

# REAL LIFE MEDIA FOR THE ORDINARY PEOPLE

Milena Mihaylova

**PROTEST.mp3**, directed by **Neda Sokolovska**, *Vox Populi* Documentary Theatre Studio, 2013

Documentary theatre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, actively brought to life in Bulgaria since 2012 by the performances of *Vox Populi* Documentary Theatre Studio is a chance to make sense of and interpret today's increasingly worrisome political reality on a global scale. It makes it possible to examine/experience anew some real events, clarify situations, and human points of view through dialogue, sharing and recognition of a common experience, personal experiences, and pains among the director, actors and spectators – they all are part of present-day reality – getting to a new path, and change. Bulgaria too is so much in need of change that this necessity has also given rise to *Protest.mp3*, directed by Neda Sokolovska, *Vox Populi's* new verbatim production. She is the director but also the main participant in it, a young person who takes a stand as she is pro-active and worried about the future of Bulgaria. It is precisely her social thinking and presence as her personal self on stage that inspires the young actors in the show, each of them with their own per-



Milena Ermenkova

Photographer Stefani Handzhiyska

sonal path, pursuits, attitudes towards life. Yet because of *Protest.mp3* they also start to make sense of their personal social activity and role as young people – not only in their personal human time but also in the crisis times of “here and now”, in Bulgaria’s present. For documentary theatre means an engaged theatre – it demands social engagement and clear personal position from every actor/person.

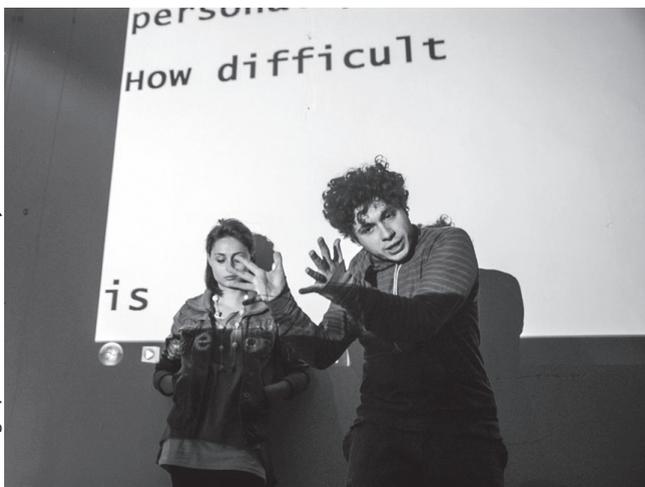
*Protest.mp3* is truly authentic, being created and happening simultaneously with the events it represents – the national protests in Bulgaria, the dissatisfaction of Bulgarians with those in power and with

life we are forced to live. The inimitable authenticity of the performance, its sharing of the real life selves of the director/actors, who keep their real-life names in the production, along with the real communication, collection and presentation of a variety of opinions of people from the crowd in order to make sense of “why and how people protest”, all this transforms *Vox Populi* and documentary theatre in general into real life media, i.e. documentary theatre, one of the most authentic and influential forms of live drama. Real life media that captures and studies the present time, the painful moments of each individual, digs into the “wounds” of the public, the crises of society, asks question and looks for answers. It also has a journalistic function but it goes beyond what journalists do. The media often remain at the “information” level and they are manipulative in their nature, lacking personal engagement with the reality they reflect. However, the authentic/documentary presence in today’s theatre actually happens mostly through the work of artists/real people, witnesses of a kind, partici-

pants in real life, for whom it is important to be themselves, to react, to provoke thinking and change with respect to the social problems of their time. To listen to the authentic voices of other people as well, of ordinary people as *Vox Populi* does by way of the world-famous *verbatim* theatre (from Latin *verbatim* – “word for word”) – the actors interview real people and reproduce their voices in real time on stage while listening the recordings through earphones. It is most valuable that these are voices that we won’t hear on TV or read what excites or worries them in the newspapers. Only the documentary authenticity of theatre today enables an all-embracing, truly authentic and influential look into the truth about the present day and people of today; it is no accident that documentary authenticity is an important theatre trend worldwide.

And people in Bulgaria today – just as people after the 1989 political changes – are witnesses and participants in national protests, dissatisfied with their lives in a country whose politicians/“deputies to the National Assembly” are not concerned with the ordinary person, electricity bills are unrealistically high, the mafia is on the loose, a young man set himself on fire to protest against social injustice in Bulgaria, and Bulgarians are still unfree, they are urging the government to resign and they are insisting on a new, different life in our allegedly democratic state. But has anything changed at all in this country, having in mind that the people kept shouting “Resign!” and “Mafia!” at the beginning of the so-called political transition in 1989 as they do now,

Photographer Stefani Handzhivyska



Milena Ermenkova and Milko Yovchev

asks Neda Sokolovska in *Protest.mp3*. And quite logically she makes a comparison between the protests “before” and “now,” and every new version of the performance on this topic is actual chronology of a kind of the protests in Bulgaria today – through real life stories of real people/monologues the February – March 2013 protests are juxtaposed with the June – July ones, with the September 2013 ones and with each subsequent day of the continuing social discontent in the country. For the times are troubled, changeable, and *Protest.mp3* is the first theatrical attempt in Bulgaria at covering these important social events in real time.

The verbatim performance (actually a theatrical study) of *Vox Populi* has been shown six times so far and it has always been different because the social reality is changing, too. The evolvement of the production is determined by this reality but also by the personal attitude, by living in the time of “here and now,” by the personal protest of each of those young artists/real people, by their pro-activeness or by their lack of faith in the path forward, two states of mind that the entire Bulgarian nation finds itself in between. *Protest.mp3* initially intended to show the results of a verbatim class on street protests (5–26 March 2013), yet it has gradually evolved into a very personal, truthful, painful production, engendered and moved by real life, demanding authentic living, non-theatrical happening on stage and real life drama which is being “written” by the social reality together with artists/Bulgarians/spectators, i.e. all of us “are writing” it together. And we all are living in it – again together.

The show first version of 28 March 2013 coincided with the period following the

protests against the energy monopolies in Bulgaria, and the Borisov<sup>1</sup> cabinet resignation, and therefore the overall feeling about what was seen on stage was one of hopelessness, of people having no idea of a way forward; such were also the opinions of the interviewed real people shown on stage – an existence with no exit. The second show was on 7 May 2013 – just before the early parliamentary elections – then the actors/real people on stage seemed to have some hope of changes to come. I can also recall their motional, semantically important etude – an enthusiastic “attempt to fly” in life but whether it would be a successful one... considering the bitterness of the absolute injustice and aggression during the protests of which Neda Sokolovska shared her personal experience in the performance. She had been among the protesters, she had felt the tension among the people, she had seen the provocateurs throwing stones, she had also witnessed the police aggression, the bloodied head of an old man. Her memory is of something “deeply wrong” because aggression is impermissible for all who take part in the protest. Her personal account is corroborated by an authentic video recording from a camera that had “captured” Neda by chance during that “bloody protest” – a real life document of a kind which is screened in the following versions of *Protest.mp3* and which is also part of real life drama in the production. Yes, she was there but when she asked point-blank her actors “Well, were you there, at the protests?” most of them answered “No!” This is the reason why in *Protest.mp3* Neda conducts an improvised simulation of a pro-

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<sup>1</sup> Boyko Borisov – prime minister of Bulgaria 2009–2013; 2014–2021. (Editor’s note.)



Photographer Stefani Handzhyska

Lyubomir Lyubenov and Petko Kamenov

test for her young actor colleagues in real time; she gathers them together in a square outlined by Scotch tape and she asks them to try to generate a collective feeling of a group, of a common purpose, and each of them should shout out what he or she really wants to protest about. I think that this is a valuable moment in the production evolution because it proves how authentic, documentary living in theatre affects not only the audience but the verbatim actors themselves since they are no longer merely performers giving life to fictional characters or recreating the authentic voices, empathising the pain/emotions of other real people, but above all, they are real people in whom documentary theatre provokes real authenticity. It provides them with a reason for human development and taking personal respon-

sibility “here and now” for the reality we are inhabiting. And this is important for them in order to empathise/understand, and not merely to present on stage, the meaning of real-life protest of young Plamen Goranov, who set himself on fire for real, for instance. He is present in the show via his participation in a music video for a Django Ze song and via a close friend’s documentary account of their shared experiences (presented by actor Milko Yovchev – an authentic presence on stage with spontaneity). The time we live in is a time of deadlock, an ordeal for Bulgarians and each of us might be Plamen at some point or we may know someone who has sacrificed themselves in the same fashion. This is why at the end of *Protest.mp3* – in all of its versions so far – we witness a young girl “setting herself on fire” who

shares with us some of her favourite personal belongings attesting “faith,” “hope,” “lust for life,” “dreams” and then bids a final farewell to her life (an emotional, sincere presence of young actress Petya Boycheva).

In the third performance dated 14 May 2013 – right after the elections – the feeling was as in real life – after many hopes/much faith in the protests and elections, there was no social change...

As Neda Sokolovska noted in the version of the performance dated 1 July 2013, and also in its version dated 27 September 2013: “Nothing has changed for 24 years!” It is no chance that in the performance dated 14 September 2013 one felt lack of trust in those in power and the question “Who proposed Peevski<sup>2</sup> for public office?” still resounded unanswered, as the actors’ attempt to “get familiar” with Maya Manolova, a politician from the Bulgarian Socialist Party and Deputy Speaker of the new 42<sup>nd</sup> National Assembly by looking into her photo and commenting on some details of her biography, by recalling a TV interview with her, also ended in distrust. And how is one supposed to trust provided that the phenomenon of “protest tourism” exists in Bulgaria and some of the protests are paid, manipulated, and it is obvious that people are divided. That’s why the protests are mutating, losing their true meaning. Hence the entire team of *Protest.mp3* loses faith that it is possible to change anything, and the end is again hopeless – a young girl “sets herself on fire” and then complete darkness follows. But in the next performance dated 27 September 2013 Neda Sokolovska stated: “I was not manipulated!”, claiming she joined the protests with all her faith and

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<sup>2</sup> Delyan Peevski – Bulgarian oligarch and politician. (Editor’s note.)

desire for change. And suddenly the disapproval of/distrust in Bulgarian politicians was in the foreground, and one of the most precious moments was the sharing of the personal protests of some of the participants in *Protest.mp3*. For example, actor Milko Yovchev’s personal protest was against the state’s carelessness about the fate of the ordinary person in our motherland as demonstrated in this case by the rude attitude of some officials of the Social Welfare Office of Lozenets when he went there with his girlfriend to receive their first child support allowance of BGN 135 they were entitled to, but which was too small sum for almost anything. He was not only discontent, he was ready to fight, to defend the rights of his family. All of the *Protest.mp3* team embrace the idea that the protests must continue until total change, that civil activity is important and that the protests are perceived as a “revival,” the only force that can bring a change to the society and the state. The preceding versions have been updated here by adding the points of view of new authentic voices, new authentic video recordings – reality documents – and even the more categorical self-presence of the actors in the present day. They are much more united now, with human empathy and looking bravely into real life.

However, both before and now – in each version of *Protest.mp3* but also in purely temporal terms – in the period of Bulgaria’s transition from 1989 on, and even today – Bulgarians feel like “emigrants in their own country,” the laws are not abided by, everybody is looking for a “loophole in the law” and as early as at their birth the people are constantly in a state of crisis as stated by two of the prototypes/live people of Petko Kamenov (actor authenticity,

spontaneity). One can feel disappointment also in the prototypes of Milena Ermenkova (inner confinement, a psychologically dense presence) and Denitsa Darinova / Plamena Pencheva (sensitivity towards the pain of the real person / authentic compassion, a multi-layered act of capturing the prototype's inner lives) who tell the moving stories of two women who both lived before 1989 and live now – the first one believed in democracy until 2000 but she no longer does, the other, a 63-year old mother, has reluctantly sent her children abroad, and she prefers they remain emigrants until the state/motherland Bulgaria is fixed. The personal confession of the actress Ina Dobрева is also touching with its painful authenticity – she shares her fear of dogs and she protests in *Protest.mp3* against the aggressive stray dogs on the streets. Actors Stefani Handzhyska, Yonko Dimitrov, Lyubomir Lyubenov, Plamen Velikov, Blagoy Boychev, who participate in different versions of the performance also stand out with their authentic expressiveness. And in the version of 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013 Neda Sokolovska tells again about the aggression at the protests against the monopolies, concluding that “this is a protest that should never be repeated but it should never be forgotten as well” and it is precisely that protest – in her words – that created conditions for more humane forms of protests thereafter. And what about today?

The time of “today” still remembers Plamen Goranov, who set himself on fire just a couple of months ago, and since late September when *Protest.mp3* was shown for the last time so far we have been witnessing a new wave of protests. In this moment Bulgarian university students, who sincerely want change, continue their protests against the Oresharski<sup>3</sup> cabinet; every day we see the cordon of police officers guarding the National Assembly; the police brutality against the young people of Bulgaria will not be forgotten. The cast of *Protest.mp3* is also young. All of them as well as the entire Bulgarian nation want their lives to change for the better, so there is justice, trust, satisfaction, and harmony. This was the wish, a prayer of a kind in the production following a young girl “setting herself on fire” in the versions dated 1 July 2013 and 27 September 2013, the actress Boryana Peneva appeared on stage with her new-born child, and the other actors/young people united by their desire for change, gathered around her, rejoicing at them...

It is time for a new life, for a fresh start!

*Published in Homo Ludens 2014/No. 17.*

*Translated by  
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<sup>3</sup> Plamen Oresharski – prime minister of Bulgaria 2013–2014. (Editor's note.)