

## Have You Seen 'The Last Macedonian'?

By Victor Bivell

*The speech for the launch of The Last Macedonian by Dushan Ristevski.  
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Good evening to everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to help launch the latest play by Dushan Ristevski. Let's start at the very beginning, the title 'Posledniot Makedonets', "The Last Macedonian".

It's an interesting concept, 'the last Macedonian'. Macedonians have been thinking and talking about it for a while, but something tells me our enemies have been thinking about it for a lot longer. Well over a hundred years perhaps and probably more. It's possible there have been people imagining a Macedonia without Macedonians for a long time, and it is a measure of their success that now Macedonians are also thinking about it.

So is this play really about the last Macedonian? Or even 'the very last Macedonian'? Well, if you haven't seen the play I'm not going to tell you. You have to read it, or see it, or watch the DVD.

What I will tell is that it's a very good play. For a start, there are plenty of interesting characters. There is Philip and his wife Svezhana, their children Makedon and Makedonka, and Philip's mother Solunka. They live in Bitola, and yes, the names are also allegorical.

There is also plenty of interesting politics. The context for the play is the political events in Macedonia over the past few years, and there have been plenty of those. The play is jam-packed with current political and social issues. Let me give you a sample.

The Prolog introduces the theme of roots. Solunka says "Koga kje go sechish kopenot - nie sme nishto, kje se unishtime" and also "bes koren nema idnina". For our non-Macedonian speaking friends this translates as "When you cut our roots, we are nothing, you destroy us... Without roots there is no future." In the bigger picture, all Macedonians know that is about the battle to keep our history.

Other early themes emerge when we are told that the Macedonian neighbour - from spite - has sold his house to Albanians and that his children have moved to Germany. There are several social issues here - animosity between Macedonians, changing demographics with Albanians moving into what were traditional Macedonian areas, and the migration of young Macedonians.

Another presence is poverty. Despite their money problems, Philip and Snezhana do not respond well to Solunka's suggestion that they go and live in the village. Nor do they find appealing the idea of going there to take up village tourism rather than traditional agricultural life. In contrast, Solunka would like to return to her village, but her family were uprooted and prosfigi brought in.

The daughter Makedonka has stopped working because the work is low level and lacks meaning. The son Makedon applies for a Bulgarian passport, which causes uproar in the family. The passport is so he can apply for work as a barman, even though he is educated. The lack of meaningful work opportunities for the young has been an issue in Macedonia for many years. Snezhana says "Za jabe uchenjeto." In English, "Education is useless".

Philip and Snezhana and their family are surrounded by political events. The color revolution is happening, there is the influence of George Soros, the 2016 elections in Macedonia, the inducement of Macedonia entering the European Union, and the protests at parliament house and what many see as the selling of Macedonia.

These quickly come to the fore when Makedon finds a post on Facebook with a photo of Makedonka and her friend Teuta painted like rainbows at a color revolution protest.

This leads to some nice dramatic moments and pointed political commentary when the drunken family friend Slave asks "A zoshto mori chupe ne gi isharavte spomenitsite na Oochk-ite vo Lipkovo i Slupchane, a? Tyky gi skvernavite nashite spomenitsi, gi omalovazhuvate nashite velikani... Trchate kako nekoj zdiveni, kako da ve fatilo Sorosovoto besnilo. A zhoshto?"

And for those of you who don't speak Macedonian, my rough translation is "Why girl didn't you spoil the monuments of the Albanian National Liberation Army terrorists in Lipkovo and Slupchane, eh? Instead you spoil our monuments, you deride our great ones... You run like someone breathless, like you've caught the Soros rabies. Why?"

And of course the political situation with Greece gets many mentions, including the 'antiquization' of Skopje, the theft of half of Macedonia and the silence from Europe about that. Also in the mix is the Macedonian pining for a kind Europe with open arms - good luck with that one. There are also globalization, corruption in Macedonia, and Macedonian party politics.

And all that, and more by the end of the second scene. Only 12 scenes to go.

Time moves quickly and soon we have the change of government, the Tirana Platform, and the former terrorist Talat Jaferi becoming speaker of the parliament and unfurling the Albanian flag and singing the Albanian national anthem in the Macedonian parliament. The massive protests in Skopje are happening outside and inside the Macedonian parliament. The Albanianization of Macedonia is prominent. Also getting a mention is the EU political interference in Macedonia through the EU foreign minister Federica Mogherini and the EU enlargement commissioner Johannes Hahn.

Among all this, there is a reminder of the 2001 invasion of Macedonia by the NLA - the Albanian National Liberation Army with links to Kosovo. The action in the family's lounge room goes into top gear when two men dressed in military uniforms and the insignia of the NLA invade the house, threaten to beat up Solunka and Philip, and ask for money. Which our poor family doesn't have. There is much aggression, but when the rest of the family arrive on the scene the robbery turns into something much more sinister for Snezhana and Makedonka. They are taken at gun point into a back room. We hear a pistol shot and see Snezhana no

more in the play; we hear Makedonka screaming beside herself for her mother and then see her emerge with torn and disheveled clothes.

It's clear that Dushan is one angry playwright. While the actions on stage and the implied actions off stage are dramatic, it's also clear that they are meant to be seen and read as allegory. They give an interpretation of how the playwright sees the many recent political developments in Macedonia. However, it is worth noting that the symbolic characters and the allegorical actions are not critical of all Albanians. The NLA insignia that the two thieves wear clearly shows that the actions committed allegorically on the Macedonians are specifically by the Albanian terrorists. And we know who they could be as former terrorists are now in the Macedonian parliament.

There is more drama. When the detectives come to investigate the murder, the family is told that their neighbor and close friend Slave has committed suicide. Slave was a patriot and had previously been very troubled by the political events in Skopje and had left to join the protests. We are left to assume that the suicide is the same one that had earlier been seen on the TV news. A body had been found in Skopje on a stone bridge called Gotse Delchev and the victim was wearing a sign that said "for a united and common Macedonia". The situation has plenty of symbolism for thought.

But there is even more heartbreak for the family. Without telling anyone where she is going, Makedonka leaves. Soon after so do Philip and Makedon in search of her. Makedon to Sydney, and Philip to Frankfurt, Europe and later Australia.

Again, all this action is also allegorical and the characters symbolic. As a people, Macedonians are in most places around the world in big numbers. The only exceptions are Asia and Africa. And the reasons are aggression and tragedy, as occurred to Makedonka, and disillusionment and the search, as with Philip and Makedon.

Philip meets various dubious characters in Europe - we know there is no shortage of those - but he does end up finding Makedonka. She is poor and pregnant, but will only say that the father of the child is Europe. The past is still too much for her and again she leaves suddenly to hide. Philip loses her again.

The action in the play then moves to Sydney where Makedon is living with his aunty, Philip's sister Marija. Makedon meets and falls in love with Dosta. Philip arrives from Macedonia, and he meets Dosta's family: her father Risto, an offensively ostentatious Macedonian patriot but with a good heart, and her grandmother Petra, 95 years old and blind but who loves to drink and dance, preferably at the same time.

There is plenty of coincidence - Makedon and Dosta's families are from the same village. Fortunately, Makedon's family is from the gorno maalo and Dosta's family is from the dolno maalo, so grandma Petra assures them it's OK to marry.

There is plenty of irony. Makedon and Dosta want to return to Macedonia, fix up their families' old houses in their village and establish and develop a rural tourism business. There is also a nice inversion. In the old days, Macedonian migrant men looked to Macedonia to find a wife, who would leave the old country. Here, Makedon goes to Australia, find a wife

and returns to Macedonia.

Meanwhile we learn that Makedonka has returned home and has had her baby. It is called Evrosija, but Philip disdainfully calls the baby Evro-silija - a reference to how Europe has forced itself on Macedonia.

And, politically, we get the Prespa Agreement. I don't need to tell you what Philip thinks of that. Nor our patriot Risto.

The play ends with Makedon, Dosta and Risto returning with hope and enthusiasm to Macedonia. Marija will follow for the future christening.

But not everyone ends up happy. Philip has a dream of his mother, Solunka, caught halfway between life and the grave as she awaits his return. It sounds loving to ask someone to wait and not die before you return, but it can turn into a prison.

The play leaves Philip's mental state also unresolved. Psychologically, he remains more lost than ever in his deep disappointment with how Macedonia and Macedonians have been treated by Europe and by European politicians, by Greece, by the Albanian politicians in Macedonia, and by Macedonian politicians and many Macedonian citizens. And don't many of us feel that way too?

For his sickness, Philip says, "nema bilka"/ "there is no medicine". But in the real world there is a cure. It's called respect - respect for Macedonia and respect for Macedonians. But then, maybe he is right and that cure doesn't exist yet.

As well as psychology, current affairs, international politics, allegory, symbolism, irony, comedy and drama, the play also has poetry. The part that stood out for me is Solunka's nightmare scene soon after the murder and suicide, and Makedonka leaving home. In her nightmare, Solunka is visited by three apparitions. They tell her that from the oak tree there remains only ash. Symbolically, that from our roots there remains only ash. She says no, Macedonia is a biblical nation. The apparitions laugh at this and say:

"Zapomni gi nashite kletvi!  
Da patish od zloba.  
Da sakash do groba.  
Da molish za Boga.  
Da postoisht be ime - Bezimenko.  
Da zbirash se shto e kletvinsko.  
Da zhalish za iskonsko.  
Da skitash i go barash rodot svoj.  
Da kopash grobovi, a na cvojot grob ime da nemash.  
Dooshata da si ja prodadish.  
Da go igrash oroto na gjavolot.  
Idnina neka vi bide - Nebidnina!"

For our non-Macedonian speaking friends, I'll give you my rough, and perhaps not quite so poetic, translation:

Remember our curses!  
To suffer from malice.  
To want until death.  
To plead for God.  
To exist without name - nameless.  
To collect all that is cursed.  
To wander and search for your tribe.  
To dig graves, but there be no name on your grave.  
To sell your soul.  
To dance the oro with the devil.  
May your future be - empty.

Powerful curses. Powerful stuff. The tragedy is that every Macedonian I know can relate to some if not most of these curses.

Let me finish by talking about two of these curses. "Da kopash grobovi, a na cvojt grob ime da nemash/ To dig graves, but there be no name on your grave." This is closer and more common than we think. And it's perhaps just as evil if not more evil than say unmarked graves for fallen soldiers.

There are two main cemeteries in our village in Aegean Macedonia. In these cemeteries, I can see the names of people buried after 1912, but I cannot find graves of people buried before 1912. I know they are there. It's an old village, and these people are my relatives and the friends of my relatives. But where are their graves? Where are their headstones? It seems there are graves without names. And there must be a story about how they lost their names.

I would be very interested to hear from anyone from Aegean Macedonia whose village has graves and headstones of people buried before 1912.

The other curse I want to discuss, and this ties in with the title of the play, is "Da skitash i go barash rodot svoj/ To wander and search for your tribe." Doesn't that sum up well the Macedonian people. Here we are in Sydney, a good sized crowd, having wandered half a world away from Macedonia. Over half our people are scattered around the world and many may never see the homeland of their parents and grandparents. As a people we wander the world and every now and then we feel the need to find our people and reconnect. As we are doing tonight.

But let's not be naive about why that is so. It's not by accident. It's by malicious design. As I said at the beginning, it's possible our enemies thought of the concept of 'The Last Macedonian' a long time before the Macedonians did.

That is because ethnic cleansing and colonization - conquering people and replacing them with the people of the conqueror - have been around for a very long time. Here is a quote from a book called Mesopotamia - The Invention of the City, by Gwendolyn Leick. "In the sixth century [BC] Nippur's population included not only Babylonians and Aramaeans, but also large groups of exiled peoples who had been deported from their homelands. This practice had been initiated by the Assyrians to quell insurrections in colonial territories and provide labour and skill for agriculture and architectural projects in Assyria."

This was 600 BC - 2,600 year ago, and the Assyrians were doing it earlier. A little research shows that the Assyrians were moving people and populations around for political as well as economic reasons from about 1,000 BC. One writer, Bustenay Oded, estimated that over about 250 years the Assyrians relocated about 4.4 million people.

King Philip of Macedonia was also known to move people around for political purposes. In the book *City and Empire in the Age of the Successors*, author Ryan Boehm says Philip used both colonization and the dispersal of populations as key political strategies. Among these, we now know that Philip ruthlessly removed the Greek colonies in Chalkidiki and along the Macedonian coastline. Yes, Greece, he did. You know he did, although you never talk about it. And if he were alive today he would do it again. King Philip wanted a Macedonia that is Macedonian, not a Macedonia that is Greek.

As we can see, ethnic cleansing has been around and has been well understood for at least 3,000 years. Through overt means such as forced migration and political oppression, and through covert means such as economic underdevelopment, ethnic cleansing - along with invasion and colonization - are the main reasons that there are more Macedonians outside Macedonia than inside Macedonia.

So we are cursed to wander the world and look for our tribe. But there is nothing mysterious about this curse. It is politics and history. It is how our enemies can create the last Macedonian. The theory is that generation by generation we blend into the mass of humanity until we disappear by becoming something else. And there are many examples of that.

But that fate is not inevitable. If we understand the why and the how, we can do something about it. We can slow it down, we can stop it. If we are determined enough we can even reverse it.

How do we do that? Firstly, we need a strong homeland, a strong Macedonia. The Kurds, who are currently in the news, are a good example of how politics works. There are about 35 million Kurds but they do not have their own country. About 28 million live in what could be Kurdistan. But, like Macedonia, their homeland is divided by four countries. Turkey and Iran each have 83 million people, so each has three times as many people as Kurdistan. Plus Iraq has 39 million people and Syria has 17 million. That's why the Kurds are still fighting for a homeland.

So the Republic of Macedonia with only 2 million people, of which only 1.4 million are ethnic Macedonians, is lucky to exist. Greece has over 10 million people, over five times as many. Bulgaria has 7 million people, three and half times as many. And Albania and Kosovo combined have 4.6 million people, over twice as many. This is why Macedonia has so many problems. And it is why every Macedonian and every Macedonian family who returns to live in Macedonia helps to make Macedonia a little bit stronger.

This is why I think the theme of returning, as shown by Makedon and Dosta, is one of the most important in the play. Their vision is to return to their village, repair their houses and build a future. The more people who share that vision the stronger Macedonia will be.

The second thing we can do is to be inclusive. After hundreds of years of being divided and

conquered, being Macedonian is not one thing. You can be Macedonian and not have a Macedonian first name or family name. Being Macedonian can mean having English, Greek, Turkish, Bulgarian, Serbian, Albanian, German, Italian or other language as your main language. Being Macedonian can be being Christian, Muslim, agnostic, atheist, or something else.

These differences only matter if we let them divide us. To survive we need solidarity and inclusiveness. We need to respect each other. So let's work with the curse and get the better of it. Let's wander around the world and have a good look for our tribe. Let's find them, and bit by bit let's do what we can to help to bring them closer together. That's how we can stop 'the last Macedonian' from becoming reality.

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