

## Speech by Labina Mitevska at the Forum Skopje – “A Soul for Europe”



### EUROPEAN CULTURAL PRODUCTS – OR PRODUCTS OF EUROPEAN CULTURE

Can you remember the last exhibition of a visual artist from Bulgaria?  
Can you name the last theatre play you have enjoyed from Belgium?  
Can you remember the last film you have seen from Croatia?  
Can you recommend a good book from Macedonian writer?  
Do you know a single acting star from Austria?  
How more ignorant can we get?

Do we know where we live? Europe for each of us gathered here in this room means many different things. Sadly, it is still a continent divided by borders, passports, currencies, newspapers, histories, and what we all want to emphasize, cultures. Luckily, we are getting closer to each other and I would like to share with you one such experience where all this melted and burned away in creative flames. This experience is both professional and personal and I believe that many of us will be reminded of many similar experiences and that there are many of us here who operate on daily basis in international environment.

Before even starting with the story I wonder do any of you needs this reminder to incite the common values and common beliefs. I assume that we would all agree that there is no alternative for us Europeans but to broaden and expand the open European space where we can all work together and pursue our individual and joint interests. The question is how to get the ideas we most probably share out of this room. I hope that the example I present can speak loud and clearly, for the argument I put forward that Europe must act towards complete integration, firmly and without any reservations, sooner rather than later.

Nevertheless, we must not overlook some disappointing aspects of our reality that are here to remind us that we need to work much harder if we want to see in our lifetime one Europe, Europe truly united. That is why I began with those unpleasant questions? I presume I would have gotten even more unpleasant, but revelatory answers. Answers that would speak volumes about our mutual ignorance of each other's diversity and the richness it carries along. How ignorant can we be to our neighbors, how ignorant we can be to the world that surrounds us, how ignorant can we be to the cultures that develop next to us? To be able to work with each other we need to make the first step to get to know each other and to respect each other.

Last year I produced a film, co-production between four European countries, and with involvement of six different funds, one from over the Atlantic and two additional European funds, “Eurimages” and “Media”. I produced a film, where on the set in the small town of Veles, just south of Skopje I had a crew created of 18 different nationalities, Macedonians, Belgians, French, Croatians, Bulgarians, Slovenians, Germans, Iranians, Moroccans and who knows what else. I can assure you that you cannot even imagine the 12 weeks we spent in Macedonia. Clashing and crashing of cultures, emotional bursts, tears and smiles, love affairs, learning words of different languages and traditional songs, dress codes, rules, customs and foods and drinks. You cannot imagine the energy that blew around us, in the small town of Veles in the beautiful land of Macedonia. After the twelve weeks, when the end arrived, nobody wanted to go to his own country, Macedonia was perfect for him or her. The burning sun was nice, mosquitoes were pets, and the bad hotel became Ritz. Because we enjoyed each other's differences, we admired each other's skills, devotion, unselfish input and joint work in a creation of something we believed in and liked doing it.

Just to mention the economic impact of this film to the local economy. The town of Veles, or Titov Veles, was an industrial giant in socialism and now it is all closed, destroyed, forgotten, falling apart. To have a job in this town is like winning a lottery. The hotel I mentioned re-opened for our crew, we employed drivers, electricians, carpenters, and we bought everything from local stores. In numbers, we spent over 600.000 Euros, we employed directly over 50 persons and indirectly probably double than that. We definitely revived the economy of this sleeping town. This town will not become a centre of the film industry, but there were significant economic benefits and most certainly cultural ones. Many people from around Europe came to know this town and this country. Many partners and whole families came to have their holidays in Macedonia. This film tours the world and from Pusan to Toronto to Berlin, Lecce to Linz, it will speak of this country and will present the European cinema.

And each one of us who worked in Veles in these twelve weeks came there for the sake of art, following the vision of one Macedonian artist, a Macedonian director and each of them with enormous input in this piece of art that was created here. Only artists are able to give everything and not even for a second to think about returns and benefits. Because of this, art is the most valuable thing that we have in any culture. Art is the universal language spoken by everyone and understood by everyone. By chance, a simple coincidence, I have been acting on eight languages so far. I have been involved in projects from Northern, Southern, Central, Eastern, Western Europe. Luckily, I've been acting in European films. Pity, how little we know of each other's cultures, how little we allow young Europeans to get to know each other better. How long will we still have to carry the crosses of our parents who still remember wars, enemies, and spies?

Of course, you all know everything about the last affairs of Mr. Sarkozy, of course you know everything about what Blair or Schroeder are doing after their retirement, of course, you know about the processes in The Hague and the problems of Kosovo. Of course, we are forced to know everything about politics and the political situation in the world.

But in Europe we need to find ways to learn more about each other's cultures, to work together, to create together, and to think together. We need to step out of our closed national domains and to be able to bring our cultures one step closer.

**Labina Mitevska:** Started her acting career in 1994 with the main role in Milco Mancevski's film "Before the Rain" which won the Golden Lion. She collaborated with Michael Winterbottom for "Welcome to Sarajevo" and "I want you" for which she was nominated as shooting star at the Berlinale Film Festival in 1998. She has since worked with established European film directors in Germany, Italy, Czech Republic, France and Slovenia. For her latest roles in Christian Wagner's "Warchild" and Sergej Stanojkovski's "Kontakt" she received international recognition. In 2001 Labina Mitevska and her brother set up a production company.