

Interview with Nikolai Burljajev

Moscow

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Translated from English by Alexandra Ovtchinnikova

Notes:

Text that was originally in English.

(Text that was added by translator)

- 00.17 - 00.23 I am Nikolai Burljajev. I was born in Moscow on the 3rd of August, 1946.
- 00.25 - 01.08 Before I met Tarkovsky I have performed in one film. In Andrei Konchalovsky's film. Since the two Andreis were friends, Andrei Tarkovsky and Andrei Konchalovsky, by the time Andrei Tarkovsky was offered to continue the work on the film *Ivan's Childhood* he has already seen me in the film of Andrei Konchalovsky where I played the protagonist. Only when Andrei passed away I found out that he agreed to work on *Ivan's Childhood* because he had warrants. They were me Kolja Burljajev, director of photography Vadim Yusov, composer Ovchinnikov and artist Chernjajev.
- 01.10 - 02.04 So I came to Mosfilm where I saw Andrei for the first time in my life. He was 28 years old. I was 14 years old. And I remember that I, as a boy, fell in love with him from the first time. Simply fell in love. Why? Now I understand why. Because I sensed Creator's Heavenly Ray directed at him. He was a man who lived in two dimensions. In reality, he was full of humor, joked around, played guitar, made pranks, courted ladies, and drank wine. He did everything. But at the same time I could see that sometimes like a short circuit...He was not here anymore. He is somewhere else. With God. The place where his creations dwelled.
- 02.05 - 02.49 That is why he became a film director number one for this world. Many directors have told me that - Andrzej Wajda, Bernardo Bertolucci, Theo Angelopoulos, Emir Kusturica. That Andrei is number one. And even Bergman, who Andrei loved very much, said about Tarkovsky: "When I saw the films of this young Russian director, I realized that he has the keys to the room that I wish to access. But I don't have the key to this mysterious room. But he, Andrei, feels in that room at home".
- 02.49 - 03.37 This mystery, the fact that he was a conductor of the heavenly will, that he could express through his films and through his work (Note: he said screen) the things that nobody was capable of expressing even if they wanted to...Or perhaps do not even want to express because everyone rushed out to make money on films. He, on the other hand, was a heavenly guide. And this is the true culture; because culture is an ability to hear the God. It is this and nothing else. Everything else is not culture. If you can't hear the God, why are you doing this? It becomes a profitable business. Then you are simply making money like Hollywood. They make money from films. They downgrade the level of spirituality on this planet. Andrei, on the other hand, elevated the level of spirituality on this planet.
- 03.40 - 05.11 Tarkovsky introduced the things that the writer Bogomolov, the author of the short story *Ivan*, did not have originally. He came up with Ivan's dreams, because only through them he could show the ideal world that Ivan has lost. The harmony, the joy and the love. They were ordinary episodes. We were doing our job, and it was my duty to do my best. Today I realize who Tarkovsky was, and what was his divine world like, and what the episodes with Ivan's dreams really were. I have wondered for a long time why Andrei being a very stylish, fashionable man...He always looked very stylish. Why did he decide to work on a war film, a patriotic film? And I have realized it only now, with the whole life behind me and with Andrei no longer among us. He is not here, but he is there. And now our ties are much stronger. Because for the last year we are in a direct contact. I am writing a book about Tarkovsky. And it turns out that I can get in

contact with Andrei, with his soul. From there he tells me a lot of things. A lot of things.

- 05.11 - 06.24 He became even more dear to me now. So yes, Andrei is doing well there. He has passed the trial and the purification circle. And now he is with the God. He is among God's confidants. He sees us from there. He sees me and all the dear ones. And Marija Arsenjevna and Leila Gard. He can see everybody but he can communicate only with me. It is a great miracle and Andrei constantly...I have, when I was acting in Andrei's film *Ivan's Childhood*...No, not then, I have not told it to the press...After that, after the completion of *Andrei Rublev* I used to tell the press that Andrei Tarkovsky is a man of faith. But I could not prove it, and I have been waiting for the proof all my life. Because the fact that he has put on my chest my very first cross in *Andrei Rublev*, could not act as proof...This is not a valid proof...It was a prop-cross. And now the time has come for Andrei to leave this world for the divine one; he is not among us anymore. So, I was invited to participate in the event dedicated to the memory of Andrei Tarkovsky. It was in our Dom Kino (Cinema House).
- 06.25-07.30 The organizers wanted to give me some extracts from his diaries to read out loud. And when I was given a book, put together from his diaries, and was given an extract to read I could not believe my eyes. I was reading something that I have searched for all my life – the proof that Andrei was a man of faith. This was the text: "Lord! I feel You drawing near, I can feel Your hand upon the back of my head. Because I want to see Your world as You made it, and Your people as You would have them be. I love You, Lord, and want nothing else from You". Intuitively, he was aware of the God. He lived in the atheist Russia. We did not talk about faith. We did not talk about Christ, about Orthodoxy, about faith. And this is what I felt in him. As a boy. This ray of God's light in Andrei, and this ray hit me. That is why we were together during two films.
- 07.31 - 09.15 Though, it was difficult for me to convince him to give me the role of Boriska in *Andrei Rublev*, because he wrote the part for another person. Not for an actor, but for a 30 year old poet, I was 18 years old. Andrei wrote for me a role of Foma, Andrei Rublev's apprentice. But when I read the screenplay I did not like Foma and refused...Or rather I did not refuse. Refuse to play in Tarkovsky's film?! It is nonsense. But I auditioned for the role without joy. And shyly proposed: "Andrei, audition me for Boriska's role?". He brushed me off saying: "No, no, no you are too young. You are still young. I made the part for another man. I wrote Foma for you. Play Foma!". So I asked Yusov for help. Then I asked the film consultant Sava Jamchikov. And Sava made a bet with Andrei: "Let's bet on a box of champagne that you are going to appoint Kolja? You won't find anyone better!". Andrei said: "No, no, no he is a celebrity. He is playing everywhere, no, no, no...". But since it was a bet, he agreed. And since they made a bet Andrei had to make an audition for me and I saw....Oh, I was so happy that he is going to audition me, that I have a chance. And when...When the audition begun, suddenly Andrei came to me and begun to whisper something in my ear. The same way like in *Ivan's Childhood*, when he was whispering in the ear he was working with me. And he appointed me. And now he send me the following message from there: "Kolja, I am so grateful to you that you have convinced me to give you the role of Boriska. Nobody could have done it better than you".

- 09.18-10.25 So yes, I begun to talk about this topic but was distracted. Only now I understand why Andrei, a very stylish man, very fashionable man, a refined intellectual, suddenly begun to work on a war film, patriotic film. Now I understand it completely. Because Andrei made a film *Ivan's Childhood* about his own childhood. As a matter of fact during the war Andrei was the same age as Ivan. That is why he did it. Everything about it was dear to him not imagined. He only came up with Ivan's dreams, made everything poetic. So, the film is about Tarkovsky's childhood which was a very difficult childhood. It was during the war, and his father left them. He left to the war front and then he left the family. His childhood was unhappy. He also was without a father.
- 10.26 - 11.35 Therefore, he has sung the song of his soul. And today I realize that his whole life Andrei was making one film. The film called *The Sacrifice*. If you watch his every film you will see that their main idea is sacrifice. *Ivan's Childhood* – the sacrifice of Ivan. *Andrei Rublev* – Boriska's, my character's, sacrifice, who is under the threat of being killed by the prince because he deceived him about knowing the secret of the bell casting and so on. Next, *The Mirror* – the sacrifice of the main character, author. *Stalker* – Stalker's sacrifice. *Solaris* - Khari's sacrifice. And finally, *The Mirror* (Note: he made a mistake here I think he meant *Nostalgia*) – the sacrifice of the protagonist. And the last film is even titled *The Sacrifice*. Therefore, he has been singing the principle song of existence all this time. Not his own existence but the existence of the whole human kind. That the purpose of life to offer one self as a sacrifice to the God.
- 11.35 - 12.44 Andrei has lived a very difficult life. Oh, he lived a very difficult life. I saw everything with my own eyes. Deficiency of money. He would finish a film and would get a miserable reward. About two thousand rubles, while his dept, I recall, was about nine thousand rubles. So he gave the money away, for the dept. How is one to live after that? And he made one film in five years. And also the pressure from the society from censorship. Pressure in personal life. He lived under...Under such oppression, God forbid! Even his death was grievous. But all this suffering has lead him to the God. Because if he would not life such a difficult ascetic life, if his dormition was not that grievous...When he was left alone...When he was practically abandoned in that hospital...His friends rarely visited him. They had to pass through the controlling nature of Andrei's most dear person, who (she) would not allow many people to see him. He was cut off, he was under the blockade. But all this suffering has made it possible for him to come so close to the God.
- 12.49 Please explain to them that once they decipher everything they will realize how important this interview is.
- 12.58 Will Leila be involved with this? Will she help them? She will, yes? She will understand all of this, if it is her, she will understand.
- 13.12 Leila understand me. And all that I speak now. They understand this...Your heart...And you understand it too, later.
- 13.29 We have ten more minutes.
- 13.37 - 14.53 Andrei had a very special way of working with actors. Always. Starting form the first

film. I remember that I and Natalja Bondarchuk, and several other actors, used to say that Tarkovsky does not work with actors. Here is the role, play! Now, however, I understand that it was a special kind of work. Spiritual work. He never taught, he never said much about the role or about the film. During *Ivan's Childhood* he announced to me: "Kolja, keep in mind that you will have one scene where you have to cry in front of the camera. And not the way you cried with Andron Konchalovsky". Then I was given an onion to smell and then cried. He said: "You will have to simply start crying in front of the camera". And I was preparing for this scene for half a year, because he said it will be my principle scene. He would give me books about the war. I remember a book *SS in Action*. Horrifying book about the war, about the atrocities of fascists. He would tell me about the working methods of the great actors like Jean Gabin. How he approached his roles. He prepared me.

14.53 - 15.53 Today I see that in *Ivan's Childhood* and in *Andrei Rublev* I play Andrei. His roughness, his manner of biting his fingers....Both me and Tolja Solonitsin, in the role of Andrei Rublev, are doing this. And Stalker too, Kaidanovsky. He is Andrei. How did this get to me? He...Well, he did show me sometimes that I had to do something like this or like that. It was a special kind of work. This work came down to bringing us, actors, to the same spiritual wave with Andrei. And after...Eternity...Through the God....Through ether...Through the vibrations of his gentle soul he showed us what he wanted. And we did it. Actors. While working with him.

15.56 - 18.09 I can talk about three forms of responses: my personal response; the response the film got during its premieres in Moscow and Saint Petersburg and the response from the public, party. At first I did not understand the film. I will admit it. I did not like myself in it at all. I thought that I am acting very poorly. How could I act so bad? So, I did not understand the film. Well, Russia, drunkards, all these drunken man, brothers who betray each other....And then in the press the film was called anti-Russian by some sort of patriots. And I thought that perhaps we really made an anti-Russian film? And then we went...Then there was a premiere in the Dom Kino here (Moscow), where I went with Andrei. The audience was amazed. But it was a film-elite. As such our film-elite understood that they were not capable of making such film. And that Andrei, with this film, was rising up, becoming a number one director. Then we went to Saint Petersburg, then Leningrad. It was also shown in Dom Kino. It had two screening in one day. I remember that audience was in shock both during the day and in the evening. They were shocked. The party leadership, however, had a different response. One member of the Politburo watched the film, made a phone call to the ministry of cinema, and the film was shelved. That was their response. Actually, how, by what miracle, could Andrei make such film? Who let him do it? Obviously, it was God. Andrei made a film about Russia, about human faith, about Christ...At the time when Christ was a banned topic. It was a miracle, it was Andrei's heroic deed.

18.10 - 20.23 As I mentioned before, Andrei has always been searching for the God, he tried to reach him. Intuitively. In all of his films he expressed these elevated onsets, these gentle divine vibrations, they are all there in Andrei's films. How did he do it? Well, he is the only one who knows that. Yusov, the director of photography, now understands how they constructed this world. I, myself, am a president of the film forum Golden Prince. I

have been organizing it for 20 years already. Our motto is "For the moral ideas. For the elevation of the human soul". In a sense it is what Tarkovsky worked on. It is the purpose of art. It should elevate human soul, guide it towards the God, towards the Creator. If there is no such ambition then it is not art, it is a profitable business. That is what Hollywood does. It is a profitable business. But Andrei....And now sometimes I organize conferences. I remember how during one of the conferences, a Serbian film critic, said a fantastic thing. That a movie screen should be akin to an icon. That the square of the movie screen should help the soul reach the divine world. Basically, what Tarkovsky was doing. Film director Krzysztof Zanussi was absolutely right when he said that perhaps art of film making has died with Tarkovsky. Because cinema today is a profitable business. Everything is set to bring money and success, preferably, during the first weekend. That is it. To collect all the money during the first weekend. *Andrei Rublev* was not able to cover its cost during the first weekend, in seven days. It was shelved. However, today, after 45 years this film has managed to collect 30 times more than its initial costs. Perhaps more. Sometimes, I see people queuing in Paris, in Los-Angeles, in Venezuela to see this film.

20.24 - 21.19 It is Tarkovsky's miracle, magic. During one of the symposiums I called him...There was a symposium in Athens in Andrei's honor. And I presented a report there titled "Andrew The First-Called (Note: Saint Andrew) in the world cinema". I will explain why. Because Aeschylus was the first one who began to talk about God, raising the people towards him (God). Then came Sophocles and Euripides and began a reverse process. They said: "What Gods? We are Gods". And the decline of the whole civilization has begun. And Andrei Tarkovsky through his work (Note: he said screen) began to elevate human souls. All the great directors of the world are thankful for that. They cannot do this, but he could.

21.27 - 23.40 I can. I can. I asked him this question: "Do you remember our last meeting?". He replied that he remembers and that he did not like the way he behaved then. This is how he reacts now to what happened. This is what happened. Before his departure to Italy, I met Yusov, the director of photography, on the street. We had something to drink and started talking about Andrei. We realized that both Yusov and I have not seen Andrei for five years. Even though Yusov lives in the same building as he (Andrei). And they have not met in five years. Because we had a bit to drink, I said to Yusov: "Let's go see him!". He said: "Let's go!". So we went to Andrei's house, rang the bell, he opened the door and our last meeting took place. We were there for about four hours. We came at about eight o'clock and left at about two at night. Andrei was very angry, very emotional and aggressive. He was saying mean things about everything, people, film makers, and the system. I remember he told me: "What? Who are you? Kolja you could have been an actor with me. And who are you now? You became a poet; you are reading your poetry. You became a director, you are making films". And to Yusov: Vadim you could have been a director of photography with me. And you? Who are you? A screenwriter, you are writing something". And for the first time in my life I tried to oppose Andrei: "Andrei, why do you chop the wings of your close ones?". I remember he broke off. And today he reassured me that he did not like himself then. That he remembers. That he remembers everything that was vivid in his life. That is all that he

has. And he remembers this. It was our last meeting.

23.44 Should we finish now? Yes it was before this. Let's not finish on this on this note, that he was angry.

23.54 - 25.22 Andrei Tarkovsky is sacred soul (Note: he says the soul of the God), that has completed the circle of life's trials. He was different, a sinner, he had everything. But he was a sacred soul because he was trying to reach the God. And he became an example of the way of the cross towards the God, for one can reach him only through the way of the cross. Only through suffering. And he has lived through this, and that is why he became unreachable for many directors of the world. One cannot reach his height without the faith in God, without devoting your art to the God. Without realizing that he actually exists. That he can see us. Andrei can see as right now. And perhaps he is not very pleased with....Thought, I believe that now he can accept everything I say. He usually...Those who depart discover the entirety of this life, harmony, and from there they see how petty is our talk about them. But right now I am talking about him in a very elevated manner, Andrei deserves it. Andrei is the grates sacred soul and people will bow in front of his art for many centuries to come. And with the God's mercy somebody will be able to overshadow Andrei Tarkovsky's spiritual level. With God's mercy people like that will come.