

“ALBENA” – THE MIRACLE OF CHRISTIAN LOVE

Veneta Doytcheva

Albena by **Yordan Yovkov**, directed by **Ivan Dobchev**, set design **Venelin Shurelov**, costume design **Daniela Oleg Lyahova**, music by **Asen Avramov**, dialectologist **Vlado Zhobov**

Cast **Albena Georgieva** (Albena), **Krasimir Dokov** (Kutsar, Albena’s husband); **Atanas Atanasov** (Nyagul), **Zhana Rasheva** (Nyagulitsa), **Vladimir Karamazov** (Ivan Senebirski), **Veselin Mezekliev** (Dyado Vlasyu), **Krastyo Lafazanov** (Marin, the Mayor), **Elena Nacheva-Lafazanova** (Marinitsa), **Dimitar Manchev** (Hadzhi Andreyka), **Nikolay Konstadinov** (Gavril), **Elvira Ivanova** (Gavrilitsa), **Teodor Elmazov** (Daskal Todor), **Yordan Bikov** (Guncho Mitin), **Nevena Mandadzhieva** (Baba Mita), **Karla Rahal** (Savka), **Bilyana Petrinska** (Keranitsa), **Radko Savov** (the Young man from another village), **Kiril Kavadarkov** (the Old man from another village), **Plamen Peev** (the Senior Guard), **Daniel Rashev** (Guard I), **Ivo Kehayov** (Guard II), **Violina Rusinova**, **Mila Tincheva** (Gunka and Tsveta, children).

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Atanas Atanasov (Nyagul) and Albena Georgieva (Albena)

Photographer Simon Varsano

Apparently, director Ivan Dobchev thinks of Yordan Yovkov's *Albena* as of a play of his "own." He revisits it in an interval of ten years as a text for theatre that is always new. In the 1980s, his performance in Haskovo overrode the museum fences off the play and threw Yovkov's world into the mud, straw and ugly prose in order to raise up the Albena phenomenon as lust for otherness, for revelation. In the 1990s, the director read the text with the ambition of a researcher who diligently checks the aesthetics of his laboratory quests at the Sfumato Laboratory. Under the title *The Sin Called Kutsar* the performance aimed to mark the reference points of a specific area of sinfulness and point it out as the eye of the dramatic cyclone. As of today, *Albena* at the National Theatre has a different semantic emphasis although in the spirit of this interpretation one can perceive the deposited distillate of the past performances. First and foremost in the breath of everyday routine which is now realized as a primal force with a hard grip on the striving soul (an echo from the performance in Haskovo) rather than as a specific reality. The torment about the moral imperative as the supreme regulator of the relationships in the community (the big question from the laboratory quest at Sfumato) also has some powerful reverberations.

The stage version of *Albena* now has a demonstrative negative strategy for analysis. It is markedly oriented against the details in the environment and circumstances, against qualifying the story, against the judgmental claim of prosecution or acquittal. Ivan Dobchev steps on another path. He introduces the play into the artistic logic of the parable. For him *Albena* is a pure and short narrative of an actually possible happening of life in which

the agents of the action are taken to the stage of life to serve as evidence of the validity of a certain value norm. The parable is the story's purpose. Dobchev borrows the motives for adjusting the form from the play's structure. The centre of dramatic events is the erring couple of Albena and Nyagul and the victim of the crime they committed: the murdered husband Kutsar. The sinful love affair and the murder both happen during the Passion Week – a time intended for reflection and penance. Yovkov put an emphasis on the contrast between the line of the holy Biblical miracle and the unbridled audacity of the secular dramatism. Among the characters there are two men from another village who – as the classical pair of heroes-antipodes – have their function in making that thematic parallel up-to-date by refrain repetition of the story about the last days of Jesus before his death and resurrection (the Old man from another village) and the profanating comments on it (the Young man from another village). Dobchev has strengthened the role of those supporting characters. They are akin to some worldly chroniclers and it depends on what they will record whether they will testify of a peasant carnal affair with a tragic end, or they will take to their place a story of the mystical transformation of the village of a great but beautiful sinner. *Albena* is a parable because it will be told and interpreted with astonishment and new humility before the miracle of a secular resurrection.

Dobchev interprets the play by emphasizing and extending the connections of the present action and the archaic one updated via symbolic acts. Out of these two cores thus crystallizes the Albena-Kutsar-Nyagul triangle seen not only in terms of adultery and crime but also as a



Photographer Simon Varsano

Vladimir Karamazov (Senebirski)

figure that can be understood in terms of the type and antitype relation. Albena, Kutsar and Nyagul as an antitype of the “holy family.” The typological treatment transcends the case, pulls it into the horizontal of the endless repetitiveness and raises it up into the vertical of divine fate. In this interpretative optics *Albena* is much less of a love drama although the director insists that it is a drama of love. *Albena* is much less of a crime and everyday life drama as well although it is read as a drama of crime. *Albena* is a vision of the ordeals of love in the worlds of the Christian understanding of affection.

The task of the setting is solved on stage by set (Venelin Shurelov) and costume (Daniela Oleg Lyahova) designers with utmost purity, graphically and confidently in terms of volumes, colours and

perspectives. The emphasis on the horizontal is dominant. The stage is optically lowered to a narrow frontal frieze into which the unharnessed carts of the peasants who had come to mill flour contrast against the black contour as in an endless line. This materialized line of blocked wooden carts with no horse power is a natural, unostentatious, and beautiful image of the rhythm in which this world is living – monotonous but endless for sure. And the objectivity on stage is thus exhausted. The space remains for the people. All of them are dressed in black, even Albena, Nyagul’s work clothes are in two undertones whereas Kutsar’s costumes and the attire of the two men from another village are in whitish natural colours. In the love scenes of Albena and Nyagul the white of the shirt joins the trajectory of the

semantic parable which will connect them to Kutsar (with his clothes turned white because of the flour) and the men from another village (with white lambskin fur coats) in order to make them stand out as protagonists of the parable of the sinful but beautiful woman and to distinguish them from the multitude of other characters being the worldly dwelling place of this story. The movement in this low horizon is only a linear one. The greatest rise is getting into a cart – Gavril is in that position from the very beginning but also Senebirski, Daskal Todor, and the Mayor.

Ivan Dobchev has substantially abridged the text and only men have remained as the decisive outcome in the tumble-down horizon of the action. And the only woman is Albena. By this correction to the characters the relationships are re-emphasized. Albena is not one of the

women in the village. She is actually the only one here. She is literally one for all. In the many men – one woman situation the erotic sense of the relations is more than explicable and expected. The direction of the movement is more than clear. Straight-forwardly, shamelessly, covertly, deliberately, accidentally the train of men are not sated with wanting, hoping, watching, judging, and giving orders to Albena. It would be illogical, contrary to Yovkov, to turn his back to the sensual chord of that relation. The director does not do it, he even intensifies the thrill of desire and non-recognized rivalry among the men. He seeks rather to unmask their primal hunger than to stay with the sex urge explanation. The selfishness and blindness feed the claims to Albena and lead to her dogmatic idealization (Nikolay Konstantinov as Gavril), possessive objectification



Photographer Simon Varsano

Albena Georgieva (Albena) and Vladimir Karamazov (Senebirski)

(Vladimir Karamazov as Senebirski), covert self-engaging (Teodor Elmazov as Daskal Todor), cowardly lust after (Krastyo Lafazanov as the Mayor), pathetically-drunken exaltation (Veselin Mezekliev as Dyado Vlasylu) and puritan frustration (Dimitar Manchev as Hadzhi Andreyka). The men's world is aimed at her with a desperate and vicious rigorism. Albena is the formal target of their passion, she is actually an ordeal and a provocation. Everyone hides in his soul the awareness of an inner fault and that blasted core bursts forth rage. Too few lovers, too many warriors of selfishness. Yovkov himself has hinted that the essential lack would not help them achieve high dramatism although some of them are tensely kept on their toes. Dobchev consolidates their personal disharmony and as if under a magnifying glass a common and dominant motive stands out: vanity. It is the motor of passions. Vanity shines through each and every peep, through each and every shameful proposal, through each and every piece of gossip, defamation, and scandal that are insolently or cowardly thrown around Albena. A paradox discreetly planted by Yovkov – men are in dismay, in a mist, in a state of dull rage because they are in the orbit of a categorical centripetal movement – towards Albena. But whether due to drunken bitterness (Senebirski), to self-destructive weakness (Gavril), to spiritual infirmity (Daskal Todor) or to dogmatic ossification (Hadzhi Andreyka) they actually fail to see Albena, they do not become aware of her as a real person.

If vanity is emptiness then the men around Albena are overfilled with it. Only two of them fall out of the line: the righteous Kutsar and sufferer Guncho. Only

they do not run about in the peasant vanity fair because they have their centre inside themselves, because of someone else. Does Kutsar love Albena is a difficult question to answer. But his great pain after he learns of the adultery reveals a heart of simple, yet clear grounds for harmony. For Kutsar his relationship with Albena is sacred as his labour, his bread and his home are sacred. Only he chokes with shame, consciousness when the sacredness of his life is desecrated. Yovkov actually almost deprives him of dialogue with both Albena and Nyagul but puts him alongside the sufferer Guncho and writes for them a great scene of Beckettian power.

Finally, Nyagul remains, the adulteress's adulterer. Does he love her, does she? Oddly, although in the play they live entirely for and because of their love, their love is somehow vain. Nyagul is obsessed with the mill, with the plans for prosperity, Albena is like a desired addition to his everyday life deprived of family affection. Albena is a bit too much of a flirty peasant "dame" who does not possess the moral strength to be a pure icon near her righteous husband-child. A carnal love of two sinners and their innocent victim in between. This configuration is too far from the love triangle with its passion and jealousy. It is closer to Mary, Joseph and Baby Jesus. The anti-type (the fallen Albena and Nyagul and the evil engendered by their fury) is possible because of the type (the holy family) and vice versa. Yovkov hints that Albena was given to Kutsar and the fact that he is simple-minded, naïve and physically strong turns him into a guard of physical beauty as a supreme good. Speechless, as if barren, falling out of every order of life he might be the poor Joseph. The strange relationship between the

beauty and the righteous man could only provoke something excessive, out of order. A wonder? Or monstrosity?

Nyagul interferes with the holy family. Albena capitulates. The wonder is thwarted, monstrosity unleashes.

Dobchev strongly desires to separate the wheat from the chaff in this story. He is quite insistent on presenting the trinity without a drop of unction. Thus, Kutsar is made physically rougher, even slightly deformed into a bent figure with colossal shoulders, clumsy gestures, heavy tread and with his eyes fixed on the ground out of which he is as if extracted as a raw piece of granite. Albena is in the extremes of the sly flirting with Senebirski (emphasized on stage in his proposal – in the colourful cabriolet, with the red candied apple pop presented to her as a gift) and in the frenzied indulgence (in the nudity of the love scene with Nyagul – in another cart with ragged tilt as a roof). Nyagul is the very hypocrisy, an impenetrable mask, coldness and rational prudence. But far before the final the same frivolous Albena can also be seen in moments of another state of mind. A routine gesture is employed by the director to show her pensive, humble, almost reverent. This is the scene in which Kutsar hands to his wife the empty copper dishes in which she had brought him lunch. He does not look up at her and with his bent figure and with his hands stretching out to give her the dishes in a long white cloth he is silent as in a ritual bow. She stretches her hand but instead of taking the dish she caresses him on the head as one does with a child. Her gesture is simple and spontaneous. The dialogue is wordless, silence is more than natural. Perhaps the sinful woman grows gentle in front of the harsh devotion of her husband. Perhaps for her

he is rather a defenceless child than a man. Perhaps he gives her mercy by his obedience. In this brief scene the righteous man and the sinful woman are in a Biblical connectedness of an instance of love that bears all things that does not envy or boast.

The other instant of pure, humble, Christian love is the finale of the play. Dobchev sees in Yovkov's finale the dramaturgical reason for his proposition about the miracle. Albena has now stepped on the thorny path towards her punishment. The whole village has gathered to see how she is taken away, to gloat and to throw stones at the murderess of her husband. Faced with the pale, repentant beauty everybody is startled. The traducers have become merciful, they are transformed into defenders. And then Nyagul shows up. Now, he is dressed in black – a simple homespun costume, white shirt. With the natural movement of Albena's caress for Kutsar, with the same silent spontaneity Nyagul takes Albena by the hand and stands up right next to her. In front of the dumbfounded multitude of people a simple ceremony takes place, a wordless declaration of love, a promise for ever. This is the standstill, the officiation of love that is revealed. The village grows truly silent in this instant. It is not merely another's secret that is divulged in front of their eyes. In that instant the love of Albena and Nyagul is revealed. The villagers' transformation is not because of Albena having changed her attire but because of the miracle of love that is revealed before them. Vanity has melted away, Nyagul and Albena get together, perhaps until death does them part.

The restrained interpretation of that parable of love is upheld by the actors with

a very precise acting. Albena (Albena Georgieva) is delicate, feminine, serene and impulsive. The actress easily strains the chords of the frivolous vitality that holds Albena in control but at the time of the test she manages to subdue the hushed feminine power that transforms the entire village. Nyagul (Atanas Atanasov) is so flintily sharp, confined and cutting that when he opens up the other side of his soul the contrast is more than startling. Kutsar (Krasimir Dokov) is monolithically powerful, primitively confident in the arrangement of his world. Kutsar really collapses faced with the terrifying dilemma that overtakes him – to kill the hand that gives

him bread or to throw the knife in front of a supreme judge. The trinity of Albena-Kutsar-Nyagul offers a configuration of the relationships that is simultaneously eruditely charged and emotionally mastered. This version sets the conflict in *Albena* into the trajectory of thinking about love through the idea of Christian faith that love is salvation, rebirth and forgiveness.

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