

*Stefan Kitanov, director and creator
of the Sofia International Film Festival:*

***“I play to win, not for
the sake of playing”***

The interview was taken by Violeta Tsvetkova, photos by Tony Tonchev

He's 58, but has the energy of a 31 year old – which was exactly his age, when he took over the director's chair for the first time. He motivates people with his ideas and he's ready to do it all – from hanging posters to negotiating with foreign film producers. By education he's an economist, a film critic and an art manager, but by vocation – a cinephile, a musician, a collector of stories and storyteller. He created the “Sofia International Film Festival” and one of the 10 major European co-production markets – Sofia Meetings. If there is someone truly concerned about the ban of public and cultural events right now, it's Stefan Kitanov. Instead of opening on the 12th of March the 24th edition of the festival that put Bulgaria on the world map of film forums, he was forced to postpone it; to cancel airplane tickets and hotel bookings for hundreds of foreign guests, to stop all screenings, briefings, pitching sessions, producers meetings.

IKONOMIST: Mr. Kitanov, Could we say that you're facing the biggest challenge in the history of the Sofia International Film Festival?

STEFAN KITANOV: We haven't been in such a situation. This is war. Against humanity. We're under attack by an invisible evil. We've seen it in the movies, but this time it's for real. We have been under other attacks, but this one is one of the most fierce ones. At least for now. Let's stand against it – not only us, cinephiles, but everyone. Let's help each other and have faith. I love films that have a happy ending. We will see such films at the 24th Sofia Film Festival. Wait for it in 2020!

It's not by chance that Kitanov the

Director is known as Kita the Optimist...

I just try to make people happy with what I do. If I'm successful, it comes with a lot of work, friends, inspiration and travelling; with consistency in what I do. It's like that since 1992 when I started working at Cinema House. Compromises are inevitable, but what matters is not to change the direction you've chosen.

Does that mean that you always knew what you wanted to achieve?

No. When I applied at the Institute of Economics “Karl Marx” (in Sofia) in the end of the 70's, I knew only that I do not want to hold an exam in mathematics. To study Finance and Credits you could apply with geography, so I got in. The five years

of studying taught me some things, but what remained forever are my friends and the love of sports. I was a key player in the university volleyball team and that stimulated me. I'm a competitor by nature. I play to win, not just for the sake of playing. If I run, I should finish first. If I finish third, I accept it, but if I can be second or first, I repeat the race. If not – I smile and move on. It is important to learn how to accept failure. What you learn from your mistakes is the best possible education!

You graduated in Film Studies at NATFA and your success began after you became the director of Cinema House. Were you ready for the challenge?

I was 31 with the mind of a 18 year old. It happened by accident. Or maybe not. After the 10th of November 1989, I was one of the first street musicians in Sofia. Later I was joined by my friend, guitar player Petar Georgiev – Pesheto (one of the best guitar players in Bulgaria). Once in April 1992 in the underpass of the National Palace of Culture, the film critic Alexander Yanakiev came (may he rest in peace!) and said: “Kita, there's a competition at the Union of Bulgarian Filmmakers for the position of director of Cinema House and me and Yanko Terziev (also a critic and friend) believe that you're the man.” I went there, I applied and I came back to continue



We follow Kita because:

- *He's both an artist and a manager*
- *He inspires. He can bring over even the most pretentious film star.*
- *He doesn't tolerate laziness and slugs.*

playing. Two weeks later I was director of Cinema House.

Wasn't that hard for a man with no management experience?

I wouldn't say so. The team of Cinema House consisted of one key projectionist, another projectionist to take his place, a cashier, an organizer and a director. There were no computers and we didn't have any means. I was writing the programs on an A4 sheet of paper and I would hang them around the other cinemas. That was the kind of director that I was. There was no office room either. I renovated myself a small room, but in order to reach it you had to pass by the projectionist's station. If someone wanted to meet me, they had to ring a bell at the left entrance of the movie hall, to meet the projectionist who was usually wearing a sweatshirt, because it's so hot around the projectors, and get the directions to "my office" from that person – that's what my first business meetings were like.

What didn't change in your way of work till now?

I have always been very strict to everything. I have never tolerated sluggishness, chaos, imperfection.

It was in Cinema House that the story of your biggest film child began – the Sofia Film Festival. Was it hard to turn it into a big European film forum?

It was a matter of aggregation, of knowledge, meetings, travelling. Our first event at Cinema House was a small festival, that my friend Kosta Bikov, who at the time he was chief-secretary of the Union of Bulgarian Filmmakers, called *World Cinema at the End of Summer*. In the crisis between 1992-1993 people couldn't afford to go on a vacation, so we gave them the opportunity to travel through film. It was back then that I started working actively with all foreign cultural institutes in Sofia and we still keep wonderful relationships. Then came the idea for Rock Film Fest, which we organized together with the British Council, mainly with the deputy director Joanna Maurice and Dessy Stoycheva, who was head of the arts department. It was by

accident again. At the London's National Film Theatre – the representative cinema of the British Film Institute, there was a program of rock films (*Rock On Film*) and Yanko Terziev and Nigel Cross of the British Council in London opened my eyes for it. With the help of Nigel the idea took shape and Bulgarian audiences saw rock films such as *Woodstock*, *Monterey Pop*, Led Zeppelin's *The Song Remains the Same* etc. We welcomed rock-legend Mitch Mitchel, drummer of the Jimi Hendrix Experience. Audiences reacted as if they were at a rock concert, such incredible energy!

And there was no stopping after that...

That's right. Along came Rock Film Fest 2 in 1994, but between these two festivals, happened one of the most important events in my life. In the autumn of 1993, British Council announced a scholarship for arts management studies. I applied, received approval and went on a post-graduate course in the UK. The seven months that I spent there opened my eyes, my hearing, all of my senses. First three months at the De Montfort University in Leicester were mostly a time of discovery for me. I met people, I travelled around England, I went to Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. I was frequenting authentic rock clubs. My tutor, Christopher Maughan would invite me to have dinner with his family. He had all the records of Johnny Mitchel, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, all bought at the time of their release. He copied on an audio cassette for me the first albums of Mitchel and I would listen to them while running at sundown in the neighborhood. I bought my first quality guitar, a Yamaha, and did a small concert for my overseas colleagues – with the five chords that I knew and my favorite songs by Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel, Neil Young. And then with some other students we sang at the Royal Mail Pub in Leister. Feeling Groovy!

Was it for pleasure or did you have a bigger goal?

I never have goals. Things happen naturally with me. I had a family, a wife and a five-year old daughter, I never even



thought of not coming back to Bulgaria or doing something different than organizing the Rock Film Fest. That's why I went to all art-house cinemas in the UK and to a few of their gatherings – real masterclasses in programming, selecting films, event-making and promotion, presentation of auteurs, brochures and catalogues, the way they worked with medias. Also concerts – first at rock clubs and later big stars such

as Eric Clapton, Joe Cocker, ZZ Top, Jethro Tull, Bert Jansch who later came to Sofia. I will never forget the arriving in London for the First Time. I had a meeting with Joanna Maurice at Kings Cross Railway station, we went by tube to Piccadilly Circus and on our way out she asked me not to look up, until she says so. We went to the surface and she said “now!” – that's when I saw the five-storey building with the sign of *Tower Records*. This legendary audiovisual store became my library.

Did you have a meeting that defined your future?

Yes. When I was in Leicester, the queen was expected to give a visit. They told me that I could represent Bulgarian students and have a handshake with Queen Elizabeth II. But at the same time at the National Film Theatre in London, there was a second part of their rock on film program so I went there. I saw *Leonard Cohen: Bird on a Wire* by Tony Palmer and... In June 1994 he was the first superstar director to come to Rock Film Fest 2. And later many times more, because he fell in love with Bulgaria. In the autumn of the same year I went to the London Film Festival and met Tony in a pub. We were having a glass of wine and he said: “Stefan, I brought the latest John Osborn script. I want to make a film about Henry Purcell and I want you to organize the shooting in Bulgaria. It's a TV film, produced by Channel 4, it's a period piece with lots of extras and in order to do it, we need a destination such as Bulgaria. I'm

Career

HHe found RFF INTERNATIONAL (1994) and ART FEST (2001) to organize yearly film festivals in Bulgaria and to produce films (THE WORLD IS BIG AND SALVATION LURKS AROUND THE CORNER, RHAPSODY IN WHITE, KING OF THE BELGIANS, THE WILD PEAR TREE, IRINA and others). He wrote the script for the documentary FSB. He distributes in Bulgaria films by Wim Wenders, Francois Ozon Fatih Akin, Lars von Trier and many others. Since 2003 he's a member of the European Film Academy. He has been awarded with “The Golden Century” and “Golden Pen”. He has been member of different juries at many festivals, such as Cannes, Venice, Karlovy Vary, Moscow, and Cairo among others. Manager of the Year of the EUROPA CINEMAS network.

sure that if you can organize Rock Film Fest, you can manage with a film too.

Was it after you shot “England, My England” that you thought – “I could do more”?

Maybe, I just wanted to do my job professionally. I found my first production company together with my friend Radoslav Spassov (*established Bulgarian cinematographer and film director*), but also learned a lot by skilled and experienced producers and production managers such as Alexander Metodiev and Rusi Lyutchanov. I’m extremely grateful to set designer Anastas Yanakiev, because for everyone on the Bulgarian side this was a huge adventure. We were still working at a “socialist pace”, but you couldn’t say “It can’t be done” to Tony Palmer. He was so demanding, every second sentence started with “I want!” and ended with “Now!”. He taught me that nothing is impossible. He taught me to be practical, to foresee things and to work quickly.

One of our greatest challenges was when we were filming the Great Fire of London in 1666. We built the set next to the Suhodol lake, which was supposed to be the Thames. In inhuman conditions. At the beginning of April 1995 there was this incredible snowfall. Sofia looked like Siberia. We took Tony Palmer to the location and see what we had done, he looked at the set, 10m away from the water and asked me: “Stefan, what’s the weather forecast?” Well, I said, in three days it will get really warm and the snow will melt. “Ok, he said. – I want this set to go on top of the hill. Now!” It was a great effort, but we did it. When shooting began, everybody was walking in water. So, if we wouldn’t have moved the Old London set, it would have drowned in the Suhodol Lake.

Who is welcome and who isn’t in your team?

It’s a natural process. With time came the desire for bigger events – after Rock Film Fest 1 and 2 we organized the *Monty Python* festival and in 1997 the first *Music Film Fest* happened and it’s musical program was curated by Ivaylo Kraytchovski – Pifa (may he rest in peace!). I worked with

Terry Jones – the Unforgettable

In 1996 the great Terry Jones was a guest of the Monty Python festival at Cinema House. Extremely warm and friendly person. We became friends in the moment I took him to the neighborhood pub “Veslets” and ordered kebacheta, shopska salad, beans with onions and lyutenitza and chilly peppers. He later invited me to his house in London, I was trembling at the thought that I was visiting one sixth of Monty Python, but when the door opened there were two of them – Terry Jones and Michael Palin. Amazing! Terry had prepared dinner and I brought some of my father’s rakia. Two days later, thanks to him, I met Terry Gilliam and we did a one-hour interview. Unfortunately, Terry Jones passed away recently. I will always remember him saying at a press-conference here in Sofia – “We have a project together and it’s called “The Mystery of Bulgarian Salads”, and it goes great with the rakia of Stefan’s father.

a small crew. And since I began organizing the festival as an independent producer, I had an office outside of Cinema House – half of my living room was separated with a library, on a table with a fax-machine and a computer on top. It stayed that way until 1999, when we hired our first room at the National Palace of Culture’ administrative building.

I have always worked with people that accept my way to do things and who are as demanding as I am. Some couldn’t keep up, some where slugs and naturally fell of the cart. Some couldn’t keep up with the pace of working in an idealistic way. Together with Mira Staleva and Kiril Lozanov we have been a team since the first Sofia Film Festival in 2001. Together with us was also Margarita Radeva, peace upon her soul, she passed away at the age of 33, incredible person! Vihrena Ninova and Svetla Damyanova have been onboard for more than 15 years. Our team has this constant core that everything else revolves around. Maybe it is not the right way, but my key principle is the realization of our projects, not just making money.

Another key moment in the story of the festival comes with the film *No Man’s Land* by Danis Tanovich, right?

In 2002 *No Man’s Land* was nominated for an Oscar and I found out that we have a wine by that name. So I went to Filip Harmandzhiev, owner of “Damyanitza” and said: “You have the wine, we have the

film – let’s make them meet.” Filip said “Ok then” and sponsored the opening cocktail. It was in the middle of the festival that the film won the foreign language Oscar, so I wrote an e-mail to the producers: “We have the wine and the film, because we opened our festival with it. You have the Oscar, but we consider it ours too. Let’s see what comes first – wine or film, and decide. But instead of pulling a Kalashnikov, come for a glass of wine and receive the first award in the history of our festival, a bulk of wine.” Producer Mark Baschet came along, I handed him the bulk and asked audiences at the National Palace of Culture: “We already have an award, but would you like it if our festival was competitive, if we had an international jury etc.” and everyone in the hall said yes. The next edition was already competitive.

How do you attract world-famous personalities?

With friends, travels, personal meetings. It doesn’t work with letters and faxes. I just go there and introduce myself, openly and naturally. That’s how it happened with Wim Wenders in 2000 at the Jerusalem Film Festival. Me and my wife were headed to at a table at the biblical lawn in front of the Jerusalem Film Archive and next to a tree I found a 20\$ bill. Pure luck! A few seconds later we saw Wim Wenders. I introduced myself and asked him if he would like to be our guest at the festival. He gave me his e-mail and said: “Stefan, I currently

live in LA. But if I'm in Europe around your dates and have a couple of free days, I will come to Sofia." And it happened in 2006. And at the press-conference he said, that he left these 20\$ on purpose... Yeah, right!

You also produce films. Rangel Valchanov sang his swan song with a film that you produced. What is your brightest memory of him?

Rangel (peace upon his soul!) played a crucial part in the life of my family. My wife Iliana Kitanova and I were still student's when he invited her to play in *Which Way Now?* (*A sega nakade?*) I asked him to join as an intern, I was an errand boy, but as a student in Film Studies, it was important for me to see the way Rangel the Magician works. It was like a dream. One day, just before the shooting started, he played an old music record, performed by the sitar-player Chaurasia, then he gathered all actors and the rest of the crew members and said: "My dear, me and the Director of Photography reached the conclusion that this will be the last film in our lives – after the last take, we will all commit suicide, Radoslav Spassov will take it on film and after he flies away too, we shall leave this to the world." Deadly silence! Rangel continued: "Please, speak up if you share our idea". A few voices came along - "I agree". He was in such control of the situation, that he achieved incredible collectivity. And then he broke the spell. On his 60th birthday Slavcho Spassov gathered us in the garden of the Film Studios. Many of the actors from *Which Way Now?* were there and we had the idea to make a sequel. Rangel and Georgi Danailov wrote a script, we applied twice for funds and they granted us a small amount, but we didn't want much. That's how *Which Way Today?* came along. In the first film my wife was an actress and I was an errand boy. In the second one, she was an actress again, I was a producer and our daughter – a production assistant. Rangel was 78, ill, but he was never late for shooting. When you have such a high spirit next to you, you follow it.

In the frame of the Sofia Film Festival you created the first co-production market in Bulgaria – how did Sofia



Family

Family is the most important thing in the world for me. I am very happy that my wife Iliana and I have been together for more than 30 years and she's been putting up with me all this time

Meetings develop?

Sofia Meetings came from my experience as a producer of the film *The World is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner* by Stephan Komandarev. I frequented many film markets and came to the conclusion how important is for a festival to have a professional platform attached so to attract the international film industry, but also to give a chance for development of people working here. Our co-production market's formula is a mix between the way project markets work at the festivals in Rotterdam (Cine Mart)

Friends

My closest friends are not that numerous, but our meetings are complete. I am quite an open person, even though I'm not an extrovert. I become close with strangers easily and trust proves in time.

and Cottbus (Connecting Cottbus). Since 2004 Sofia Meetings became one of the 10 most important co-production markets in the world. Here we have the crème de la crème of the European Film Industry, especially people interested in Central and Eastern European cinema. This market is a launching station for new Bulgarian films – 90% of them started as projects at the Sofia Meetings. A great role was played by Mira Staleva, who has been heading the market for 16 years!

You still believe that despite the coronavirus, the Sofia Film Festival and Sofia Meetings 2020 will take place?

Look what people say, it's Coming Soon! I would like to greet my neighborhood, Sofia, Bulgaria, Europe and Planet Earth with the song *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* from the film *Monty Python's Life of Brian* by Terry Jones. I would also like to greet you with the song *We Shall Overcome*, but let's not get too serious and get back to the ending of *Life of Brian*: "Worst things happen at sea, you know...". Let the Big Fish worry about it.

It's clear - Kita (the whale) should worry about it. And what is he like at home?

When at home, Kita isn't whimsy at all. He's a bad actor, he's natural and straightforward, some times even too much. Because of all my work maybe I didn't spend enough time to take care of my growing daughter, unlike my wife who devoted herself to her. Now I would like to compensate with my two and a half year old granddaughter Dimana. Every moment I spend with her equals infinity.

How does she call you – Kita or Grandpa?

Dadu.

What are Dadu and Kita's dreams for 2020?

Dadu dreams of more time with Dimana, and Kita dreams for the festival to start and be over sooner, so that he can have more time for Dimana (*Kita smiles*). ☑

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