikova

*Hashove*<sup>1</sup>, based on **Ivan Vazov**'s novelette *Unloved and unwanted (Nemili-nedragi)*, adapted for stage, directed and sound design by **Alexander Morfov**, set and costume design by **Elena Ivanova**

Cast **Valeri Yordanov, Petar Popyordanov, Rusi Chanev, Valentin Ganev, Reni Vrangova, Valentin Tanev, Hristo Mutafchiev, Zahary Baharov, Plamen Peev, Teodor Elmazov, Evgeni Budinov, Deyan Angelov, Darin Angelov, Daniel Angelov, Dimitar Rachkov, Elisaveta Gospodinova, Vladimir Karamazov.**

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## Spectator – excitement

When is the spectator excited? When the performance hits his/her emotional vulnerability, when it plays out in front of him/her something experienced, felt, when it touches upon something out of his/her own sensations, fears, presentiments.

This performance is populated, first and foremost, with everything that drifts in the air of our streets and pubs, in the inner spaces of our feelings, thoughts, shares, fictions. The present day is direct-

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<sup>1</sup> *Hashove* (1894) is a transliteration of the title of the dramatization made by Ivan Vazov of his novelette *Unloved and unwanted (Nemili-nedragi, 1883–1884)*; the title roughly translates as “exiles”, “outcasts” or “vagabonds” and refers to Bulgarian immigrant revolutionaries in Romania in the 19<sup>th</sup> century while Bulgaria was still under Ottoman rule.

ly recognizable by the scattered elements in the set design and musical score – like the graffiti written on the wall (a possible allusion with the Berlin Wall), separate musical passages from contemporary cinema (music from the new French cinema’s landmark film *Amélie Poulain*, the Balkan ethno-music, etc.) and the more indirect analogy with films such as *Wings of Desire* by Wim Wenders, etc. What excites all of us is the palpable discrepancy in our feeling about our “own” place” which is versatilely indicated in the performance. And this does not only express the topic of emigration in the actual geopolitical aspect but also the one of inner emigration. It creates a feeling of alienation from what is familiar, close, native. The universal dimension of this performance is the topic of emigration, and the Bulgarian thing in it is found in the unique signs that only we can identify.



Photographer Ivo Hadjimishiev

*Hashove* after Ivan Vazov, adapted for stage and directed by Alexander Morfov, National Theatre, Sofia, 2004.

This is yet another performance of Alexander Morfov that brings the spectator to its main topic: to think of ourselves as a community, to look around at where we come from, at who those before us were, and what we are today, where we are going to – as a whole, and not one by one. Ivan Vazov wrote his novelette *Hashove* fearing that the common values are lost at times of conquering individualism. The time of the performance is different, the globalizing present-day world imposes new points of view on the notion of the national. But it is precisely today that the deprivation sensed by Vazov of a sense of community because of personal pecuniary interest has no less grounds. The sadness deeply felt and transferred via the performance hits one of the most painful spots of our contemporary life.

### **The outcasts**

Are those Vazov's "outcasts"? Of course they are not. Those "outcasts" are as much a notion coming out of the reading as they are our contemporaries. The question so asked is incorrect but it is usually asked when some classical, iconic works such as *Les Misérables* for the French, *War and Peace* for the Russians, etc. are staged. So reaching out to the icons is usually followed by accusation of blasphemy. Whether Vazov's outcasts are de-heroized, whether they are "booed" by Morfov? In *Hashove* as well as in other texts Vazov does not spare his characters his Völkerpsychologie observations. The same typological touches that we find in the performance were placed in their portraiture as early as by Vazov, albeit more slight-

ly. Morfov employs a very effective metaphor – at some point the outcasts are equalized to the figures of the group sculptures of the fallen freedom fighters that we know very well. But he does not mean the characters but those who happen to live below, in life’s “down and under,” the non-heroic characters, those who feast in the pubs, steal to feed themselves, the hot heads who are nevertheless dying for an idea. The outcasts set off to sacrifice themselves for their fatherland out of idealistic motives, in emigration they starve, freeze, fight, steal, serve time in jail and finally perish for the idea – for the liberation of Bulgaria as Bulgaria herself is now quite imaginary, merely a memory, a symbol.

Morfov has looked upon the group character of the outcasts with fierceness: he has approached them in order to understand them, to throw them down in the mud and then to raise them onto the pedestal of the

frozen group sculptural portrait in the end. We can say that he simultaneously hates and loves them – as part of himself – as we hate and love those different external egos that we find and protect in ourselves. The power of this reading of “Hashove” lays in the personal commitment.

Everybody is looking for someone else to listen to them, to console them, to take care of them. Dostoevski described precisely that. If we deprive ourselves of the father, if we deprive ourselves of the God, then we take our second ego out of ourselves in order that we converse with it, and even when we shout at it we take refuge in it at the same time. We, the adults, remain children how are in a constant quest for our mother, even if we do not realize it. The outcasts are repeatedly orphaned. The first time, as everybody, when they separate from their mother, the second time when they leave their native land, and the third time when

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they lose Strandzhata, a pub keeper, a patriot who gives shelter to the outcasts. Indeed the mother, Bulgaria and Strandzhata are the three projections of the same whole without which they fly off in space as specks of dust. This triunity is already planted in our classical works of literature. Morfov further elaborates it. The scene at the hotel divides in two the time before and after Strandzhata's death. Before they get to know the outcasts sit together in the hotel bath-tub, as it baptised as one whole body. After they get to know the entire organism disintegrates, the outcasts disperse, having fallen into weightlessness, having lost their point of attraction, their sense of a whole. Only one figure is left wandering – Brachkov – the intellectual who, even when he starves, cannot bring himself to sell his books for a long time. Whirled by the rhythm of an alien life he is thrown outside and increasingly realizes that he is irreversibly alien. The action thus aims headlong at the culmination: on the very edge of the high wall the boy tears pages from the book and throws them in the air. This is also felt as the performance's transcendence into the present day. Who needs words, who needs written thoughts, who needs something that is not physically consumed?

In Morfov's solution the cast of actors is part of the monumental visual picture, of the abundance of theatrical means. It fits the dynamically changing space. The actor constantly passes between the presence in the theatrical dramatic "now" (acting out the narrative in front of spectators) and the alienated sign incorporation into a metaphorical picture. The emblematic figures of Strandzhata, Makedonski, Hadzhiyata, Brachkov, Vladikov, Popcheto and the others stand somehow aside, and the actors Rusi Chanev, Petar Popyordanov,

Valentin Tanev, Valentin Ganev, Valeri Yordanov, Zahary Baharov, Hristo Mutafchiev, shorten and increase with a very precisely found sensation the distance among merging with the romantic halo, the irony at them and at themselves.

And today when everything is for sale this point of view towards the Bulgarian outcasts sounds attractive because the ideal nevertheless comes to the surface above the material, even in the extreme situations when it is all about survival.

### *Space-time*

In this performance the story of the outcasts is presented via the montage cinema principle. The theatrical space is at times a place across the Danube where theatre in theatre is enacted observed from the point of view behind the curtains, at others it is a bit of a winter view of the foreign town with the hurrying crown running in the zeal of its festive and workday rhythm. The idea of a real place of action – the pub, the hotel where action built as per the logic of causality takes place – alternates with visionary scenes in which space speaks the language of symbols recognizable in the national context: a post-battle landscape, the hanging of Levski, and others. Placed in a montage fashion one after another these scenes semantically extend the impression of the ones that precede and follow them, and provide a different point of view towards them. The farcical scene of the "revolutionary" theatre performance in which the actors toss severed heads with turbans merge into the post-battle landscape that carries the anxious presentiment back and forth: to the preceding and to the following episodes. The sensation of tragic predestination

hangs over the comical scenes having cast its shadow from the symbolic “live picture” that precedes them. Thus, the montage thinking as an essential element of the film language here acquires a specific theatricality.

Space and time change dynamically in the course of the theatre action. Where is Bulgaria – which is its space in the performance – the mock-up that passes by carried by the river (in the stage space – the place of the orchestra pit) or inside in each of the outcasts? Where is the river – the place of the orchestra pit or the imagination? The river-boundary according to the vision of the performance is a border not only between the countries but also between the palpable and the imaginary.

Bulgaria shows up on stage in the form of a mock-up carried by the river – the border river that separates the outcasts from their native land. A mock-up of a small Revival-time town – small houses with red

roofs, a small white church huddled between the crowns of the trees in leaf, everything is lit by a warm sun (in the wintertime cold in which the outcasts freeze this sensation of the sun beams that keep warm is attained by the lighting). Something irreversibly lost that has no real value now but only an innermost one. The effect of this scene is unique. The vision is at the same time sensual and imaginary – a fairy, an image yearned for but so material and at the same time so enchantingly far away.

This is how Bulgaria appears to the emigrants: as a distant memory, as a bright relic-image nested deep in the heart – and it passes away, the river carries it – the actual Danube or the mythic river Lethe... And they are let alone, in a pile very close to one another, and yet each on his own – a silhouette nested in his own blackness. And yet together... And yet alone.

What is called a native land? – A topos that has some geographical significance –

Photographer Ivo Hadjimishiev



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on the Balkans, or the place inside me? Inside “me” because “us” no longer exists. And “me” hangs in weightlessness. Which is that place, so broadly and metaphorically presented in the vision of the performance – the bank opposite Bulgaria, a territory on the Balkans, a corner inside me – this place is not the native land. The native land floats in front of the inner gaze as a memory of the paradise lost.

Loneliness. This is the emigrant’s spiritual substance. This sensation is achieved by all theatrical means. The set design operates with the suggestion of the big scaled planes: the ground under their feet is displaced, abysses open up and one jumps over them to find himself somewhere else – beyond the limit of the specific place and time; or abysses in which one sinks. The high horizontal walls that move and cut parts of the stage opening at times look like a port’s high fortified waterside. Actors move on a bridge high above and look quite small and lost where as they do look small, crushed and lost again in the foot of the huge dark wall. In the figure of Brachkov freezing with cold, loneliness and despair in the foot of the tremendously high wall the loneliness is palpable with the contrast between small and big. This figure cuts into the flow of the festive crowd joyfully circling around. The loneliness is sensuously palpable precisely in the crowd, roaming amid the multitude. As a contrast of **one and many**.

### ***The history***

The idea of time as history is tangibly present in the performance. History passes through the stage as a dream, as a vision, as a memory, and is directly wound to the present in the end. There the outcasts are

put on a pedestal, transformed into statues. A live picture that stands still at times, that is animated at others – here time has again a logic of its own. It runs really at times, at others it sweeps away into some mystification where the frozen figures of the monument are as if alive, it is as if their petrification is a matter of an instant in the historical time, and in the next moment they might move, speak out, ask for how long they would remain so, or would wait “until the gypsies cut them for scrap metal”? Where are they? From this side or beyond? This indication of the two worlds happens repeatedly in the performance. The white angelic wings of Brachkov, Makedonski’s descent into the gapping hole in the floor of the stage – as if to the “underworld” – these are all Old Testament visions. Freezing and reanimation of the figures from the monument as well as the return of the dead to the still living Makedonski create a loose barrier that allows for free passages between this side and beyond.

The role of the woman in the performance has its place in the look on history. The woman inserted as a foreign body, like some picture from another world – a normal and at the same time romantic world, collaged onto a battle scene. She always shows up NOT in time and NOT in the proper place, she always hampers and falters, for her there is always NO time for her. The loving woman in the performance is Don Quixote. She attempts to stop the wheels of history. She arrests the train to which the monument of the heroes is “attached.” She wants her beloved one and does not give him to history. But history goes on the tracks. And yet it turns out the wagon has been detached...

What is called love for the native land? What is the pledge – to die for the freedom

of the fatherland? A cruel bracket that clamps life and demands that you sacrifice everything – from the normal existence and satisfaction of the quotidian needs through the love for life to life itself. If you will sacrifice yourself for the idea little is not enough, you must give everything!

The history runs in front of our eyes and merges with the present day into the odd shade-off of three different moments: the outcasts in emigration, Makedonski after e Liberation, and a sensation of today that shoves through the open gaps between these two domains. There are several “doors” to time through which the spectator passes led by the vision of the performance. When Makedonski jumps together with Brachkov through the “furrow line” as conditionally depicted in the set design and designated by the collapse he lands in a different time. Thus, as time conditionally changes so changes space. The theatre performance – a theatre inside a theatre depicting a battle with the Turks – is transformed at some point into a post-battle landscape. But this is no longer a parody theatrical fight, this is an ominous picture – a landscape after the real battle. We have it in our minds as depicted in our poetry. The ravens circling around and cawing – the vision according to Botev<sup>2</sup> appears repeatedly in the performance. This picture is outside time, we are carrying it wherever we are. Indeed this performance is very Bulgarian, only we, the Bulgarians, can decipher all these signs. For a moment a picture of a gallows appears with ravens hovering above it and we know – this is the picture *Hanging of Vasil Levski*. The

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<sup>2</sup> The reference is to a poem by the great Bulgarian poet Hristo Botev dedicated to the hanging of the revolutionary Vasil Levski, an iconic national hero.

visual solution abounds in such signs that lead us through time by their non-verbal message.

The Revival ideal of a collective community had disintegrated at Vazov’s present day and he is painfully sad about it. For us this is a value model of a bygone era but what follows? Is there a society in the place of this conservative collective community? Our inability to get united around a positive idea is the consequence of a process of development that began long ago but is yet to be completed – once individualized the separate cell still does not manage to become part of a constructive process – to function and be responsible for the life of a whole organism. This performance of *Hashove* is a sequel to the cycle of performances on our classics that provide a new point of view and are a reckoning of a kind of our place along the “past – present” axis in terms of national self-consciousness, maturity of political thinking.

Why does Brachkov have wings in the performance? He is the pure soul, the poet, the one who will not bring himself to sell his books even when he is starving. He is the white crow – the idealist who will remain un-real amid human weaknesses that centrifugally disperse ourselves when there is no awareness of social empathy, of responsibility before an idea that is more important than self-satisfaction.

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*Translated by  
Atanas Igov*