HOW IS IT POSSIBLE TO WRITE THE HISTORY OF SOCIALIST-ERA BULGARIAN THEATRE?

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The general framework of historical research of a certain period calls for answers to questions about boundaries in several directions: the chronological beginning and end; the limiting guidelines for the subjects of research, and last but not least – the differentiation of the researched phenomenon from all its inauthentic manifestations. If we raise these questions in reference to Bulgarian socialist-era theatre, they take on specific dimensions: 1. when did the so-called socialist era start and end; 2. which aspects of theatre practice will be studied; 3. how was theatre defined.

History, political science, sociology, economics, cultural studies explore the issue of dating a historical period or an era. Theatre history would greatly benefit from such an academic approach. There is theatre research that tackles the issue of chronological boundaries in specific research tasks. Researchers, to varying degrees, employ an interdisciplinary approach to establish periodizations (it is possible to observe discrepancies in their definitions), drawing on social and political dynamics and evaluating the significance of events in the past, yet also updating some internal 'thresholds' related to facts of reassessed importance[1].

What should be studied within theatre practice is a question that mostly relates to processes of artistic practice. Several core topics need to be researched in detail. Though it is hardly possible to develop an absolute

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[1] Iordanov, Nikolay. Varhu periodizatsiite na istoriyata na balgarskia teatar. In: Izkustvovedski chetenia. Sofiya: Institut za izsledvane na izkustvata, 2010.; Nikolova, Kamelia. Obrati i dilemi na rezhisyorskia teatar v Balgaria prez parvoto desetiletie sled Vtorata svetovna voyna. – Problemi na izkustvoto, 2016/№1, pp. 3-12.; Nikolova, Kamelia. Teatarat v Bulgaria: periodizatsia i aktsenti. – Problemi na izkustvoto, 2020/№3, pp. 12-19. Nikolova, Rumyana. Model na funktsionirane na balgarskia teatar v perioda 1944 – 1989 godina. Sofiya, 2020, pp. 8-13.; Spasova-Dikova, Yoana. Melpomena zad zhelyaznata zavesa. Chast I. Naroden teatar: kanoni i saprotivi. Sofiya, 2015, pp. 11-16.; Topaldzhikova, Anna. Razrivi i novi posoki. Balgarskiyat teatar ot sredata na 50-te do kraya na 60-te. Sofiya, 2009, pp. 9-29.

hierarchical structure, we may still claim that Bulgarian playwriting of that period is a topic of utmost importance along with acting and directing, set design, and music, in short – the entire range of theatre performance elements. This implies writing the histories of various theatre professions. The next step is to historicize theatre performance.

What was thought of, defined and perceived as theatre might be the most challenging question to phrase and answer, given the period's tension between permissibility and authorship freedom. This implies writing a history of the official theatre doctrine and that of alternative facts.

But above all, the pivotal question is: why is writing the history of socialist theatre considered different from writing the histories of the other arts of the same period? The challenge is at the heart of theatre art – the theatre is a phenomenon of the fleeting moment. This ephemeral nature which has been discussed multiple times is the fundamental challenge to theatre history of any period.

The specific challenge to defining the socialist era is a result of the general framework of artistic practice being under absolute state control. The state was omnipresent in all segments of theatre practice and that interference was direct, brutal and imperative. The state – theatre relationship was one of dictate, control and sanction. State coercion resulted in the creation of theatre that may have existed only within the permissible boundaries of ideological content[2]. This is exactly what researchers need to do: they need to describe the facts of the period's official agenda and determine their degree of significance then and now.

What is the scale of this exploration? One of the stable points of reference is the text, the plays. The plays being works of literature can be read even today. The socialist-era plays may be approached with all kinds of research tasks. The Bulgarian playwriting of that period may be interpreted through the extent it matched the centrally required ideological framework.

Writing a history of resistance is a priority. Many follow-up questions arise here. There are the so-called 'right plays'. But there are also plays whose topics formally complied with official requirements, yet they were undermined/refuted though the use of a range of artistic means.

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[2] Popiliev, Romeo. Tsenzurata po vremeto na komunizma ili rezhimat na zabranyavane – pozvolyavane. Sofiya, 2018.

There were possible authorial interpretations that displaced, fractured or imploded the essence of the doctrine expressed in the official method of the so-called socialist realism.

Contemporary research carefully explores this complex optics of playwriting, which was forced into inventing ways to go beyond the permissible content and values. The issue of the imposed topic of the so-called 'resistance' is particularly complicated. The 'resistance' plays dealt with the fight against fascism, the heroes and victims of the political struggle between communists and the state before 9 September 1944. Staging such plays was initiated and encouraged by the socialist state as all theatres had to have such plays in their repertoire. A research definition of those plays is: 'texts of direct resistance', offered as an antithesis to: 'texts of reverse resistance'[3]. Wherever those expressions of contestation, criticism, or alternative highlights were an integral part of purely artistic literary devices, they are still available for interpretation today. This makes historical research of socialist-era dramaturgy possible in principle and objectively justified. The history of the Bulgarian socialist-era theatre is possible both as a narrative about the routine regulated occurrence and as a narrative about discord. These two storylines intertwine and the facts from the plots of the routine and the extraordinary take place at the same time.

But often ideological discord in the theatre was achieved not through the messages in the plays but rather through the expressiveness of stage interpretation. Such an example is Georgi Karaslavov's play *Mother of All*, which is a literal version of the party doctrine. (A mother who is a guerrilla supporter betrays guerrillas to save her husband captured by the police. She bakes poisoned bread and takes it to the guerrillas. Her husband is released, but he shoots her to death for her betrayal and then says to their son: 'You have just one mother – the Party.') Rashko Mladenov, a very young actor back then, played the son's role in the production of the State Theatre in Ruse, and he shared his recollections of events: 'Slavi (Shkarov) managed to transform this terrifying play into a formidable performance. It turned out that the audience who had come to watch a heroic spectacle, an apotheosis of communism and party loyalty, in fact saw what a terrifying story Karaslavov had written. It was a travesty poking fun at art, theatre, and people. But Slavi had managed to inspire the actors with his

[3] Ibidem, p. 83 and p. 109.

decision. The great actress Elena Stefanova played the mother, and Yanko Chernev played the father. Both played magnificently, like possessed. I even remember causing trouble when I dared to say: how can such a play be staged? And I will never forget Yanko Chernev's answer: 'Remember everything is subject to art. Whether it is Karaslavov or Shakespeare, you play with all your might.''[4]

This story involves director Slavi Shkarov, but there is a huge number of such stories. What I would like to point out is that the theatre fact (one particular play and its stage interpretation) is indicative of inobtrusive fundamental issues that need to be further explored. Along with the play analysis, historical research should further focus on analysing the other segments of the theatre fact (directing, acting, visual solutions, music choices). Historians, as a rule, look for records of the facts they study. For the theatre, those records should be the reviews appearing right after the performance.

As a rule, any historical research looks for records of the facts it studies. For the theatre, those records should be the reviews written right after the performance. Professional reviews are the essential testimony of artistic life in any age. But when art critics are both censors and executioners, their testimony is no longer a reliable source. Deconstructing reviews by literally reversing statements is counterproductive and it does not work, since critical responses yield a range of feasible interpretations. Theatre reviews remain in time and they should be researched as an authentic testimony about and from that period.

There are no records left of: 1. what the participants in the theatrical process experienced; 2. what the audience experienced. Artists from all theatre professions may further share their thoughts, recollections, etc., or they may be interviewed. The last three decades have put a heavy toll on the number of living witnesses as they are getting fewer and fewer. As stated in the cited testimony, the essence of some performances could not be deciphered by merely reading plays and reviews or by counting awards from various theatre forums. What audiences experienced in socialism is also extremely elusive, almost impossible to recreate. There is evidence of compulsory visits to compulsory performances, along with evidence of spectators' genuine interest in various performances. There are stories circulating about people queueing

[4] Georgiev, Yordan. Geniyat i zanulenoto vreme. Teatralniyat pat na rezhisyora Slavi Shkarov. Plovdiv: Zhanet 45, 2019, p. 96.

to buy tickets that are certainly not exaggerated. For example, in the 1960s, when the regime was already stable and strong, theatre was one of the most powerful tools of influence, with audiences constantly interested in it to the point that they would be overtly critical. 'In those times when television was still taking baby steps, there were no video clubs, discos, night clubs, there were no mega concerts, it was the theatre that was the entertainment most sought-after, it was an outlet, a social barometer. The queues for tickets in front of the Satirical Theatre were so long that they took a turn in Rakovsky Street, bypassing the queue for the so-called 'expensive fruits' (imported bananas, oranges, tangerines, especially before the New Year's Eve), then Stefan Karadzha Street and Rakovsky Street.'[5]

It is obvious that all this must be interpreted in a broader and more complex context (theatre as an outlet that gives vent to pent-up discourse, theatre as almost the only alternative for social interaction). We may well employ approaches from other humanities.

Context is crucial to understanding any specific theatre case study. This long period had its own stable features and there were many micro-periods within that framework. It might be more beneficial to write portraits of artists of all professions, and this emphasis will highlight both the unique and the general.

So far this has been a discussion of Bulgarian writers, texts and theatre professionals. But the socialist era also offered repertoire selections of international plays (classical and contemporary), there was this interaction with international theatre (tours, information), Bulgarian theatre also appeared on international stages. Once these interactions between the national theatre and the international practice are studied, there is a range of testimony emerging, with conflicting degrees of reliability. International theatres on tour in Bulgaria were mostly from countries in the so-called Eastern Bloc, primarily from the USSR. In the 1970s and 1980s, performances from Western Europe also toured the country, in some cases there were even plays written by the most significant figures of European and world theatre. It is impossible to measure the individual impact on both artists and audiences resulting from their interaction with that diverse theatre experience.

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5 Topaldzhikova, A. Op.cit., p. 71.

An important part of theatre history is its own myth making. It is hardly possible to subject actors' achievements to an objective, scientifically proven analysis. But every age propels its stars to relish their achievements. The question is how to measure socialist-era actors' unique, personal contribution to dull plays made tolerable through superb acting, or contribution to plays whose ideological messages actors rendered more sophisticated and finely nuanced.

There are studies that have analysed the acting profession within the paradigm of socialist theatre[6]. The landscape is much broader than the practice shared in just one theatre (the National Theatre). Moreover, there were a number of acting achievements in alternative aesthetics that took place in fringe theatre, made often by artists who were deliberately disparaged, belittled and ignored by the official doctrine.

The historical study of socialist theatre should not ignore any evidence of myth-making.

When Leon Daniel staged *Hamlet* in 1965[7], the performance was almost immediately suspended and it gained a legendary status. Many elements of the props, costumes, colours were construed as coded messages, with the audience willingly getting involved into a process of reading through decoding. Rumour has it that there was a communist star carved into the king's throne among other embellishments. Mladen Mladenov, the performance scenographer, recalled his memories: 'After the premiere, there were reviews that made you think there were people hallucinating in the house. For example, even experienced theatre professionals such as Vasil Stefanov claimed that the king had worn a 'red cap'. Others saw a red star on the king's throne. Good they didn't see the American flag.'[8] The audience expanded director Leon Daniel's range of strong political highlights, thus creating its own images. Which was more significant in this particular

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6 Spasova-Dikova, Y. Op.cit.

7 Vandov, Nikola. Teatar „Balgarska armia". Letopis. Dekemvri 1950 – avgust 2020, 2020, p. 12. („After the theatrical reform in the autumn of 1964, the name (of the theatre, n. a.) was The People's Stage Theatre. It unites the Armed Forces Theatre, the Labour Front Theatre and the Pernik People's Theatre.")

8 Mladenov, Mladen. Tsenzurata, Leon Daniel i „Hamlet". – Homo Ludens, 2022/№ 25, p. 209.

case? Discovering the truth about facts or discovering the truth about experiencing those facts?

The non-existent communist star was part of that performance's life, part of the audience's life. Though it is a challenge to reconstruct such a performance, it is even more compelling to do so as a research task because of the impact factor generated by such influential theatre facts.

For example, one of the leading directors of the next generation of theatre professionals, Ivan Dobchev, who often highlighted Leon Daniel's huge influence on him, says: 'I can recall his 1965 *Hamlet*, with that desolate road that seemed to go from the infinite to the open grave on the proscenium. I remember Hamlet's black polo shirt and the four 'knights' who carried him as dead onto the stage on a stretcher, and Claudius' red robes, with the cap reminiscent of Stalin and Todor Zhivkov. I can recall the 'rumour' spread by 'those who always appear at the end', about the red star discreetly carved into the throne; I can recall the fear and anxiety once *Hamlet* was banned. That had been preceded by the even more scandalous condemnation of Leon Daniel's directing of Ivan Teophilov's play *The Poet and the Mountain*, which had also been suspended, with Leon Daniel fired and sent into exile away from Sofia.'[9]

A diverse range of forums (such as festivals, theatre reviews, theatre days and theatre weeks), organized and controlled by the state, played a huge role in the overcentralized theatre system. Though they had different topics, and they were hosted in various time intervals, they all were a form of mandatory institutionalized control on theatre life. The Review of Bulgarian Drama and Theatre, which was held every five years from the end of the 1950s until 1989 (to honour yet another anniversary of 9 September 1944) was particularly significant. All professional theatres took part in that forum, and they had to stage new Bulgarian plays and compete for awards before juries in several regions. Winners had the opportunity to perform in Sofia and compete for national awards in all theatre professions. All performances were discussed, with theatre critics particularly active, and the obligatory party line was imposed through the system of awards or ostracism. Artists were under enormous pressure, they were forced to stage politically 'correct' plays, and they had to suffer the consequences

[9] Dobchev, Ivan. Avtoportret v ogledaloto na stsenata. Plovdiv: Zhanet 45, 2022, p. 138.

of their artistic performances whenever the authorities labelled them as dangerous, subversive or reactionary (it is worth researching the vocabulary of those labels). The personal drama of writers, actors, directors and artists who succumbed to official pressure is another huge field of research that needs to be explored.

Socialist theatre could only be studied with an interdisciplinary approach. Theatre researchers may well benefit from the accomplishments and concepts provided by tools of sciences such as history of society, history of aesthetic movements, sociology of art, reception theory. In terms of reception, only combining different types of testimonies can offer material for a more complete picture. Official documents, reviews, individual professional records of theatre professionals' recollections and personal observations of theatregoers could construct conclusions of an objective nature.

The history of socialist theatre cannot be rendered outside the history of society in that period.

But theatre is a territory of energy exchange taking place only 'within the moment' of the performance. Bringing history to life is usually achieved not with the resources of science, but through art. When we read Mikhail Bulgakov and his *Theatrical Novel* and his play *The Collusion of Hypocrites* (better known as *Moliere*), we are not only reading fiction, but we are getting immersed into that age. In the history of Bulgarian socialist-era theatre, playwright Valeri Petrov wrote the play *Theatre, My Love* as a love letter to theatre and actors. Perhaps the authentic experience of the past is also detectable in the spirit of such examples of meta-theatricality – these examples belong to history, yet they say the most important things about history.

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