CONFORMISM AND RESISTANCE

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Comprehending the legacy of communist times, including the legacy of the arts, may start with the question about the collapse of Soviet-style totalitarian communism in Eastern Europe. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 may further be interpreted as subtle rhetoric: following the Second World War, the Wall, inevitably compared to its Chinese counterpart, was the epitome of divided Europe; its fall was a historic event, a metaphor for the end of one historical situation and the advent of a new one. In fact, what we consider a historic event is just the metonymy of a chain of real life events, of a historical process that led to a turning point. In hindsight, the fall of Soviet-style communism may be seen as a long process which began in the mid-1950s with the attempt to partially liberalize Soviet power, went through the resistance against the regime in a number of Eastern European countries in the 1960s, 1970s and the 1980s, and ended with the regime imploding in a futile attempt at radical reformation. But it is important to note that since this disintegration was not caused by any military defeat, it was taking place gradually, with complex and conflicting processes under way behind the otherwise ideologically monolithic facade.

Humanities scholars researching the recent past usually employ two notions to refer to art in communist times in Eastern Europe. Both notions seem to me rather reductive, yet they are still worth considering:

The first notion is the transfer of the military dictatorship model. This notion constructs an image of a repressive regime, which eventually crumbles and the arts come back to normal. The premise is that, in the meantime, while the dictatorship lasted, the arts resisted the regime in their own way.

Although political government in Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1989 could be defined as dictatorship, this model certainly does not take into account the complex nature of Soviet-style totalitarian regimes, which, especially after the mid-1950s, offered venues of artistic expression whose ultimate goal was to legitimize the regimes for the global 'progressive' public. Those venues were also used as local 'social vents'. In fact, the military dictatorship model is mostly applicable to the Stalinist period, imposed in Eastern Europe in the wake of the Second World War until the mid-1950s.

After that, brutal repression was superseded by much more sophisticated means of control, which even involved bribing most intellectual and artistic elites in Eastern European countries. But what mattered in this case was the provision of venues of partial freedom, which made possible phenomena such as Moscow *Sovremennik Theatre* or Grotowski's *Theatre Laboratory* in Poland, along with many other artistic venues in Eastern Europe that emerged after the mid-1950s. In that period Bulgarian theatre too experienced phenomena that transformed theatre language within the national context[1]. In the following decades of the regime's partial liberalization, similar creative situations, though short-lived, without doubt paved the road for artistic innovation. Since 1989, the historical narrative has usually developed around such situations. Those 'creative situations' commonly occurred outside the capitol city, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, and they entailed groups of like-minded playwrights, directors, actors, and stage designers, who shared similar ideas about theatre.

However, a closer look at those situations in Bulgarian theatre would show that they had been created with the blessing of the ideological Establishment, which later would either disintegrate them piece by piece or would abruptly put an end to them. Not only was that achieved by suspending plays and performances, but also by transferring leading artists to other theatres, some lured by the promise of better career opportunities, some punished to work in far-flung and smaller theatres. Yet, it is results that are important for theatre history: due to the partial freedom granted to Bulgarian theatre in the aftermath of the 1956 thaw, a specific hybrid theatre emerged which was kept in existence to the end of the regime in 1989. It incorporated features of Stanislavsky theatre (as a mode of stage representation) and Brecht theatre (as communication with the audience), a hybrid theatre of ideological correctness and allegorical criticism of real life.

The second model still applied to the theatre in communist times requires juxtaposing official and dissident cultures. Without doubt, drawing a line between those two has both conceptual and aesthetical significance. We can easily define the differences between those two cultures. Official culture embraced socialist realism. Anatoly Smelyansky, the prominent Russian theatre critic and historian, sums it up: 'Socialist realism… must be studied

[1] Topaldzhikova, Anna. Razrivi i novi posoki. Balgarskiyat teatar ot sredata na 50-te do kraya na 60-te. Sofiya, 2009.; Nikolova, Kameliya. Rezhisiorat mezhdu limitiranata svoboda i totalniya kontrol. – Homo Ludens, 2005 /18, 231–241.

like any other style… [its] main features were rationalism, didacticism, clarity and simplicity. It was everywhere: in the typology of the heroes, the voices of the actors, the sets, and the choreography of the major scenes...'[2]

Whereas dissident circles, whose philosophical horizons ranged from the struggle for socialism with a human face to the protection of human rights and humanist values, were far more involved in avant-garde art. In Bulgaria, ideological censorship was more severe than in other Eastern European countries, that's the reason why we are able to discuss avant-garde and neo-avant-garde influences rather than radical movements and styles. Artists of the magnitude of visual artist Christo Javacheff pursued successful international careers once they managed to defect to the West. Theatre as a collective art simply stood no such chance beyond this country's borders or outside its native language. Georgi Markov, for once, gained international acclaim. He had defected once the regime had tightened its grip in the aftermath of the 1968 Prague Spring. 10 years later he was assassinated for his political journalism in London by the Bulgarian secret police. Markov had kept writing plays and theatre criticism abroad, but he had maintained a connection to Bulgarian theatre only through his radio broadcasts on the BBC, Free Europe, Deutsche Welle, which were jammed on Bulgarian territory. Free-thinking theatre artists who remained in Bulgaria had to conform, make compromises, and sometimes even make a deal with the 'devil' so that they could keep working. The devil in this case was the Communist Party or the secret police, because belonging to their structures provided some immunity against local party leaders' attacks or against ideological hardcore criticism. All this resulted in artists assuming a highly controversial civil identity, and in aesthetic terms this caused the emergence of hybridity which was a crossover of the ideological canon of socialist realism and the neo-avant-garde aesthetic influence exerted by the theatre and the other arts in Western European and Eastern European countries that enjoyed a greater degree of creative freedom – mostly Poland and former Czechoslovakia. There was also an unspoken consensus that innovation and the inevitable foreign influences had to be integrated into the 'system' rather than let them destroy it.

The opportunistic interpretation of French philosopher Roger Garaudy's ideas about realism in art (Garaudy was a member of the Central Committee of the

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[2] Smelyansky, Anatoly. The Russian Theatre after Stalin. Translated by Patrick Miles. Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 2.

French Communist Party in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s) became particularly prominent among artists. Garaudy referred to realism in art as 'realism without borders', meaning it may accommodate Picasso, Saint-John Perse and Kafka equally well[3]. Though hardcore defenders of the official ideological paradigm would never agree to that interpretation, such an approach provided indirect arguments in favour of, say, Yordan Radichkov's unusual theatre texts and their right to exist. His texts were allowed on stage with the explanation that they adhered to folk traditions or they were merely labelled as 'magical realism'. As a result, it was possible for Radichkov to enjoy a successful social career as a writer irrespective of the regime. However, that career did not prove a reason good enough for his play *Image and Similarity* (1986) to be staged because the play drew direct analogies between its grotesque images and the political reality of the time.

In the aftermath of social change in this country, there has been a complete reassessment of the cultural heritage of the previous period and a new emphasis on the oppositional nature of Radichkov's work, with in-depth literary analyzes tracing some degrees of hesitancy. (Plamen Doynov: '... Yordan Radichkov's *Fierce Mood*, published in 1965, is a crystal clear image, so to speak, of alternative writing in the socialist era, whereas his *Gunpowder Primer* (1969) is a compromise between his grotesque style of writing and the politically correct topics of social realism'.[4])

Radichkov's example indicates a fundamental methodological problem, still relevant today, which arises when writing the history of communist times: shedding light onto the *liaisons dangereuses* between politics and the arts. They are particularly conflicting and ambiguous, especially when today we do not acknowledge any originality and creative talent, the kind Yordan Radichkov had.

Another fundamental problem is that the archives of Bulgaria's communist secret police are still not fully available to the general public. But even a partially lifted curtain shows numerous challenges to interpreting that period – for example, it was not just hardcore supporters of official ideology who

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[3] Garaudy, Roger. D'un Réalisme sans rivages: Picasso, Saint-John Perse, Kafka. Préface de Louis Aragon. Paris, Plon, 1963. Roger Garaudy's book was translated into Russian and Bulgarian and became highly popular with Bulgarian intellectuals.

[4] Doynov, Plamen. Za alternativniya kanon. In: Portal „Kultura" – https://kultura.bg/web/za-alternativniya-kanon/

were connected to the secret police of political control and repression, but also leading artists and art critics defending creative freedom. The problem is by no means confined to our national realities. Just five years ago, we were shocked to find out that a leading French intellectual of Bulgarian descent, Julia Kristeva, was an informant with the Bulgarian secret police, although it is not clear whether she was fully operational or this was just a way for her to defect to the West.

Precisely because of such controversies, theatre historians, at least the ones working after 1989, prefer to reveal just individual parts of the whole picture – they focus on case studies rather than the overall narrative. But can history be told through individual case studies? – those of artistic successes or the ones of banned / censored works of art. The problem is precisely the overall narrative about that period. As we are drifting away in time, we need to compress our knowledge of the individual aspects of that reality into a conceptual understanding of it, just as we need to compress our knowledge of its legacy.

Moreover, understanding that legacy in different aspects of public life in communist times may give us a more objective interpretation of the past. For example, the extensive growth of state theatres in this country led, on the one hand, to their inefficient over-centralized management[5], but on the other hand, it created cultural spaces used even today as a distribution network.

We need though to differentiate between the democratic model of the *maisons de la culture*, initiated by Andre Malraux in France, who, convinced by the arguments of the political left, sought decentralization of culture, and the huge cultural infrastructure in Eastern Europe developed in the communist era to keep people within a single ideological paradigm.

We can observe the intangible cultural heritage left by communism in the artistic achievements of those decades. And they are not related in any way to regime-favoured official culture.

Though imposed ideology pervaded all aspects of social and cultural life and the Establishment secured it as a way of life, it was life's spontaneity and unpredictability that would still leave venues beyond control and provide underground spaces, or even encourage dissident circles and conscious pas-

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[5] Nikolova, Rumyana. Model na funktsionirane na balgarskiya teatar v perioda 1944–1989 godina. Sofiya, 2020.

sive or proactive modes of resistance. That's why we should acknowledge two types of breakthroughs in the ideologized social and cultural space: aesthetic achievements already granted international recognition (that is, beyond the Eastern Bloc), and the moral artistic and intellectual acts that followed Alexander Solzhenitsyn's appeal for morality in his self-published essay *Live Not by Lies* (1974). Yet we certainly need to be cautious. For example, Georgi Dzhagarov's play *The Public Prosecutor* was commissioned by the Establishment and it was published in the West with a prestigious introduction by Charles Percy Snow[6]. It was even staged at a small London theatre as part of the regime's propaganda effort. In the 1980s in particular, the secret police started to embed the dissident myth about artists and intellectuals so that the regime could play them around one way or another; some of these people had a significant impact on this country's transition to democracy following 1989.

Regardless of any complex hermeneutic operations, we should also be able to identify how theatre benefited when it tried to circumvent stagnant normative aesthetics and ideology. For example, restricted freedom of expression triggered the development of metaphorical language on stage. As mentioned earlier, Bulgaria experienced a regime of tighter restriction, which was not conducive to the emergence of theatre laboratories similar to Kantor's or Grotowski's in Poland (this happened far later, in 1989, with the establishment of the *Sfumato Theatre Laboratory*[7]), yet the lack of market competition in a communist economy allowed for extended periods of rehearsal, sometimes going on for three to four months, or even for five to six months, which were one-of-a-kind creative laboratories for the development of stage language and professional skills. Artists and intellectuals gravitated towards leading directors such as Leon Daniel, Vili Tsankov, Yulia Ognyanova, Lyuben Groys, Dimiter Gotscheff (the latter worked entirely in Germany from 1985 to his demise in 2013), and many others, to establish artistic and intellectual circles, which brought a breath of fresh air into Bulgarian culture. Another prominent French intellectual of Bulgarian descent, Tsvetan Todorov, recalled his life in

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6 Dzhagarov, Georgi. The Public Prosecutor. A play, with an introduction by C. P. Snow. Translated from Bulgarian by Marguerite Alexieva, adapted by C. P. Snow and Pamela Hansford Johnson. Published by University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1969.

7 Nikolova, K, Iordanov, N., Topaldzhikova, A., Doytcheva, V., Popiliev, R. 30 sezona *Sfumato*. Sbornik studii. Sofiya, 2020.

Bulgaria before he left for good in 1963: “Back then I lived in an environment of theatre people, poets, artists and I took part in their projects... There were those two extraordinary directors: Vili Tsankov and Leon Daniel … Theatre was full of life at the time.”[8]

I point out that ambivalence with no intent to strike a balance between the positive and negative consequences of the cultural model imposed in those four and a half decades, I merely aim to outline the multi-layered processes during that period. Because I believe that it is the contradictions, sometimes the paradoxes even that help reveal the truth about of a historical situation.

We certainly must never forget that this was a totalitarian situation. Repressing freedom and depriving people of basic rights was not just ethically unacceptable. Even today we can clearly observe negative consequences in purely aesthetic terms.

One such consequence rarely discussed stems directly from the containment of avant-garde artists into small groups. As a result, the dominant majority of the audience has maintained a rigid attitude towards theatre. We observed that contradiction in the 1990s, when Bulgarian theatre was catching up on the missed dramaturgical and stage practices of the second half of the 20th century, while still in need to build its own audiences.

One last sad conclusion about the consequences of that period. Constraints placed on artistic practice and theory were so backward that fighting those constraints wasted so much energy which otherwise could have been invested into more productive areas. Furthermore, the compromises made to allow a performance to reach its audience, or the deeply encoded messages to the readers/viewers, render such a performance rather dull or difficult to decipher from a contemporary point of view.

Therefore, every historical account of that time should aim to highlight names and plays that are still significant today, and are likely to remain so for future generations.

Of course, this is much easier to achieve in dramaturgy, and literature in general, or in cinema, rather than in stage practices, for the simple reason that those stage performances are not right with us.

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[8] Todorov, Tsvetan. Dalg i naslada. Edin jivot na posrednik. Razgovori s Katrin Portven. Sofiya: LIK, 2003, p. 41.

Reconstructing stage life requires that we leave behind the mythology of stories told about the work done by this or that actor, director or scenographer, which still circulate in theatre to this day. We should trust even less awards and positive critical reviews in the press at that time. Instead we have to try to see someone's contribution to theatre life, 'translated' into the language of modern theatre studies, which tells the story of theatre development in Europe and the world in 20th century. There are still remnants of theatre memory – photographs, sometimes film and video footage (often in poor condition), empirical descriptions of performances, of staging decisions and acting performances, sketches for costumes, mock-ups for sets... I am convinced that a concerted effort should be made, on the one hand, to find and systematize empirical material in order to reconstruct a live theatre performance, and on the other hand, to 'translate' theatre life that we have (to an extent) managed to conjure up or recall into generally valid theatre language.

The overall historical narrative of the theatre and the arts in the times of communism will always need two storylines – one about the general picture of cultural life in totalitarian conditions, the other one – about the personal aesthetic and moral choices of the individual artists whose work we are exploring.

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