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An interview with Stephan Komandarev, director of *Directions*: “The first step is to have a clear picture of what’s happening. I don’t see any other way.”

David Walsh and Joanne Laurier

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We spoke with Bulgarian filmmaker Stephan Komandarev, writer-director of Directions, in Toronto during the recent film festival.

David Walsh: Can you tell us something about your life? I understand you studied medicine.

Stephan Komandarev: I studied medicine, but at a certain point I realized my interest was not to become an internist or a gynecologist, for example. My interest lay in psychiatry, so during my education in general medicine I did supplemental courses in psychology, group therapy. I received a diploma in group therapy. So when I finished my education in general medicine, I immediately began to work at a psychiatric hospital in Sofia for children.

My career path seemed clear. My chief told me, ‘One day you will be the head of the hospital.’ But it was in the middle of the 1990s and it was a very difficult time in Bulgaria; economically and in other ways.

We received some donations from another university, two cameras and other equipment. The idea was to shoot some scenes of family therapy, keeping the identities anonymous, for discussion among the doctors and also for the benefit of the medical students. Because I was the youngest doctor there, I was told I had to take care of the equipment. So I started to work with this. Slowly, I began to become interested. I began to take one of the cameras home on weekends, shoot small things with friends. I stayed at night to do the editing in the hospital etc. etc. After that I went to film school, so after 20 years I stopped doing medicine.

Joanne Laurier: What was the situation for Bulgarian cinema in the 1990s? I imagine it was difficult.

SK: Of course. There were only one or two films per year. Now it’s a little bit better. Now it’s ten films per year. It’s far from satisfying.

DW: Is there no problem with censorship today?

SK: No. Before 1989, there was political censorship. Today it’s a matter of economic censorship. It’s very difficult to find financing for a film. Before ‘89, there were 50 films per year made in Bulgaria. There were some very good ones made in those days. Lyudmil Kirkov [1933-95] was one of the most interesting directors. The end of my film, in the snow, is an homage to his last film, *Friday Night* [1987].

You had a working film industry where various kinds of films were made. Today Bulgaria is the setting for various American action films, because we are cheap and there are many good professionals.

JL: What was the origin of this particular film?

SK: It’s a small and very personal film in some respects. I have two children. My daughter’s in the film. She’s the girl who’s going to school

in the morning and then at the end. Several years ago I began to ask myself: what will happen with these two kids? What will they do? Where will they live? How will they live? After 27 years of so-called transition in Bulgaria, the results are not at all good.

There are many things that are not positive. In general, the cultural level of the society has fallen further and further down. I also teach students at the same film school where I studied, and I can tell you that year after year the level is going down. The level of poverty is growing larger and larger. Bulgaria is the poorest country in the European Union. The country is shrinking. In ‘89 we were nine million, now we are seven million, and that without a war! This is without precedent.

The prognoses are not good and for some reason I made this decision to stay in Bulgaria. My family is there, my friends are there. I made that decision at the beginning of the ‘90s when many of my friends emigrated. That’s why I care about what is happening to the society, to its people, to its culture. There is a very strong crisis of values in Bulgaria. The reality that you see on the media is totally fake. That’s why we chose the motif of the taxi driver, because they’re sitting there and they’re in the middle of this reality, of life.

Certainly the picture we have in our movie is very different than the picture you see in the Bulgarian media and get from the politicians. But I can say this is the real picture, this is the reality. It’s very important for me that people in Bulgaria see the film. It’s opening in January. We are going to make a big campaign, not so that we can make a lot of money, but so that the film can get a big audience.

DW: It’s also an angry film, which it needs to be.

SK: Of course, if we want to try to change something, this is the way.

DW: Was this primarily the product of feelings that had accumulated over time, or was it the reaction to something that had immediately occurred?

SK: It was an accumulation of experiences, observations, discussions with friends, a lot of reading of various authors, Bulgarian and otherwise. So it was a process, it took me years. That’s why I said this film is very different from my previous work; because at the moment I’m not so much interested in the past. After ‘89 we made many films about how it was during the previous decades. Now it’s been 27 years and the things happening now are much more interesting or relevant or disturbing; and very crucial for this part of the world.

DW: In the opening scene, the mafia-banker is terrifying and obviously based on reality. Where does this social type come from?

SK: Bankers all around the world are similar. They want more and more. And if there are no controls on them, well, we saw what happened in 2008. In Bulgaria the frustration is similar. But of course we are a small country; we know each other, so things are very clear, transparent. All the stories in the film are based on real events.

There was a case several years ago of the killing of a banker; a similar situation, not in Sofia, but in the town of Burgas on the Black Sea. So we took this story ... of course we changed this and that, but it's real. It's a form of blackmail, what the banker does. This situation doesn't exist only in the banks; it's everywhere--this connection between the financial elite, the politicians. It's part of the octopus, which is not only Bulgarian.

Everyone in Bulgaria knows about this criminality, but the thing that is most difficult for me is that more and more for many people this is "normal." But it's not normal.

JL: Do these types come from the former Stalinist bureaucracy?

SK: Yes and no. Most of this transition that was made in 1989 was made by the *nomenklatura* [key Stalinist officials]. They wanted to transform their political power into economic power. So the Communist *nomenklatura* was the engine of this change. In this process, they did a lot, they took a lot. Now many of these people, who were in the Communist Party before, are the biggest anti-Communists, the biggest fans of the European Union, of United States and anti-Russian. I know many examples personally of this. People who were the most furious Communists before, in one night they turned one hundred and eighty degrees. Now they're acting the same way, but with different slogans and aims. It's very cynical.

These people don't have principles or values. They are again on the top and we see the results.

I am not nostalgic for that totalitarian period. But in this fake "transition" we've destroyed many positive things. We had a very good social system. The standard of living was much better; the educational system was amazing, health care, etc. We destroyed all of this and, as I told you, without a war. Although when you travel out of the big cities in Bulgaria you feel like it's a country that's been at war.

DW: You said last night at the question-and-answer session that to show reality is part of changing reality.

SK: The first step is to have a clear picture of what's happening. I don't see any other way. I'm a filmmaker and this is my way. I am not a politician. So, of course, the first step is to have a mirror-picture. After we have the picture we can try to change something. Because now at the moment the biggest problem is that people in Bulgaria, and not only in Bulgaria, are living day-by-day and do not have pictures of their country and their lives.

JL: Are the suicide rates going up?

SK: Yes, although not like Estonia, they are the champions at this. The bridge idea came from when I was shooting a documentary three years ago about a fisherman on the Black Sea. There is a big bridge in the town of Varna on the Black Sea and one of the places where our hero was anchoring his boat was under that bridge. So during the shooting, there were two cases of people jumping. And for the fishermen this was quite normal—one or two people per week. So we were very shocked. We saw a car stop and the fisherman would say, 'Ah, another guy jumped from the bridge.'

DW: Young, old?

SK: Every age. One of the biggest problems is what's happening with the older generation. They spend their lives working every day, and now they're living on only \$100 or \$200 a month. My father died less than one year ago. I was taking care of him because the last few years he was ill. It was really very difficult. I succeeded in helping him. He received all the treatment he needed, because I was there. The pension he received, and he was a professor, was only enough to pay for his medicine. That was it. Bulgaria is full of old people who are living alone and for them it's a real

nightmare to stay alive.

Something new has happened in the last ten years, there's a new generation—the Skype generation—because the parents are somewhere in the world, working in Spain, in England, and so forth. These kids are raised by the grandparents. And the only connection they have with the parents is via Skype. And the results are terrible because the grandfather and grandmother are not the same as the mother and father. They have better clothes, better jeans, better shoes, but it's really a problematic generation; a lot of violence.

I did a documentary seven years ago about a town in the northwest of Bulgaria. It was a small town almost without women because all the women were in Italy working as caretakers for old people. So in this town, there were only kids and fathers, more or less. And they would receive money from the women and, of course, there were a lot of problems.

JL: One of the things you mentioned at the question-and-answer session was that the man who was on the bridge ready to commit suicide was a professor who spoke seven languages. You mentioned that you knew many people with higher education who were obliged to drive a cab.

SK: This is true. The salary of a teacher is very low. You must do something else to pay your bills. Some people start to drink and go into a depression.

JL: Have there been many strikes?

SK: Yes, there are some, but they do not have success. In Bulgaria, this is a problem. If you try to fight for social justice, for more salaries, for protecting people who are working, then you are nostalgic for "communism." Now we have a new God, the God of the market; the invisible hand of the market.

JL: And it's a social catastrophe.

DW: Is there an effort to whip up Bulgarian nationalism?

SK: Of course, in society this is the easiest way for many people to explain the problems. It's much easier to blame, for example, the refugees, the immigrants. In the film, there are callers to the radio show speaking along these lines. One of them says we Bulgarians are the most supreme creatures in the world. That was my voice, incidentally. But not my ideas!

DW: The call-ins were effective—and real.

SK: Many of these comments I took from the Internet after the real killing of the banker in this town of Burgas.

DW: Where does Bulgaria stand in relation to US-Russia geopolitics?

SK: Now I am writing a new script—the second part of something like a trilogy. It will be a feature film about three pairs of policemen. Two police officers are arguing all night about this, because in Bulgaria we have a strong connection with Russia. This is a way to avoid thinking about what is happening at the moment. Fake battles: "Ameriphile" against Russophile.

It's complicated in Bulgaria. We are in the European Union, we are in NATO. Bulgarians like to deal with life through anecdotes or jokes. So at the beginning of the film, you have the joke about only optimists being left in Bulgaria, because all the pessimists have left. We have a joke in the new film about the European Union: that after Brexit, the only country that will stay in the EU will be Bulgaria. After Bulgaria becomes part of any alliance or organization, it breaks up!

DW: You have extreme right-wing elements in the Bulgarian government now, don't you, fascist types?

SK: Let's say, they are trying to be. They are trying to be nationalists. In the typical Bulgarian way, it's not very serious. They are not fascists. They just love money. This is their way to make money. It is good that they are not real fascists.

JL: The way you portrayed the banker in the film—he could have been a fascist type.

DW: They may not be Hitlers, but they are real dangers. Remember Hitler was a joke in 1923 too.

SK: Of course.



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