

# TOPICAL PHILOSOPHICAL THEATRE BACK ON STAGE

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***Delhi Dance*** by **Ivan Vyrpaev**, directed by **Galin Stoev**, stage designer **Nikola Toromanov**, costume designer **Elitsa Georgieva**, composer **Emiliyan Gatsov – Elbi**

Cast **Vladimir Karamazov, Radina Kardzhilova, Radena Valkanova, Svetlana Yancheva, Sofia Bobcheva, Elena Telbis, Sava Dragunchev**

National Theatre – Sofia, premieres 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2017

Galin Stoev's production based on *Delhi Dance* by Ivan Vyrpaev was an event of profound significance on Bulgaria's theatre scene in 2017/18, eagerly awaited with undisguised interest by the theatremakers and the sophisticated audiences. What piqued up their interest in advance were both the statement by Marius Donkin, the then newly appointed director of the National Theatre, to the effect that in his development plan for the coming years he would count on Bulgarian stage directors well established in Europe, and especially on Galin Stoev, who not only made a name for himself in Belgium and France, but had also worked early in his career for the National Theatre<sup>1</sup>. This was seen as the comeback, after a 16-year absence, of a director, emblematic of the Bulgarian theatre in the wake of the 1989 political change. Expectations were further rising

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<sup>1</sup> Galin Stoev worked for the National Theatre – Sofia between 1999 and 2001.

due to the fact that meanwhile, Galin Stoev won the competition for director of Théâtre National de Toulouse and had immediately after the premiere in Sofia to take over as director as of 1 January 2018. And finally, in the last week prior to the premiere, it transpired that Stoev was to begin the first year of his directorship at the Theatre of Toulouse with this production and the Bulgarian cast and creatives<sup>2</sup>, scheduled to run throughout January. This overburdened with expectations atmosphere undoubtedly put the director to yet another test, and it is only fair to say that he passed it successfully. Galin Stoev and his well-teamed ingenious creatives such as set designer Nikola Toromanov and costume designer Elitsa Georgieva, composer Emiliyan Gatsov – Elbi and cast: Vladimir Karamazov, Radena Valkanova, Radina Kardzhilova, Svetlana Yancheva, Sofia

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<sup>2</sup> It was performed in Bulgarian with French subtitles.

*Delhi Dance*

Bobcheva reasserted their talent, ambition and skill to make a salient, contemporary and impactful theatre dealing with essential questions of existence. With its theatrical aesthetic and intelligent visual solution combining live acting and exhibiting on a big screen moments of the performance shot with two cameras set on tripods onstage, *Delhi Dance* instantly featured prominently on Bulgaria's generally monotonous 2017 bill, and was enthusiastically acclaimed, receiving polemical rave reviews from critics, who commented it mainly in terms of the chosen aesthetic approach.

All that said, Galin Stoev's production at the National Theatre after his 16-year absence from Bulgaria's largest national playhouse should be defined as the 2017 event of great significance (along with several other events). What, however, went

almost unnoticed in the vast array of reviews and commentaries and what actually featured the production prominently on Bulgaria's theatre scene of late was the fact that his staging posed openly and directly and dealt with a clearly articulated and maximally relevant current philosophical question; that it was a philosophical performance on a burning issue. A very rare occurrence on Bulgaria's stage indeed. For various and complex reasons, subject of another study, most of the Bulgarian theatremakers deem taking the liberty to argue about a directly posed and actually relevant philosophical question, to be either 'antediluvian' or far too boring or an excessive luxury. Forgetting about such (pre) conceptions was one of the helpful acquisitions in Galin Stoev's life of a '*theatrical nomad*' (in his own words) in several European countries in the last two dec-

ades<sup>3</sup>. *Delhi Dance* stands as a worthy testament to this.

Which is the burning philosophical issue in *Delhi Dance* put on the stage? A fundamental question of existence is that about suffering that fills the world and that a man living in the traditions of the Western (European) civilisation cannot accept, rebels against, looking for the culprit and dreaming of punishing the latter. This problem is tragically insoluble. Even if coping with all the injustice, violence, wars, poverty, misery and oppression (though the world has for centuries now been far from such an ideal perspective), the main source of human suffering shall remain in place: one's life is limited; losing one's nearest and dearest and the pain of their loss; the finality of death accompanying and constantly interfering with life remains. What are then the options for man to cope with this situation? That is the question in which Galin Stoev is strongly interested existentially and mainly as of sudden and urgent importance now, in a time of unceasing terror threats and a number of international conflicts, entailing humanitarian crises, calamities and injustices. By choosing Ivan Vyrypaev's play for his burdened with expectations premiere at the National Theatre and the opening of his stint as director of the theatre in Toulouse, the director clearly and directly posed this question.

Ivan Vyrypaev is a playwright, who established himself in the early twenty-first

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that Galin Stoev showed his interest in contemporary philosophical theatre in his early career in Bulgaria. In 2001, again at the National Theatre – Sofia he put on for the first time in this country a most complicated and gripping post-modern work, Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*.

century on the European scene owing to his consistent and committed seeking or rather giving an answer to the question under consideration: the question about suffering in its existential and at the same time everyday context. He started his acting career in his native city Irkutsk, Siberia, Russia (graduating from the Irkutsk Theatre College in 1974), playing also in other cities across the district; in 1998 he went as a part-time student to Boris Shchukin Theatre Institute and in 2001 moved to Moscow. Here, in the next year, he was one of the founders of Театр.doc<sup>4</sup> that shortly afterwards enjoyed enormous national and European popularity. One of the theatre's earliest premieres was that of his play *Oxygen* (2003; its production at Theatre 199, Sofia, directed also by Galin Stoev was premiered on 1 July 2003, gaining popularity in this country as well). This was the fourth of a total of seventeen dramatic works composed by Vyrypaev for now, that gained him the name of the emblem of the new Russian drama in his country. In May 2003, I attended KONTAKT International Theatre Festival in Toruń, Poland where the production (in which Ivan Vyrypaev played the lead role; dir. Victor Ryzhakov) of Театр.doc was included within the Official Selection and receiving the Best Production Award, the play, the playwright and the theatre won their first international recognition and European popularity<sup>5</sup>. Two years

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<sup>4</sup> Театр.doc was founded on 14 February 2002.

<sup>5</sup> See in: Николова, Камелия. КОНТАКТ'2003: между доброто качество и жаждата за изненада. В: Театърът в началото на XXI век. София, 2015, с. 418–421. [Nikolova, Kamelia. *KONTAKT'2003: between good quality and thirst for surprises*. In: *Theatre at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Sofia, 2015, pp. 418–421.]

later, in 2005, Vyrypaev, encouraged by the success of *Oxygen*, set up his Oxygen Movement Agency to make films (seven for the time being, some of them award-winning); moved to Poland and went on composing his sombre philosophical plays, most of them, as mentioned above, consistently exploring the aforesaid philosophical question about suffering in the world and in human life and how it can be endured. Perhaps *Delhi Dance* formulates this question most straightforwardly and gives a most definitive answer to it.

The play adeptly presents the two main viewpoints on the problem of suffering: the Western and the Eastern. For a man raised up in the traditions, philosophy and morality of the Western (Judeo-Christian, European) civilisation, suffering in the surrounding environment engendered both by violence, poverty and injustice and the permanent presence of death, is unbearable, unacceptable, a permanent subject of resistance, of anger, of pain caused by frustration over the impossibility to end suffering as it puts to the test not only the emotionality but also the mind of Western men, the cohesive moral views, categories and judgment of the developments. That is the reason why Western men are a priori unhappy; suffering never goes away, it is impossible for them to be happy for they are forced to always feel dissatisfied, guilty, to resist, to judge, to look for the culprit, to wreak vengeance, to want punishment. The eastern view on the suffering in the world and man's attitude towards it, in Vyrypaev's succinct interpretation, is radically different. He believes that everything happening in the universe and in the immediate life of an individual – good and evil, happiness and unhappiness, poverty and affluence – belongs together, being a

product of a universal divine energy. That is why eastern man takes it without judgement or resistance, feels and experiences it naturally like breathing, like '*heart rhythm*' (as one of Vyrypaev's characters insists), never wondering how the witnessed/experienced violence, injustice, poverty, humiliation or death of a close relative was possible. The pain of all these sears, becoming *ecstatic* joy and relief, a beautiful supra-real feeling. The playwright calls this type of exalted and relieved happy living beyond suffering 'a dance', where everybody and everything become one. Life is accepted as it is and suffering becomes redundant. It is in this eastern viewpoint on living and suffering that Vyrypaev finds the only possible answer to the basic existential question he poses.

The briefly presented maximally clear and at the same time very complicated to formulate and articulate, and especially in a dramatic text, clash between the Western and Eastern views on suffering in *Delhi Dance* finds an inventive and convincing expression. We can safely say that this is perhaps the Russian playwright's best play in terms of its compositional strategy. Vyrypaev introduces five characters: Alina Pavlovna (The Mother); her daughter and popular dancer (of *Delhi* dance) Ekatherina; Ekatherina's boyfriend Andrey; a dance critic and a friend of the mother and the daughter, impersonally styled as the *Elderly Woman*, and the Nurse, all of them placed within an orderly system of coordinates. The Mother and the daughter, who are easily readable personifications of the Western and the Eastern views on suffering respectively, are placed at either end of the x-axis; vertically, on both sides, are Andrey and the *Elderly Woman*: the former as desperately in love with the daughter and her

dance, i.e. as irrationally attracted by the eastern viewpoint, and the latter as a rationally and dispassionately analysing different dance styles, but proving eventually to be obsessed with the *Delhi* dance and therefore unable to depict it. The Nurse and Andrey's Wife are outside the system as the former is meant to tell the relatives about the death of someone of their nearest and dearest, i.e. to herald the suffering, while the latter is the victim, who suffering (attempting suicide) causes greater suffering (the death of Andrey, who cannot deal with his feeling of guilt). Besides this adept coordinate system of the text's concepts and vibes, Ivan Vyrypaev makes a very precise and impactful move to communicate also the eternal and never-ending circle of suffering and the perennial sore point of suffering and enduring suffering. The author builds his play as a sequence of seven

short one-act plays (numbered consecutively 1 to 7, each of them titled and with its own list of the characters), where the action unfolds in strikingly similar waiting rooms of different hospitals, beginning with announcing the death of a character, who is not on the list given in the beginning of each play. Thus, playing with time, the author methodically takes his characters' lives to bring them back to life, making them cause and experience suffering.

The production of Galin Stoev and his team is definitely possessed by the dramatic inventiveness of the text, and skilfully continues and further develops it in the visual solution and the actors' scores. As for the evident Ivan Vyrypaev's involvement with the eastern viewpoint on the suffering in the world, on man's attitude towards it and its sources, the director, the creatives and the cast perceive and present



Sofia Bobcheva (The Nurse) and Vladimir Karamazov (Andrey) in *Delhi Dance*

Photographer Gergana Damyanova



it rather polemically. In short, their answer to the raised fundamental philosophical question oscillates between the Western and Eastern viewpoints, unable and unwilling to abandon the values and morals of the European territory, where there is good and evil, crimes are subject to a punishment and the guilt is borne, striving at the same time to retain something of the options to comfort and translate the pain into art, given by the eastern viewpoint. This ambiguity and inner polemicism of the sought answer is explicitly displayed in Nikola Toromanov's set design. A film production studio with green walls is built on the grand stage of the National Theatre, where in the beginning of each of the seven one-act plays several pieces of stage furniture (two chairs, an armchair, etc.) are alternating to indicate a hospital waiting

room. Above the studio, there is a big screen showing close-ups of the actors' faces while performing certain episodes, shot by two cameras set on tripods on-stage. Thus spectators watch the relatively orderly, reserved and predictable behaviour of the characters/actors and at the same time unexpectedly captured 'hidden' moments, flashing up both uncontrollable shock and pain of the performed/experienced suffering, and the blessed peace of accepting and shaking it off.

Such philosophical productions rely very much on the actors and at the same time pose an extraordinary challenge to them. Moreover, if the text is composed by Ivan Vyrypaev, known for his specific manner of playwriting, using routine situations (lonely young drug addicts; a man infatuated with a dancer, but unable to deal with



Photographer Gergana Damyanova

Radena Valkanova (The Elderly Woman), Svetlana Yancheva (Alina Pavlovna) and Vladimir Karamazov (Andrey) in *Delhi Dance*

his feeling of guilt for cheating on his wife, etc.), and clichés of everyday and formal language to treat profound existential problems. To Galin Stoev, who has years of productive collaboration with the Russian playwright and has demonstrated a clear preference for the performative theatrical aesthetic, it is these tensions between the authorial text and the actor that are especially attractive and productive. Actors in his directorial concept should not impersonate the characters of the philosophical play, but rather be people really interested in the question it deals with. For then and only then the banal or grandiloquent lines, they pronounce, will formulate their own authentic questions and concerns rather than being mechanically repeated clichés, which contain unfathomable for them reflections of the author. Vladimir Karamazov as Andrey, with real enthusiasm and inner plasticity, excels in coping with his difficult task to present himself onstage in a philosophical discussion on suffering. Radena Valkanova in her initial scenes is somewhat hesitant about whether to show the characteristic in her *Elderly Woman* or to demonstrate her own interest in the topic under consideration. In the fourth one-act play, titled *Calmly and Attentively*, she confidently departs from her hesitance and makes a wonderful and very personal depiction of the *Delhi* dance for Andrey, devastated by his guilt. Svetlana Yancheva

opts for balancing on the verge between her role and her own authentic articulation, and her most focused moments of this difficult balance are really memorable. The main risk facing actors with such substantial philosophical texts, masked by profane everyday or infantile pretentious clichés, is to recite them hollowly or fill them with random tensions and emotions. Elena Telbis as Andrey's Wife fails to avoid this risk. The same holds partly true for certain moments of Radina Kardzhilova's performance, but as a whole she has commanding stage presence (in the demanding role of Ekatherina, performer of the *Delhi* dance). Sofia Bobcheva as the Nurse is also very precise and inventive in the logic of the aesthetic offered by the director.

There is so much more that can be said about Galin Stoev's *Delhi Dance* at the National Theatre. What, however, should not be overlooked and what more or less sums up all possible commentaries, is that a missing until now genuine philosophical production discussing important and topical subjects is already on Bulgaria's bill.

*Published in Homo Ludens 2018/No. 21.*

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