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John Pepper (Italy - the USA) have release a premier in Saint Petersburg Theatre on Vasilievsky. The piece "My dear Mathilda" based on a play written by Israel Horovits - a famous American playwright, winner of many prestigious theatre awards, was born thanks to the following circumstances: Pepper loves Petersburg (visited many times); he dreamt to work with Russian actors (saw several Russian performances and was mesmerized by the Russian actors on stage); he admires plays and scenarios by Horovits (they are acquainted since the time when Pepper was producing movies in Hollywood), and "My dear Mathilda" amazed him so much, that he was going to stage it in Italy and is planning to do this next year.

To get John Pepper to direct

- John, how should I introduce you: Italian or American director? Cinema or theatre director? Actor or photographer?

- I am an Italian director, I was born in Italy. And I am as well American. For twenty years I've been living in France. I was lucky to work in many countries - France, Italy, Sweden, States. First of all I should be introduced as a director. I am the last protégé of Eduardo De Filippo. He is my teacher, he taught me best lessons about the theatre and how to work with actors on stage.

My other great teacher is American film director George Roy Hill. He is most noted for directing such films as "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" and "The Sting", which both starred the acting duo Paul Newman and Robert Redford. He was a wonderful actor's director. He used to tell me much about the dramatic art. He taught me two supreme lessons. The first - acting technique should be studied at school (I was taught the Stanislavskian Method). The second - it is necessary to be on stage or on-camera all the time. Not because I am an actor (frankly speaking, I am an awful actor), it is important to be constantly reminded that it is great honor to be an actor and it is a fragile profession. We can do whatever we want - build huge set-dressing, put the best light, but if the actors are out of place and act badly - no good will come out of it. My task is to help them take the right direction. And also a director needs to understand the author, his or her thoughts and remarks, make them alive. When you get John Pepper to direct, you do not hire a director, who only works with actors, - you get everything as a whole. I come with the play, with my vision of stage props, costumes, sound, music. I create the world which people will inhabit.

- Where is your home?

- In Palermo.

- What and where have you been recently directing?

- I directed "The wind singer" by William Nicholson in Théâtre Montparnasse in Paris. This is a family drama. I have also directed it on Broadway. In Paris it was huge success, good reviews. Many newspapers wrote about our play - from communistic "L'Humanité to monarchic "La Croix". It is important for me to receive good reviews on the actors' play, not my work. These are them who make people live through the story, cry or laugh. My name is to be in a shadow. My pleasure is when the piece

is ready and I have a chance to observe the audience. When our relations are based on trust - the actors will fly above the sky. When creating a movie I can shoot whoever I want, say, you, and direct and film some tricks, then go to the editing room and make my mounting. And this will be more my own work. In theatre it's different.

- Have you finally left cinema for theatre?

- No, I haven't. I am already quite old (I am 56) to choose the projects followed by my experience. And not because I do not need to earn money or I do not need a job. After our Saint Petersburg project I will need some time to take breath. I am planning to go to Krasnodar and Sochi. I will spend couple days alone, taking photos. My new series is about water - and I'll start on the Black Sea.

- What do you prefer shooting?

- When I started working as a photographer I could not decide at once what I would like to shoot: objects or people, trees, water or children. I was just walking and taking pictures. My new album is about the idea how small the human being is in comparison with the mother nature. I think now we all - men and women all over the world experience the same feeling of loneliness, regardless of whether we live in a rich or poor country.

- Do you enjoy working with Saint Petersburg actors?

- This is ultimate pleasure! Dmitry Vorobiev is a super talented actor, he is just fantastic! I am a so called actor's director, I love actors and try to make them give everything they can. It is exciting to see how Elena Rakhlenko and Natalia Kruglova grow and develop during rehearsals. It is like observe the flower blossom.

- The Dutch director Jos Stelling often says that Russian actors are the most disciplined. What can you say about western actors then?

- I think that Russian actors possess one of the most extraordinary discipline. Based on my personal experience - they are the best in the world. (However, you know, in any country there are some great actors. I also believe the English, American and Belgian actors are also organized). I have seen several plays in the Theatre on Vassilivsky and other Petersburg theatres, I have observed actors work, I saw their honesty. They do not play, they let their characters live.

"You can stay if you want..."

- How did you meet Eduardo De Filippo?

- This is a good question! I live in New York that time and I have already reached some level (quite small though) and I wanted to go higher. I really needed a good play. In America the majority of theatres are commercial. It is difficult to get there, they keep their own company. You have to live there and be famous, then you can be invited. If a director works for a commercial theatre, he needs to involve an actor with the name. And for this you need a very good play.

I was a young guy who directed 6 or 7 plays, I was passionate, as they say there, but I was still a kid at heart. The agent offered me a play of a very high level, written by Tom Stoppard. That time in New York they showed "Filumena Marturano" directed by Franco Zeffirelli. They were supposed to have 2 shows - on Saturday and Sunday - and then leave on Monday. I heard that De Filippo said: "No! to America". I said: "Wonderful!" De Filippo is admired all over the world. He is Italian, I am Italian. He is from the Left,

I am too. I have read all his plays except for the one. It was so difficult that I just couldn't handle it and decided to put it off. I chose three plays that really spoke to me. I started calling to everybody I knew in Italy asking: "Does anybody know Eduardo De Filippo? Or do you know anybody who knows him?"

And there was a miracle! This is a funny story, I never told about it... Rafaella, a lady who lived with me that time and later broke up, she was a friend of Eduardo's wife. Maestro was told about me: "Please, could you meet this young director. He is gifted. Give him 10 minutes". He entered the room and said:

- Sit down. Have you read any of my plays?

- I have read each and all of them!

- And what do you think about ...?

OMG! (John is laughing) This was exactly the play that I didn't manage to read. And so I had to confess:

- Eduardo, you can ask me about any play of yours, but this one I just couldn't read - it is too serious...

He looked at me like that (John shows). I was sure he thinks I am a piece of shit and he will tell me to get out of there immediately. After a long pause he said:

- All right, you are honest. What do you want now?

And so I explained that audience in the States loves his works and it is unfair to deprive people in pleasure to admire his plays simply because he decided that American audience is not interesting. "This is not true, - I was so courageous, - you just had bad experience. Let me direct your play - "Le voci di dentro" (The inner voices) or "L'arte della commedia" (The art of a comedy).

He asked why I chose those two. He asked me about main characters, about people, about life. I was so sweaty! I was talking to him for four hours! And then he said:

- Ok, come tomorrow morning. I start directing a new play.

The next day I was in his house. This was a man of 150 years old! (Do you remember how old I was then?) He moved the furniture. The actors came and they started rehearsal. I was taught the American style and here was a prompter. Like in the 18th century. I was just blown away!

- You can stay if you want, - said Eduardo.

And so I did for two years. I was touring with him. This turned out to be one of the most amazing experiences of my life.

There is one more story, which I like telling. Once we were touring in Genoa. The performance was over and the audience was applauding, the curtain was closed, but people kept on clapping. De Filippo came to the audience - quite short, slouching, very old, he took a handkerchief out of his pocket, rubbed his eyes and said in Italian: "Grazie, grazie". I looked at him - De Filippo was crying. After so much success and so many years on stage! And then I asked him: "The audience still touch you to tears?" He looked right into my eyes and said - firstly I will say his words in Neapolitan so that you could hear the music (loudly, emotionally, quickly he says), which means (says in English) - "What, tears? I was just removing makeup. I am starving and I really want to go have dinner!". (Pepper is laughing). This is awesome, isn't it?

Little Caesarion

- At the age of 6 you were filmed in "Cleopatra" with a Hollywood star Elizabeth Taylor. How did you get there?

- This was a chance circumstance! This was in Rome. My parents were walking on the beach. After a nice lunch with wine they took a nap. And I was bored. I started to help the worker to heave twin-hull boats alongside. And some guy said: "Hey boy, do you want to be in a film?". My parents used to tell me not to speak to the strangers, so I pointed him where my parents were and he went to have a talk with them. He turned out to be a casting director. He explained that I could perfectly play a role of a little Caesarion - son of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar. My father was a journalist and he did not believe it. But later on and was taken to the studio "Cinecitta" and a film test was made. This is how I got the role.

I remember there were big sphinxes, just huge. And I was so small! And the platform was uneven. Cleopatra was sitting on a throne and I was placed at her foot. I remember my nose was right where her knee was. I remember her sweat shirt and yellow trousers and even the way they were cut at the bottom.

First time we were rehearsing with a dubbing actor. And finally there was the day when Elizabeth Taylor arrived in Rome. Her and Richard Barton were super stars, they were famous all over the world. The life stopped when they appeared somewhere. There were approximately 150 musicians on the set. There was around 300 people pulling those sphinxes. Downstairs there was standing Caesar (Rex Harrison) and Marc Antony (Richard Barton). Three actors played African slaves. Their task was to lift the platform and let Taylor walk down the stairs. It was really hard, they did it hundred times before - no problem. And this time they gave that platform a swing. Elizabeth was frightened and she started screaming. Like that (he shows) - she was screaming like a bird. I looked at her and said: ""Don't worry, Ms. Taylor, I was also scared first time". And you know what she answered? "You, Charlie, I'm saving my skin and you go save yours". So basically "welcome to the cinema business"!

What else do I remember from this story? Years later I was working as an assistant of the American director George Roy Hill. The movie is called "A little romance", a young actress Diane Lane starred there, and it was my first work with Lawrence Olivier. I found out that there is a rule: if an underage actor works his salary should be out on his bank account and wait for him until he is 18, I needed money, so I called my father and asked: "Dad, do you remember "Cleopatra"? Where is my money?" There was a big pause and finally my father answered: "Do you remember a swimming pool where you used to like swimming so much? Do you remember how happy you were?" - "Yes" - "I am very happy you enjoyed it. This was your salary".

That was pretty common. My parents are artists: father - Curtis Pepper - a writer, he is 96, my mother is a famous sculptor Beverly Pepper - she is 90. And they still work. My father have recently finished a book. And my sister Jody Graham is a poet, won a Pulitzer Prize. This is a great mystery that I am still normal (more or less)!

John Perets (Pepper in Russian)

- I would like to express my gratitude to Ivan Pavlutchenko for being my translator and assistant. He is a friend of mine. Moreover, he is a grandson of a famous Saint Petersburg artist Gelya Pisareva. This play in the Theatre on Vassilievsky would not succeed without him, - said John Pepper. - All right? (starts speaking Russian). I know several words in Russian. My favorite is: "Zdravstvuyte, menya zovut Ivan Perets!"