THE SOCIALIST REALISM CANON IN BULGARIAN PLAYWRITING: THESES ON ITS DEVELOPMENT BETWEEN 1944 AND 1957

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In his extensive series of recollections, Kamen Zidarov nonchalantly retells a conversation Nikolai Liliev had with an actress in the early 1950s. Liliev was the National Theatre literary adviser and the well-established actress insisted on a farewell performance hosted for her. She was adamant in playing a queen, arguing that her audience had once seen her for the first time on stage in that role and now it was only befitting that her audience bade her farewell as a queen. 'What audience are you talking about?' Liliev allegedly asked the actress.

> "Mine! I have my audience, and if you provide me with the tickets, it will take me just a day to sell them to bank directors, generals, high-ranking officers, diplomats, they have all been worshipping me since my very first performance."
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> 'But, Madam, the audience you are talking about is long gone... these people are all being reformed in labour camps..." [1]

Kamen Zidarov shared the story without the slightest hint of self-censorship. Moreover, it seemed perfectly normal for him that the old theatre audiences had been sent to labour camps in the 1950s. Sometimes the memoirs of leading figures in the literature and theatre of the People's Republic of Bulgaria speak volumes about the crimes of the communist regime as if those had been completely natural instances in the past paving the way for the so-called historical necessity: *Your audience is gone. It is in the camps.*

Whether the audience was literally in the labour camps or it could have been there is irrelevant to the receptive situation in the early People's Republic. The important thing was that the audience had changed. Even if it still comprised some of those bank directors, generals, high-ranking officers, diplomats, those 'has-beens' – along with the crowds of workers, peasants, progressive intellectuals and other working-class people – it already represented a different

[1] Zidarov, Kamen. Zvezdi ot goliamata pleyada. Sofiya, 1973, pp. 87–88.

audience, reformatted by a new socialist realist drama or by selected classical plays interpreted in the stage language of socialist realism.

The regime propaganda and cultural policy in the People's Republic of Bulgaria in the late 1940s and early 1950s created its own audience with new theatre repertoire reflecting the new horizon of reception. Through their characters, the newly coined Bulgarian plays yielded a new nation on stage, which was observed by a nation in a state of transformation, with some significant part of it able to recognize itself in the characters acting on stage as in society.

Theatre roles were developed as one-dimensional, either *positive or negative*, to function as certain types of social roles, so that each member of the audience could think about their own origin and purpose and see what kind of person they wanted to be – a *positive or negative* character in the new world of the People's Republic of Bulgaria.

The opening thesis of this text states the obvious: in the first decade of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, the socialist realism canon created its *new socialist realism audience*; that audience became the firm foundation for the reception of subsequent works of socialist realism.

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Could we (re)construct the socialist realist canon of dramaturgy in the People's Republic of Bulgaria after 1944? Which plays would it comprise? Which exemplary texts written for the stage according to socialist realism principles would make that list?

The 9 September 1944 coup gradually gave rise to historical long-lasting repercussions, and it appeared to have removed from the theatre context any plays suitable to stage. That void urgently needed to be filled, primarily with texts that were able to match the fundamentally different local and international social and political situation.

In the 'transition' period between 1944 and 1947, the new Bulgarian plays staged at the National Theatre included titles such as Krum Kyulyavkov's *The Struggle Goes On* (which premiered on 5 April 1945), Asen Raztsvetnikov's *The Ultimate Act of Heroism* (it premiered on 16 September 1945), Magda Petkanova's *Tsaritsa [Queen] Teodora* (it premiered on 18 December 1945), Andrey Guliashky's *Swamp* (it premiered on 8 March 1947), Krum Kyulyavkov's

The Borsanovs (it premiered on 6 October 1947)[2]. As early as the first month following 9 September 1944, those plays established the privileged guidelines of ideological topics that domineered the new 'socialist drama': the so-called anti-fascist resistance; the struggle for national liberation; the nationalistic patriotic ideas borrowed from the Middle Ages; the class war with the so-called 'has-beens' and with people who opposed the new regime.

About 20 plays, that is, over 50 per cent of all theatre productions on the central national stage consisted of Soviet or Russian classical plays. In other theatres, several new Bulgarian plays were staged for the first time: Kamen Kalchev's *Freedom Fighters*, Alexander Girginov's *Fires of Pernik*, not to even mention the swarm of propaganda plays and one-act plays staged on propaganda stages or at election campaigns. In that specific period between the Kingdom and the People's Republic, Krum Kyulyavkov emerged as the new influential playwright. He was instrumental in establishing the cultural policy of the Communist Party and he was head of the Propaganda Office (Agitprop) at the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Workers' Party (communists), whose play *The Struggle Goes On* launched 'the beginning of Bulgarian drama created by our progressive writers'[3]. His *Borsanovs* was hailed as 'the first Bulgarian comedy after 9 September 1944'[4]. Yet it is worth noting that none of the new Bulgarian texts staged between 1944 and 1947 ever entered even the short-term socialist realism canon, and there were no new productions of those plays later.

That was the approach imposed at the very onset of the People's Republic of Bulgaria in 1947–1948. The party line around the Fifth Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party unequivocally prescribed the intensive implementation of *Soviet practices* in all aspects of society, with the socialist realism method becoming mandatory for all artists. As a genre combining literature and theatre, playwriting suffered institutionalised pressure from the totalitarian authorities through the centralized state theatre network, which was specifically imposed on art.

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2 Naroden teatar "Ivan Vazov". Letopis. Januari 1904 – juli 2004. Avtorski kolektiv: Nikola Vandov, Antoniya Karakostova, Ivan Garchev, Snejanka Galabova. Sofya, 2004, pp. 369–393.

3 Penev. Pencho. Istoriya na balgarskia dramaticheski teatar. Sofiya, p. 931.

4 Karaslavov, Georgi. Krum Kyulyavkov – voynikat na partiyata. – V: Karaslavov, Georgi. Blizki i poznati. Misli i spomeni. Sofiya, 1968, p. 134.

That's the reason why the next short period between 1947 and 1956 saw the creation of the most representative socialist realism plays, which closely emulated Soviet models, yet to an extent they were also trying to bring a specific 'national flavour' to the time and place of action. The National Theatre staged productions of Orlin Vasilev's *Alarm*, Kamen Zidarov's *The King's Mercy*, Andrey Gulyashki's *Promise*, Lozan Strelkov's *Reconnaissance*, Angel Wagenstein's *Moscow Time*, Orlin Vasilev's *Love*, Stoyan Ts. Daskalov's *The Turning Point,* Kamen Zidarov's *Hard Times*, Todor Genov's *Belief*, Georgi Karaslavov's *The Gaberovs*, Krum Kulyavkov's *The First Strike*…[5] The number of titles was growing all the time. In just five seasons – from 1948 to 1953 – new Bulgarian plays written for the stage got to 70, and just 14 never went into production[6].

The overwhelming number of contemporary plays not only radically changed the features of Bulgarian playwriting, but also caused a feeling of dissatisfaction. Despite strict theatre subordination, the list of leading contemporary Bulgarian plays written for the state repertoire of theatre in the People's Republic of Bulgaria was compiled with tensions and clashes. Of course, those tensions and clashes never really questioned the imposed 'creative method' or the guaranteed sustainability of the socialist realism canon applied in writing dramaturgical texts. Instead they registered tension and instability as socialist realism norms were consistently being failed. Scandals surrounding a number of otherwise politically correct plays were usually hushed up.

Clashes in the heteronomous theatre field between agents all professing socialist realism, yet always in dynamic competition, at times had unsuspected analytical potential to explain processes in the history of drama. There were numerous examples in the 1940s and 1950s that the history of literature and theatre either never told or just partially shared (for example, stories surrounding plays such as Orlin Vasilev's *Love* or Kamen Zidarov's *Hard Times*). Those examples would reveal the mechanisms that were the driving force behind the entire Bulgarian socialist realism dramaturgy, which was open to

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5 In: Naroden teatar "Ivan Vazov". Letopis… pp. 396–454.

6 These summary data were obtained from the cited report of the Head of the Arts Department to the Chairman of the Science, Art and Culture Commission regarding the repertoire of the theaters for the 1952/53 season. In: Nikolova, Rumyana. Model na funkcionirane na balgarskiya teatar v perioda 1944–1989. Sofiya, 2020, p. 109.

constant rewriting and redrafting in order to comply with the guidelines of the directive and politically charged aesthetic discourse.

The second thesis of this text states: The exemplary Bulgarian plays of socialist realism projected their own 'imperfection' and fundamental 'incompleteness'. Socialist realism in the playwriting of the People's Republic of Bulgaria was only plausible as a paragon impossible to follow.

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One reason for this failure to comply (or rather perpetual failure to comply) with the norms of socialist realism was rooted in the very nature of Sovietization of art in the People's Republic of Bulgaria. Positioned as a 'disciple' of Soviet theatre, Bulgarian drama with each new text was put to the test in front of strict examiners who belonged to the circle of experts most fluent in socialist realism: Soviet theatre professionals touring Bulgaria and the neophyte Bulgarian critics who had just embraced socialist realism.

Soviet actor and director Boris Babochkin's appointment as chief artistic director at the National Theatre in Sofia was indicative of that process. Already world-famous for his role as Chapaev in the eponymous film, this Russian expert spent a year in the Bulgarian capital (from January 1951 to January 1952), to achieve a 'real breakthrough in our theatre' and reveal 'the power of high Soviet theatre art'[7]. Babochkin got down to work Chapaev style and in just a year he staged three Soviet plays at the National Theatre and three more at the State Higher Theatre School. He also provided guidelines to theatres in the capital and elsewhere. His opinion was authoritative for almost all – from dictator Valko Chervenkov to the National Theatre director Kamen Zidarov. In those brief months, Babochkin managed to become the most influential theatre professional in the People's Republic of Bulgaria.

Even before his arrival in Sofia, the Soviet director had already been imposing his choices: he had turned down the Bulgarian play about Georgi Dimitrov, *The First Strike* by Krum Kyulyavkov. He brought to Sofia the Russian play about Dimitrov *Leipzig – 1933* by Kompaniets and Kronfeld[8]. The play was

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[7] In: The famous Soviet director and actor B. A. Babochkin left our country – Teatar, 1952/ № 4-5, p. 44.

[8] In: Karaslavov. Georgi. Op. cit., p. 136–137.

staged at the National Theatre in November 1951 and it was performed over 200 times in the whole country[9].

The overwhelming presence of Soviet plays in Bulgarian theatres repertoire in the 1950s confirms the general rule that the new socialist realism production of Bulgarian writers was not enough, both in terms of quantity and artistic and political value.

The third thesis of this text states: Until the mid-1950s the theatre socialist realism canon in the People's Republic of Bulgaria consisted mainly of Soviet plays. The new Bulgarian plays performed complementary functions; this was part of their 'incompleteness' and 'imperfection' as works of art representing the new political and aesthetic doctrine. In a nutshell, in the 1950s, Soviet drama assumed the functions of *contemporary Bulgarian drama* as well.

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The growing strength of socialist realism canon in Bulgarian playwriting in the 1950s was also a result of the destabilised status of the author in literature in the People's Republic of Bulgaria. The process of deautonomization of the creative person in theatre incorporated a number of new aspects: the system of the party-state order; the 'collective work method' (from writing the text to staging it); the practice of collective discussion of written and/or published works; the ever present possibility that a revision requirement may appear at any moment; the perpetual threat of the production being suspended, etc.

Thus, writers became de-individualized, they entered the context of *collective authorship*, which was handled by institutions monitoring dramaturgical writing, such as the repertoire office at the Science, Art and Culture Commission, every theatre's art council and (to an extent) the playwrights' division at the Bulgarian Writers' Union. There was one authority though that outranked them all, and in the 1950s it appeared to be beyond challenge: the communist leader as an arbitrator. Valko Chervenkov personally read and assessed plays that the Science, Art and Culture Commission, the Bulgarian Writers' Union or theatres had doubts about. The leader would meet with writers and theatre professionals, he would often recommend redrafting texts, and sometimes he even intervened whether a play should be taken down or not.

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9 In: Naroden teatar "Ivan Vazov". Letopis… pp. 423–424.

The new socialist realism plays emerged as a response to the constantly renewed and rephrased call to serve current politics. Kyulyavkov wrote *The Borsanovs* to serve the Patriotic Front government's fight with the opposition, which was eventually defeated in 1947. Gulyashki's *Promise* was inspired by the constant challenge to fulfil promises made to the government. Zidarov's *Hard Times* was written to celebrate the *new woman in the village*, but above all the play endorsed the campaign against the 'enemy with a party ticket'. Boyan Balabanov's *Director* was a response to the nationwide movement of workers' and peasants' correspondents, encouraged by government, etc.

The fourth thesis of this text is brief: Exemplary socialist realism plays were created by a *collectivized author* who tackled the topical 'tasks of the day', propagated by the communist government.

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Among a number of more or less representative books of plays, the two-volume *Bulgarian Drama* (1957) presents the best summary of the tumultuous changes in the drama and theatre from the early years of the People's Republic of Bulgaria. This publication was also borderline, because it appeared at the start of the 'thaw', which triggered the first 'revision' of the socialist realism dramaturgical canon. The first volume included plays written in the past and considered dramaturgical legacy: *Ivanko (Asenya's Murderer)* by Vasil Drumev, *Exiles* by Ivan Vazov, *The First* by Petko Y. Todorov, *Mother-in-law* by Anton Strashimirov, *At the Foot of Vitosha* by P. K. Yavorov, *Masters* by Racho Stoyanov, *Golemanov* by St. L. Kostov and *Boryana* by Yordan Yovkov[10]. Thus, the book became the first part of a two-volume edition, in which eight plays from the classic heritage preceded six contemporary plays selected in the second volume as representative of the period of the early People's Republic of Bulgaria.

These two volumes functioned as communicating vessels that both connected and differentiated between dramaturgical eras. The editors who compiled the volumes were Kamen Zidarov, Slavcho Vasev and Pencho Danchev, Pencho Penev, who wrote the foreword of the first volume, and Vladimir Karakashev, who wrote the foreword of the second. The publication provided an updated version of a unified national dramaturgical canon, which brought together

[10] In: Balgarska dramaturgia. Sbornik. Parva chast. Ed. Kamen Zidarov, Slavcho Vasev i Pencho Danchev. Sofiya, 1957.

traditions from before 1944 and texts written after 1944 in the new doctrine of Marxist-Leninist ideas and socialist realism principles.

The first volume contained the 'list of most significant plays in the history of Bulgarian theatre', which (according to Nikolay Iordanov[11]) 'outlined the realistic trend in the history of Bulgarian drama'. The volume saw the implementation of the principle of retrospective teleology, with the selection of the plays made so that they could determine the future development of Bulgarian playwriting. They expressed the realistic genealogy of contemporary socialist realism drama. They were given the status of precursors and forerunners of plays written after 1944. New writers were expected to draw ideas, trends and genre characteristics from them, as well as from Soviet theatre, so that they could guarantee the national origin of drama in the People's Republic of Bulgaria.

To summarize, the primary link between the plays before and after 1944 was the acknowledgement of various forms and manifestations of the *progressive ideal*, embodied in dramaturgical plots built around the archetypal conflict between *innovators (revolutionaries) and conservatives (reactionaries)*.

The second volume incorporated Krum Kyulyavkov's *First Strike*, Kamen Zidarov's *The King's Mercy*, Lozan Strelkov's *Reconnaissance*, Orlin Vasilev's *Love*, Magda Petkanova's *Rebellion for Land* and Ilia Volen's *Wolf Times*[12].

Though we won't acknowledge this compilation as an anthology of fundamental texts that were intended to illustrate the high achievements of socialist realism drama until 1956, we should still look at it as a synthetically presented snapshot of the Dimitrov-Chervenkov's age in drama.

Although just six, the plays cover almost the entire range of issues and themes of those days: the heroism of the communist leader in his struggle against fascism; the anti-monarchist and anti-imperialist class struggle; the guerrilla movement and the problem of treason and espionage; the challenges of building the communist future; people as the driving force of uprising in the past; 'the wolf-like morals' in the capitalist village of the interwar period. What is most striking at a first glance is that the so-called

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[11] In: Iordanov, Nikolay. Socialisticheskiyat realism I balgarskoto dramaturgichno nasledstvo. – Homo Ludens, № 21/ 2018, pp. 202–212.

[12] In: Balgarska dramaturgia. Sbornik. Vtora chast. Ed. Kamen Zidarov, Slavcho Vasev i Pencho Danchev. Sofiya, 1957.

contemporary theme was hardly developed in those plays (apart from *Love*) and industrial issues were barely present even though they were typical of socialist realism. However, that choice of material does not come as any surprise for the transition period between 1956 and 1957, given that plays about manufacturing in that decade, though numerous, rarely satisfied critics, the authorities and the audience.

According to Karakashev's foreword, the book tried to present a different type of snapshot: using the plays, it intended to 'outline the main motif in our entire heroic history – the fight of the people for freedom', and the 'socialist outlook' of the authors 'helped them better understand the essence of social clashes of the time they depicted, and helped them go more deeply into the characters' psychology ... to draw the prospects of social development'[13].

The six plays represent a specific range of authors and themes. On one hand, writers such as Krum Kyulyavkov, Kamen Zidarov, Lozan Strelkov and Orlin Vasilev indicated the dominance of communist and socialist realism playwrights, and on the other hand, Magda Petkanova and Iliya Volen joined the line next to them as reformed non-communist 'companions', who had embraced progressive ideas the nation shared. The range of topics also expanded into six different historical periods.

That is why, 25-year-old Karakashev, newly trained to build a socialist realism critical narrative, decided to comment on the plays in his foreword not in the order of their publication or staging, but rather 'having in mind the historical sequence of the different stages or moments of the history of the Bulgarian people'[14] – from *Rebellion for Land* (about the 1850 uprising) to *Love (*about events in the early 1950s). Thus, each work acquired significance as an element of the common historical path to national and class liberation.

The critical interpretation connected the texts in a union of the meta-dramaturgical objective correlation predetermined by the Marxist-Leninist worldview, entirely focused on the teleology of revolution and the 'construction of socialism'. Thus, the foreword to the second volume was meant to build the socialist realism version of a shared dramaturgical-theatre narrative about Bulgarian history.

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13 Karakashev, Vladimir (Predgovor). In: Balgarska dramaturgia. Sbornik. Vtora chast. Ed. Kamen Zidarov, Slavcho Vasev i Pencho Danchev. Sofiya, 1957, pp. 6–7.

14 Ibidem, p. 6.

The fifth thesis of this text states: Around 1956/1957, socialist realism became the dominant feature of the entire Bulgarian playwriting – as politically charged aesthetics and as a system that claimed that through its texts it completely matched all aspects of Bulgarian life in the past and in the present. From then on, socialist realism began to gradually get reductive, but it also began to expand. On one hand, step by step, it renounced strict compliance with its former principles, which had been mandatory until recently, on the other hand, it became *omnivorous*, appropriating works that were either a deviation or were sometimes even in opposition.

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Each crisis in the communist regime around thresholds such as 1956, 1968, etc. transformed the canon by leaving plays out of it so that the list of plays written during the People's Republic of Bulgaria got so short that it was about to disappear. It is true that plays which were an integral part of theatre repertoire in the first decades of the People's Republic of Bulgaria were no longer staged after the 1956 thaw and after 1989 they seemed to have completely gone into oblivion. Not exactly.

Although abiding by the canon, the plays created in the late 1940s and early 1950s began to step off theatre stages as early as the 1960s, yet they were still viewed as relevant and prestigious historical examples in the texts of theatre criticism and historiography until the very end of the regime. Plays such as *First Strike* and *Alarm* and comedies such as *The Borsanovs* functioned for a long time in the historical self-awareness of Bulgarian theatres as *the first gems in the treasury* of 'our socialist drama'.

The history of the theatre after 1944 did not tolerate 'empty' periods filled with 'empty' plays.

The socialist realism canon existed in a paradoxical way – not on stage, but in the art narrative of the early years of the People's Republic. An artificial ghost draped in an academic attire.

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