

Dangerous Words

Excerpt translated by *Romas Kinka*

1.

It seemed to many at the theatre that Odin the director had not died of a heart attack. Even though that was the official version.

It seemed to many at the theatre that he had died because he chose the wrong Word. As the Bible says, in the beginning was the Word. And it was not the right one.

And then a vacancy came up at the theatre and a chance for director Safyrov to rise from the dead.

It was from Odin, the old director, that Safyrov inherited his office and the Verdi opera on which work had already begun.

Not a popular Verdi opera but one rarely put on. And besides that – one with a superstition!

Its whole name could not be uttered out loud: that would bring misfortune on the troupe, the performance of the opera, and the whole theatre.

The title had just two words. Director Odin had chosen *La forza*, the name by which it was always called in Europe. He had chosen *La forza* and died. He had done everything correctly and look what happened!

In a word, words had to be chosen carefully.

After Odin's death a heresy arose, namely that the name of the Opera had initially to be translated. After all, the name of the Opera would be written in our language and not in Italian. And with the translation of the name everything was turned around – the second word became the first!

'All that's left is to give in to Destiny,' said director Safyrov on making his acquaintance with the troupe.

He said the word and did not die.

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It seemed to Director Safyrov they were all looking at him coldly and that is why he had climbed through the window.

He did this three times so that those singing wooden horses would understand without words what improvisational art is.

Unlike director Odin, Safyrov was not an opera director but a theatre director and looked for quite different things on the stage. To tell the truth, he hated opera but after all of life's vicissitudes he was prepared to carry whatever cross he came across.

'Not like a robber! Not like a robber!' shouted director Safyrov while he crawled through the window for the last time. 'But proudly. With your head held high! After all,

it's a lady you're going to see! You can't do that on your side or your bottom! Even if that's more comfortable.'

It was only the young Don Alvaro he was teaching how to get in through the window, but everyone was listening to him. It would've been better if Safyrov hadn't shouted anything about 'the lady' because the cold eyes looking at him with suspicion instantly glazed over with frost.

'Proudly,' repeated Safyrov. 'With head held high!' trying to make everyone looking at him forget about 'that' lady. Both 'that' lady and all the other ladies who had carried away his life and his fantasies. Who had pushed him for all eternity into a non-existence with piquant memories of twenty, ten and six years ago. And if Odin had not suddenly died, Safyrov might never have returned from that non-existence.

At least that is how the first two years full of emptiness had seemed to him.

Tenor Don Alvaro the horse seemed to Safyrov not to be wooden and even reminded him of himself in his youth, and that is why Safyrov from the very beginning started with him, as if trying to rewrite himself and his own past.

'One shouldn't look back,' said Safyrov.

Don Alvaro, now climbing through the window with pride, did not look back.

That phrase 'one shouldn't look back' was not aimed at him or more precisely – not at him alone but at all of them.

'One shouldn't look back,' repeated Safyrov.

That 'one shouldn't look back' could also have meant everything would be different from now.

Both generally speaking at the theatre and specifically on the stage. That could've meant one should forget director Odin's classic old-fashioned method: to create a character exclusively with one's voice.

That 'one shouldn't look back' could also have meant one should forget everything anyone had ever heard about Safyrov, his adventures and failures.

And not to look with eyes of ice. Because now everything would be different.

'And what if I were to jump through the window?' asked Don Alvaro.

He was one of those who wanted to best his teacher straight away and that is why he immediately showed his talent as a jumper by knocking into the temporary set, and, out of inertia taking several steps up to Curra the maid, who was standing in the wrong place, knocking her over as well.

'Idiot,' Curra the grey-haired maid said loudly while lying on the floor.

She lay there thinking of how to best to get back up on her feet from her position lying in the dust looking like a star fish. It was clear that the wisest thing for her would be to make a joke of it all while at the same time not look like a joke. Especially when you're fifty plus. And Curra was a lady of fifty plus, who had kept her figure and her looks and who was Odin's lover, as her colleagues at the theatre said behind her back. The very Last One.

As director Odin's lover she wanted a lot and wanted everything and so she sang everything that came along, all the major roles, ones that were often not suitable for her, lost her voice and sank to the level of maids. And there was no one to give her a helping hand in that situation.

However, only one person - the Marquis of Calatrava - laughed openly as he looked down at the star lying there. Coughing in a deep bass and snorting. Maybe that was the effect of treatment of alcohol abuse with coding or perhaps, when you are over sixty, the opera theatre's honoured bass and your wife is the theatre's chief accountant, caution is reduced to a dangerous minimum.

'Next time you think of jumping rehearse a bit,' said Curra through her teeth to Don Alvaro, but getting up on her feet and smiling at everyone artificially.

One had to act carefully with Curra. It was only now in this production that she was a maid but at the theatre she belonged to the most dangerous clan best avoided at all costs: one could be eaten alive.

But even she should have seen that it had not been done on purpose, that Don Alvaro had a completely different motive: to show off to the new director and make an impression on the Gypsy.

'Another incident like this and you're going to be singing like a mezzosoprano or, in the best-case scenario, like a contralto,' commented the Marquis of Calatrava, pushing Don Alvaro as he was getting up.

His sense of humour was most often limited to castrati, their sympathisers, and other bodily things. And, generally speaking, in art it was physiology he liked most.

The general emotional temperature in the hall rose by at least ten degrees, and that meant that Safyrov's climbing through the window was not in vain, a live conflict developed on stage and now what also developed was the possibility to begin work.

With Don Alvaro, of course, it was easiest. He was young, obviously seeking attention and recognition at any cost, and he could easily accept any instruction or advice from such a famous director as fatherly love.

But what could one do with someone like the Marquis of Calatrava? This was not the first time that Safyrov had had to contend with him. Even though Safyrov's memory had completely erased his first name and surname. The first time was twenty years ago in the same theatre when Safyrov was trying to prove he was a director.

And if, drawing on his memories of the Marquis of Calatrava, he had to sum up or introduce this colossal embodiment of contempt in one word to anyone, that word would be 'schemer'.

Fortunately, young Don Alvaro accidentally shoots the Marquis of Calatrava in the first act and no one has to work with the Marquis of Calatrava after that. He can go straight home.

What can one do with someone like the Marquis of Calatrava?

Safyrov had a lot of experience of working in the theatre and was easily able to identify who had the deadliest saliva and the sharpest teeth in any troupe.

Safyrov decided the only right approach in a duel with the Marquis of Calatrava was to constantly praise him.

'Forget the past. In everything you do, there cannot be anything superfluous,' explained Safyrov to Don Alvaro. 'Less theatre, more life.'

It seemed to Safyrov that Don Alvaro was like him not just in profile and en face but also in his thinking and perhaps he even had the same goals as Safyrov did when he was his age. Intuitively, Safyrov felt it was with Don Alvaro that it would be easiest

to find a common language. After all, finding a common language with people is not easy, especially with women. They were a species of primates particularly gifted with fantasy. You say something to a woman, putting her hand on your shoulder or somewhere else, and she will see something completely different behind those words and that hand. Twenty or ten years pass... but they don't want to forget that 'something completely different' because they even take medicine to boost their memory. And what then? And then, suddenly, they decide to remember some facts publicly and tell them to others. And what facts can one remember after twenty years? As neuroscientists say, it's no longer possible to remember anything, it's only possible to reinvent things. And then because of those fantasies and memories of 'facts' worthy people are thrown out of their jobs.

Safyrov was treading a new path, but the past did not want to let go of him.

'I want you to show the audience how you love and how you die not only through gestures. I want you to love and die on the stage,' said Safyrov.

It was as difficult to find a common language with theatre actors as it was with women. They neither wanted to love nor die on the stage. It seemed that all the time they were only thinking about their voices and not thinking at all about their hands and feet, well, unless it was the women.

Safyrov tried not to return to the subject of women.

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On his first day director Safyrov hung an engraving on the wall of his new office, in the engraving was a dandy, his face contorted with anguish, on his knees praying to Heaven, and around him only swine or, one might say, boars with bristles.

It was on the second day that someone at the theatre identified the engraving as being by Dürer.

What did the picture with the swine symbolise?

Director Safyrov's repentance and his attitude, as a person, to the troupe?

Some inevitable questions arose.

'He regards all women as swine. Even though, if one gives the matter more thought, he used to regard them as sheep,' summed up the one-eyed and only hairdresser at the theatre after weighing up the available information,

And how was one to take what the theatre's one-eyed only hairdresser had to say? After all, she was tone deaf. Even though she hears everything, even the things she shouldn't.

There weren't many at the theatre who knew that the Dürer engraving, stuck with scotch tape on the white wall of Safyrov's new office, was called the *Prodigal Son*. And that he, Safyrov, was the prodigal son but without the swine.

The swine were not the cause of everything but the result of everything.

The swine were the Punishment in the biblical sense of the word. For going astray.

For everything.

'There is good luck in all of that suffering... in the crucifixion of oneself... on Golgotha,' said Safyrov loudly to himself and to everyone, trying to die and love and sing and not look wooden on the stage.

‘I understand that to sing and proudly climb through a window is difficult. But that – that is your good fortune. Your good fortune at every agonising step you take: both when you experience a crisis and when you’re so frightened that your body trembles before you go on the stage. Without all of that you will never experience what it is to serve the theatre,’ said Safyrov to himself and to the world.

He wanted everyone to think about their personal suffering, their personal crucifixion, and their personal Golgotha, but, after catching the occasional glances of the others, the thought kept coming to him that they were not looking at themselves but at him and were seeing his Golgotha and not feeling in the least sorry for him.

There wasn’t a person on the stage who hadn’t heard of the theory of good luck in suffering. It would reach the future stars of the stage and backstage when they were still at the Theatre Academy. Good luck in suffering – that was the basic truth on which the theatre stood. However, each director could apply new colours or, to be more exact, new forms to suffering.

On this occasion, Safyrov went further than others had done in clarifying and explaining to others the meaning of good luck in suffering.

‘Our suffering,’ said Safyrov. ‘Our suffering is the salvation of those who come to see us. Looking at us, at the suffering we show, they slowly heal their own suffering. You – you are missionaries. That is the mission of all of us. Even though we haven’t taken the Hippocratic Oath. And how will you show great suffering, if you are not the embodiment of it in all its poses ... no, not in its poses,’ said Safyrov hesitating. ‘Not in its poses...’

The young Gypsy standing in the shadows sniggered loudly, but Safyrov did not turn around. He hadn’t looked a woman in the eyes these two years past. He had had enough of women. It would be best if all the roles could be performed by men, but this was musical theatre, and you couldn’t replace sopranos with tenors or baritones.

‘And how can you show great suffering if you yourself haven’t experienced it in all its forms?’ asked Safyrov, correcting himself.

The fact that Odin in dying had left him an opera and not an operetta to finish, made Safyrov, it must be said, happy.

There is no morality in operettas and never had there been.

In an operetta everyone engages in something only to the extent that they are pretending to be someone else than in the official libretto and are trying to seduce someone amorally while howling songs of questionable merit. Generally speaking, operetta as a genre can be ascribed to one of the minor forms of amorality.

Only opera, only tragic opera with a curse attached could raise Safyrov above all earthly tragedies and return to him everything that he had lost because of the fabrications and grievances of women and show his true power.

But let us return to Dürer’s engraving.

Apart from the swine, there was another interesting nuance.

Dürer transferred that biblical story of the son, who had gone astray and found himself amongst swine, to a 15th century West European architectural landscape. Setting it in amongst Bavarian houses. He had done something no one else around him was doing.

For this innovation Dürer was especially praised after his death by art historians and pseudobiographers from different centuries.

Probably that was what was most important to Safyrov. No, not the praise, or to be more exact, not just the praise - that came second. The most important thing to Safyrov was that Dürer had transposed an old story to a new environment, one very well known to the inhabitants of Bavaria. In short: he took that more than one-thousand-year-old biblical story and made it relevant to the environment and time he was living in.

And Relevance was Safyrov's basic creative principle and, as the critics wrote, what he did was simply magical.

'Sorry!' Patria called out from the darkened hall. 'I have an urgent question.'

Safyrov turned around to make sure that was really Patria.

Patria was not a role but the shortened form of the name Patricia, even though, if one were to go deeper into things, Patria was both a name and a role. Or a role fitting Patria's name.

Patria did not serve the theatre but higher ideas. She was simply in charge of the theatre and for that reason not to listen to her would have been both unwise and perhaps even dangerous.

Patria stood in the darkened hall, she always stood in the darkened hall or in a darkened corridor and therefore there was nothing to write about her apart from the fact that Patria always observed the world from the anonymity of darkness.

'What's the question?' Safyrov asked the darkness.

'It's regarding Curra, the Gypsy and the Mayor of the Town of Hornachuelos,' Patria answered from the darkness of the hall.

'And what about them?' asked Safyrov not understanding the question.

At first glance it was really hard to understand what the connection between Curra, the Gypsy and the Mayor of the town of Hornachuelos was and why they were asking any questions.

'We can't include these characters in the libretto,' Patria explained from the darkness.

'Why can't we?' asked Safyrov. 'If they're already included in the libretto?'

'First of all, we can't in this day and age use the name Curra' for women,' explained Patria.

'Why can't we?' asked Safyrov.

'Because one can find unnecessary subtexts in that word and cause a scandal,' explained Patria.

'Perhaps that would be good thing?' asked Safyrov.

Safyrov found Patria standing behind his back tiring.

'That could cost us, and the opera might have to be completely cancelled almost as soon as it's been put on,' explained Patria.

That was how things seemed to her standing in the darkness.

'Nowadays we have to be very careful,' explained Patria. 'Couldn't we call the maid, for example, Cu-ra-ra?'

'We couldn't call her Curara,' said Safyrov. 'Curra is a good-hearted maid, and not a maid who's a poisoner. That would be the wrong con-no-tation.'

* 1. Translator's notes (here and below). The Russian word *кура* [kura], meaning 'hen' or 'chicken', is used colloquially in a derogatory way of women.

‘But perhaps we could call her Curie?’ asked Patria.

As far as I’m concerned, we could call them all Curie, thought Safyrov, but didn’t say it. Patria was precisely the person in talking to whom one had to think about words.

About what you were saying.

‘It could be Curie,’ Safyrov agreed without any further discussion.

‘Very good,’ said Patria. ‘And now about the Gypsy.’

‘But I want to be a Gypsy!’ the young Gypsy cried out unhappy.

She really did have the talents of a fortune-teller/psychic to understand people without any words being spoken, to quickly sense and assess danger and had no inner conflicts with the character she was going play. She even looked like her character – with her long black curly hair and black eyes, as if nature itself had destined her for that role.

‘No one’s asking what you want, complex matters are being decided here,’ said Patria.

It became clear to everyone on the stage what Patria wanted from the Gypsy, but no one interfered. In matters like this everyone was out only for themselves.

‘This is 18th century Seville!’ the Gypsy shouted from the stage into the darkness. ‘When Gypsies were gypsies.’

‘But outside these walls it’s the 21st century,’ said Patria from the darkness. ‘We might all have to answer for those sorts of names for the characters.’

‘So, call me Gitana,’ said the Gypsy. ‘If it’s that bad.’

‘Curie, Gitana ...’ Patria affirmed in the darkness. ‘What’s left is the Mayor of Hornachuelos.’

‘And what about Hornachuelos?’ asked Safyrov. ‘It’s the name of a Spanish town.’

‘But it sounds like a Russian swear word,’ explained Patria.*

‘You can change it to whatever you want,’ said the Mayor of Hornachuelos. ‘I’m very happy to agree. My wife also agrees.’

The Gypsy sniggered behind his back, even though she didn’t know the wife of the Mayor of Hornachuelos and couldn’t imagine what she looked like or even if he really had a wife.

‘It’s all very simple,’ said Patria. ‘We’ll change the Mayor of the Town of Hornachuelos to the Mayor of the Town of Hornačuelos. That’ll be fine and even the State Language Control Inspectorate won’t get at us.’

‘Anything else?’ asked Safyrov in mild irritation.

So far, nothing serious had been sacrificed, but he found Patria’s interference and involvement in the processes irritating.

The theatre is a kind of closed Zone and as a normal closed Zone it has its principles.

If in a normal Zone the basic principles are not to collaborate with the administration and not have any debts, then the basic principles of this theatrical Zone are not to collaborate with Patria and not take part in filmed advertisements. In short, not to tarnish one’s good reputation and try one’s hardest not to lose face.

But to completely pay no attention to Patria, to ignore her and tell her to mind her own business would be very unwise.

* The Russian slang word хуйло [khuylo] – with the root хуй meaning ‘penis’ – is used as an insult.

That could destroy one's whole theatrical career.

'According to the libretto Don Alvaro is a proud descendant of the Incas of West India,' said Patria.

Both Don Alvaro and Safyrov completely agreed with that. With him being a proud descendant of the Incas of West India.

'And a natural question arises for me, why do we see him like that?' Patria asked from the darkness.

'As a proud descendant of the Incas of West India?' asked Safyrov.

'As a robber or a violent person,' explained Patria.

'That's not how we're portraying him,' replied Safyrov, 'It's just that after he climbs in through the window it seems to him that his beloved no longer loves him and as a proud descendant of the Incas of West India, he reacts temperamentally to that.'

'If he were to really strangle her, we'd have a full theatre,' the Marquis of Calatrava mumbled in a low voice several times.

He liked various kinds of physiology and violence on the stage.

Wouldn't it be possible to somehow change or somehow get across that Donna Leonora is not torn between her love for her Father the Marquis of Calatrava and Don Alvaro, the proud descendant of the Incas of West India, but between her love for her Homeland and the new European values,' asked Patria.

'She's not a Ph.D.,' said Safyrov through his gritted teeth. She's not even a university laboratory technician.'

He didn't want to talk about Donna Leonora at all.

'Another natural question has occurred to me: what's the Marquis of Calatrava doing in his daughter's room at midnight? Isn't it possible to discern some dangerous aspect in that?' Patria, standing in the darkness, continued to get at Safyrov and now the Marquis of Calatrava.

'What dangerous aspect?' asked Safyrov.

'Paedophilia,' answered Patria from the darkness.

'She's over eighteen years old, and the first time the Marquis of Calatrava goes into his daughter's bedroom is to wish her goodnight and to say he won't agree to allow her to marry Don Alvaro, and the second time is when he runs into her room when he hears a noise,' explains Safyrov.

It seemed to Safyrov that after she'd heard his logical explanation Patria had disappeared in the darkness and now it would again be possible to work. He raised his arms and opened his mouth to speak...

'And that's not everything,' one could hear Patria's voice again coming from the darkness. 'Couldn't we change the proud descendant of the Incas of West India to someone more relevant to these times?'

The words 'more relevant' acted as a catalyst in Safyrov's brain.

'To what exactly?' asked Safyrov.

'To a Turkish, Kurdish or Senegalese refugee.'

'We'll give that some thought,' said Safyrov most probably having himself and the world in mind. Patria was most probably satisfied with that answer and melted into the darkness.

The Marquis of Calatrava mischievously hummed a short *Destiny* motif from the not short overture to *Destiny*.

‘And now we’re going to learn to throw things,’ said Safyrov.

After Patria, he needed to calm himself down and to calm down the others. And to think about the cost of his new cross.

Drama actors learn how to throw things in their first course, but no one teaches opera soloists things like that. And that’s why they don’t know how to. How to throw things, how to fall down, how to show their emotions, how to show what they want. They just stand there like singing scenery and think about their melismas.

Their heads are simply formatted differently, thought Safyrov.

‘One can throw anything in a multitude of different ways,’ said Safyrov. ‘One has to choose the most efficacious way.’

‘The most effective?’ enquired the Gypsy.

Her view of the world was very pragmatic.

‘The most efficacious,’ explained Safyrov. ‘So that the audience can see things from the balcony and remember things for a long time. You have to learn how to throw things even when not actually holding anything. For example, we throw a pen in one way and a laptop in a completely different way,’ said Safyrov. ‘To throw something is an art.’

‘To throw something and not to get at all hurt,’ murmured the Marquis of Calatrava using veiled metaphors.

The Gypsy, sorry, now Gitana, sniggered.

The thing that had to be thrown was a pistol. And that’s not just funiculi, funiculà.

The pistol had to be thrown by the proud descendant of the Incas of West India and that’s why he was irritated. And everyone else was just looking at Don Alvaro to see how he was going to throw it, and only wanting to throw something themselves.

‘Each of you think what your character can throw in order to reveal themselves in that role,’ said Safyrov. ‘Your body will tell you how you should act. Listen not just to your voice, as you’ve all been doing up till now, but to your body as well. First, learn to listen to your body, and then – while you’re listening to your body – sing.’

The pistol was a prop, so there was nothing to be afraid of.

Don Alvaro tried to throw the prop pistol holding it by the handle and holding it by the barrel, and in such a way as to make the handle spin in the air, as well as from the top to the bottom, and then simply let go of it raising his arms.

The plot of this scene is simple: Don Alvaro, the Proud descendant of the Incas of West India, wants to marry the Noble Donna Leonora, the daughter of the Marquis of Calatrava. In short, a terrible mésalliance.

The Marquis of Calatrava, the father of Donna Leonora, comes to visit her at night and strictly orders her, his daughter, to forever forget about Don Alvaro! Whereas Donna Leonora had already promised Don Alvaro to secretly elope with him that very night. And she had already told her maid Curra about her promise. Sorry, Curie.

Donna Leonora is torn between her father and her beloved, in short, she is wavering. And when Don Alvaro, all worked up after his ride and from love, proudly enters through the window, it initially seems to him that Donna Leonora no longer loves him.

Whereas she is simply wavering. But even though she is wavering she immediately

starts singing with him 'I am yours, I am yours, with all my heart and all my life,' and at this point, on hearing the noise, her Father the Marquis of Calatrava, rushes into the room and believes that Donna Leonora has lost her honour. That she has lost both her honour and the honour of the house.

Whereas she is only wavering.

Don Alvaro swears in song to Donna Leonora's father the Marquis of Calatrava that she had not lost any honour. Not her own and moreover not of this honourable house.

She is only wavering.

And in order to prove that the proud descendant of the Incas of West India is ready to accept an honourable death at the *épée* of the Marquis. Ready to accept death and is not even getting ready to defend himself with his pistol. Unfortunately, the pistol falls to the floor and fires unexpectedly from the impact, the bullet hitting the Marquis.

Donna Leonora just staggers.

The Marquis of Calatrava collapses epically and in dying curses his daughter Donna Leonora. Curses her and that will now be her Fate.

The Marquis of Calatrava goes home immediately after collapsing. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief.

'Has Patria left?' enquires Safyrov speaking into the darkness. 'Perhaps Don Alvaro, the proud descendant of the Incas of West India, shouldn't have a pistol? Never mind shooting someone by accident. Perhaps it's politically incorrect in this day and age? What could one substitute for the pistol?

'A mobile phone,' says the Marquis of Calatrava.

Everyone was already getting ready to go home, some of them maliciously humming a fragment from *Destiny* from the overture to *Destiny*, some of them thinking what they could throw at somebody.

Donna Leonora was standing in the middle of the stage, but Safyrov didn't glance at her neither during the entirety of the rehearsal nor when everyone was leaving and saying their goodbyes.

And even when he was speaking about her to others, he spoke about her unwillingly and in the third person.