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Vadim Kolganov: “If Not For Theater And Cinema, I Would Be Teaching Children”

Over the course of his creative career Vadim Kolganov, Distinguished Artist of the Russian Federation, has played dozens of memorable roles in movies, TV shows, many of which have become extremely popular. He is known to theater goers by his remarkable performance at the “Theater at Trubnaya”. The actor is uniquely talented and creates vibrant and true-to-life images of various characters. Vadim Kolganov spoke to BM.Moscow Foresight correspondent about his profession, new projects, video clips and songs.

- Vadim, you did not grow up in a theater family, but went on stage for the first time when you were 9 years old. How did this happen?

- I grew up in a family of teachers, who taught at a rural school. My mother taught Russian language and literature, my father was a math and physical education teacher. My father had his own very interesting system, it was described to me by his students, who became successful people. The system was very simple: if you accomplished your task, help your neighbor. And this brought excellent results!

Then we had to move to Orenburg for a number of reasons. I spent my young years there.

I went on stage when I was four, I “barged in” simply by chance. This was related to us moving. In Orenburg my parents had to

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change many occupations. My mother initially worked at a store, then she got a job at a place which was totally weird to me, it was the Gorky Regional Drama Theater. At this time this was just a hodgepodge of words for me.

Once my mom took me to her work place, to the accounting office. Naturally, I got tired of sitting around in the accounting office and my mom permitted me to walk in the third floor hall, but prohibited going anywhere else. Just 15 minutes later I went down to the second floor and then to the first. I saw huge doors that were ajar, there was some music, darkness, and I stepped inside… One curtain, two, three curtains and all of a sudden there was a ray of light, and in it sat a bearded man with some sort of a crown on his head, and a woman in a spotty suit sitting by his feet, and the man shouted menacingly: “I will destroy you, little fiery snake!”. And I stood there, looked at them and realized that something had to be done! I ran back to the accounting office screaming: “Mom, there is a man threatening a woman!”.

The whole accounting department raced after me down all the floors, and they ran up to the very huge door and realized that I was taking them to the stage. I kept pulling: “Mom, just a few steps, and you will see the villain”. I was crying, and they burst out laughing. And all the way home my mother kept trying to explain to me that what I had seen was s special place — a theater. I said: “What do you mean special? But he was being mean to a woman!” And my mom replied “This is also possible in a theater, but this was not for real”. This is how I found out what it means to be an actor. And when I was 8 years old, my sister took me to the Young Spectators Theater. She wanted, just like many other schoolchildren at the time, to go on the stage by all means. Back then, all Soviet girls dreamed of an actress’ career. It is most curios, my sister came there and did not like it, but I was accepted in the long run. Starting from that time, I was growing up in the Young Spectators Theater, and that was my conscious decision.

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- Little fiery snake...

- Little fiery snake, indeed...

- And since you were 8 years old and till the time of your entry to a theater institute, you had been unswervingly going towards your goal? Or did you have any scruples about your career choices?

- After my graduation from the 10th grade they wanted to send me to Moscow to study. But I realized that I did not know anybody there, nobody was expecting me. And I sort of intuitively felt that I lacked experience. And I could not think of anything better than to enroll into a college to become a computer operator. I liked it and at the time it seemed to me that this would be excellent in future. The present day is proof to that: modern technologies are an integral part of our lives, and IT specialists are in great demand. And then I met a teacher of mine from the Young Pioneer Palace. When he learned that I had applied to become a computer operator, he exclaimed: “You must be out of your mind! Take your application back at once and go to the culture college. You will join the distant learning department and then transfer to full-time learning”. This is how my fate steered me back to the right course through such people.

I graduated from a culture college with honors, served in the army for two years, came back and went to study in Orenburg. In a year, having saved some money, I decided to go to Moscow, though I had already turned 23, and this was a bit late. This is how my fate brought me to the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK): this was the first institution me and my friend applied to, and we were rejected, they did not need us. But this was probably the only time of my application efforts when I hadn’t had any bad feelings, because I did not like VGIK at all. Lots of people in the corridors, everyone was smoking, everything seemed sort of untidy. There were odd-looking people with dyed hair (it was really out of the ordinary then, unlike today). But there was the story when I did enter the Russian University of Theatre Arts (GITIS) and at the same time didn’t. Here’s how it went.

Andrei Alexeyevich Goncharov had sent me to a contest straight from my audition. I came in August and started rehearsing, preparing. But for some tragic chance Goncharov was late for audition of our group of five, which was the first for the audition. Two people from the five had been accepted, including me, and we were relieved. Then Goncharov came to audition the second or the third five, it had turned out he was stuck in traffic. When he was done with the audition, he addressed the whole course, and suddenly he said: “I did not audition these two”. We tried to explain to him that that happened when he was stuck in traffic, to which he replied: “Not my problem, out you go”. Just imagine, I just felt that I had been accepted, and then I wasn’t.

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In an hour they called us back in to recite and sing. But you can understand, the mood wasn’t right and I failed again.

I did not want to go back home, I kept thinking about work, I was even going to enter a circus college. Life went on. And then all of a sudden, a friend of mine, with whom we came together, saw an advertisement that VGIK was inviting more applicants, but to the directing, and not to the acting department. I was first auditioned by Oleg Borisovich Shukher, who then introduced me to Marlen Martynovich Khutsiev, and I got accepted, free of tuition fees. This is how I got into VGIK. And this was my fate!

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- It seems that your first impression of VGIK had turned out to be wrong?

— It took me about a year to get used to VGIK. But the funny thing is that initially I tried to get into the acting department, and on my second attempt I tried to join the acting section at the directing department. This is a different story. And I essentially liked it very much, especially when we had foreign or domestic cinema. Just imagine: it's 1994, very few people heard of home theaters, and we had classes in a small movie theater within VGIK, maybe seven or ten rows of chairs, a huge screen, and you get to watch world cinema masterpieces! I was so inspired by this, I watched all of Chaplin, Bergman, Tarkovsky and many other big screen luminaries. I felt like a king of the universe, because all of this was for me and my fellow students. It was miraculous!

- In early 2000s you appeared in "Tatyana's Day" TV show and performed in a theater at the same time. How did you manage those two major roles?

At the time I was not too busy at the theater. But still, they accommodated me. I even had to ask the director, Stanislav Govorukhin, for permission to leave. His feelings were hurt, because there was an upcoming show. He liked my work. But I had been cast for "Tatyana's Day" and wanted to be in it very much. I literally hopped on the last bus: I came to an audition for a different role in a different movie, but was offered to go through another audition, which was ran by Yevgeny Marchelli at the time. He watched me and said that I looked too young (I auditioned for Vitya Rybkin role). And then I said: "Give me 15 minutes". I went out, asked the makeup staff to get me an ugly pencil-thin moustache, a fake belly, put on a knitted sweater and... added ten years to the image of the character. This is how I got into this TV show. And we put together a wonderful Rybkin family. I should say, that movie and TV show acting are a great opportunity for an actor not only to play an interesting character, but to expand his audience. I adore theater since my childhood, but movies and TV raise recognition by a broader audience, and this visibility (among other) then brings spectators to theater productions.

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- Vadim, you mentioned the “School of Modern Play” theater, which had been your second home from the start. Its name has been changed recently, and now you are a lead actor at the “Theater at Trubnaya”. Could you please tell us what is in store for theater goers due to these changes?

- Yes, you are correct, the theater was formerly called the “School of Modern Play”, and the theater company mostly worked with modern plays. There were a couple of exceptions: they had on a triptych, three “The Seagull” plays (one of these was a classic Chekhov’s “The Seagull”), there was “Don Quixote”, it had a lot of music and was called “Hello from Don Quixote”. And the rest were modern plays only. Of course, this was great, but the actors missed classic plays very much. And when Dmitry Astrakhan became the art director, the art policy changed as well: the theater was renamed to the “Theater at Trubnaya”, and the repertoire now features Russian and foreign classics. To the joy of spectators, we now have Ostrovsky plays, perform English, French, Italian plays. Just recently we have had a premiere of “The Top Hat” production based on a comedy by Eduardo De Filippo. It is very pleasant to work with such material. And this has helped us to fill up our seats, we have new spectators coming to us, and what makes us happy, we see many young people in the audience. At the same time, we have kept some shows from the previous repertoire, for example, “At Truba” immersive performance, which is incredibly popular with our viewers. On May 9 we run a special program in celebration of the Victory Day with free entry. There used to be about 150 spectators, but the numbers kept on growing every year, and last year we had about 900 people. The theater could not accommodate everyone wishing to attend, and we had decided to run the show once again on May 18. This year we will stick to our tradition and we will have a holiday concert for the 80-th Anniversary of the Victory, and in a few days we will present our “Five Evenings” premiere. This is a play any actor dreams of. And with Dmitry Astrakhan’s arrival, as they say, dreams come true!

- These are good changes! You have pointed out that now you perform more classic shows, Russian and foreign classics, and the theater attracts younger people. What do you think is the reason for this, is it diverse repertoire or is it something else?

- It’s all rolled into one: both the cultural policy and the direction of the theater have changed. What I also like is when every season our company gets together (we call that the season opening), the management speaks of future plans. And it is very important that 95% of what was said at the start of a season gets implemented. This means the director knows what he wants, he manages to bring all his ideas to fruition, and he, mind you, also has students, film shooting, which he also runs. Currently three projects are being rehearsed simultaneously. These are “Five Evenings”, “All About Eve” (the show will be released in April) and “Don Juan” (the premiere is scheduled for September). I cannot recall anything of the kind. There is no place you

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could find to sit down and rehearse, all spaces are occupied. Just imagine this whirlpool! Sometimes I feel like a student. These are good changes!



- You have your “Vadim Kolganov’s Creative Workshop” educational project. Is it any easier for young people to succeed now?

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- The only new opportunity here to unlock one's creative potential is that now there are online platforms for young people, where anyone could fulfill oneself these days. Students usually have a bit naïve picture (just like me in my youth) of the acting profession. And when you start studying and especially working in a theater, if you are lucky, then you realize that this is much more serious, profound, and how unpredictable it is to a certain degree. There is no guarantee that you will get noticed, start to appear in films, and most importantly, get hired by a theater. It's all individual. If a course is taught by an art director of a theater, there is a chance he could take in some of his students. But if you do not land in a theater, it's no big deal at all — your life goes on! The acting profession could be useful in any other field. It involves a lot of psychology. It is going to be useful if you become a lawyer or a child doctor, even more so if you are a journalist.

As for the creative workshop, the reason it had been created is that people of various ages have the need for theatrical art. The workshop was established in 2016, and there is nothing mandatory about it. It is there to open the door for those people who had knocked on once, it but had never been let in. For example, my wife Yekaterina Kolganova now works with students of various ages, with different life stories. She teaches senior people, helps out in a rehabilitation center as a social worker. She's taught former drug addicts, alcoholics, and they have displayed striking changes! Doctors and psychologists who worked with them, had not been aware of what Pandora's box they had to open. People change right in front of your eyes, and this is encouraging.

- You come from a family of teachers. Please tell us, how do you feel in the role of teacher and mentor? What are the difficulties in this role?

- In my school years I directed my first show with junior pupils, and back then teachers commended my teaching skills and suggested I should choose this path. But for the culture college, I would probably be a teacher. I did not go to a teacher training college due to my responsible nature, because I thought I had some skills, some good skills, but that I needed to put more work into it, but frankly speaking, I was too lazy. But I have a lot of experience in out-of-school education, applied in practice in various summer camps for children in Orenburg region, as well as in All-Russian children centers "Orlenok" and "Artek".

- And what are your movie plans? Would you want to direct a feature film?

- If my fate, to which I listen to very carefully after multiple signs, gives me this opportunity, I would, of course, happily go into directing. As I have already said, I studied at the directing department of VGIK. I would be especially happy to shoot movies for

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children, and I have some experience in this: I participated in the Producer Movie nomination at “Crimson Sails” festival, which took place in Artek. We shot short films together with children in three-four days. And I especially liked that the best short movie was selected by vote of children. I was nominated for several years in a row and won it three times.

- **Vadim, it is little secret for those who have been closely following your creative career, that you write poetry. Recently your song “They woke up the bear” has premiered and spread online like wild fire. This May our country and the whole world will celebrate the 80th anniversary of the end of the World War Two. Do you have plans for any new songs, dedicated to this event?**

- This is true, I have been writing poetry and songs since my childhood. Like many creative people, I have written without any prospects for publication and never thought I would get a second wind someday, and my lines, that were just verses, would turn into popular songs. Naturally, this has been triggered by the latest events in our country and in the world. The “God Is With Us” song from my upcoming album (and I hope, it will be released some time, God willing) is dedicated to my cousin, who lost his life in the SMO, and the “Z Time” song — to all of the Donbass. As it happens, these very songs have resonated with my audience, and now at my creative evenings viewers often ask me to sing these songs. And then many people say that they were surprised to learn that Vitya Rybkin (from “Tatyana’s Day” TV show) could author these intense songs and poems. How do these lines come to me? Sometimes verses come in little bits and pieces, essentially on the fly. Here I am, driving to a rehearsal, stuck in traffic and singing a tune for my new song. Or I am on a train to Saint-Petersburg on my way to a show, I have trouble sleeping and there is a puzzle of words for my new song taking shape in my head. Songs are like children; each has its own birth story. And it is very important for me as an author that my verses have made their way to the hearts of my listeners. Just recently I have finished the “Cathedral” song, which premiered at Spas TV channel.

- It is argued that acting is a dependent occupation. Would you agree with this? If you would, then how satisfied are you with your “dependence”?

- This is a continuous process. And indeed, actors are dependent, especially movie actors. Whether they choose you or not. But I have a philosophical view of this. How much time has theater been around as an art? Over three thousand years. What I mean here that they have predicted its death many a time: when the movie industry came into existence, then with the TV industry. But the theater has lived, lives and will live on. The secret of its resilience is in its energy. While there are spectators, they would need a theater, they would need to come and learn something, live through something, get to know something new. Theater does not care whether Vadim Kolganov performs at the “Theater at Trubnaya”, whether he is successful in movies or

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not, whether he has his audience or not. Theater means something more. You should be happy to be related to this.

As for dependence, let me say this: I have gone through many stages and started to think, that along with my favorite Yevgeny Yevstigneyev, Yevgeny Leonov, Leonid Kuravlev and many other great actors, at the very same time there had been an army of other actors, who could have been even more talented, we do not know this, but for some reason they had not been noticed by directors. Some had been kept out, some had been overlooked, some had been underestimated and some had been banned. And how could they live with all this? They were also in a dependent situation. They are gone now, and nobody remembers them anymore. Those actors that I have listed, are remembered by their movies. They were busy, featured at the big screen, the whole country knew them. And at the same time there were other actors, who only appeared on theater stages and were known to a limited number of spectators. There is some injustice in this! But they did exist, they brought joy to people, just the theatrical audience was much narrower versus TV and movies. They were involved in the process! It is due to them, among others, that the theater lived, lives and will live on. I genuinely believe this!

As soon as we have touched in our interview the subject of the 80th Victory Anniversary, I would like to congratulate everyone with this holiday and invite to the “Theater at Trubnaya”, where we expect our spectators 365 days a year. Actors of our theater are ready to surprise, make happy and give hope. We are always happy to see you! Yours, Vadim Kolganov

Anna Bondareva

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