

INTERVIEW WITH LEV PRUDKIN

By Eugenio Renzi, Paris 2024

The production of Bleeding Blue Bird [BBB] is a story in itself. Can you tell it from its beginning?

I wrote the very first draft in the 1990s, while I was studying in VGIK [Russian State Academy of Cinematography] in Moscow. I was very much inspired by my memories. As a child, coming from a family of actors and theatre people, I would spend a lot of time attending rehearsals and performances. I saw *The Blue Bird* countless times, and it never failed to fascinate me. That being said, the script I was working on was not and never became an adaptation of Maurice Maeterlinck's famous fairy tale. Instead, I wanted to express the feelings that I have experienced, as a child, watching this play being performed on stage and an awe of being backstage and seeing all those people without makeup after the show. I imagined the whole building as a magic place where wonderful and probably dreadful events might happen.



Another important element present since this first version of the project is the idea of a fake twist, a macguffin – the actor that suddenly disappears during the performance. I was quite happy with the script I wrote back then. But, we were in the 1990s, in Russia, the industry of cinema being practically nonexistent then, and I had no means and no hopes to produce it. So this project lay untouched for almost twenty years. Until, in the summer of 2017, after finishing my first feature *No-One*, I decided to pick up the idea where I left off. By that time I already left Russia and lived between Europe, Ukraine and Israel. I completely rewrote the script, building new senses on the two elements that I mentioned before. This new version pleased my producers. From the very beginning it was clear for all of us that it would not be a commercial project but rather an artistic one.

Do you like to write?

Not so much! I care about images and feelings more than words. Most of the dialogues come from Maeterlinck. But not all. For sure, I don't like to write stories. What I like is to visualise the film in my head. When it's clear in my mind, I put it down on paper in every detail. That's why my scripts are «director's scripts»: full of visual elements, angles, shots, camera movements... Most of all, I like to be on the set, directing, working with actors. I also very much like editing. Writing is definitely not my favorite part of the process of making a film. And yet, it's a necessary step for any independent filmmaker.

Because the storyline is fundamentally a macguffin, a crucial element of your work is the transition from one scene to another. Is it something that you figure since the script, or does it come later, in editing?

Most of the transitions that you see in the movie were scripted. The script is about 160 pages long. Everything is described quite meticulously. But the editing process added some very important modifications to it. Mostly cuts. The first rough cut was three hours long. The final version is 1h 40m.

Three consecutive performances structure the film. Why is that?

I have conceived the storyline in three acts. Which might seem a quite classical approach. I didn't want to stretch the story too much and rather keep it concise. So three acts was the right rhythm. But, again, the plot is a distraction. Even though I have been trained to be a scriptwriter during my studies in Los Angeles, I am not a professional scriptwriter. I do not wish to be one. I am not interested in crafting a story following the rules of commercial cinema. For instance: we are at page 17, here we need a twist, on page 22 we should introduce a villain... I play with those elements, but it's quite clear that the whole thing is just a game. I do not follow the rules nor do really break them, which would be, in a way, taking them into consideration. I just don't think very much about it. In writing, I let myself wonder following my intuitions and feelings more than pure reason.

One of the questions that this film raises, is whether or not a director should take into consideration audience reactions as a part of his creative process.

The director who is the character of my film seems to be tired of depending on audience's reactions, he wants to be free in the creative process. As to audience - there are two of them in BBB. The audience in the film. And the audience of the film. I came to the conclusion that I needed to create a connection between those two audiences. But I did not want to explain why or how this connection should be. Some of my assistants, in the editing room, wanted to lead the audience of the film in a more explicit way. I didn't. Though we have, both in the script and on camera, some scenes that explain a little more about what is happening in terms of narration, I finally decided to cut them off. I felt that they would compromise the very purpose of BBB, which is to create an experience that, as a spectator, one should comprehend emotionally or even better intuitively rather than understand rationally. I wanted BBB to be a maze of sensations, visions, premonitions.

You do not adapt *The Blue Bird*, but you use it to produce an experience. Why this play rather than another? What does *The Blue Bird* mean to you?

In order to answer, I have to go back a little in time and speak about my family history. My grandfather Mark Prudkin was a theatre actor. He started his career in the Second studio of the Moscow Art Theatre created by Konstantin Stanislavski in 1916. He was a Jewish guy from a little town of the Moscow district. For him, the only way to find a place in the world was to be part of something big. Stanislavski took him under his protection. He became part of a company of great actors. One of his first important roles was Shervinsky in the play *The Days of the Turbins* by Mikhail Bulgakov. His life was consecrated to theatre. Consequently, he refused to work in cinema until very late in his career - when he accepted to play the father, Fyodor Pavlovich, in

the Soviet adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov* [Ivan Pyriev, USSR, 1969]. He lived a very long life. He was 96 years old when he died in 1994. He was already 77 years old when I was born. But he was still performing in theatre and I remember him very well. I would hang around in the Moscow Theatre all the time. I was also sometime on scene, I played some minor roles. Most of the time I would be backstage. That's why in *BBB* I am so obsessed with the backstage. With everything that happens behind the scenes. All the fuss, the excitement, the fear... As a child, I would also daydream imagining myself on stage, someday... *The Blue Bird* is the flagship performance of the MAT. Probably the most iconic just after *The Seagull* by Chekhov. Between five and eight years old, I watched it every Sunday. I never missed a show. And I could not get enough. I would always sit in the director's box with my grandmother Yekaterina who also worked in this theatre as a first assistant director. In my mind this play captures the essence of art. The freedom of art. And it's for this reason that I wanted *The Blue Bird* in my film. It represents the fate of art in our modern days.

BBB is the story of a conspiracy. You already make it clear that this plot is not important on a narrative level. So, at what level does it matter to you?

A director is supposed to direct, to master, to decide. The director of the show in the film feels that something is happening in the backstage of his play, he can see it coming, he observes it growing, but he is unable to fully grasp it. I wanted to express this feeling of losing control to something that is beyond your will.

There is something of Pirandello in the idea of actors taking control of the scene...

Probably... I'd say not just actors in this case but actors-invaders, intruders posing as actors. This is very possible in a Shakespearean world that is theatre.

Was the choice of Kyiv part of the creative process?

Absolutely yes. It wasn't there in the old version that I wrote in the 90s. But, since I started to work again on the script, I knew that it should be Kyiv. We discussed it many times with my producers. That was before the invasion of February 2022. The war of course was already there, since 2014. I was spending a lot of time in Kyiv. We all had this feeling that everything could even go worse. The script reflects this anxiety. This is also why the structure of the film is not obvious. It shouldn't be, because those feelings weren't clearly structured in our minds either. It is designed like this, made with the fabric of nightmares. That's why it can be perceived not on the level of consciousness but on the level of intuition on which it was conceived. So, Kyiv was important to me as it was to my producers. We felt that Russia wouldn't stop and there would be blood. The feeling I had there was very alike to my childhood backstage fears in those dark long corridors with unexpected turns and echoing footsteps... of something that might happen... and eventually it did. As the blue bird of the tale, the city of Kyiv represents art, happiness, hope. And the city is now bleeding.

The theatre is the Theatre on Podil. How important for you was this location?

It's a very modern theatre. But it is built on an ancient and for me one the most beautiful streets of Europe, Andriivskyi Descent. Connecting the upper town and the old Podil neighborhood, it

is the heart of Kyiv. It was crucial for me to secure permission to shoot on this location. It wasn't easy. We had been granted only twelve days to do all the scenes there.

Most of your crew comes from the UK. But some actors are Ukrainians.

I was making two different language versions of the film, in English and in Ukrainian. Those two versions are very close but not identical. This is a UK movie, I collaborated with English actors, Arthur Darvill and Hannah Arterton, and English producers who found Ukrainian production and post-production companies for *Bleeding Blue Bird*. Many actors and the whole crew are Ukrainians.

You play a character too... Why act? And why this particular character?

I do not think that I will ever act again (smiling). Maybe in someone else's movie... But to act and to direct at the same time, it's really hard. If I have forced myself into it in *BBB* it's only because I had no alternative but replace the actor who was cast to play what ended up to be my role and who let us down last minute. A lot of decisions concerning the cast had been made shortly before the shooting. Some even when the shooting had already started. I know that when the director plays a character this might look like a clue. As if the ideas of that particular character were the voice of the director in the film. But this was unplanned and I was just acting.

Speaking about acting, in the middle of the film you show some footage of an interview with Stanislavski. Can you talk about that?

A great actor and director and a great theorist of the art of acting and directing. In this very rare footage he is talking about nothing. He is fatuously chitchatting with another actress. I guess what I wanted is to show that, sometime, the content of a conversation between actors can be perfectly silly and senseless and yet the conversation itself not be useless: it can be a way to reach out, to hit off and find a common ground. That's not a method... There is no method for that. But it's very important for me to establish a personal relationship with my actors, same as for the main character inside the movie. Usually I don't do much table reading. Instead, I work with every actor separately, face to face. And every time is different. What I say, how much I say, it depends on the moment, the person, the feeling. Sometime you feel that a certain actor requires a strong and precise direction. Another actor, on the contrary, might need very little. I'm just trying to find out quickly who needs what.

I have the impression that the costumes and the makeup are very important for you. It's part of the *mise en scène*. And it is also part of the story.

We have a very good artistic director Alena Drobna. She works in theatre, this was her first time as production designer in a film. And a great make-up designer Tetiana Tatarenko.

I started to think about makeup and costumes very early in the process. They specially matter in the film because one of the main themes of *BBB* is transformation. Transformation of the actors into characters. But also transformation of some non-actors into actors. Eventually, everyone is an actor in this story. Like in life, for better or worse. Therefore, everyone has to transform himself. And I wanted this transformation to be very physical. To the point that sometime it's hard

to say who is who. I asked Tetiana to disguise ... But not completely. As a spectator you should sometimes wonder, is he or she the same character I've seen in the previous scene?

****Buñuel famously plays with this ambiguity in That Obscure Object of Desire. ****

His last film, I love it. Do you know the story behind the choice of casting Carole Bouquet and Angela Molina for the same role? At first, Buñuel wanted Maria Schneider. But they had a conflict and finally he decided not to work with her. A few days before the shooting, the production proposed two replacements: Bouquet and Molina. Two very different types of beauty, one very cold, the other very sensual. Buñuel couldn't make up his mind, until he decided not to and go for both of them. Sometimes you have an idea that you cherish very much and it's only when you are forced to drop it that you realise that what you have to do is better than what you wanted to do in the first place. It happened to me very often.

Speaking about Buñuel. One of your locations could be one of his surrealistic innerspaces... It's a big hall where a feast takes place.

We call it « mystic hall ». This scene is at the very heart of the film. It's a dream. In the previous scene, we see Sonia taking a nap. And after, she wakes up directly on stage, in a bed, with her brother, like at the beginning of the original tale. So one can assume that the scene between is her own dream. The mystic hall is an imaginary place where all the different realities of the film are finally connected: stage, backstage, life... So, in a way, the dream, the vision is the ultimate reality.

The camera movements, in this particular scene but also in the film in general, are audacious and free.

It was very important for me to be as less theatrical as possible. We did not want to imitate and even less to reproduce the experience of a theatre spectator, we don't film the point of view of the audience, we almost don't see the audience. This was one of the most important topics of my conversations with director of photography Boris Litovchenko.

At some point, the conspirators have a discussion about flies and bees. The flies are dummies, but effective. Whereas the bees, precisely because they are so sophisticated, might be unable to survive... Should we assume that flies represent the public and bees are the artists?

The text comes from Maeterlinck. Not The Blue Bird but another work of his: The Life of a Bee. I also used some quotes from The Life of the White Ant. In this particular scene, one should notice that the conversation takes place between two «bad guys» – let's call them conspirators. Their goal is to divide. Divide the world into ants and bees, into bad people and good people. That's what evil is about: separate. Of course, every individual is different from another. Differences exist. But, and Maeterlinck talks about that, nobody should be segregated because of his difference.