

You Are Not Scared, He Told Me

Magda Vášáryová

The year 1989 will enter history as a year of change. Just like the year 1968, 1948 and 1938 or 1918. But just like each change also this one started long before November, long before the year 1989.

During Normalization¹ and the 1980s I was an actress – a member of the ensembles of Nová scéna and Slovak National Theater. Theater is a strange phenomenon especially well-tuned for detecting the opinion of the audience. People are sitting in the dark. They don't communicate with each other and their attention is directed at the lit stage and actors – manipulators with people's emotions. Freedom started to creep into the dark space of the auditorium already in 1986-1987. It was mostly initiated by women – they would usually be the first among the audience to start laughing more loudly, reacting to the subtlest of allusions that didn't even have to have a clear political connotation. Very often their reactions would be followed by sharp whispers of their husbands or companions: "Be quiet, don't laugh that loud...do not applaud...". Men were afraid they would lose their positions – especially when the audience was mostly composed of people from some companies and organizations.

When in 1988 Alexander Dubček came to the National Theater to see our show and his white hair was well noticeable to all people in the audience, it was mostly women who looked at him, whispered his name and surrounded him after the show. When he came to see us backstage we all flocked around him. At that time, he was a symbol of unfinished change of the year 1968 which was deeply engraved in us as an injustice that corrupted our lives for good.

In November 1989, at the begging of the theater strike, Milan Křažko² approached me to read our appeal to our fellow citizens at the first meeting in SNP Square³ "I asked also others, but they are still scared. You're not scared," he told me. I remember this strong moment even after twenty years – how I was reading the short text into a weak microphone in the flickering light of street lamps. Of course, I was scared, but my fear was not new. In

¹ In the history of Czechoslovakia, the term normalization refers to the period after the Soviet invasion in August 1968, esp. to the period of the 1970s. It was characterized by restoration of the conditions prevailing before the reform period of the second half of the 1960s up to the year 1968 and subsequent preservation of this new status quo (Translator's note).

² Milan Křažko – a popular Slovak actor and one of the main protagonists of November 1989 and its aftermath (Translator's note).

³ Square of the Slovak National Uprising - one of the main and largest square in the center of Bratislava (Translator's note).

1970 I was expelled from the University; in 1993 I was banned for one year from acting. In 1989 I signed an appeal of sociologists and wrote personally a protest letter to president Husák to release from prison my former professor M. Kusý and J. Čarnogurský. Together with my husband we also signed various other public proclamations. I well remember that obtrusive feeling of insecurity when Radio Free Europe was reading our names and we were listening in the silence of our apartment. But as they say: "the die has been cast." In November and December 1989 I traveled together with my colleagues from the theater all over Slovakia. We experienced incredible meetings with workers in Trenčín, Dubnica, Nové mesto nad Váhom, Žilina, Ilava, Brezno, Podbrezová, Žiar nad Hronom, Banská Štiavnica...

At night we would be driving back home to catch the final moments of discussion in the Studio S theater in Bratislava. We would be sitting there late into the night, shivering with cold, wet, but happy. In the meantime, our mothers would make us coffee, do our laundry, iron our clothes and look after our children so that we could go out to make a revolution☺.

And on January 15 1990 I decided to change my life and I accepted the offer of president V. Havel to become an ambassador of free Czechoslovakia. And the rest is history.

P.S. I would want to believe that those women who first started to laugh freely before November 1989 have raised a generation of their children and inculcate in them the value of freedom.

Translated by **Eva Riečanská**

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