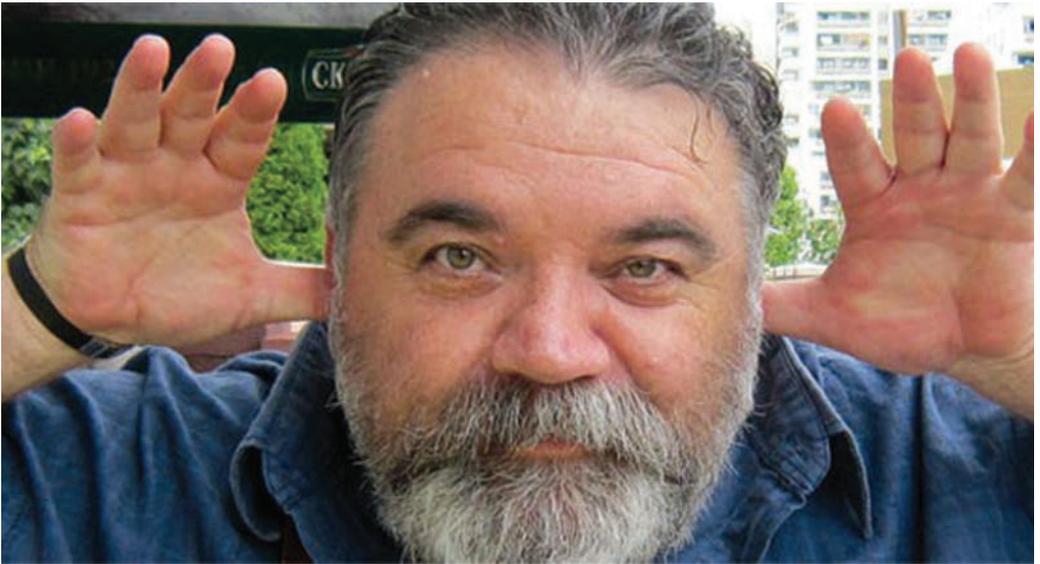


The Festival of Jokes



Macedonia does not have long and cold winters. But it has preserved a calendar with lots of winter festivities. Once their aim was to keep the family and the community together during the long, cold and dark nights enabling them to pull resources and exercise social control during the months with shorter working hours and possible food shortages. People celebrated religious occasions with feasts, shared food resources and engaged in social activities in front of the fireplaces and around fires.

Today it seems that the festive and cultural moments predominate in the seasonal celebrations turning old traditions

into gratuitous entertainment without due respect of religious and social rules. Many winter celebrations are a blurred mix of Pagan and Christian traditions contradicting each other.

The first festive occasion comes up shortly after the celebration of the secular New Year. Following the Julian calendar, Macedonian Orthodox Christians celebrate the Christmas' Eve two weeks after the majority of the Christian World, on 6th January. But instead of a solemn feast in a mournful atmosphere *Badnik* (the Christmas Eve) is celebrated by burning huge fires and eating and drinking gatherings in each neighbourhood. Oak tree branches are cut and carried home to protect the family and to bring good luck.



Sometimes the event is even celebrated with fireworks. The whole festivity is organized by a 'godfather' who is chosen by chance.

In Kavadarci, the most popular wine and rakija producing area, the municipal authorities are organizing a special festival, the popularity of which has been increasing over the years. The festival is devoted to jokes. It is based on the belief that the locals have a special sense of humour, which they cultivate more than residents of other parts of the country. One of the country's most renowned authors and performers in the humorous genres is Bubo Karov, who was part of the most celebrated K-15 trio. While part of K-15, he always used Kavadarci argot in his jokes.

Kavadarci Joke Festival uses the traditional set-up of the Christmas Eve celebration, enhancing it by the traditional, yet not so much used today, cultural format of oral story-, or rather, joke-telling. On January 5th a big fire is lit on the town's central square, and the most talented joke-tellers compete telling their best jokes with explicit sexual connotations. The atmosphere is warmed up by warm rakija and wine, which are traditional winter drinks, and by eating pork sausages (which goes against the



rules of the religious fasting period).

Three awards are given to the three best joke-tellers. They are accompanied by the traditional Koleda stick (*koledaska*). Koleda is another ritual announcing the Christmas Eve. It happens at dawn when young kids go around the houses and collect presents while wishing inhabitants a good start of the year, health and prosperity. The gifts they receive are put on the koleda stick.

Regardless of its roots, this festival has good prospects, as it is based on the most popular local identity, reinforces it and adds to the preservation of the rich oral heritage of jokes, which would otherwise be forgotten.

At the same time it is a chance to taste good wine and rakija, for which the region is famous.