



**Goran Stefanovski**

## Tales from the Wild East

The lack of comprehension for historical as well as present day events on the Balkans has to do with the very different character of master narratives in east and west. If only the West would "try to create a context, to adjust its horizon of expectation" to the Balkans' stories, and not vice versa, writes Goran Stefanovski.

### When were we sexy?

Once I discussed a topic for a speech with my friends from the Hamburg International Summer Festival. They suggested a provocative title: "Why the East is not sexy any more". I instinctively felt attacked. What? Me, *not sexy*? What could they possibly mean by that? Sexy how? Sexy by what criteria? "Sexy" — What a cheap word! I looked at the question again. "Not sexy *any more*?" This implied that we *had been* sexy before. Before when? When exactly were we sexy?

Could this mean that the East was sexy when it *wasn't* sexy? When it was struggling under Stalinist yoke? And that it *isn't* sexy now that it's trying to *become* sexy in the Western sense of the word? Was it sexy when it pretended that it was innocent and naive, and stopped being sexy now that it pretends to be sophisticated and experienced? Was it sexy when it was *passee* and folkloristic and stopped being sexy now that it wants to emulate the West and catch up with the latest "isms"?

My Festival friends are clever. Maybe their thesis was ironic, maybe deadly serious, maybe both. But they got me hooked. I started itching to say *something* on the matter. Something cynical, or something deadly serious or both. (My "something" will zoom on ex-Yugoslavia which is where I lived and knew best. I don't know how much my examples will apply to other Eastern European countries.)

Eastern Europe is desperately trying to reinvent itself and define its new identity. Its artists are waking up from a historical narcosis. They are rubbing their eyes, shaking off their delusions and resetting their memory. They are looking at the clock to check the time, feeling around to check the place. They are gazing at themselves in the mirror, bewildered. They wonder what to wear: "What do I want to look like? Who am I?"

Most of the clothes on offer at the moment come from the fashion houses of the West. The Eastern European politicians are unashamedly parading in them. They feel proud to beg money wherever they can smell it. They gladly change their countries' constitutions to meet demands from the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. They wholeheartedly

embrace the global, multinational mode of operation and call it progress. Yet these same politicians no longer pay their artists. "Sorry! No state control, no state money. We are all on the market". Still, from these same artists, under the table, they tacitly expect a bit of nationalist purity, of searching for the roots, of the "old time religion". They say: "Yes, we have the new hardware now, but let's keep the old software. Yes, we *are* all on the market and we *have* sold our factories and our asses, but it's *your* job not to sell our hearts and souls". So not only do the politicians keep their artists hungry, they also require them to sing.

No wonder some of the artists pine for the certainties of the "ancien regime". They say: "At least the censors paid undivided attention to us and there was heating in winter. The dictates of the party weren't as ruthless as the dictates of popular taste. Socialist realism wasn't any worse than capitalist realism." This whole sweet and sour agony goes under the fanciful name of "social transition". Which is another name for spiritual rape.

And the West yawns. "We've seen it all before. We went through that ourselves a hundred years ago. It's Oliver Twist primary accumulation of capital. Boring! You'll take a hundred years to reach our social democracy. By which time we might be off to the moon." So the Eastern European artists seem to be doomed not only to undignified poverty at home, but also to being hopelessly out of fashion in the West, where they look for salvation. Insult added to injury.

My discussion with the Festival about the topic for the speech somehow came off the agenda with the beginning of the war in Kosovo. NATO bombed Serbia into oblivion. As if to jump-start it into modernity. Did that make us temporarily sexy again? I will never know.

### **How I lost my story**

My name is Goran Stefanovski. This is the story of my life in a few short sentences. I was born in the Republic of Macedonia, which, at that time, was part of the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. My father was a theatre director and my mother was an actress. I spent my first 40 years in Skopje as a playwright and a teacher of drama. I married Pat, who's English. We had two children and we were happy. We had a good story.

Then, in 1991, the Yugoslav civil wars started. Our lives took a sharp U- turn. Pat decided that the future of the Balkans wasn't going to be the future of our children. They moved to England. I started commuting between Skopje in Macedonia, where my secure past and my greater family were, and Canterbury in England, where my uncertain future and my nuclear family were. I started living between two stories. "We 've lost our story", I told Pat. "No," she said, "the story has lost us".

When I first arrived in England, as Sarajevo was burning, I met a well-meaning producer who wanted to cash in on my story and made no secret about it. She told me: "Goran, you're an asset now. But it'll only last six months. You must hurry up."

The six months passed. I didn't make my producer rich. Now I spend my days trying to work out the continuity between my two narratives and the artistic role of someone on the borderline. I patiently try to explain to my friends and relatives in Skopje that I haven't forsaken them forever and that I'm not living

in the lap of luxury in the promised land of the West. I patiently try to explain to people in Britain that I am not a refugee bleeding-heart playwright with a post-traumatic stress disorder. I have little success in convincing either side. They all seem to have strong ideas about who I must be. They have their clichés and stereotypes.

### **How my friends lost their story**

So now I live in Canterbury, an olde worlde, touristy little town with a cathedral. On the main street there is a comics shop selling Americana novelties. In the shop window there is a life-size colour cut-out of a character from the popular television science fiction series *Babylon 5*. It is a picture of a creature with a big halo of flesh around her head. I know the actress behind this character. She is a friend of mine. Her name is Mira Furlan. She used to be one of the best actresses of ex-Yugoslav theatre, film and TV. She was the protagonist of our drama and the hero of our story. Now she is an alien. She has become one with the stereotype about Eastern Europeans.

Recently a friend came to see me in Canterbury. His name is Rade Serbedzija. He was a legendary actor in ex-Yugoslavia. He was Hamlet. He was in countless films and new plays. He was the protagonist of our drama and the hero of our story. Rade is now an international star who gets parts in Hollywood films. As what? As a suspicious, Eastern European mafioso, an unreliable type, verging on the psychopathic. Hamlet has become a subsidiary character. The protagonist has turned into an antagonist. Rade has become an illustration of the cliché about Eastern Europeans.

We had a barbecue, on a rainy English Sunday afternoon, under an umbrella. We drank wine and talked about old times. Then I took him to see the photograph of his alien compatriot Mira Furlan. I looked at them next to each other. The two ex-heroes in virtual reality. Out of their history and out of their geography and out of their story. I told Rade: "We've lost our story". "Maybe we never had it" said he.

I can hear the yawns from the post-modernist gallery. "Story. Continuity. Fate. Life. Death. Why are you Eastern Europeans so gloomy and pathetic and paranoid? Why can't you cheer up a little. Wake up! The world is a post-modern game!" Well, possibly it is. Or, possibly it can be. When it isn't a pre-modern mass grave.

### **What is a story?**

A story is a narrative. An account. A sequence of events. It tells us who we are, who we have been, who we could become. It is an interpretation. Like identity, which is also a story of who we think we are, a constant negotiation and renegotiation of self. Like theatre, which likewise is a reflection, a vision of the world and oneself, a reading of the past and a projection of the future.

Let me make a few personal observations about how I see the differences between the Eastern and Western European basic stories, between the two master narratives. I hope that might throw some light on where my East is and how it came to be there.

### **Master narratives**

Last year I saw a BBC documentary about Kosovo. A teacher in a classroom in a Serbian school was telling his pupils that five hundred years ago a battle was lost against the Turks and that now it was their task to take revenge for it. This teacher was offering these children a narrative, a template for their identity. It was full of warriors, historical revenge, unsettled scores, sacred national ideals on the horizon. There was too much of my history in it.

My daughter Jana, who was six when we arrived in Great Britain, had stories in her first text book about a group of children who lost their dog on the London Underground. A funny story with a hint of magic in it. No history, no wars, no fixed identities. A global, open, decentralised, civic concept of the world. There was none of my history in it.

I kept asking myself which of these narratives was better for my daughter. And why should these narratives be mutually exclusive? And could there be a healthy balance between them? I needed urgent answers to these questions not only as a parent, but also as a citizen. Let alone, artist.

Who is in charge of these narratives, anyway? They are written by civil servants in various ministries of education. (Apparently it took the German and French Ministries of Education ten years to finally standardise the school history books and decide how the subject was to be taught to children.) These master narratives create the social context and intellectual discourse in which an artist operates. They are the centrifugal forces of society and culture. The artist can take it or leave it, but the context is there. Like gravity.

### **Donald Duck v. Byzantium**

I would like to examine these two different master narratives in their ugliest, most vulgar forms. Let me call the Eastern world Byzantium. It is a closed society, vertical, patriarchal, macho, rural, only one person at the top knows anything — it is a closely knit society, where you can never be lonely, but can never be left alone either. Social position is fixed; everyone has a nickname — your past, future and present are all a given thing. There is no democracy, no tolerance, no logical space for homosexuals — or women, for that matter. Individualisation comes at a deadly price. This is a world of ethnic fundamentalism. On one side, brothers in eternal embrace, on the other — traitors and outsiders. This narrative is black and white and is only concerned with the collectivist tribal issues. It allows primarily for a big National Theatre, casts of thousands, operatic reckonings. The Eastern European story is a tale of one lock and one key.

On the very opposite of this world stands Donald Duck. He lives in an urban, fast, global, consumerist, post-industrial society. He has no mother, no father, no wife, no children. He takes care of three nephews — God only knows whose they are. He sees his girlfriend from time to time, but then they go to their separate homes in their separate cars. Donald Duck doesn't belong to anything larger than himself. He is an individual par excellence. A loner in pursuit of happiness. He is like a cowboy in a saloon whose life depends on being quick on the draw. His narrative has no geography or history. It is splintered, fragmented, dispersed. Donald Duck is the bastion of political sterility and metaphysical failure.

### **Donald Duck enters Byzantium**

What Eastern Europe has been witnessing in the last ten years is the entrance of Donald Duck into Byzantium. He walks with a swagger and he brings his model of the world. (This model is primitive and unlike the Western European social–democracy. It's a variety of cowboy capitalism with blazing guns. Or perhaps that's what it becomes when it reaches our shores.) Countless Western non–governmental organisations explain in endless workshops what should be done and how. The Eastern Europeans pay lip service and snigger behind their backs: "Just leave the money and piss off. You ain't gonna tell me what to do. " Donald Duck comes with a stick and a carrot and the universal mechanism of greed and consumerism. "Let's create chaos, and then establish our order. Let's create hunger and then sell our food. Let's make every Chinese think they're worthless unless they drive one of our cars."

### Eating salt

During our civil wars CNN showed us as tribes with complicated names and strange political habits. Against this backdrop were the groomed and coherent CNN reporters, in pristine shirts, putting order into the chaos, explaining the mess in plain English. Did it work? Western intellectuals would often catch me at international conferences and ask me in hushed voices: "What exactly is going on down there?" So CNN did manage to make one thing clear: that we are incomprehensible. "Don't bother to understand *them*?"

This is unfair and it hurts me. And I know how my mind works when I am hurt. I am ready, as the saying goes, to eat a kilo of salt. Let me shift gears here and stray from my essay into a dramatic soliloqui in my atavistic voice: "You think I'm incomprehensible? You ain't seen nothing yet. I'll show you incomprehensible! Yes, I know I'm making a fool of myself and eating salt in front of you while you shake your heads. And I do it just to spite you. Just to damage myself. Because I have learnt in all of Dostoevsky that the only way I can prove I am free is to work against my better interest. My Protestant wife will never understand this. She refuses to accept this as reasonable human behaviour. And I agree with her. But I only behave like this in unreasonable situations, under unreasonable pressure. Only when you step on my foot. So now you're telling me I'm an irrational monster. You, who've seen me before and who know I'm not usually this way. You, who've told me yourself how generous and hospitable and warm and bighearted and soulful I am. You say you're not happy with my story! You tell me I should change it? And unless I do, you would? You know what? Fuck you! How will you change my story? With a bombing campaign? With the Hague Tribunal? With UN Resolutions? With bribes and blackmail? With theatre festivals? I don't think so. I will change my story when I want to and if I want to. You think I'm not sexy? So what. As the poet said: "We're ugly but we have the music". Now you have me on the barricades! And this battle will go well into the next millenium. And in the one beyond it!"

Back to the essay! Let me make one thing clear. I am ranting here against the ugly, invisible multitudes who make and maintain a cliché. I am attacking public opinions which are being discussed in bar and pubs. I'm certainly *not* addressing here my friends in Frankfurt and Stockholm and Avignon and Kilburn who feel as much trapped by all this as me. I'm not addressing the idealists who went to the Korcula philosophy school and who, in 68, adored my ex–country. And whose ideals now lie smashed as much as mine. Who can now see how the banks and international companies buy their own Western governments, as much as ours. Their world and my world are closer than ever.

## Whose is the story?

Now that the wars are over, all we get on British television from time to time is news from the life of the British battalions over there. It is the story of "our boys in the wilderness". The story belongs to the storyteller. *Casablanca* is not about the Second World War in Europe and Africa. It is about a sexy American from New York. It is about an individual in pursuit of the American dream. It is about Hollywood and Disney. Excuse me, where is my place in all this? I don't mean private space, I mean personal space.

When Indiana Jones goes "out there", he doesn't go to any particular history or geography. He goes to a jumbled-up Third World, full of greasy losers, mostly without a face, and mostly killed wholesale. Because Hollywood doesn't make room for geography and history, Eastern European artists do not feel properly represented. So they yearn to supply their history and geography. Their own map of the world. Their own compass. But here lies the trap which makes them obsolete. Their kids who go to the cinema are between 18 and 22 and they don't care about geography and history. They care about Indiana Jones.

How do you solve this impossible equation! In my part of town they say: "How about I tie both your hands behind your back and we play basketball?"

## My map of the world

The West nurtured a granite conviction that "no good could come from the East". That the story of the countries behind the Iron Curtain was one of a drab life, bleak aesthetics and secret police. This was a political projection created for the purposes of the Cold War. In Yugoslavia we always cried for exemption, always wanted to prove we had "our own way." Perhaps we *were* an exception to the rule, but it was the exception which proved the rule. The cliché applied to us too.

(Of course I have these clichés myself. I have always been suspicious of anyone who plays rock and roll and is not white Anglo-Saxon or plays jazz and is not black. So I should not complain when I meet people who are suspicious of Eastern Europeans dabbling with the performing arts.)

So how was our story different from the cliché? What, if any, was our *differentia specifica*? Well, we grew up in the sixties on our folk stories as much as we grew up on Kafka and Sgt Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band. We enjoyed unrestricted travel abroad. We grew up on the Belgrade International Theatre Festival — BITEF. The Living Theatre came to Yugoslavia in 1968, when hardly anyone knew about them outside New York City. Grotowski, Brook, Bob Wilson were household names in Yugoslavia. We brushed shoulders with them. We believed that we sent them to the West. That they came to show *us* what they had first, and only then, after our approval, would they go and show it elsewhere. We were very pompous and arrogant. Almost sexy!

But, so what? Perhaps *because* the Yugoslav experience was this sophisticated that it met such a shameful and violent end. Belgrade never really appropriated the novelties of its BITEF festival. It watched and observed, but it took little in. Under the veneer of Europeanism, it kept its Byzantine narrative intact.

## The deadly pull of the master narrative

The historical rhythms of Eastern Europe have been asynchronous with the West. Particularly in the places which were under Ottoman rule. These societies never saw the Renaissance, Classicism or the Enlightenment, they never saw the Industrial Revolution, the Napoleonic Code or the social contract of Jean–Jacques Rousseau.

This arrhythmia is a source of constant tedious comparisons and a permanent state of dismay. Our identity oscillates between deep inferiority and a lofty superiority. The inferiority is based on a sense of economic worthlessness. The superiority is based on a sense that we are the exclusive owners of Soul. (This is what even the two–bit Slav mafiosos believe. I personally can't see any differences between them and the two–bit mafiosos anywhere else.)

The luxury of artists in the West is that they can stay away from politics and still have ample space for discourse. In the East because of the centralisation of society, there are no avenues for alternative discourse and no parallel spaces. Staying away from politics looks like retreating into autism. You can see productions, made smack in the middle of a historical earthquake, which bear no resemblance to that reality. They witness something else — a certain escapist solipsism of "this is not happening, this is not here, this is not us".

It does take a lot of courage to stay alive and make ends meet under the everyday pressure of that "historical soap opera". This courage can't be appreciated from the outside. The Western observer pretends to know exactly what could be done in the situation, how these wrongs could be made right, and how this drama could be powerfully dramatised. (It's like watching football on TV and knowing how to score every time.) A western novelist once said to me: "I so wish I could live in your part of the world, then I would have a story." That may be so, but she forgets that the chances are she would be so sucked into that story that she would not have the time or the energy to even comprehend it, let alone articulate it in a novel form.

### **An unwanted story**

So what was this lamentable lost story like in the performing arts of my ex–country? I believe it was authentic and genuine and pretty well articulated. In 1990 the Eurokaz Theatre Festival in Zagreb decided to show the Yugoslav "performing arts story" as it then stood. Within the Festival there was a meeting of the Informal European Theatre Meeting or IETM. A whole new generation of young Yugoslav directors was presented to the Western independent producers. Their names were Dragan Zivadinov, Vito Taufer, Haris Pasovic, Branko Brezovec... These people were fearless in telling a story. I believe the story was sexy, as were the people who were telling it. As were the other, slightly older directors, like Slobodan Unkovski, Ljubisa Ristic, Dusan Jovanovic... It was the story of our time and place and context, a pastiche, a tragi–comic tale of a world spinning between two mighty political grinding wheels. But the story failed to sell. The Western producers said it was hard to follow, difficult to file, they said it did not match Western horizons of expectation.

So the story went to the dogs. Together with the storytellers. Some of them became ideologists of political regimes, some ministers of culture. They were all sucked in by the centrifugal forces of their respective master narratives. Perhaps the Western producers (and here I mean not only theatrical, but also political) could have tried to create a context, to adjust the horizon of expectation to the story, and not vice versa. Perhaps, just perhaps, if that story

had been recognised and supported, there would not have been the war which demolished it.

And now, after the rivers of blood, the question arises again: "Wo ist Osten"? Well, there was a time when the East (at least my corner of the East) was screaming "Here we are!" and the West replied: "We can't see you. You're not where we expect you to be. Be somewhere else, so we can see you".

But that is all history now. And there's no use crying over spilt milk. I know there was nothing personal in it, amigos! It was strictly business!

### **What to do?**

It is street wisdom in the Balkans that it is impossible to be born and die in the same country. Within one's lifetime, the house will fall on your head and you'll have to start building again. "The constant repetition of the same". It is a given, like a natural disaster.

The Eastern European theatre is stewing in the pressure cooker of political turmoil and is undergoing a tectonic shift of identity. It is consoling itself that real artistic birth is only possible in the crucible of historical pain. (And, to be fair, there is the towering Western success of the films of Kusturica and Mancevski and the music of Bregovic which the Eastern European performing artists can strive to emulate.)

The Eastern European performing artists will have to snap out of their amnesia and remember that it was their own convoluted society which, in a spasm at the turn of the century, spurted out Chekov, Malevich, Stravinsky, Eisenstein, Nijinsky, Harms, Vvedenski and Bulgakov. The same names which the ever-so-flexible West appropriated as its own. And so it happened that the East which came up with these names became known as the Wild East. And the Wild West, which came up with Wyatt Earp and Calamity Jane, became the suave and cool proprietor and guardian of modernism.

The Eastern performing artists have some old-fashioned and lonely homework ahead of them — to find their voices, remember their names, regain their self-assurance, reclaim their space and recognize their continuity. They have to earn their stories and make them their own. For whatever these stories are worth. And however sexy they may, or may not, be.

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