

The Times Higher Education Supplement

London, UK, 3 February 2006, No. 1,728, p. 10

PROFILE: GËZIM ALPION – playwright and lecturer in media studies

Speaking for the refugee in us all

By Anthea Lipsett

Immigrants are all too often seen as a threat and that worries Gëzim Alpion.

It bothers the senior lecturer in media studies at Birmingham University so much that he has written a play exposing the frustrations and tragedies of asylum seekers in his adopted Britain.

While not a refugee himself, Dr Alpion understands their plight. “In a sense we are all refugees. I view myself as a wanderer and I have sympathy with them,” he says. “It’s not a joy to leave your country. It’s a tragedy.”

Born and brought up in Albania in the 1960s, he had a happy childhood in the countryside with devoted parents who “valued education above all else”.

His siblings still live there, but Dr Alpion left after being offered a place to study English literature in Cairo – paradoxically, via a scholarship provided by an Albanian government known for its isolationism.

“It’s a very high price to pay to leave your country, but it’s also a privilege to take in different cultures and civilisations because that’s where you discover that we are all the same. We speak different languages but all talk about the same things: family, culture, civilisation, politics, religion...”

In 1989, Durham University offered Dr Alpion a place to study D. H. Lawrence at masters level. Within three months, he upgraded to a PhD.

“It was then that I first felt like an outsider. People couldn’t understand why an Albanian wanted to study D. H. Lawrence. I felt nationalism wasn’t important but the English have an inferiority complex in terms of foreigners.”

Since then he has taught various subjects, including modernism, Anglo-American literature, film and media studies and creative writing at Huddersfield and Sheffield Hallam universities, Newman College of Higher Education and now at Birmingham. His controversial book on Mother Teresa will be published by Routledge later this year.

Being a playwright may be a sideline but writing generally is an itch that Dr Alpion has to scratch. Over past three years, he has travelled the breadth of the Balkans collecting stories, and his second play, *If Only the Dead Could Listen*, is the result.

The play tells the story of a Kosovan Albanian refugee who falls in love with a Serbian girl, which was forbidden in the 1980s.

“It’s a secret affair,” he says, but they marry. “When it becomes public, the girl is gang-raped and then dies. The protagonist has lived in England for

ten years without documents. He has no faith in human kind and relates only to his dead Serbian wife.

“With literature you can make a point more emphatically than with research. Literature can take people out of the dark.”

Dr Alpion is a successful academic, but he sees himself foremost as a writer. He values the greater freedom of expression that writing gives him and its ability to keep him grounded.

“As a writer I’m trying to make sense of my rootlessness. I see theatre as a part of my research work but the writing keeps me sane,” he confides.

“Through literature I can say what I can’t through my work. You can be controversial with writing in a way you can’t be with research.”

Controversy does not bother Dr Alpion, who places great value on freedom of speech, but excessive political correctness does. He says the forced closing of *Behzti*, a play that caused offence to some Sikhs in Birmingham, was a disgrace.

“Everybody should be able to say exactly what they want so long as it makes sense. Let people be open and controversial,” he says.

“If you come to this country, then you have to abide by the rules. We are trying to educate students to sensitive issues but in academia freedom of speech is important.

“The intellectual voice has quietened down too much. They have to play a role as much as artists. Scholars should have the intellectual integrity to speak out.”

If Only the Dead Could Listen is showing at the MAC, Birmingham, on February 7 and 8 at 7.30pm.

I GRADUATED FROM...the universities of Cairo and Durham

MY FIRST JOB WAS...as an English teacher, aged 19, in my native town of Peshkopi in Albania

MY MAIN CHALLENGE IS...to never have a midlife crisis

WHAT I HATE MOST...is excessive political correctness

IN TEN YEARS I...look forward to my daughter's graduation and having the first pint with my son

MY FAVOURITE JOKE IS...money