

Modna Jana

Interview with Angelina Atlagic,
Costume Designer of Pandur's latest production 'Barroco'

Quiet in Life, Powerful in Art

ANGELINA ATLAGIĆ
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Jovan Cirilov an acclaimed Serbian theatrologist and one of the greats of Serbian theatre and culture, wrote, among other things, in the catalogue for the exhibition of the works of Angelina Atlagic: 'Angelina Atlagic is her own competition. Once she has created and conquered something in her art, she immediately surpasses her own achievement with imagination and quality of the work that follows. Even though she changes from one show to another, she is always recognisable. I don't even have to look at the programme of a show, I immediately recognise her handwriting and her talent. She is quiet in real life and strong in her art. Her costume designer's work is grand as though she were a hundred, and yet she is of age a lady has no reason to hide.'

No other words would better introduce our today's interlocutor.

You have won awards in different corners of the Earth, you are equally successful in theatres all over the world. What do you think is the best evaluation of your work?

Receiving an award is a great acknowledgement. When it happens abroad, in an environment that doesn't know you, with a much stronger competition, that's even more of an honour. I have been fortunate to receive Borstnikov Award for my first production in Slovenia, that of 'Misanthrope'. It also happened to me with my first production in Moscow, 'Poisoned Tunic', and then 'The Fourth Sister' in Athens. It felt very good to see that my work is recognised and different from others'.

Even Almodovar was thrilled with your work. Have you by any chance received an offer to 'dress up' some of his films?

Premiere of the production of 'Barroco' in Madrid was really magnificent. We spent the whole Summer there. We worked in an extraordinarily creative environment. Actress Blanca Portillo amazed me with her enthusiasm. I have not seen such commitment to acting in a long time, especially since she is a star of the Spanish cinema. Blanca worked with Almodovar on his latest film, 'Volver', and during the filming she was offered a part in his following one. I am very glad that he came to the premiere and that he liked what he saw.

You often work with Slovene directors and theatres. Is there a difference between Serbian and Slovene theatres, bearing in

mind that Serbian theatres have a longer tradition and that Slovene ones are more west oriented?

In the past seven years I worked on thirty productions outside of Serbia, sixteen of those in Slovenia. If we add to that the last three productions I took part in in Spain, directed by Slovene director Tomaz Pandur, we could easily say that in the past years I have been working in Slovene theatres more than in Serbian ones. I like to work in new environments, I see it as a great challenge. It has become quite ordinary somehow for me to receive assignments a year in advance, so that I have enough time to prepare my work on such productions, to analyse the play, collect information and work on the sketches.

It is well known that you enjoy working with Tomaz Pandur. Is he very demanding in his work?

My collaboration with Tomaz Pandur started in Thessaloniki in 1997, when Goran Bregovic gathered us on his multimedia project 'Silences of the Balkans', which was the closing ceremony of Thessaloniki – Culture Capital of Europe. Ten years have passed from that time to this recent premiere of 'Barroco in Madrid'. In the meantime, we worked together on the productions of 'Inferno' and 'Alas'. Even though it doesn't seem like a lot, I could easily say that these productions have marked the past ten years of my work with their visual beauty and special aesthetics. Working on a play with Tomaz means that you are completely dedicated to what you started to do. He sets the highest goals and standards for himself and expects the same from his collaborators. He is a merciless professional and fierce perfectionist, but at the same time a complete enthusiast – but then, without such a combination there can be no real and great artistic achievements. That's why I like to work with him so much.

For the grand premiere of the opera 'War and Peace' at Bolshoy Theatre you created 500 costumes two years ago. This is a theatre that boasts of one of the longest traditions in the world. Did you feel nervous prior to this great event?

Working on the opera 'War and Peace' was an exquisite event in my work as an artist. I had the opportunity to meet and work with legends of Russian and world musical theatre – Mstislav Rostropovich and Boris Yelshin. The very notion that you're working at Bolshoy Theatre fills you with some kind of special inspiration, adding to that the fact that it was a Russian opera and one of the capital works of world literature, with an extremely large number of costumes. Of course, I was nervous, but also overjoyed to take part in such a memorable feat.

When preparing costumes, do you collaborate with actors, apart from taking their measurements?

A theatre performance is primarily created by actors. My job is to help them bring their characters to life, to make the costume, with its co-

lour, shape and function, tell something about the piece itself. A costume designer's work is very complicated and is strongly dependent on actor's ability to wear the costume appropriately and thus breathe life into it. For this reason, it is extremely important for me to establish a deeper contact with actors, because a costume is not merely clothing, but a sign that actively takes part in the performance, its dramaturgy and directing.

Describe for us the development of costumes for some historic spectacle, such as 'War and Peace'.

In the case of history based pieces, the most important things are research of the period, reaching for factographic particulars and insight into the life of the times in question. Preparations for 'War and Peace' lasted for a whole year. I'd spent a lot of time researching uniforms for various military branches, both Russian and French. Some issues arose when I moved away from historic accuracy, in order to emphasise certain aesthetic and dramaturgical specifics, which military uniform experts found inexcusable. I had to explain that we were not dealing with historical reconstruction, but an opera.

Does your work in theatre influence your style of clothing?

Of course. I carry out all my ideas and costume exhibitions on stage, so I have nothing left for other creations.

Do clothes make a man or is it man who makes the clothes?

Clothes do make a man. It is the first non-verbal information that we give about ourselves. At the same time, the way in which someone wears the clothes provides some more and often unexpected information. It's a two way street. It's difficult to fill an internal void with an external wrapping, but it is also difficult to imagine that an intelligent and interesting person is dressed in a careless or unsuitable way.

Is there any good taste left to speak of at the time when girls reveal all through their choice of clothes and leave nothing for others to discover?

We know that it is the charm of fashion. We live in a time when we all pay great attention to the external, there is a cult of the body, cult of nurturing, shaping and presenting the body. We could easily make an analogy with the ancient Greece, where the cult of the body was also very observed, but also that of the spirit. Proportions that were ideal back then remained the norm in the arts for centuries to come. This has all been shattered nowadays, with the attempts to model some sort of virtual bodies. When all this is coupled with transition and poor taste, it results in a tragicomic image we see in the streets so often.

Your work is impressive. Tomaz Pandur has recently opened an exhibition of your work in Belgrade. What followed the Bolshoy

Theatre and was it difficult to continue work and career after such a theatrical Mount Everest?

That's what I'd asked myself too, what's going to happen after Bolshoy Theatre? Is it easy to get an offer that would be as interesting and at such a high level? But at the time when I was working on the opera 'War and Peace', Tomaz Pandur invited me to work with Nacho Duato and his famous Compania Nacional de Danza of Madrid. In this way, my touring of the world theatres continued in the best possible way, with the work on the new ballet by one of the greatest choreographers of our time. The ballet 'Alas' is based on the film 'Wings of Desire', and Nacho Duato, choreographer, but also dancer and actor, will once again appear in it after a long time of not performing. This was a great honour for me, and a great challenge.

In 1985, Angelina Atlagic graduated from the Stage Costume Department of Faculty of Applied Arts in Belgrade. From 1984 until present, she designed costumes for over 150 plays, ballets, operas, children's and puppet theatres, three feature films and numerous projects for TV Belgrade and TV Skopje. In some productions she features as both Costume and Set Designer. Since 1999, she teaches Set and Costume Design at the Directing Department of Academy of Dramatic Arts in Cetinje, Montenegro. In the same year, she held lectures and presentations of her work in several US universities (Nebraska, Indiana, Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas). She exhibited her work in Czech Republic, Japan, Israel, USA and Canada.

Since the year 2000, she worked as costume and set designer in Russia (Bolshoy Theatre, Studio Fomenko in Moscow), Greece (National Theatre in Athens), Spain (Compania Nacional de Danza, Centro Dramatico Nacional, Centro Cultural de la Villa in Madrid), Italy (CSS Teatro stabile di innovazione del FVG in Udine), Sweden (Interkult in Stockholm), Slovenia (SNT Drama in Ljubljana, SNT Drama and Opera in Maribor, Slovene People's Theatre in Celje), Macedonia (Macedonian National Theatre and Drama Theatre in Skopje).