

ATTEMPT TO FLY – INTOXICATION BY A DREAM

Albena Tagareva

Attempt to Fly written by **Yordan Radichkov**, directed by **Stoyan Radev**, scenography **Venelin Shurelov**, costumes **Elitsa Georgieva**, music **Theodosy Spassov**

Cast **Georgi Mamalev, Zafir Radjab, Valentin Tanev, Valeri Yordanov, Pavlin Petrunov, Christo Petkov, Yosif Shamli, Darin Angelov, Deyan Angelov, Marin Yanev, Maria Kavardzhikova, Blagovest Blagoev, Nikolay Urumov, Stefan Kashev**

National Theatre – Sofia, premiere 13th and 14th November 2018

Flying with a hot-air balloon is a peculiar experience. It is fundamentally different from the other possibilities reached by humanity. The reason is that the balloon is a means which relies solely on the air currents in order to start moving. Its direction depends on them, not on human will. The wind takes it off the ground and the flight is close to free soaring. The feeling of such an experience to some extent can be described with the phrase “wherever the wind takes you”, and the only thing left for you to do is to enjoy the flight.

Yordan Radichkov (1929–2004)¹ turns the balloon into the main character in his play *Attempt to fly*. What is unusual is that this is a military barrage balloon, whose initial function is to stay stationary in the sky, tied down to the ground with ropes so it can obstruct the way of hostile air-

¹ A representative of the Bulgarian magic realism, established himself as a writer in the 70 s and 80 s.

crafts. In the play the author has “set the balloon free” of its guarding functions and has given it travelling characteristics – to drift freely in the sky. Radichkov uses the symbolism of this character to introduce the idea of the free flight of the human spirit, which has turned into an impossible dream at times of severe restrictions of all free thinking.² Bold dreams, however, have the unique power to unite people regardless of how different they are. One whole neighbourhood gathers various wags and weirdos and sets off to pursue this dream. The desire to fly comes to life on the stage of the National Theatre in the play by the director Stoyan Radev.

The text by Radichkov re-appears on the theatre stage at a time when the obstacles which have existed during the com-

² The play is based on the novel *The Tied Up Balloon*, which is the foundation of the Binka Zhelyazkova movie with the same title, banned by the communist censorship in 1967.



Photographer Stefan N. Shterev

Attempt to Fly

munism³ have supposedly disappeared for the modern person. Their free will is unlimited, travelling is not a problem, as well as the possibility for one to choose where their home will be. Today all this is a question of personal choice and initiative. Despite the fact that the text was written about 40 years ago during the totalitarian regime, it sounds painfully relevant even without the associations with the impossible for the ordinary people privilege of the ones in power.⁴ In today's world, in a situation of segregation of society into smaller and smaller, and more closed communities and groups, having little interest in each other, where building of walls (real

and virtual ones) seems to be a defence strategy from the unfamiliar, chasing the unknown, the dreams, has the ability to broaden the mind.

The story line of Radichkov's play essentially presents the desire of a group of people to ground a wandering barrage balloon and to take advantage of the fabric it is made of in order to make shirts and other useful everyday necessities. The initial material incentive for action, however, is fast replaced by the much more important and essential human necessity to rise, to dream, to fly.

The stage version by Stoyan Radev sticks to the text and the messages set by Radichkov. The director remains faithful to the dramaturgy while trying to reach and emphasise on a main line, which turns into the focal one in the play. He focuses on human relationships and strives to turn the

³ The communist party in Bulgaria was in power from 1944 to 1989.

⁴ Free travel abroad for the citizens is carefully controlled in the years of communism.

characters into real, living people, despite the absurd nature of the play. This pursuit of his towards a distinct realistic theatre is noticeable as an approach in his previous plays too.

In *Attempt to Fly* the director points out the patriotic line, only vaguely hinted in the text. It is this approach that can be described as the director's creative touch of the play by Radichkov. The topic being introduced is of the need for unity around common values, which have to be defended by society as a whole and not by individual figures. The group flight in the play is a metaphor of the urge for mutual, not individual actions. The calls "Let's row together, brothers!" sound extremely emotional. The strong patriotic passion in the play is also delicately interweaved by the music by Theodosy Spassov, who masterly interprets the folklore motives. Music has

a vital role in the play. The kaval compositions create the image of the ever so important element of the overall atmosphere of the play – the melody of the balloon, the sound of its soul. It is set by the author and is present on stage through musical environment. The Balkan Mountains and its noises also have their place in the system of poetic characters. Its sound topic is also presented by T. Spassov's kaval. The wind and the sound of the balloon are fundamental elements, contributing towards the formation of Radichkov's picturesque world in the play.

The director has tried to get out of the convention of the magical world, typical for this author, by developing the characters into a strictly realistic direction. The well-known marginal, peculiar and extremely typical characters from Radichkov's work, have been made softer, mellower

Photographer Stefan N. Shterev



Attempt to Fly

and somewhat more down-to-earth in the play. What stands out is Granny's sweet-heart⁵ (played by Marin Yanev), whose image is a counterpoint of the large group of simple, rough peasants from the Avramovo neighborhood.⁶

The director has kept the vitality of the character in which Marin Yanev skillfully impersonates, adding a unique walk and delicate mannerism. The roles of the two groups of pursuers are distributed in such a way that they match the physical features and character traits of the actors themselves. Georgi Mamalev gets into the image of teacher Kiro – the leader of the first group of chasers of the balloon. His small figure (compared to the others) gives teacher Kiro – an informal leader of the pursuers, the necessary dose of irony and humour. The actor manages to maintain his performance between a typical Radichkov character (a simple, yet genuine and poetic soul) and the grotesque. Hadji Avram (played by Valentin Tanev) is the third character in the group of the respected villagers. He is a religious man, a church volunteer and a tamer of one crow. V. Tanev creates a modest, timid man on stage, who occasionally feels waves of bravery. The actor uses physical feature to outline the image of Hadji Avram. He is slightly bent down, fearful and with an insecure voice. Pavlin Petrunov represents the character of Mathew the Nil, harassed by a flea in his ear. He is a naïve, good-hearted weirdo, who is willing to put up with the torture of

⁵ It is typical for Yordan Radichkov's work is that the names of the characters relate to and describe their features.

⁶ Distinctive settlements for the mountainous regions in Bulgaria, where in a vast area there are only a few houses scattered around the hills.

the flea. Zafir Radjab takes on the role of the groom Iliyko – a curious enthusiast, ready to discover the world. Valeri Yordanov builds a solid and colourful image of the Rooster – the blacksmith of the Avramovo neighbourhood. This is the character which is stereotyped most in the play. He resembles more the village fool and a gypsy thanks to the slang used by the actor.

In the second group of pursuers we have The Yoke (played by Yosif Shamli, 1972–2019), who is an arrogant tough man, nearly a rebel, whose temper can hardly be controlled. Shamli creates an image of a man of steel who has a vulnerable soul. The role of Avram the Shuttle is trusted to Christo Petkov, who is the witty one – a commander, able to control the people he is surrounded by. He is the antipode of Mathew the Nil. The Shuttle also has a "chronic" problem – he always gets thorns stuck into his heel, but unlike the Nil, he gets the whole gang around him to deal with the issue. The director has selected the two actors – P. Petrunov (slim and small) and Ch. Petkov (tall and chubby) as complete opposites, which counteracts the two characters visually and physically, apart from dramaturgically. The brothers Darin and Deyan Angelov somewhat naturally, in line with their close family relation, play two brothers goat keepers – Peter and Pavel, who do not leave even for a moment their small cask. These two characters are almost caricatures unlike most of the others, realistically presented. This decision, however, does not confront the overall impression of the actors' play, but reveals the wide range of weirdos in Radichkov's world.

The costumes by Elitsa Georgieva also add to the versatile presence of the actors. In them one can find elements of a few

eras – from the clothes of teacher Kiro and Hadji Avram, typical for the guildsmen during the Bulgarian National Revival, through traditional folklore elements added to the images of the two missionaries Peter and Pavel, to the uniforms of the chief (Nikolay Urumov) and the senior (Stefan Kashev), who have direct reference to the socialist past. Meanwhile the trainers and track suit of The Yoke and Avram the Shuttle form associations with the present time and the vision of village hooligans.

The director Stoyan Radev has managed to develop an actors' ensemble in which the individual performances are equal. The artists somewhat naturally and organically, with the methods of psychological theatre, get under their characters' skin, skilfully sketched by Radichkov.

The only female character, Avramovitsa (Avram's wife), is entrusted to Maria Kavardzhikova. Unlike the solid and extremely realistic performances by the actors playing the pursuers, M. Kavardzhikova offers a very strong, schematic play. The actress remains external to the world the director has built up until that moment. Her appearance in the play seems patched up to the overall realistically psychological line. She does not manage to achieve the organics of the rest. This is felt most strongly in the way the actress performs her monologue. She appears on stage, stands in the centre of the hemisphere, created by the scenographer Venelin Shurelov, and delivers her lines in one breath, while the pursuers go past her. This choice of image perhaps derives from the necessity of counteraction and assessment of the "light-minded" behavior of the men, the avrams⁷, set off to chase their dreams. The

⁷ As Radichkov calls his male characters – a direct reference to the biblical figure of Abraham.

attempt for such narrator's voice though is neglected and it does not serve its purpose fully.

The scene in the play takes place in some abstract space, in an unidentified time, on an almost bare stage, in the middle of which there is a metal hemisphere, reminiscent of a mysteriously appearing dome. At the same time this simple and uncomplicated element creates associations with the curves of the Balkan Mountains, amongst which the Avram neighborhood lies. This decision is also a precondition for the creation of a dynamic backstage, which reveals the pursuit of the balloon. The group of chasers moves up and down the "hilly" stage until it goes low enough so they could grab its ropes. What comes next is a visual transformation of space – the appearance of the pursued object.

The scenographer Venelin Shurelov paints an impressive picture of the balloon. In front of the eyes of the spectators one small part of the flying object, described in detail by the actors is being revealed. However, this part is enough for each viewer to be able to complete in their mind the image of the "heavenly wanderer". What makes the vision powerful is the combination of the actors hanging on the ropes and the hemisphere, turning on the stage floor. Despite the factual static character of the decision (the actors practically remain in one place), the scenographer has managed to create a strong impression of movement, of a real flight. This is achieved thanks to the rotation of the circle, the added smoke and light, reflecting on the metal surface of the dome, resembling flashes of sun rays.

The special decision acts as a summary of the overall idea of play. At first glance it



Photographer Stefan N. Shterev

Attempt to Fly

is totally plain and uncomplicated, but it is this simplicity of the means of expression that creates the strong, even epic notion. The endeavor to let the spirit fly is synthesized in an episode in which the actors are drifting with the balloon in the sky. The time of the flight – free and unpredictable, is the moment of cathartic purification. It is here where the living and their departed relatives meet. In neutral territory. This is the communication scene in the play. This most sacred moment, which is on the edge of reality and dream, is being interrupted by the deafening sound of the weapon. The free flight is brutally stopped. The opportunity for a man to rise above their everyday life, to look at their world from above and to find the mistakes in their way of living, is taken away. The attempt of take-off is abolished. The only thing left is

a dazed feeling like after a surrealistic dream, which has been so real that it is difficult to accept is as an illusion created by the mind.

The idea of the flight of the spirit is accompanied by the questions of what restricts the free will, the thoughts and dreams. The answer, which the play by Stoyan Radev gives is that the biggest limitations are not so much those imposed by the authorities or external factors, but the ones that a person sets for themselves.

Published in Homo Ludens 2019/No. 22.

*Translated by
Stanislava Nikolova*