

Do you think that affairs between young men and older women can become lasting relationships? Or do they exhaust their meaning as initiation rites?

Certainly they can be lasting. There is no general rule, it depends on the individuals concerned. I have met happy couples - young husband, older wife - who have come to explain to me how in *Praise of Older Women* changed their lives and how they decided to get married after reading the book. A basic factor to take into account is how intelligent the young man is. One of the things I tried to demonstrate in the novel is how closely related intelligence is to sex.

And biology?

These relationships are ideal for growing, for becoming educated. Later a lot depends on the difference in age. If the boy is sixteen and the woman is forty, the relationship can work, but not so well if the boy is twenty-six and the woman fifty. However, even this is ceasing to be a problem thanks to hormone pills and hormone plasters. A Viennese critic wrote: "The women loved by András Vajda don't need hormone plasters." I was pleased by the comment, not just because it suggested that my narrator was a lively character but also because it spread the news of hormone replacement therapy. It is something that ought to be talked about much more than it has been, until all women know about it. Thanks to hormone replacement therapy it is now possible to stay young, in body and spirit, until a much older age than most people think. In the end, of course, biology has the last word and we all grow old, unless we die first.

Do you propose the same hypothesis the other way around? Young girls with older men?

Well, I believe that a girl of 18 is always better off with a man of 30 than with a boy of 18. As for men of 50 or 60, Molière wrote great comedies about that. The novel that I'm writing at the moment is about an older man and a young woman who live happily together, but in quite extraordinary circumstances. It's inspired by the figure of Dalla Chiesa, a brilliant, brave and incorruptible Italian police general, aged 61, who was assassinated by the Mafia together with his young wife. By all accounts they were very happy, but they lived with the knowledge that they could be assassinated at any moment. The proximity of death makes everyone the same age. I had the good luck to live under constant threat of death in 1944-45 and in 1956 without suffering any harm, and I'm here to talk about it.

There is one obstacle to your theory, which is fidelity. The older woman in your novel is generally a married woman. In the way that you set up the relationships they are not troubled, but in real life they may be.

Infidelity is a very serious theme in *AN INNOCENT MILLIONAIRE*, which in this sense may be seen as the second part of *IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN*. That is only in the first part; so you could talk about infidelity without painful consequences. There are both types. In real life I've seen many cases of marriages which have been saved by the

wife's infidelity. One of the things that happen in marriages which stop working is that the wife resents the fact that she's not enjoying herself, and she takes it out on her husband. In such cases infidelity can make a person more tolerant within the marriage.

You give the impression that this arrangement works as long as it is not made explicit, as long as the couple don't have to face up to reality.

Of course, men are vain and at the same time they're obsessed with their performance. They cannot forgive infidelity, because they can never free themselves from the suspicion that the "other man" was better. Bad marriages need lies. If you'll pardon me I'll quote from *AN INNOCENT MILLIONAIRE*: "If hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue, marital lies are the tribute indifference pays to love." But we are talking about bad marriages. And certainly a good marriage is not built on infidelity.

In your Canadian phase you were a friend of Leonard Cohen, someone who doesn't appear to be too close to your world.

We were friends and neighbours when I lived in Montreal. He had a friend, Robert Hershorn, son of a rich garment manufacturer, who was fed up with counting the millions produced by his father's suits and wanted to publish a magazine. Bob Hershorn asked Leonard to edit it, but Leonard had a family to help him out whereas I didn't have a cent, so he suggested me for the job. We made a literary-political magazine which was called *Exchange*, a kind of *Ajoblanco* of that time. The staff consisted of a marvellous designer and cartoonist, one secretary and me. I edited it and organized the distribution to bookstores, universities, etc. It was mainly university teachers and students and intellectuals who read *Exchange*, and I had just come from a revolution, so it was a magazine with a lot of drive which attacked all kinds of sacred cows. For example, we promoted the works of Bertrand Russell, calling him the great liberal philosopher of this century. I was not in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament, but I supported his campaign for banning atmospheric nuclear testing. I also published a story by a French-Canadian writer about a homosexual priest, which couldn't get published anywhere else. None of this went down too well at the millionaires' club, and Bob Hershorn's father told him he would disinherit him if he continued to publish *Exchange*. It was the end of us. Really the end, because after this Bob got hooked on heroin and a few years later they found him dead from an overdose in a Hong Kong hotel. Our art editor met the father some time later and said to him: "And now are you glad your son isn't publishing a magazine?"

CHANGES IN THE EAST

Like all of Eastern Europe, Hungary is going through a period of drastic changes. What do you think of the present situation in your native land?

I feel full of hope. Just to mention my personal experience of the