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Interview: Angelina Atlagic, Costume Designer

Costume is a sign that tells us a story

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Observing people in the street, in a theatre, I try to glean the system of non-verbal signs and messages that each person transmits about themselves through the clothes they wear. It helps me to portray different characters in plays, characters the spectators can recognise and understand in an instant.

Costume designer Angelina Atlagic presented herself to Podgorica audience in the 'Centar' gallery with the exhibition of theatre design entitled *Close Up*. This artist of extraordinary costume designing opus has from 1984 until present realised design of over a hundred and fifty plays, ballets, operas, children's and puppet productions, and costumes for three feature films, as well as significant projects in drama and entertainment programmes of TV Belgrade and TV Skopje. In some shows, she features as both set and costume designer. Her costume designs were nominated and pronounced the best in Spain, Greece, Russia... In an interview for our newspaper, she announces, among others, that this month she has the premiere of the play 'The Stone' by Marius von Mayerburg in Wiesbaden, for which she realised set and costume design. This is to be followed by the opera 'Mandrake' directed by Slobodan Unkovski at Belgrade's Madlenianum theatre, whereas in January, at Studio Fomenko, the premiere of 'Alice Behind the Looking-Glass' is to occur, for which she did costume design.

You have long resisted the idea to exhibit costumes outside the theatre context. Why?

I believe that theatre costume, plucked out of the context of a show, loses its essence. Without the actors, light, movement, set, it becomes a mere shell, an armour from which all life has vanished. What remains is a form, the colour, the texture of fabric, details...

Still, the exhibition you presented to the public of Podgorica bears the title *Close Up*. What have you eventually decided to point out when it comes to costumes?

I thought it could be interesting, showing what is not seen, and is nevertheless so visible and present in a show. A spectator begins to see things that are invisible from the distance common in a theatre, she or he thinks about the amount of time spent on making the costumes, of the skill of the tailors, seamstresses, hat makers, shoemakers and

other artists and craftspeople who take part in creation of a theatre costume. I wanted this exhibition to show a close up shot of costumes and thus affirm not only my work, but also the work of all these artists, more often than not anonymous, who are such important creators of a show. I also wanted to promote photographers whose work, at the very end, when the lights of the theatre are out, is the only document that testifies of its aesthetics and visual attraction.

When you do period costumes that are, I feel, the greatest challenge for a costume designer, how much time and research it takes you to create them?

For me, it doesn't matter whether a costume is contemporary or a period one, what matters much more is director's concept and possibility of creation that is equally interesting in all periods. Still, when it comes to period costumes, as in the case of the opera 'War and Peace', the time of research and collecting historical data is much longer than usual. The work on the opera took a year, and half of that time I spent in studying military uniforms from early 19th century and specifics of Russian costume of the time. I like to work with directors who encourage imagination and create visually attractive shows.

Costumes you design are not solely the work of the hands and of an imaginative eye, but also that of the precision of the mind, and your costume designing voice is very much recognisable. How do you achieve this authenticity on stage?

Even though I like visually attractive productions and costumes, I believe the visual part cannot be successful if it fails to follow specifics of the play in question and actively take part in the production, not as a mere wrapping around the actors' bodies, but rather as a sign and interpreter of the emotional states of characters, developing throughout the show and following directorial and dramaturgical concepts. I read each play several times before I begin the work on the drafts and I return to it again during the work itself. It is very important for me for everything included in the costume to be justified and functional within the play, not just a mere attraction. Making of a theatre costume is a very complex process, primarily on the plane of ideas, and then also in its realisation, there are many obstacles to be overcome on this journey.

Critics say that you're a fanatic of the unity of style, and in the past three years you have more often than not created entire visual identity of productions. How much of a challenge is set design for a costume designer?

From the very start of my work in theatre I have done both set and costume design, but in the past ten years I've done shows where I am the designer of both set and costume more. Even though it is difficult to do the two jobs at the same time, this has become increasingly interesting

for me, and in a way it's also easier to create costumes within my own set design. What I find very inspiring is that my approach as costume designer is significantly modified when I'm doing the set at the same time. For every artist it is important to develop and progress, and in the same way the work on set design has become a very important phase for me, not only in the sense of design, but as a way better to approach the essence of the production and the essence of being a theatre professional.

Has costume design stepped out of theatre and come closer to fashion design, and if yes, how much so?

These two fields have come to be very entwined recently and even switch places. On catwalks we increasingly see costumes that belong on stage more, because they are very much inspired by history, very rich in form, colour and details and the very technique of making the costumes has come closer to the ways in which it is done in theatre. At the same time, on stage, we see dominance of contemporary fashion costume, classics in contemporary costumes is very trendy and it is almost considered dated to do costumes of an adequate historic period. I think this is a matter of moment and that trends are constantly shifting, just like fashion itself. What gets established as a trend one day becomes obsolete the day after. Therefore, through reading the plays and becoming profoundly familiar with the very structure of the piece, I try to discover whether it's better to remain in the realm of history or whether a change of period would enable better interpretation of the play itself. That may be the very reason for which some translations of classics into contemporary costume work, and others don't.

From a costume designer's point of view, when you work on contemporary plays, how do you distance the costume from the everyday clothes and do you do this at all?

Realistically conveyed costumes from real life or 'historically accurate costumes' look either unconvincing or exaggerated on stage, which is why it is necessary for each costume to experience a sort of stage transformation and become 'theatrical'. It is a kind of translating into the language of stage and it might be for this very reason that it is neither easy or simple to do reconstruction of a period, just as it is neither easy or simple to stage contemporary costume. Thus, whenever I do contemporary costume, I try to translate it into theatrical language, where each detail on the costume, just as the costume itself, represents a sign that tells us a story, about the character, about its traits, its emotional state... Observing people in the street, in theatre I try to gain insight into this system of non-verbal signs and messages that every person transmits through the clothes they wear. It helps me portray different characters in the plays, characters the spectators can immediately recognise and understand.

Your costume designer's work is compelling and crowned with some of the greatest European awards. You work in Moscow, Greece, Italy, Macedonia, Spain, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro... What are the similarities and differences between these environments in terms of set and costume designing thinking?

Similarities are those that make theatre in all meridians operate in the same way and the fact that in it you can speak the language of theatre, understood by all. Parallel to this trait that connects all people of theatre, there are certain specifics that are primarily reflected in organisation and production parts. In Russia, a costume designer only brings the drafts with fabric samples to technical department, then they go through some kind of control by the art director and thence to workshops, where teams of experts work on their realisation. Costume designer is present at a single fitting and the next time she sees the costumes is on stage, during dress rehearsals. This is very different from the way this is done in our country, where it is possible to be involved at all stages of development of both costumes and the play and where the possibility of changes exists. I like both of these ways, but both of them require certain experience and preparation.

Rosanda Mucalica