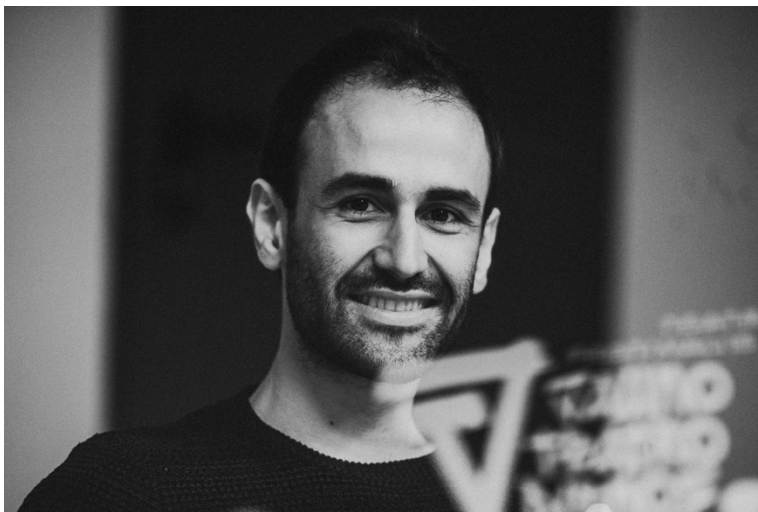


## Stepping out of Self-centred spaces

Conversation with Yasen Vasilev, Bulgarian dramaturg, writer and critic



Yasen Vasilev is educated at the theatre academies of Sofia and Shanghai and works in the field of contemporary dance and performance as a dramaturg, writer and critic.

Since 2018, he is a regular contributor for Springback magazine, collaborator of Belgian choreographer Ehsan

Hemat, and co-founder of Radar Sofia, a residency space for playwrights and artists at risk.

The practical research of his Master thesis on the politics of dance, NUTRICULA (2015–), has been developed and presented internationally in the form of workshops and performances that aim to test and re-imagine the limits of the body.

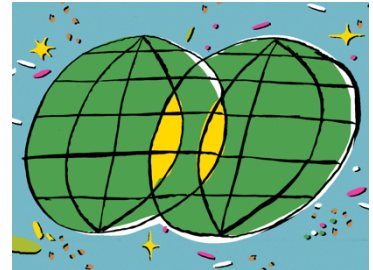
IMPOSSIBLE ACTIONS, a collective piece for 10+ participants which grew out of this research, was first produced by Radar Sofia in 2021, and is an ongoing trajectory, activated by local performers and institutions in different contexts. It got the annual award for dance of the City Hall of Sofia in 2021 and a nomination for the IKAR award in 2022.

Yasen is one of the ten participants of 'A Fair New Idea?! Sustainability and International Collaboration in the Arts', organised by the Flanders Arts Institute (2021-2022).

In this conversation, Yasen Vasilev speaks about the particularities of working in the arts in Bulgaria compared to other EU countries, about global inequalities in international artistic networks, and about the urgency of slowing down creation processes in a world that is going ever faster.

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This conversation was conducted online by Jumana Al-Yasiri on July 19, 2022. Commissioned by the Flanders Arts Institute in the framework of A Fair New Idea?! initiative: 'Working Internationally Sustainably'.



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**In order to prepare for this conversation, I actually felt that I had to look on a map to see exactly where Bulgaria is. I realised that Bulgaria sits exactly in the middle between Southwest Asia, Western and Eastern Europe. Bulgaria is in the Balkans, it is a member of the European Union, and Ukraine is not very far either. I wonder where the question of internationalism in the arts falls in such a complex geographical, cultural and political context?**

Yes, indeed, Bulgaria is a sort of hot geopolitical point and has been like this for centuries, a crossroad between East and West with lots of various influences that have actually remained, and you can see it in the culture and in the architecture as well. At the same time, speaking of the international arts market or the performing arts networks, we are in a sort of marginal position. So, it's disconnected from Western European networks, which are functional, fast-moving and built on institutions and on a lot of public funding. This is also related to our shift from socialism to capitalism at the end of the eighties-early nineties, and how a wave of privatisation and deregulation completely shifted and changed the public landscape, including culture. It became a divided society with many inequalities and limited public services, and this became quite clear when the war in Ukraine started. Historically, Bulgaria has been very linked with Russia and our national holiday is on the 3rd of March. It's Liberation Day and it's the day that the Russian army was fighting the Ottoman Empire for the liberation of Bulgaria. I remember on this day this year [2022], and it was just like a week after the war started, that there were two main opposing views in the public debate, especially on social media and on TV. One group was saying we should basically cancel our national holiday, and the other group was saying, no, we should be proud of our history but they were waving the Russian flag on our national holiday! I think both positions are extreme and very hard to identify with, and it just shows how deep the rifts and divisions in society still are today.

**What about the international dimension of your own work in the field of contemporary dance and performance? I personally think that the international dimension of our work always comes from a personal place, from a personal urgency that drives us to open our work to the rest of the world. How does this relate to your**

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**work as a dramaturg and theatre maker, and also in the work you do with the residency space Radar Sofia?**

I started initially as a writer and poet. I studied dramaturgy at the Academy of Sofia. I'm very linked to language, but I felt I couldn't work internationally because I was writing in Bulgarian. It's a 'small' language that is not spoken anywhere else on the planet. I think it was a combination of growing up and the political instability that also made me want to distance myself. That's how I ended up doing my Master's in China at Shanghai Theatre Academy. It was my switch from working with dramaturgy as written text to working with dramaturgy of movement, dance and performance. I was the only European in a Master programme with twelve people from all over the world. For me it was really a decolonization of thinking in practice, not in theory. That completely changed my life and the way I approached my writing. This very international context influenced me to take this step towards contemporary dance. Later on, I went back to Europe, where contemporary dance historically has been institutionalised and has a huge network of support. I wanted to be part of this network, to make connections and to find a place for my work in this international context. I find contemporary dance, much more than theatre, is an international practice and many companies are mixing people from different countries. It's quite open and quite progressive, in my view.

Of course, I travel a lot, but I also keep one foot in Sofia. I was in dialogue with Alexander Manuiloff, who is also a Bulgarian dramaturg and the director of Radar Sofia, and with Milena Stanojevic, who is a Serbian director and performer, and is also part of the team. They wanted to start a residency. At one point I officially joined the team and the first resident we invited was from Shanghai, Zhang Xian, a playwright and choreographer, the person I wrote my thesis about. So rooted in Sofia, Radar wants to open up to the world and to compensate for the lack of national cultural policy and for being disconnected from international networks. So the idea is to bring artists who come to work on a project of their choice, but also to involve them in the local community in the form of workshops or some form of exchange which makes it a two-way process.

**In your response to the open call 'A fair New Idea' of Flanders Arts Institute, on the theme of 'Sustainability and International Collaboration in the Arts', you called for a slower approach to residency programmes and to the international circulation of artworks; but one might argue that it's already very slow in some parts of the world where there is a lack of or less resources. Getting to these resources already takes so much time for many artists who live or practice their work in what are considered to be the margins of the art world. In your opinion, where is the right balance between this very fast European or Western production pace, and the slower and more complicated contexts in which many artists and cultural practitioners live and work today?**

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This is a very valid point that I can identify with because I also think Bulgaria is in the margins, though in a different way than, let's say, Lebanon or Syria or Egypt or Brazil or any Southeast Asian country. Bulgaria is in the European Union, so travel is easier and access to some funding is easier. Also, an EU passport allows you more freedom than others. I think when I call for a slower process, I do mean it's still a *paid* slower process. That is a very important point in what you call the Western production model, which is a very capitalist production model that wants to see results all the time. Often, artists are forced to work faster than their practice actually requires, and then they need to keep up this pace, which often leads to burnout and doesn't allow a deeper investment into the work. If they're lucky, they perform, they tour and then they're gone, and they are expected to make a new piece again if they want to keep working in the field. That can be very draining. During Covid, there have been talks about how to make things slower, how to invest in the practice and not in the production, how artists can engage further with the places they go to. Often residencies are funded on statistics - number of people from the number of countries that you host.

So basically, and in the best case, people go abroad, receive some public money and they can develop a project for a month or two months, and then they move on again. In a lot of places they can't come back. You need new people all the time, and rarely there is a meaningful, lasting conversation between the artists and the institution. That's something that we are trying to change. We like to keep contact with the artists we invite. We want to create more opportunities for them. We want to bring them back to Sofia. We want to help them build a network. Again, this is a sort of institutional critique of how you allow these artistic processes to grow because they often need research time, which in many places is still not funded. So, before you get into these one to three months of production you need to be extensively thinking, researching, talking to people, reading, watching other works. This is also *work* which takes time and is expensive. I guess that's what I mean by slowing down; not making a new piece every year. The actual production pressure is completely unsustainable. But I'm lucky that as a dramaturg I can work on other people's projects, so I can actually make a living by providing services (in the language of this economy) to other artists as a dramaturg.

With the Covid crisis, big institutions in the Western world have started to think about slowing down; but in terms of travel and the question of carbon footprint, I find something very problematic from a Western or European perspective, where you have a good railway system on a small continent where people can travel by train. If we're speaking about someone coming from India or China or Brazil, and then basically not having them at a festival or restricting the number of people you can have from Brazil because of the carbon footprint, I find it quite problematic because it exacerbates existing inequalities with the Western world being on top and deciding who is allowed and who is not allowed to travel under the guise of this ecological consciousness. This is a conversation that is really

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important to hold: how do we redistribute resources? How do we make artistic practice possible in other places than a few big centres?

**I know that the question of inequality is something that worries you. Do you think there is a concrete and pragmatic way to begin repairing decades of misbehaviour? You mentioned the pressure that is also on artists, the guilt that they may feel when they want to travel and show their work. What do you think about that?**

Earlier I also mentioned deregulation. From my perspective and from the Bulgarian context and how historically things developed here, I think that's a major cause because we used to have very strong unions of musicians, visual artists, writers, theatre makers, architects, and so on, which all had regulated working conditions and payment set. These unions also had a huge network of property within the country, and I guess they were also connected internationally. It was a national policy under socialism, of course this is not at all to idealise this time and we know it came with a strong censorship, and so on. But afterwards, these unions lost their power, they lost a lot of their members, they sold all of their properties. It was all privatised or just left to decay. The properties were falling apart because in the nineties they didn't have the budgets anymore to keep up with this new economy. Today, more than thirty years later, I feel my generation is finding out that we need to go back and start to form some sort of unions to make sure that we have basic working conditions, that we have proper pay and access to public infrastructure, and that we can work. It's really difficult because this has to come from grassroots initiatives, while the prevailing ideology of our time, that is fed through education and media, is basically 'every man for himself.' This idea of community is totally not in vogue. People are just in competition with each other and not in cooperation. It's very difficult to change mindsets. This is a big shift that needs to happen by thinking first, before getting any concrete results.

**You started to answer my next question. In addition to the question of sustainability, the participants of 'A Fair New Idea - Sustainability and International Collaboration in the Arts', also reflected on international communities in the arts, meaning the collective as a tool for a more sustainable way of working together across different parts of the world. How do you see the spaces of negotiation between the individual and the collective in the transnational artistic landscape today?**

I'm very interested in stepping out of this self-centred space. I've been interested in this topic aesthetically in the work that I've been doing, which tries not to criticise but to eliminate self-expression. Finding a way of using your own body as a tool that is producing or performing forms, so that the performer is not engaged in this idea of self-expression, which I think is a very problematic idea. I started this research in Shanghai, a physical solo, which is titled NUTRICULA. It's interesting how this project addresses a lot of the things we

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are talking about but not only in the content or aesthetic, but also in its conditions of appearance (I wouldn't call it production because it never was in a production phase). It only happened in Shanghai because I had time, money, space and people to do it. I was working with Kwame Boafo, a Ghanaian performance artist and scholar. We had met at Shanghai Theater Academy and we created a strong creative bond and partnership. We both wanted to continue working together in Europe, we applied for residencies and got accepted, but he never got the visa and he also lost his Chinese visa. So it was really these inequalities and these geopolitical tensions that we're speaking about that made this collaboration fall apart.

When I went back to Europe, I continued by myself, just taking the essence of this initial concept that I was proposing to him and offering it to other people and finding out how it develops through other bodies in other contexts. It was a series of completely different works based on this same concept where artists with different social and political biographies from different races, genders, nationalities approached this same idea. In the process, I developed an archive of these solos, and then I started doing workshops and passing on the score to bigger groups at the same time. So I started thinking of it as a practice. In this process of doing workshops I got very interested in group dynamics and so the question of how to take a distance from oneself or how to eliminate self-expression became a collective question. Then I started getting very interested in how to form a community, and how to work within a horizontal process where decisions are taken collectively, where no one is leading or where responsibility is distributed between all the members. So both on an aesthetic and organisational level, it's this idea about how we might build a community. This is a major question for me now and also for Radar because we are trying to create a community of local artists around this residency and to form a group of people who share resources instead of competing for them.

**Well, the question of collectiveness and togetherness brings me to the question of the audience. You work in performing and live arts, which is a cultural expression that is historically and organically built on the physical presence of and interaction with an audience. Where does the question of the audience fall in the conversation about working internationally more sustainably?**

This is a difficult question for me because personally I haven't been so invested in developing audiences, though it keeps coming up in grant applications, and it's a big question here in Bulgaria because of this delinking that we're speaking about, because a lot of the history of contemporary dance is unknown and unseen here. People need access to contemporary work so that these audiences can experience it and then maybe take a step towards searching for something new. I personally have been very focused on research, on finding depth of my practice before getting into this mode of producing and

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showing. Radar Sofia is also thinking about audiences, but at the same time it's a residency space, so it's more oriented towards research. But we are always open to sharing processes and what we are doing. We try to do it in the context of another institution that is a partner, so often in the context of a festival or in a theatre space that has its own audience, which allows us to access people who are beyond our network.

**I actually wanted to ask you about festivals, which seem to be essential to the performing arts sector as spaces for showing and sharing. But today we also hear that festivals are draining too much energy and too much resources. They are still considered as important places to meet artists, colleagues and counterparts from different parts of the world. What do you think about the current state of the performing arts festivals, at least in Bulgaria and in Europe?**

Festivals have been very important for me to see work and also to build a network. But in relation to the notion of slowing down it is problematic to bring over a big company for two days and then fly them back to their country without any engagement with the local context. This is linked to the previous question about the audience, about how to create stronger links so that there's proper exchange? I don't know the answer to this question. It's a very difficult one, but I believe in international exchange. I do think it's important to be physically present in a place, and it's totally different from having an online zoom or a digital platform. For example, I'm now in Burgas, a city at the Black Sea coast in Bulgaria. It's a city that had a very strong artistic spirit in the performing arts in the late seventies. Today, it is probably the best Bulgarian city in terms of infrastructure and a good example of how things should be done. We've been working here in the cultural centre, which was renovated two or three years ago, and it's maybe the best cultural centre in the whole country. They have seven professional dance studios, which we don't have in the capital at all. At the same time, these studios are not used because the city is small and it doesn't have a strong artistic community anymore. Most of the artists moved to Sofia or abroad. Not so many people come to work here because they prefer to be in Sofia, and because they think there's no audience in the city. I'm thinking now about how we can move the artistic process from the capital, which is overcrowded, to here, where infrastructure exists? And by moving these processes here, how can we open them to local audiences in a way that they can engage with? How to slowly build an audience? Now, even if you show a work here and you have a great new space with a great stage and all the technical capabilities, it's empty because people don't know it exists. And for them to know, these encounters need to happen on a regular basis, not once or twice, but often and with a sort of persistence and insistence. I always think it's not a sprint but a marathon. You need to persist for many, many years and then it will produce results.

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**In an article you published in 2021 in *Spring Back* magazine, you wrote: ‘Don’t just blame Covid for this crisis. Restructuring the cultural field has already led to more artists and fewer resources’<sup>1</sup>. Since the burst of the Covid-19 pandemic, we’ve seen a huge number of initiatives across the globe aiming at rethinking and restructuring the field. The open call ‘A fair new idea?!’ by the Flanders Arts Institute is actually one of them. It was an almost euphoric reimagination of the international arts and cultural landscape. I remember 2020 and 2021 as years, months, weeks of Zoom calls, meetings, and reimaging. What is left of all this more than two years after the first lockdown?**

It really felt like something might change radically, but I think it bounced back and it became a version of the old world, and even faster. I feel we are overcompensating for these two years of pause, and then suddenly there is an explosion of the things that have been contained. Everyone is doing so much more, or at least in Bulgaria. It’s also because we had a big push from the National Culture Fund, so suddenly because of Covid there was a lot of new funding. It’s counterintuitive, but the independent scene here gained a lot of recognition and a lot of funding because of the pandemic, which didn’t exist before. These were emergency packages that remained permanent for now and that completely restructured the field. And for the first time, a lot of artists could work professionally and be paid.

On an international level, I don’t know. I think we went back to normal, whatever that means. Since September last year [2021], I’ve been travelling non-stop and I’ve been going to festivals and residencies in what feels again like a frenetic energy. And with everything that’s going on socially and politically, it’s also a strange pace because you don’t have much time to reflect.

I’m writing for *Springback* on a regular basis, and I find it very difficult to write when I’m on the move and I’m on the move most of the time. So slowing down in that sense is also important to allow things that are already working in you to emerge. In relation to this article that you brought up, which is about travelling as an imperative in the economy of residencies and the festivals, there is an inflation of co-productions because you need more and more partners in more and more countries who give you less and less money and take less risk. It becomes difficult to make work in such circumstances. At the same time, these arguments or this position shouldn’t be taken or understood as a critique or as a sort of radical position that we just need to move back to the local and to work locally. I already said it but I want to stress it again.

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<sup>1</sup> VASILEV, Yassen, ‘Circulating artists, defunded infrastructures’, in *Springback Magazine*, 28 January 2021:

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I find it extremely important to go to new places and to have this intercultural dialogue and exchange. So, when I'm speaking about these structural problems or this extreme pace, it is a critique of how the field is structured and of the working conditions of artists within that field and what it produces in them. At the same time, I really love doing this and that's why I keep doing it. So basically, it's about having the choice to be in the field but be slower, or be in the field and be a parent, for example, which is also a big question: how do you do it as a freelance artist? So that you have more choice and that this choice doesn't affect your way of living.

This is some sort of dream or utopian vision of how things can function in a more just and sustainable way. I think my call is not for being more local or travelling less, but having more autonomy: how do you structure your working life and how do you feel secure in it?

**Yasen, we're coming to the end of our conversation. Before we leave, do you have a new idea that you would like to share with us about how to make our practice as artists and cultural workers more sustainable and fairer?**

My strategy and my interest now are dialogue and sharing. Not facing all these issues or problems alone, but constantly articulating them with peers and discussing them and finding ways to support each other. This can be on an organisational level if you are working in an institution, just reaching out to others and being transparent about your problems and what you're struggling with. Sharing your ideas rather than keeping them hidden, trying to cooperate to find ways where these ideas can intersect. It is also the same on a personal or artistic level where if you develop your own practice, to do it in active dialogue with other artists. It's so beautiful to be in parallel tracks when you know you have people who are walking the same path, but it's their own path and it's your own path and you are doing your own work. You feel supported and you give back support to your peers. I think that is very beautiful and is a better way to walk or to run this marathon.

**Thank you so much, Yasen, for this beautiful conversation. Good luck with all your projects and hopefully we meet in person.**

Yes, I hope so. Thank you very much as well for the invitation and for the questions and the conversation.