HERMENEUTICAL FEELING AND RATIONAL CRITICISM

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Writing a sufficiently satisfactory historical account of the communist/socialist regime is a daunting task because of the regime's specific features. On the one hand, it was totalitarian, repressive and authoritarian in seemingly consistent way, and on the other, it never ceased to reinvent itself, which made it internally anarchic and self-devouring. The regime was hesitant in its own conviction. Allegedly it embraced change without changing significantly. And this becomes even more obvious whenever we attempt to tell – especially succinctly – the history of theatre of that time; how to get started and how to proceed with the analysis. In this text, we intend to focus on several important issues: the importance of the written text for the theatre performance, the comprehensive censorship at the time and the USSR's complete political and cultural dominance in our lives.

To start with, theatre remains a living art, despite the strong emergence in the last several decades of a huge range of novel, increasingly complicated and exciting visual and digital techniques. As a result, totalitarian authorities always kept a closer eye on the theatre, because books are written, films are shot, pictures are painted. Even the play, the text itself, though subject to special preliminary observation and attention, may still in a way dodge censorship in a live performance, with words or sentences removed or added. That happened in 1987 at a performance of Mikhail Shatrov's *Dictatorship of Conscience* at the People's Army Theatre when actress Mariana Dimitrova read out a civilian group's declaration renouncing the regime. Known as the Ruse group against air pollution, that civilian group had been protesting against transborder air pollution in Ruse. Moreover, theatre has developed an elaborate set of means to add another layer of meaning or a fine nuance to the spoken text. In that period critics would often pretend that they did not notice the new connotations, and they would simply water them down, vaguely referring to them as a 'contemporary and civically engaged' message, yet the audience knew better and would respond spot on. Generally speaking, critical reviews from that period, i.e. texts, sequences of words and sentences, are currently a huge challenge whenever we try to accurately reconstruct a performance, since reviews more often than not avoided revealing the performance's full poten-

tial, depending on whether critics needed to pursue some more malevolent or more benevolent purpose. Another challenge we face today is the low-tech recording or even photographing of performances, compared to the quality available today. Irrespective of potentially multiple interpretations, the text of the play remained the backbone of the performance, and construing that text was meant to create a readable idea about the world and life, whether a more direct one or a metaphorical one. This definitely was not a post-postmodern work of art, in which form either strongly dominated meaning or at least made meaning subordinate. Hence, texts had to be thoroughly scrutinised and they needed to undergo a complicated process of numerous levels of censorship, that is, levels of approval or banning. What road did texts go? Texts were initially the target of the writer's own self-imposed censorship, then they were further inspected by theatre management, or a theatre director or the theatre's literary adviser. Simultaneously or shortly after, texts needed to get the approval of the Repertoire Unit of the Theatre Division at the Arts and Culture Commission, whatever that agency was called over the years. Yet all these oversight bodies were always deemed insufficiently capable of effectively enforcing socialist principles of art and culture in life. The Repertoire Unit was also in a difficult position and it had to fight not only to get the 'right' texts, that is, texts complying with the party line, but it also had to shortlist the more or less appropriate plays from a huge array of graphomania.

Every year theatre management further needed to report its repertoire to the Theatre Division, which had to include a certain percentage of Bulgarian, Soviet, Russian and Western plays (to the advantage of Soviet and contemporary Bulgarian plays). The ratio between modern and classical drama also had to be worked out right. Local party structures' ideological officers closely monitored the entire process.

From about 1949 to 1956, the Repertoire Unit was very pro-active in creating the new Bulgarian play. It was the Unit that compiled and disseminated the topics of the dramaturgical texts and asked writers to provide for approval a draft or a concept in advance. If text approval may be defined as preliminary censorship, what actually took place was a practice of pre-preliminary censorship. What then ensued was text redrafting and reviewing, which further slowed down the already cumbersome process of theatre production[1]. Therefore, it

[1] Nikolova, Rumyana. Model na funkcionirane na balgarskiyat teatar v perioda 1944–1989 godina. Sofiya, 2020.

may be argued that from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, the author was in fact collectivized and generalised, and therefore the term 'censorship' can hardly be applied; everyone was working on the text so that it could abide by ideological requirements and socialist realism in its most primitive form. Thus, it seems that well before postmodern theories, it was communism that refuted the author's existence. The real hide-and-seek between the play's author and the prohibitive-permissive authorities seemed to have started after the 1956 thaw. The disintegration of the collective and compact author quite naturally led the already partly emancipated author to his/her natural longing for even more freedom, timidly hiding from the imposed ideological and formal depersonalizing principles.

In order for authors to maintain some bare minimum of vitality after 1956, periods of tightening and loosening censorship started to take turns not unlike a heartbeat attached from outside. The 1956 thaw was followed by the regime again tightening its grip after Khushchev's 1963 angry speech decrying modernist artists. The subsequent thaw was cut short by the Prague Spring so the 1969 Review of Bulgarian Drama and Theatre turned out to be quite bleak. Gradually, another thaw set in, especially following the Helsinki Accords in the mid-1970s. Between 1982 and 1985, the regime tightened its grip again, and with the advent of 'perestroika', the next thaw caused the abolishment of censorship. Censorship started from theatre management and its artistic council, went through the cultural cadres in the local party leadership, then theatre critics, the Repertoire Unit at the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry itself, moved to the Central Committee of the Communist Party and creeped even higher. It is worth noting that the sheer monstrosity of the whole process was a result of the centralization of theatre work in this country. Other countries from the Eastern Bloc, such as Poland, reorganized and decentralized their theatres as early as 1956 so that theatres were no longer managed centrally, in those countries they were now run by local municipalities, though theatres would still receive state funding. Decentralization made possible phenomena such as Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotowski, etc.

Here are the main rules of banning and approval that might be derived from numerous official reports: 1. A high upbeat vibe is a must, there should be no bleak sentiments or negativity. 2. Artists need to be politicians applying the party line. 3. Artists 'should not be dismissive or critical of party nomenclature' in works of literature and art. 4. Artists should not practice any form of escapism or collectivism. 5. Artists should not distort form and they should

avoid any misrepresentation. 6. Artists should steer away from petty topics: i.e. 'the grey stream' and 'small justice'.

But the question about optimism/pessimism remained the most important one for the entire socialist period, and that was pointed out in 1984 by Stoyan Mihailov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

Once freedom was limited, bans became omnipresent. No rights, just obligations: to work hard, to vote and support the Party, to watch out for any anti-communist activities. Thus, society became the object and subject of censorship. Therefore, censorship was everyone's duty – artists, critics, censors and Party bodies. It was impossible to take the law lightly either: Art. 108 of the Criminal Code criminalised fascist ideology and defamatory statements against the state and the regime, and those could be easily traced in art. The 1971 Constitution stipulated in Art. 46 that artists needed to adhere to the 'spirit of communism'. So censorship became everyone's job, yet it was an act committed by an unknown perpetrator, and perpetrators were so ubiquitous, they would cover for each other.

Communist society in general strives to total monoculturalism: ethnicities, races and classes must merge into one, once class enemies and national identities are destroyed of course. Differences cannot be encouraged. Instead they are tolerated as far as there is the understanding that socialism, being the precursor of communism, still harbours them. Otherwise the trend in communism ideally would be one of uniformity and repetition. Therefore, comprehensive censorship is meant to completely reconcile differences and expose enemies. Impossible peace is sought after through the elimination of all possible differences. Thus, despite all its comprehensiveness and monstrosity, communist censorship remains as elusive as communism itself. It is also pertinent to ask whether endless differentiation today may pose a threat of repetition and uniformity achieved again in more round-and-about ways.

However, it should always be pointed out that Bulgaria was not just the USSR's 'closest ally in the Warsaw Pact and COMECON' between 1944 and 1989, in reality the country was completely occupied. The only more independent cultural event, somewhat paradoxically, was actually the 1981 pompous celebration of the 1300th-year anniversary of the establishment of the Bulgarian state, which made Big Brother feel 'nationalistic jealousy'. In fact, the rules of banning and approval were neither phrased by the Bulgarian Communist Party nor by the Great Narrative about communism, nor even by socialist

realism theory. That theory had been an increasingly meaningless far-fetched concept since the 1970s. The rules depended on the international situation and, respectively, on Moscow. In fact, for the entire period it was Moscow that decided which Western authors to be banned or published, whether they were left-wing writers and playwrights such as Arthur Miller, Sartre or Camus or absurdists such as Ionesco and Beckett. But despite attempts to strictly emulate 'Big Brother', there were still some differences between the Bulgarian and Soviet systems in terms of censorship. The censorship administrative organisations, such as the Theatre Division with its Repertoire Unit in Bulgaria, did not yield that much power and coverage as they had done in the Soviet Union ever since its establishment. Once the USSR was established, two important structures were founded right away: the Main Directorate for the Affairs of Literature and Publishing, or the so-called Glavlit, and the Main Directorate for Repertoire Monitoring, Glavrepertkom, and both had their subdivisions in the Republics and throughout the Soviet Union. In fact, Glavlit was in charge of Glavrepertkom[2], and Glavlit itself was part of Narkompros (the People's Commissariat of Education, which had been named differently over the years.) Glavrepertkom was responsible for the prior and subsequent political oversight over the repertoire of all performing arts companies. One 'Art Censorship Instruction' stipulated that performing arts could be 'publicly performed provided they have been approved by censorship authorities.'[3]

In general, authorities in the USSR, unlike their communist counterpart in Bulgaria, never shied away from using the word 'censorship'. In 1936, they almost set up a censorship department to be called exactly just that. Yet, they would still prefer to use the term 'oversight bodies' in public instead of 'censorship'. Of course, Glavlit and Glavrepertkom often received 'secret' instructions from senior party officials, for example, from the Head of the Main Department for Protection of State Press Secrets at the USSR Council of Ministers. Thus, on July 12, 1971, P. Romanov, head of the same department, gave an order to Glavlit that curiously read: It is prohibited to publish any of Valeri Petrov's works, reviews or information about him that may put him in a positive light. Writers Dragomir Asenov, Emil Manov and Yordan Radichkov shall not be published, nor any reviews or information about them shall be shared without first reporting to the Directorate General.' It is only pertinent

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2 Istoriya sovetskoy politicheskoy cenzury. Dokumenty i kommentarii. Moskva, 1997.

3 Ibidem, p. 528.

to recall that the banning order was issued in the aftermath of the so-called 'Solzhenitsyn case' in Bulgaria in 1971. The instruction quoted was certainly not a decision taken by that head of state secrets, most likely the ban had been issued by even more senior party officials. This seems to be one of the problems of the 'socialist' banning and approval: there was an admin act of censorship (though written in a secret document), whereas the actual party directive was almost never announced publicly unless some party leader decided to openly ban some art or artist.

Communism arrived in this country most ridiculously and in some sense unexpectedly with the Red Army and the occupation of the Bulgarian Kingdom. That circumstance triggered swift changes in the country's entire educational and cultural system. There was a frantic search for the new hero representing the new individual, who did not really exist; there was no such prototype. The party line was for art to tell the story of the 9 September Revolution, yet that had been a military coup, there had been no Revolution. To sing songs about the grand resistance that never was.

To seek the leading role of the working class in an almost entirely rural country. And yet, there was an October Revolution in the USSR, there were quite a few workers in 1917. Events did take place in the USSR – not exactly as described – in any case that history did exist and it had not been transplanted from elsewhere. Cultural processes there were gradually developing from Soviet theatre avant-garde in the 1920s to the imposition of socialist realism in the 1930s. In this country, however, the Soviet snapshot of the 1940s had to be imposed on the entire society.

Another ongoing process was developing in the West after the Second World War. The strict division of classes, of exploited and exploiters, was coming to an end there, whereas the working class, still only a project, was defined as the ruling class in this country. Elsewhere individual freedoms were expanding, yet they were vanishing in this country. Elsewhere the hero as a dramaturgical and aesthetic category had been subject to doubt since the early 20th century: as early as modern drama and the avant-garde, with Pirandello and even with Brecht, whereas in this country the hero had become a central concept and he needed to be either positive or negative. In fact, that return to monolithic unity can also be defined as cultural regression. The method of socialist realism, even Stanislavski's system, recommended at least until the 1960s as the only one, were ways to achieve repetition in art and eliminate differences.

Finally, it is most important that we approach that period without the bias of our current perceptions of life and the world, given that we are pampered by the security of freedom we are experiencing now and we tend to reason through that sense of freedom. Back then, no one, especially artists, ever dreamt of the free market, or private property or free enterprise. Usually it was consumerism and material attitudes to life, or individualism and selfishness that were the butt of satirical ridicule. Moreover, no one thought that the state could ever distance itself from its financial support for art.

Performances were levelling criticism not at the ideals proclaimed in party documents or in Marxist theoretical postulates, but rather at their obvious discrepancy with reality. Reality did not reflect the primary ideological principle's claim that 'everything is built in the name of the individual' towards creating the 'new individual'. There was a striking discrepancy between the misery of the present and the ridiculously inflated picture of the future that socialist realism painted. Thus, criticism of the regime actually came from the left, and this is quite obvious in many texts written by Stefan Tsanev, Georgi Markov, etc. This is another problem many texts face when they are interpreted from a contemporary viewpoint.

Currently researchers should try to look at that period and theatre without hubris, with a hermeneutic feeling, yet with rational criticism. It is obvious that theatre was indeed a mechanism completely controlled by the authorities, but nevertheless they did not manage to kill and automate it in that proposed utopia. Moreover, theatre was a kind of a safe haven, a 'timeshelter' for all those who refused to commit to the 'construction of socialism and communism', of the 'new time' and 'new individual'. Yordan Radichkov might be a relevant example, in his case, critics often demanded that he contribute 'more actively to the construction of socialism', despite fully recognising his talent and originality. But he just wouldn't commit, he just couldn't, irrespective of what he spoke about at art and party events. Theatre back then supposedly had to abide by 'socialist protocol', yet it could always come up with ways to avoid it while keeping a very low profile. I may wonder whether even now theatre might be a safe haven for people who fail in a world of programmers, engineers, business people and entrepreneurs.

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