

Bulgarian director opens a curtain on the former East bloc

By Joan Dupont

AVIGNON, France: 'All the world's a stage.' Shakespeare was the inspiration for "Genèse 2" (Genesis No. 2), by the 33-year-old Russian playwright Ivan Viripaev, which had its French premiere at the Avignon Festival this year. Directed by Galin Stoev from Bulgaria, the play is a montage of true and false, real and imaginary: a wizard display of deconstructed theater from the heart of the former Eastern bloc countries, a vision of survivors visited by biblical imagery and nightmare flashbacks on years of dictatorship.

Stoev, 38, who has worked in Brussels and Liège, Belgium, and with the Comédie-Française in Paris, plans to tour Canada with the production. He calls the piece an important challenge, opening up new space for audiences.

Two men and a woman perform several roles against a backdrop of mirrors that reflect their outbursts and transformations. The setting is a psychiatric institute where a professor of mathematics named Antonina Velikanova has been interned, diagnosed with acute schizophrenia. She believes she is Lot's wife, and converses with God - or her psychoanalyst.

The play opens on the narration of a letter Velikanova purportedly has written Viripaev asking him to stage her script. Her name even appears next to his in the credits as co-author, and a character named Viripaev also appears on stage.

Actually, the playwright is in Moscow, working on his second film. And perhaps there is no such person as Velikanova, who cannot stop looking back - and talking back - to her psychoanalyst. "They are a couple, but they could also be a divided self," says director Stoev.

Viripaev, born in Irkust, Siberia, is known throughout Europe. After his first play, "The Dreams," he went to Moscow where he joined the New and Social Play Centre Teatr. doc, an experimental space for young artists. He also directed "Euphoria," an almost silent film shot by the Don River, prizewinner at several festivals.

"I met Ivan in 2001, and our contact was instantaneous," Stoev says. "After the fall of the Berlin Wall, I had gone to Germany and read a few contemporary Russian texts.

And back in Bulgaria I directed his first play, 'The Dreams.' Then, Ivan sent me his second play, 'Oxygen.' We staged both my version and his version."

"We were curious to see if a text conceived in countries like Russia and Bulgaria, recognizable because of our common past, could work in a context that has nothing to do with these references."

Stoev, who had his own successful career in Bulgaria, came from the generation that started working immediately after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R.: "Heavy doors opened, so people needed fresh blood, and it was easy to break into the big institutions," Stoev says.

It was a historical moment; he worked for five years as visiting director of the National Theater in Sofia "doing classics my own way," including Mishima's "Madame De Sade" and Brecht's "The Caucasian Chalk Circle."

But Stoev quickly realized that those heavy doors were closing again. "It made me angry, but I didn't really want to become a big Bulgarian director." He traveled to England - the Royal National in London and the West Yorkshire Playhouse at Leeds - "to learn the way British theater functioned."

He also worked in Slovenia directing Pierre de Marivaux's "Jeu de l'Amour et du Hasard"; in Macedonia on an update of Sophocles's "Antigone," and in Germany on an operetta, "History," by Witold Gombrowicz. He has spent the last four years in Liège, Belgium, where he founded his own company, Fingerprint, with Belgian, French and Swiss actors.

In fact, Genèse 2, their first production, a mere hour and 10 minutes long, is an immense collaborative effort. The play, translated by Tania Moguilevskaia and Gilles Morel, stars Céline Bolomey, who plays Antonina/Lot's wife. Vincent Lecuyer plays God/the analyst, and Antoine Oppenheim plays Ivan/Prophet John. Music by Sacha Carlson is performed by Mélanie Evrard, Marine Horbaczewski and Michel Lambert. Lighting and video effects create a vibrant backdrop.

Stoev is currently involved with the French translation of Viripaev's latest play, "July." "Viripaev's theater is a new approach," he said, "because the real show doesn't happen on stage, but more in the heads and bodies of the spectators. I treat the actors as workers who are there to build a labyrinth, and to offer the spectator a possibility of creating his own performance, his own interior paysage."

"I believe that the theater of the future is not theater that treats the spectator as a consumer, contemplating a completed piece of art in a museum, but rather offers something unfinished, so he can take the responsibility of creating his own show."

Like in Antonina Velikanova's analysis? "Exactly. My work is to make them all exist naturally on stage even though everything is calculated. A good director is a director who disappears from the scene."

This play on words and beliefs flashes with humor, far from the documentary line that Viripaev appeared to adopt earlier in his career.

"Although Ivan is very provocative, he hasn't had problems with the government. In Moscow, he himself acted in it on stage and they can't imagine the play without him.

"These days, the church has become quite powerful, and all the politicians are on TV appearing in church - the cult of the good citizen. So Ivan comes up with a text that is controversial, but it doesn't seem to endanger him.

"In Russia for 70 years, and for 45 years in Bulgaria, religion was banned, and now there is a feeling that we have to develop our spirituality. After the changes, people went back there to find a place that was not dirtied by politics. I find this important."

Stoev was happy about the reaction of the Avignon public to the play. "It touches people: after the show they were overcome and couldn't analyze what they had seen, which is what we wanted."

He was especially pleased because, he says, in France, critics and theatergoers tend to take political positions. "It's funny, because a lot of people in the realm of culture are ex-Trotskyite or ex-Maoist, so they can't get why God should be the subject of a play. We are supposed to be free."

But cultural differences can create cultural boundaries. He sees theater as a humanistic force, opening up space within us.

"How free are we in our minds? Often not as free as we think. And performance touches a sensuous spot in us, because we are so divided in our contemporary selves, in this modern society. One of the aims of theater is to help us to find strength in ourselves."

"I grew up in a world where you projected your dreams from behind the Wall to this place across the world. We tried to search for information which was banned. Then, after, we realized that the problems are everywhere - but you learn to take responsibility."