COMMUNIST-ERA THEATRE AS A 'FOREIGN' COUNTRY

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In order to explore some methodological strategies applied in writing about the history of communist-era theatre, I would like first to use the metaphor in the title of David Lowenthal's book *The Past is a Foreign Country*.[1] The keen traveler's approach may be compared to that of a responsible researcher exploring theatre in a certain time frame. Learning about a foreign country will get us to official sources of information and what they promote as the country's most exciting destinations. Yet, in reality, itineraries, events, and places off the beaten track prove most fascinating; multiple personal travel writing stories that share different vantage points and details or present a fundamentally different approach – some storytellers may be simply awe-struck with the country and/or they may feel nostalgic about it, others may be critical of it and they would not recommend visiting, etc.

The rich and fully detailed description of a foreign country should present all viewpoints as comprehensively as possible. Applied to the history of communist-era theatre, this metaphor outlines a similar picture. The ideologues and strategists of the communist state left for posterity (a) narrative/s that used the communist paradigm to present processes, events, and individuals; they singled out those works of art that most complied with the canon of socialist realism, imposed as the only permissible method of creating art.

But the most exciting facts about theatre are the ones that establish deviations from and cracks in normative aesthetics.

We may continue to draw parallels between the process of learning about a 'foreign' country and studying theatre in a particular period in the way we come across different personal testimonies, or even completely opposite interpretations of same events, etc.

We all agree on the importance of knowing the past. There are already quite a few testimonies about the period between 1945 and 1989, including those about the arts and particularly the theatre. They mostly focus on a certain detail or vantage point, and they often contradict each other either in terms of written records and/or personal narratives. As a result, the history of

[1] Lowenthal, David. Minaloto e chujda strana. Sofiya, 2002.

communist-era theatre is still incomplete. There is no consensus even on how to refer to that period – communism, socialism, totalitarian socialism, the period of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, etc.

Why do we find it so challenging to deal with our theatre's recent past?! What threats/ordeals are there in store for us when we try to reassess the legacy of theatre from the communist period?! What methodological and ideological questions are raised when we explore and write the history of that 'foreign country', that is, communist-era theatre?!

The questions that I find compelling are probably the same questions that fascinate most people who think of the subject. These questions emerge in a hypothetical situation that requires us to be responsible to future generations and to patch up a comprehensive account rather than tell the history of communist-era theatre from a specific point of view.

This is one of the fundamental questions: How do we choose which works of art constituted the history of theatre of that period? In a society completely dominated by communist ideology, with a totalitarian state exerting ubiquitous control, the theatre could exist mostly through works of art that served the authorities and illustrated the theatre canon of socialist realism with specific examples.

These are indeed facts, events and individuals that we may find in communist theatre criticism and theory. They were the subject of numerous academic papers and critical reviews and they were recipients of nominations and awards. That alone should make researchers proceed with caution whenever using sources from that period. Very often those sources contain reviews that should be read to mean just the opposite in order to sustain objectivity.

In most cases, researchers face a confusing conundrum as evidence is a potpourri of true and false facts and assessments. In case researchers commit to describing opportunistic theatre life in great detail, they may easily fall into the other pitfall of canonizing otherwise mediocre works of art as significant. Nevertheless, some of those works of art may still be described in order to illustrate policies or share narratives of processes and individuals.

Bulgarian theatre in that period existed within the range of works of art which aspired to comply with the canon (construed as a set of rules and norms) of socialist realism, and works of art which attempted to expand the boundaries of the cannon. In the Bulgarian context, there were none

that definitively opposed the canon. Yet, there were situations, phenomena and events throughout the period that brought something different to the theatre landscape. Very often they were a result of the establishment of informal groups of like-minded people around a theatre director. Often works of art would cause a stir only because the authorities' response and ensuing censorship validated them as dissident and rule defying, even though their authors never intended to deviate from the canon.

It is understandable why researchers focus on individuals and works that aspired and, to some degree succeeded in broadening the boundaries of what was permissible in the arts.

But if our narrative consists simply of the so-called 'cracks' or 'deviations' from the canon, we would present a rather unrealistic and largely idealized snapshot of the period. Singling out certain facts and events from the general picture of stagnation, restrictions and ubiquitous control, and comparing those with the first difficult years of transition after the fall of communism, triggers 'socialism nostalgia', which can be traced in many countries of the former Eastern Bloc.

Therefore, we may draw the conclusion that we should strike a balance when we present opportunistic works of art as relevant to the period's context and as indicative of the communist state and party policies on theatre and theatre events, personalities and processes that establish the narrative of theatre life deviating from the normative aesthetics.

If we agree that this is our fundamental approach in how we single out facts to compile the history of communist-era theatre, then we will stumble on many exciting details that historians may find befuddling. Referring to these details, we may raise questions such as:

Were there any works of art intended to comply with socialist realism requirements that would still deserve attention in terms of artistic quality?! Were there any performances based on plays entirely within the canon that were still exciting, innovative and provocative for the period in terms of theatre language?! Were there any acting or visual achievements in those performances?! If so, what acid test do we run to shortlist them? Obviously, we could not use any reviews from that period…

The test of time could be a criterion applied only to the text of the play. But it is not completely reliable, since there are many examples of plays

that nowadays are no longer staged, yet they had their role in the development of dramaturgical and stage practice within that period. Such examples were the plays written in the wake of 1957 or the so-called 'thaw' once the personality cult had been denounced, plays that established the concept of 'poetic drama'.

Poets such as Ivan Peychev, Valeri Petrov, Stefan Tsanev, Ivan Radoev, etc. also started writing plays.

It was Ivan Peychev's *Every Autumn Evening* that set the new trend. The play was first staged at Ruse Theatre by Lyubomir Sharlandzhiev and later shown at the Second Review of Bulgarian Drama and Theatre in 1959[2]. The audience and especially theatre professionals were aware that they were witnessing something dramatically different, because for the first time a play focused on the human condition rather than the class struggle and the communist party line[3]. Dimitar Avramov recalled a similar feeling of excitement caused by the new trend when Valeri Petrov's play *When Roses Dance* was first staged in 1962 at Haskovo Theatre[4]. Many writers of fiction also started writing for the stage – Georgi Markov, Nikola Rusev, Yordan Radichkov, etc. Some texts were not staged at the time, but they played a role in diversifying theatre in that period and in shifting the focus away from strictly communist party topics and characters.

We may explore some very exciting and intriguing details in our attempt to answer the question: What makes the history of communist-era theatre more challenging in comparison to the other arts and other periods?! One of the answers is that it is theatre's nature to comprise multiple components. This fundamental feature allows one and the same work of art to exist in two simultaneous narratives: the approved and the banned; or the canon and its alternative.

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2 See: Popiliev, Romeo. Saprotiva na dramata v dramata za saprotivata. Sofiya, 2013.

3 According to the memories of Antoaneta Voynikova: „There was a lot of sadness in the play, the poets turned Bulgarian drama to human feelings. For the first time, what was sought was not the communist party or the working class, but the human. Nothing like this had ever appeared in our theater ". In: Topaldzhikova, Anna. Razrivi i novi posoki. Balgarskiyat teatar ot sredata na 50-te do kraya na 60-te. Sofiya, 2009, p. 142.

4 Avramov, Dimitar. Dialog mejdu dve izkustva. Sofiya, 1993, p. 371.

For example, a text that was granted approval, yet the performance on it resorted to theatre language and means of expression not complying with the approved norms of socialist realism.

Hamlet, directed by Leon Daniel and staged at Narodna Scena Theatre (Bulgarian Army Theatre now) is a frequently used example. The production has been defined as 'one of the major events in the history of Bulgarian theatre between 1944 and 1989'[5], but there had been just several performances before it was banned, with its director losing his job.

There is also a challenge in the premise that the ideal for the socialist realism work of art is utopian[6]. Because of its ambiguous and protean nature, this ideal is unattainable by even the most compliant and subservient artists. That is one reason why certain works or authors joined the list of 'deviations' from the canon or 'cracks' in normativity not due to artistic qualities or conflicting ideological messages, but because of the way the authorities responded to them. Authors who had long been tolerated by the authorities could be suddenly sanctioned in that period.

One example is Todor Genov's play *Fear*. At the end of 1957, this text, along with some others, (the long short stories: Emil Manov's *Unreliable Case* and Lyuben Stanev's *The Laskovs*) found their public critics and decriers. People involved in their promotion were also punished. Gocho Gochev, editor-in-chief of Theatre Magazine, and Mikhail Velichkov were the theatre professionals disciplined, the former for publishing the play *Fear*, the latter for writing a review about it. Todor Genov was a die-hard communist.

A contemporary reading of the text would not doubt its compliance with communist ideology. Censorship at the time, however, found inconsistencies with the required normativity. In a report to the writers' party organization, Andrey Gulyashki went to great lengths to explain the reasons for the verdict: the play digressed from party literature principles, it literally refuted party leadership, it parodied state nomenclature and communist cadres, it focused primarily on the vices of a former guerrilla fighter, creating a "murderer,

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5 Nikolova, Kamelia. Rezhisiorat mezhdu limitiranata svoboda i totalniya kontrol. – Homo Ludens, 2005 /18, p. 233.

6 For the changing policies towards the dramaturgical heritage from the perspective of socialist realism, see: Iordanov, Nikolay. Sotsialisticheskiyat realizam i balgarskoto dramaturgichno nasledstvo. – Homo Ludens, 2018/ № 21, 202–215.

womanizer, scoundrel, someone completely incompetent, bad father, money grabber, swindler, sycophant"[7], etc.

Another example how individuals and works of art moved between the approval and the ban or between the canon and its alternatives is Orlin Vassilev's play *The Buried Sun*, staged by Leon Daniel at Burgas Theatre in 1959. Until then this author's texts (*Love, Happiness*) had had a number of productions. But with his play *The Buried Sun*, the playwright came under fire. Party critics disproved the lack of any mandatory embellishment of reality, even though this requirement had been allegedly abandoned after the 1956 April Party Congress. The depiction of communists was frowned upon as those characters were seen as materialistic and selfish. The play was criticised for its false interpretation of reality, for the lack of optimism and faith in the communist future, leading to lack of prospects – a major accusation against many works of art, because the bright communist future was supposedly the upbeat vantage point of socialist art.

Artists and their works had to constantly strike a balance between the permitted and the forbidden. The most indicative example is Georgi Markov's writing career. The author was 'spotted' by the authorities following the success of his 1962 novel *Men*. Todor Zhivkov had a policy of wooing artists, but also controlling them using 'timely' sanctions, and Georgi Markov was not spared either. His novel *The Roof* was turned down for publication in 1964 and its first edition was issued only in 2012. Georgi Markov's plays were staged though.

His first play *The Cheese Merchant's Wife* (1963) was directed by Yulia Ognyanova in Trudov Front Theatre. Next Markov wrote his comedies *The Last Patent* (1965) and *Pretentious Coffee* (1966). His next text for the theatre *Squeezing in under the Rainbow* (1965) had two stage productions in 1966: in Tolbukhin (Dobrich) Theatre, directed by Nikolay Polyakov, and in Plovdiv Drama Theatre, directed by Krikor Azarian[8]. It was Asen Shopov's production at the People's Army Theatre in 1967 that caused one of the scandals in theatre in that period. As a result, the director, along with actor Naum Shopov and his wife, were transferred to Burgas Theater. In 1968, once Georgi Markov personally pleaded their case with Todor Zhivkov, and the latter gave instructions so that they were allowed to return to Sofia.

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7 Central state archive, f. 357-B, r.1, a.u. 67, p. 6–7.

8 For these performances, see: Voynikova. Antoaneta. Sedmiyat tsvyat na spektara. – Teatar, 1967/ №2, 43–44.

One of Georgi Markov's most performed plays was *Assassination in a Cul-de-sac*. In *In Absentia Reports About Bulgaria*, Georgi Markov tells the story how he himself turned down the presentation of Nikolay Polyakov's production in Sofia, (which he had created at Sliven Theatre), lying to the authorities that he did not like the performance. Markov did that because he wanted to spare the performance any backlash, which he believed was part of a well-planned scenario[9].

Georgi Markov's account is indicative of the ambiguous situations in which artists often found themselves, and of the complexity of the period. But it is also a reminder that we may fall prey to misinterpreting events if we simply trust facts that are so easily available.

To mark the 25th-year anniversary of the communist coup d'état on 9 September 1944, the Art and Culture Committee commissioned Georgi Markov to write a play about the Bulgarian Communist Party's anti-fascist struggle. As the play was meant to be based on written records, the author was provided access to the Ministry of the Interior Archives. According to Georgi Markov's testimony, he literally copied texts for the main part of the play, which made it a 'strictly documentary play'.

The text first needed the approval of Angel Solakov, Minister of the Interior, then another check followed to established the accuracy of the cited material. The play was directed by Asen Shopov at *Salza i Smiah* Theatre.

There was a closed-door performance a few days before 9 September 1969, and then the production was suspended by Venelin Kotsev, Ideology Secretary of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party. Ivan Kondov, the theatre admin director, was fired. Georgi Markov describes the reasons why the authorities censored the play: 'The play was suspended and banned by those who had commissioned it. I was told the reason for the ban was "its depressing impact". The naked truth of documents was abandoned for a tacky and commercialized ceremony. Maybe the comrades were not commemorating fallen communists but instead they were paying tribute to themselves. Thus, the 25th-year anniversary of 9 September was left without a remembrance play.'[10]

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9 Markov, Georgi. Zadochni reportaji ot Balgariya. Sofiya, 1990, p. 316.

10 Ibidem, 53–54.

While writing *Communists*, Georgi Markov was also working on the play *I was him*, a comedy satirizing nepotism and favoritism in socialism. Its general rehearsal was on 15 June 1969 at the Theatre of Satire, followed by recommendations to redraft the play. That evening, Georgi Markov defected to the West.

It is important to clarify that these examples occurred at a time when the authorities were sending unfair messages to society that they had come to terms with the mistakes made on the way to building a new social order and people were allowed to point out those mistakes. Some artists believed that it was time for more open discussions and for expanding the boundaries of creative freedom. None of them attempted to question communist ideology, but die-hard communists responded in a way that would place them in a one-of-a-kind opposition, often intra-party opposition.

This paper intended to take on the formidable task of raising some methodological and ideological questions that are inevitable in any attempt to historicize communist-era theatre. I believe that a meaningful, though incomplete, presentation of theatre of that period should answer most of them. The abrupt changes of models in all aspects of life and its subjugation to one ideology emphasize the importance of understanding the context of the communist period regardless of what narrower topic is being researched. Because of the omnipresent government and communist party interference in art, it is essential to study and present the cultural policies on theatre; the role and mechanisms of the censorship machine and of the secret police. Another important research perspective is to explore and study theatre of that period within the context of European theatre processes and within the context of the Eastern Bloc.

A comprehensive account of that period would further add smaller narratives about individual texts, performances, artists... and their occasional complex manoeuvre between imposed canonical frameworks and attempts to expand them.

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