

Listen Here!

by Goran Stefanovski

CONTEXT:

I am a playwright. I was born in the Republic of Macedonia where I lived most of my life. For 18 years Patricia, my English wife, lived there with me. Then, in 1992, with the collapse of Yugoslavia, she moved back to England. For six years I was left flying to and fro, between Skopje in Macedonia and Canterbury in England. I was living in two worlds, literally, no metaphor intended.

During this period of toing-and-froing I was lucky enough to work on a number of European projects. Most of them were in some way connected with the issues of interculturalism. I worked with a friend, a partner, a producer, an Italian American living in Sweden, whose name is Chris Torch, or Chris Torchio, if you will. Our projects included collaboration with various Eastern European artists, but were primarily co-financed by Western European countries and primarily aimed at Western European audiences.

This packaging caused confusion and consternation in various quarters. I witnessed a series of odd misunderstandings, dramatic ironies, traps and pitfalls, heavy negotiations, hits and misses. Chris Torch believed he was championing the cause of sharing cultures, crossing borders, remapping, making sense of the new European challenges. He believed he was a pioneer of interculturalism.

But on the ground, I heard libels, loud and hushed, aimed against him, but which reflected against me as well. I heard the terms “cultural imperialist”, “multinational trickster”, “corporate con-artist”, “globalisation cheat”, “shark”, “charlatan” and “fraud”. On both sides of the fence he was suspected as somebody who buys cheap artistic labour in the East and sells it for profit to the West. Many people didn’t care

* Paper delivered at the international symposium “When culture makes the difference. The heritage, arts and media in multicultural society”, organised by the University of Genoa (Faculty of Foreign languages and literatures) and AEC-Associazione per l’Economia della Cultura (Genova, 19-21 November 2004). The paper has been published as “Stammi a sentire, Gran Bretagna!”, in S. Bodo, M. R. Cifarelli (eds.), *Quando la cultura fa la differenza. Patrimonio, arti e media nella società multiculturale*, Meltemi, Roma, 2006.

what the performances or the actual artistic articulation were like. They hated the idea on principle. “We know this is a swindle. Why bother to see it”?

I was bewildered. My friend, Chris, of all people? The actor from the Living Theatre, the ultimate theatrical anarchic wild bunch of the Sixties? The founder member of Jordcircus, a theatrical commune based in Stockholm? In my books the man had cool credentials, but for many folks out there he was a cigar-smoking slave driver.

Let me illustrate this. During a first meeting between some Macedonian actors and Chris in Skopje, they asked how much money they would get for their work. Chris answered that they would get the standard European wage. One of the actors said, between his teeth: “I can find that kind of money in the street.” He was lying. There was no money to be found in the streets of Macedonia. Chris said: “That may be the case, but I thought you were an actor and wanted to make theatre and not look for money in the streets”.

This conversation has stayed with me over the years. To this day I wonder what was in the mind of my actor friend, what manoeuvre, what mental calculation. Probably something like this: “I know I am worth little in market terms and I am quite resigned to that fact. But now here is this guy who comes from the market place and is showing an interest in me. Why? What’s in it for him? Maybe I am worth something after all. I wish I knew what. Maybe I am worth a lot. What if I am priceless and don’t know it? I can smell a conspiracy here. I won’t sell. I’ll push up the price, sleep on it and wait for better offers.”

One day in 1995 Chris and I went from one Macedonian theatre to another trying to garner interest for our multi-ethnic project. We were working on a remake of Euripides’ Bacchanalia where the Bacchantes were all male. We decided to get actors of Macedonian, Turkish and Albanian ethnic origin to simply and powerfully dramatise the reality on the ground. We went from door to door, from the Macedonian National Theatre to the Drama Theatre to the Theatre of Turkish and Albanian Nationalities, inviting them to collaborate.

This turned out to be an explosive proposition. “Collaborate! We’ve never collaborated before. We are suspicious of each other, we guard our own interests, we are almost enemies. What do you mean, collaborate?” And there was poor Chris, with his post-

hippy utopianism, talking of sharing a potluck feast, where everyone brings a dish to the table. People were suspicious. “We want to get rid of those socialist-realist ideas and you want to sell them back to us? You’re trying to sell rope to the family of a hanged man.” Incidentally, that was the very day when there was the assassination attempt on the life of the President of Macedonia, Kiro Gligorov.

It became obvious to me that one humble producer like Chris Torch can shake the very centre of a small, national, macho, patriarchal cultural axis. That one person can become a screen for every passion and fear, desire and paranoia which happens to be flying around. Like a lightning rod, that one person attracts whatever energies and anxieties people have about the world and themselves. The moral of this story is that with the best of soft-core multicultural intentions you can go straight to hard-core nationalist hell.

Of course, when these people, full of passions against strangers, happen to become strangers themselves and find themselves in foreign lands as immigrants, they carry those passions with them. And they project these passions on everyone passing them in the street. “They must despise me the way I would despise them if I was in their place.”

They nurture these passions, they beef them up, they put them in the heart of their identity, they wind up around them like a vine around a trellis, until it all becomes one and it’s hard to tell what is real and what is virtual, what is genuine and organic and what is contrived and artificial. This mindset then gets so convoluted that it is difficult for outsiders to understand it or probe into it. The sweet and sour irony is that this mindset is also difficult to understand for the one who has it.

I would like to try to dramatise this mindset in a little soliloquy I’ve written. It is an imaginary conversation that a Macedonian immigrant is having with Britain. It doesn’t take much of a stretch of the imagination to apply it to the Italian scene, where the addressing could be done, perhaps, by a North African.

TEXT:

Listen here, Britain. Do not be alarmed at my addressing you directly like this. Yes, it’s me, Zoran. Remember me? I believe it’s time for us to have a little talk, in private. Something’s been bothering me about our relationship for some time. I feel betrayed. I came here because of you. I believed I was yours and you were mine. I left everything

behind, sacrificed everything. I arrived at Heathrow, two years ago, with my heart in my mouth. I looked around. You were not there waiting for me. I didn't know what to do. I joined a long queue, some immigration officials wanted to know my name and the purpose of my visit.

Months passed. I was waiting patiently for you to give me a sign, to address me, to make a move. You never called. You acted as if you didn't know me at all. I put up with it. I work in a hardware store in London. I live alone. I am depressed and grizzly. Everything feels like salt in my wounds. Sometimes I think I should kill myself. A spectacular suicide would be some kind of solution. Leave a note blaming it all on you. I spend my weekends imagining you coming to my funeral, swollen with grief, all sexy in black.

I go to English evening classes. Paid for by the local council. I'm not very good at it, but neither are my English neighbours. They don't understand me, I don't understand them. I have an accent, they have an accent. I haven't read Shakespeare, they haven't read Shakespeare. I'm an outsider, they're outsiders. I go to evening school, they don't. Now that's not right. They should go to evening school too. "English language and culture for beginners."

I never went to university. A friend of mine told me I should study sociology. He said it was easy. He tried to explain to me what it was. I didn't understand him so I didn't go. I chose to be educated in the school of life. I was unemployed. Lived at home with my Mum and Dad. When I turned 33, my father said I should go and work in his friend's hardware shop. I said I would never work in a hardware shop, that I was born for better things. We quarrelled. I decided to leave. A friend told me I had a sexy Balkan face, that that was what they were looking for in the film industry.

I turned towards you. You also gave me reasons to believe I was an exception. Someone special. I could feel your promise. So I came here. I waited for my break, for you to take me out of my misery, invite me to tea at your place. But you never did.

The only job I could find was in a hardware store. Oh well, at least it's a job. All the English people I know are unemployed, living on benefits.

All that makes me sad and angry. And one day you will have to apologise for it. But, instead, you send me a crappy little amateur English film director who wants me to be

in his community project film for hyperactive immigrant children. I would play an immigrant who is drunk and has entered a school full of children, where his son is too. And his son is ashamed. And I am ashamed and I sober up and come to my senses. What the hell is that? It's insulting. Thanks, but that's not what I had in mind.

James Bond, yes! I would accept to be James Bond in a major production. I would be cool and fearless and kill the madman who wants to take over the world. And you come to the gala premiere in Leicester Square and give me a standing ovation. After which we go hand in hand into the London night. Shaken but not stirred. Having a spectacular success for me would be some kind of solution. I want to make blockbusters. Not educational films about how immigrants find it hard to integrate.

I refuse to work with that loser who can only find financing for projects with immigrants and has no one who wants to work with him. He started telling me about various schemes, funds and initiatives. Crossover, cultural diversity. "There's a whole game out there", he said, "to make quick money." He told me I would be ideal as The Face of the Autochthonous Minority. I asked him what it meant, I said it sounded like a venereal disease. "Don't you worry what it means", he said, "just come with me." So he takes me to meet this woman in an office. She sits me down. She starts telling me she would want to empower me and draw me into the public arena and give me access to the debate and the political process and how I would be able to voice my interests and get a concept of my cultural affinities. I had no idea what she wanted from me. I felt scared, like at the dentist's, so I ran away.

I laugh at your mechanisms of democracy. For years before it collapsed, Yugoslavia believed it had all the tools for survival and brotherhood and unity. Everyone pretended they loved everyone else. One day a strongman came and banged his fist on the table and said: "Gentlemen, the game is over. Fuck off." And that was all it took for the whole house of cards to slip into civil wars.

My friends tell me that your attraction for me is purely physical. That I am just a one-night stand. That you are a whore with millions of other lovers. That you have a hole where your heart should be and that you fill that hole, like a dragon, with 40 immigrants of various cultures a day. And you call this world culture.

Maybe I should turn my back on you and make a spectacular return home. That would be some kind of solution, too. Just say goodbye and say I've got to go because of my

obligations. And leave you in tears - walk away and not turn back. I'd go to my homeland, make up with my father, go back to my dances, my food, my flag and my gypsies. For little money they do all the shitty housework for you, cook, clean, iron, *et cetera* - it's like having a personal slave. At home I can be a king.

So you think I am the usual suspect, a bastard with dual loyalties, unbalanced and unpredictable. Well then, maybe I am. Maybe I should execute a spectacular liquidation, kill that director in the streets of London and stick a message of hate with a knife to his corpse. Yes, murder would be some kind of solution, too.

I know you don't care for me - it's all a lie. Strictly business. Smart Offshore Outsourcing. Cross-cultural conflict management. You can't fool me, I can see behind the façade....

Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And so on and so forth. Well, let me stop the story here and say a few words on behalf of my immigrant hero. I am confident I know how he feels and I am confident he would say this if he knew how.

He would ask you to please not give up on him. Because for as long as you reach out for him, he will be able to play hard to get. As long as you seek, he can hide. He needs you to play his bad mother, his whore, his ugly witch, so that he can feel like the innocent lamb, the good guy, the victim. But give him time. He's got a lot of growing up to do. He will work on his pride and learn how to listen. He is a better man for having loved you. He has so much to give. Don't give up on him.

Perhaps one fine day he will get the spectacular award of Employee of The Month at his hardware store. Which indeed would be some kind of solution. Then he will let you go. He will set you free and you'll go your way and he'll go his. And then he'll be able to smile and say to himself: What a wonderful multicultural and intercultural and transcultural world this is!