THEATRE IN BULGARIA IN THE PERIOD 1945–1989: BETWEEN IDEOLOGY, TRICKERY AND ESCAPE

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One of the most important questions facing historiography in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall is how to (re)think and tell today the history of culture and, specifically, the history of theatre in Eastern European countries during communism. This text is yet another attempt in our quest for an answer.

I intend to discuss Bulgarian theatre in the communist period, and I would like to explore questions and issues that emerge today when we attempt to tell the history of theatre of that period.

Two major historical narratives about communist-era arts and culture in general have emerged in Bulgarian cultural space since the change of regime in 1989. The first narrative has written history by exploring subversion, resistance and dissidence[1]. The other narrative has reconstructed and critiqued the regime's ideological concept about the arts and culture as a whole, as well as the regime's hands-on strategies and methods used to enforce and implement that concept in real terms[2].

The first narrative is rather fragmented. It mostly focuses on separate symbolic or less prominent situations, artists and works of resistance against the imposed official aesthetic canon, as well as important critical incidents – scandals, works of art being banned, or political repressions against artists. We may argue that this historical narrative has been developed on the principle of *case studies* which are used to look for (or at least, are used to suggest) a more comprehensive understanding of the general ideological and cultural context of the period between 1945 and 1989.

The other historical narrative has been established in exactly the opposite direction. This narrative primarily uses historical and theoretical methodol-

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1 Topaldzhikova, Anna. Razrivi i novi posoki. Balgarskiyat teatar ot sredata na 50-te do kraya na 60-te. Sofiya, 2009.

2 Elenkov, Ivan. Kulturniat front. Sofiya: Institut za izsledvane na blizkoto minalo, 2008.

ogy[3] in an attempt to outline the entire philosophical, ideological and socio-cultural model of the communist era, as well as the principles of ideological construction and practical functioning of that model. While this second historical narrative outlines the general picture of the communist state and its culture and arts, that is, it describes the official political and aesthetic canon, along with all instances of its subversion, it does not intend to trace and research individual events, artists and works of art in any detail. As far as this narrative ever dwells on them, it is only to treat them as examples that confirm its historical and theoretical conclusions and critical analyses.

These two major historical narratives about the arts and culture in Bulgaria in the period between 1945 and 1989 have been developed to exist rather simultaneously in the Bulgarian post-communist space in the last three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and without doubt they have incorporated proper research and analysis in order to make sense of the recent past. Yet, both on their own and together, they have failed to tell the complete story of those dramatic times of ideological normativity, bans, political repressions and incentives for artists. We may argue that these two narratives do not tell the story the way it was lived, with all its colour, deceitful visibility and duality. In other words, these two narratives neither tell that story using the lives of all groups of people as either individuals or as society, nor using the choices, achievements and failures people made/experienced. One exception is the large-scale project[4] for the comprehensive research and rethinking of the history of literature, led by Prof. Plamen Doynov from New Bulgarian University.

In terms of theatre history, this objective critical and multilayered research and rethinking of Bulgaria's communist-era theatre legacy still needs to be done, even though there are already quite a few analyses[5] of both types described above.

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[3] Nikolova, Kamelia. Teatarat v Balgariya: aktsenti. – Problemi na izkustvoto, 2020/ № 3, pp.12-19, p.16.

[4] The Literature of the People's Republic of Bulgaria. Series, comprising 21 books so far, ed. Plamen Doynov. Sofiya, 2008–2022.

[5] Topaldzhikova, Anna. Op.cit.; Popiliev, Romeo. Saprotivata na dramata v dramata za saprotivata. Sofiya, 2013; Popiliev, Romeo. Tsenzurata po vremeto na komunizma. Sofiya, 2018; Nikolova, Rumyana. Model na funktsionirane na balgarskiya teatar v perioda 1944–1989. Sofia, 2020; Nikolova, Kamelia. Rezhisiorat mezhdu limitiranata svoboda i totalnia kontrol. – Homo Ludens, 2015/ № 18, pp. 231-241; Iordanov, Nikolay. Sotsialisticheskiyat realizam i balgarskoto dramaturgichno

As mentioned earlier, I intend to explore these issues as a step forward in this forthcoming direction.

One possible approach to theatre development in the period between 1945 and 1989 is the observation of *behaviour*, or more precisely, the observation of different types of life and aesthetic behaviours exhibited by theatre makers, that is, actors, directors, playwrights, scenographers, historians, critics, all forced to live in the regime specific conditions. I need to point out that if we apply this approach combining the strategies of the two established historical narratives presented above, we will undoubtedly manage to create a far more profound, multilayered narrative that we have been looking for, or at least we will move closer to it. Ultimately, this will be by far the most holistic and objective account of Bulgarian theatre in that period.

Which were the dominant aesthetic behaviours of theatre artists in reference to official ideology, the status quo and the official aesthetic canon of the communist period in Bulgaria? We could summarize those in three main categories:

The first of those behaviours was either the *sincere belief in or the conformist commitment* to the establishment, enforcement and support of the official canon.

I would define the second behaviour as *tricking* the regime (theatre people have recalled that back then this type of trickery was also referred to as 'outwitting the regime' or 'lying to the regime').

The third type of behaviour was *escaping* the system. The forms and manifestations of that escape were numerous, with varying degrees of danger and effectiveness.

Those behaviours, that is, those three modes of life and artistic expression, of direct everyday experience of life and creating theatre became constant for the entire communist era, yet they went through different transformations and manifestations in different periods.

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nasledstvo. – Homo Ludens, 2018/ № 21; Tagareva, Albena. Poetichnata valna v dramaturgiyata i neiniat stsenichen obraz v predstavleniyata na 60-te godini na 20 vek. – Problemi na izkustvoto, 2021/ № 3, pp. 48-54; Denchev, Petar. Mimetichno i antimimetichno v teatralniya spektakal ot perioda na sotsializma v Balgariya. – Izkustvovedski cheteniya/Art Readings'2022. S., 2023, pp. 249-257 i dr.

Those three types of behaviour emerged and gained prominence in their most exposed and distinctive version in the first post-war decade of 1945–1956, when Bulgarian theatre, along with theatres in the other Central and Eastern European countries that constituted the Eastern Bloc, underwent a radical Soviet-type philosophical, aesthetic and organizational transformation in order to be converted to just another propaganda tool of the new communist ideology.

In that period, some theatre professionals certainly committed to constructing the official canon of imposed socialist realism out of genuine belief so they eagerly embraced that behaviour. Those people were directors, playwrights and actors who believed in communism. Now, following the political changes, they were being appointed in top positions in theatres and in the cultural administration because they had participated in workers' theatres or similar theatres before the war. Boyan Danovski, Stefan Sarchadzhiev, Phillip Phillipov clearly exemplified that trend. The end of the Second World War marked either the peak of professional development or at least the successful start of a career in theatre for almost all prominent representatives of the first generation of theatre directors in Bulgaria, who had been profoundly influential in shaping the previous period (1918–1945), which proved to be the most eminent for Bulgarian theatre until then. Those were the directors of the National Theatre: Nikolay Masalitinov (who was 63 in 1944), Hrisan Tsankov (54), Boyan Danovski (45), Alexander Fall (45), Alexander Ikonografov (47), Stefan Sarchadzhiev (32) and Kristyo Mirski (29)[6], and a couple more directors such as Yordan Cherkezov (who was 43 at the time), who primarily worked in theatres outside the capital city. After the government reshuffle in early September 1944, quick steps were taken to ensure the establishment of an ideologically reliable cohort of directors, resulting in the immediate change of management at the National Theatre, as writer Vladimir Polyanov, the National Theatre director, was forced to resign at the end of September 1944, with all directors of the main political, economic and cultural institutions[7] following suit. Polyanov's position was entrusted to Trifon Kunev, a member of the Agricultural Party. As soon as he took office on 11 Oct 1944,

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[6] Having graduated in theatre directing in Cologne, Krystyo Mirski made his debut with the National Theatre troupe during its evacuation to Pirdop on April 22, 1944 with the production of Racho Stoyanov's 'Masters' (Maistori).

[7] Nikolova, Rumyana. Za istoriyata na teatara ot perioda na NRB: predvaritelni hipotezi i vazmozhni diskursi. – Godishnik na NATFIZ' 2012, pp.76-83, p.77.

he appointed several new directors full time: Stefan Sarchadzhiev, who had already performed as a guest director at the National Theatre; Kristyo Mirski, who had debuted at the National Theatre with Kunev's troupe a few months earlier; and Phillip Phillipov. A little later, at the beginning of 1947, Boyan Danovski was appointed too and he took over the position of chief director.

Those directors were all entrusted with the mission to establish the new socialist theatre and they fully committed to their task. In fact, they had already been ideologically prepped up for it as early as the 1930s, well before the end of the war. The primary architect was Boyan Danovski, who met Georgi Dimitrov in Berlin in 1932, and they discussed[8] the idea of Boyan Danovksi's setting up an amateur workers' theatre in Bulgaria, similar to the amateur workers' agitprop troupes and theatres, such as Karlheinz Martin's Tribune Theatre and Erwin Piscator's theatre, whose work Danovski got to know in Germany. Back in Sofia, Boyan Danovski established two amateur workers' theatres: Tribune and Narodna Scena (People's Stage). They were quickly shut down though, and in 1933 Danovski again left for Germany to move to Moscow in 1934, where, as he stated, he learned Stanislavski's system[9], but what actually happened was that he was introduced to socialist realism, which was being deliberately imposed in theatres in its most ideologically rigid version in the Soviet Union at the time. Returning to Sofia, the director founded his Theatre Studio (1936–1937) to train actors in aesthetics he attempted to create as a synthesis of Stanislawski's realistic and psychological theatre and Brecht's political theatre. Stefan Sarchadzhiev and Phillip Phillipov happened to be his students and disciples as a result of their training at his Theatre Studio. Irrespective of any individual aesthetic differences emerging among all those directors in the following years, they remained the first key representatives of the behaviour of true commitment to the establishment and imposition of the official canon of socialist realism in Bulgarian theatres.

In contrast, many people who had already worked in the theatre considered it unacceptable to commit to either the imposed mandatory canon of socialist realism or to silently partake in its development. They had to resort to other types of behaviours, such as trickery and escape. Yet, most of them did not have any choice. They were denounced as unreliable enemies of

[8] Danovski, Boyan. Krastopatishta. Sofiya: Izdatelstvo „Nauka i izkustvo", 1988, pp.100–101.

[9] Danovski, Boyan. Predgovor. – V: Stanislavski, K. S. Moyat zhivot v izkustvoto. Sofiya, 1976.

the new communist society and they were effectively silenced. They would either go missing in political repressions, or forcibly removed from theatres or they would be further marginalized by a transfer to a 'safe' place (such as the operetta). The dramatic turning point in Hrisan Tsankov's artistic career clearly exemplified such a 'safe' transfer. The change of political regime triggered an immediate full ban on this prominent director's work[10] at the National Theatre (Nikolay Masalitinov was another director sanctioned). In fact, Bulgarian theatre artists who had worked between the two world wars were all wearing the brunt of political repercussions. Hrisan Tsankov, who had been chief director at the National Theatre as of 15 January 1943, was fired and banned to work in theatre. Later, that ban was partially lifted so he could work in the periphery and, most importantly, further away from the core (that is, the National Theatre) that influenced socialist theatre aesthetics. Thus, Hrisan Tsankov, who happened to be the primary and most influential representative of Bulgarian theatre's conventional expressive aesthetics in the interwar period, was practically banned to contribute to theatre life of the communist state. In the next twelve years, until he retired in 1957, he could only work in the operetta. Yet, this imposed marginalization had a silver lining as it allowed Hrisan Tsankov to maintain a behaviour of internal escape from the system.

Attempts at deceiving the system, reaching compromises and mimicry in those years were just too obvious and easy to recognize. What happened to the other leading director from the previous period, Nikolay Masalitinov, the Russian émigré of 1917, is indicative. Masalitinov tried to fit into the new environment by staging Russian classics and some Soviet plays, but the new authorities still remained suspicious and ambivalent towards him. As for escape, it was rather literal in that period since quite a few theatre professionals left the country, with others quitting theatre for good.

To understand theatre development in communist times, especially the transformations in those three types of behaviour that theatre professionals exhibited, it is crucial to draw comparisons with what was happening in the other Eastern Bloc countries. That's why it is particularly valuable to analyse the next time period between 1956 and 1968, which remained in history as the period of thaw that started after Stalin's death and the Hungarian Upris-

[10] More detail: Nikolova, Kamelia. Obrati I dilemi na rejisyorskiya teatar v Balgariya prez parvoto desetiletie sled Vtorata svetovna vojna. – Problemi na izkustvoto, 2016/ 1, pp. 3–12.;

ing, and as the period when socialist realism expanded its boundaries, with the mandatory ideological message kept intact.

The new politics feigned regime liberalization among false calls for freedom and diversity in art while introducing new hidden mechanisms for political stagnation and control of the individual. This was the time when authorities initiated and launched projects to diversify and expand the uniform and rigid theatre landscape. The Establishment would single out young people with lots of potential, mainly directors, and would provide them the opportunity to work in 'their own theatre', experimenting with theatre language and 'constructively critiquing' society. Such projects were launched in all Eastern Bloc countries.

It would be particularly worth drawing parallels between 26-year-old Jerzy Grotowski's debut in the Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole in Poland in 1959 and the establishment of his Laboratory as a manifestation of this central directive, common to the entire Eastern Bloc, and its Bulgarian version with four directors: Leon Daniel, Vili Tsankov, Yulia Ognyanova and Metodi Andonov, taking over Burgas Theatre (autumn 1957–1960). This parallel is highly productive for a separate comprehensive analysis that I have completed in another research paper. In this case, I will only comment on the differences in the type of behaviours those directors exhibited. Having been granted this unexpected opportunity for creative freedom, Grotowski chose the behaviour of internally escaping the regime. This type of behaviour was feasible in that environment. He began his experiments with theatre language, with actors' bodies, and with his interaction with the audience in the mystic theatre he was hoping to create. That was his own solitary quest as he kept ignoring the official political and aesthetic context in his country. That choice of behaviour allowed him to become one of the most recognised symbols of European theatre neo-avant-garde, along with, of course, his extraordinary originality as an artist and the chance to gain international fame with Barba's 1965 book about him and the subsequent invitation to present *The Constant Prince* at The Theatre of Nations in Paris in 1966. Tadeusz Kantor, another prominent Polish theatre reformer, chose similar behaviour of possibly escaping the regime. The Burgas Four went for another choice of behaviour. They were all directors with leftist loyalties so they sincerely and authentically started to build, enhance and 'constructively' criticize from within the official canon[11].

[11] More detail: Topaldzhikova, Anna. Op. cit., pp. 163–178.

This resulted in the authorities stepping in and dispersing the group. Their resulting change of behaviour is worth noting – once they saw through the dual nature of the policy of controlled freedom, they opted for the behaviour of trickery, turning to allegorical directorial interpretation of mostly classical texts, so that they could indirectly raise and discuss relevant political and social issues.

The transformation of those three types of behaviour in the last two decades of the communist period, the 1970s and 1980s, was symptomatic. We would not be exaggerating if we argued that the transformation was one eloquent symptom that foresaw the end of communism. Those were the times of relative stability, but also of stagnation and routine in Bulgarian theatres. All became skilled, to a different degree, in handling the aesthetics of 'socialist realism without borders'. The main strategies of contribution to theatre life were the conformist participation in its maintenance or the use of trickery by employing allegorical language in the plays[12] and on stage[13] to talk about problems of society and the political system. The arrival of the youngest generation of directors such as Ivan Stanev, Vazkresia Vikharova, Stefan (Tedi) Moskov put an end[14] to all this in the mid- and late- 1980s. From the very start those directors opted for the behaviour of internal escape from the system into the world of theatre laboratory and experiments with theatre language.

Last but not least, the awareness of all this duality, covertness and caution in the personal and professional behaviour of people making theatre in communist times explains to a large extent some of its current problems, such as the refusal to directly raise relevant political and social issues or the shyness and ineptitude in the interpretation of fundamental issues of humanity and human existence today – just to mention two of them.

Translated by Kristana Ivanova

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12 More detail: Doytcheva, Veneta. Novi piesi v nova situatsia. – Homo Ludens, 2011/ № 15.

13 More detail: Iordanov, Nikolay. Sotsialisticheskiat realizam i balgarskoto dramaturgichno nasledstvo. – Homo Ludens, 2018/ № 21.

14 More detail: Nikolova, Kamelia. Alternativniat teatar ot sredata na 80-te: malchaliva aktsia v tialoto na normativnia kanon. V: Sotsrealisticheski kanon/Alternativen kanon. Sofiya, 2009.

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