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Interview with Angelina Atlagic

There's no erotic in nudism

ANGELINA ATLAGIĆ
Set & costume design
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Angelina Atlagic

Painter and costume designer Angelina Atlagic (45) is 'princess of imagination'. She was dubbed that by composer Zoran Hristic, a man with a refined sense of everything that makes life richer and more fulfilled.

Ever since 1985, when she graduated from the Faculty of Applied Arts in Belgrade, she worked on almost 150 productions as a costume designer and often as a set designer as well. She also designed costumes for three feature films, and worked on television and in numerous theatres in Serbia and abroad.

For years, she's been one of the most sought after masters of her craft. She is a professor with the Theatre Directing department of the Faculty of Drama Arts in Cetinje.

When was it that you entered this line of work?

Ever since I was a child I expressed great love and talent for drawing. After completing high school I couldn't decide between arts and applied arts, and finally I chose costume design, as a somewhat more concrete profession.

How long have you been painting?

The first three years at the Academy are dedicated to drawing and painting. I enjoyed these classes and considered dedicating myself to painting alone, but in year three a whole new world opened itself to me, so I changed my mind yet again and left painting for later.

Painter Milos Sobajic maintains that painting is not for women...

I believe that dividing work into men's and women's professions has been dated and obsolete for a long time, especially in the arts.

How much do people tell about themselves through their clothing?

Very much, for those who know how to read the language of clothes. Almost everyone is very particular about what they put on, even people who don't want to stand out. Clothes become a part of personality and a message transmitted to others even before one says a word. The first contact and first impressions often depend on one's appearance and one's clothes.

Do a woman's clothes speak about her man and vice versa?

The way one is dressed also speaks of the relationship of the two people involved. Couples tend to have a similar style of dressing. Sometimes their clothes are in a complete contrast with their actual character, a shy person can get dressed provocatively and eccentrically, in a desire to conceal their true nature.

How do you manage all that on stage?

In order for a character to be convincing on stage, it has to be alive, to play the subtle game of covering and uncovering and revealing. It is not enough to merely dress up an actor in a beautiful and historically accurate costume, they have to have a certain character, which is expressed through clothes first. It takes finding the right measure between how much of the character should be shown through clothes, and how much room the actor herself or himself has to have for that.

Is your profession obliging in terms of your own clothes?

I don't feel the need to design myself too much. I probably satisfy that wish in theatre, creating costumes for actors. What matters for me is for the clothes to be comfortable, functional and practical. I travel a lot, so I try to take as few things as possible, but also to have something for any occasion. I would describe my style as casual, but also elegant.

Which part of your body do you hide with your clothes?

I think it is nicer and more interesting to be more covered than not. History of costume shows us that each period had its own aesthetics and its own attitude towards the erotic. Décolleté in women's costume disappears and re-emerges through centuries. In Victorian times everything was buttoned up, the nineteen twenties revealed the legs, nineteen thirties the back and nowadays we can see women revealing almost everything, just walking down the street. I think that the measure of good taste has been lost in this flood of undressing, but also that of being intriguing. The very last stage of undressing is nudism and that's where the erotic stops.

Who has the last word in your work: you or the director?

Our work is entwined, and we have the last word in our respective domains. I also discuss things with actors. I like it when they're pleased

with my costumes, because they are not just clothes, but also a part of the characters they play on stage.

Has anything unpredictable ever happened to you during preparations for a show?

Some quite unpredictable situations often occur on the journey from drafts to the fully realised costume. It's become anecdotal how the actor Voja Brajovic resisted to put on the costume I created for him for 'Theatre Illusions', and a couple of years later, in a catalogue for one of my exhibitions, he wrote that this has become his favourite costume and favourite part. At the same theatre, Yugoslav Drama Theatre, during the fittings for the play 'Powder Keg' almost all actors were against my design concept. I was sure that I was right, and with the help of director Unkovski the costumes were not changed. After successful premiere everyone was pleased, and I found great satisfaction in the actors congratulating me. Actors' often experience a play in quite differently from us who observe the process from the outside, as a whole.

What shows you worked on are running in Belgrade and worldwide?

Two recent shows I designed both set and costumes for are currently on in Belgrade: 'It Had to Be So' at YDP and 'Claus and Erica' at Little Theatre 'Dusko Radovic'. The opera 'War and Peace' is on the repertory of Bolshoy Theatre in Moscow, whilst the plays 'Poisoned Tunic' and 'Rhinoceros' are on at the famous theatre 'Fomenko'. Ballet 'Alas' is running in Madrid, and they have just completed touring Korea. Tours in Paris and Sydney are scheduled for next year. Opera 'Lakme' was done in Maribor in coproduction with the Japanese, so it also had a premiere in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya. I am currently working on the production of 'Bocaccio' in Madrid, with the premiere scheduled for September 12.

How much are you interested in sports?

While I was living in Sombor I used to be a very active volleyball player. I prefer team sports, but since I don't have time for them, I keep fit at a fitness club near where I live, although I don't really manage to do it quite regularly.

How do you feel about the sports persons' 'costumes'?

Sports gear has recently undergone great changes in terms of design and thus became a part of everyday wear. Trainers used to be worn for sports exclusively, and now they even match an evening suit.

What do you think about sports uniforms?

I like to see members of our national teams in well designed suits. Uniform has its purpose and aesthetics and I am sorry to note some sort

of repulsion towards it them in our country. For instance, school uniforms have been put out of use even though they have a series of very positive traits. They are practical, and they also diminish the visibility of social differences, ever more pronounced in our society.

Do you only think about yourself in your journey through life?

I like team work and that's probably one of the reasons I chose theatre, which entails tolerance and a flair for working in a group. I like moments of creative solitude, but I believe life has no meaning if we spend it enclosed and self-centred. I think the beauty lies in giving and socialising, in exchange.

Have you found the meaning of life?

I think I am on my way to finding it. My work is such that in it you constantly wonder about the meaning of life. Working on a theatre play involves re-examining things on a daily basis, from personal to social and philosophical.

What do you deem most valuable?

Moments in life when we are completely aware of our own existence. Unfortunately, this usually happens at times of great crises or misfortunes. It's only then that we discover the true purpose and beauty of living, whereas otherwise we tend to be engulfed in insignificant everyday matters.

Are you religious?

Not in a traditional sense, but also not in the fashionable one. I don't need God to tell me what's good and what's not, a moral being inside me tells me that. I believe every one of us, regardless of their religious affiliations, has that kind of responsibility for themselves and others.

What is your philosophy of life?

I don't believe in destiny and in predestination, but I do believe everyone gets what they deserve and what they invest in themselves and others. If we give ourselves entirely to what we do, if we put all our love and skill into that, each work becomes art.

What are the things that love depends on?

First of all, on what's within us. It is difficult to find in others what we don't have ourselves. Being in love is a fleeting condition, and love is a process that goes through various stages.

You have a job you love, how about love?

At the moment, I am very pleased with my work and love life. For everyone involved in the arts, it is very important to have a partner who has understanding for this type of work, like my life partner Miodrag Colic, a great lover of theatre. Even though he's a plastic surgeon, he doesn't miss a single premiere in Belgrade, and he is always there to see every one of my shows abroad.

Do you have any vices?

Anything you do in excess can be a vice: food, alcohol, cigarettes... I try to enjoy everything in moderation. I'm not a follower of the 'nothing but healthy living and exercise' trend.

How do you spend your holidays?

Most of the time I go to exotic journeys with Miodrag, a passionate traveller, to Asia, Africa, South America... Since vacation and night-life are not our primary goal, we don't travel with travel agents' packages, in order to get to know a country and its people in the most genuine way possible.