STRATEGIES OF PERSONAL RESISTANCE: HOW TO TALK ABOUT PRE-1989 BULGARIAN THEATRE

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Contributing to the important debate of reassessing totalitarian legacy in the European context, specifically Eastern Europe, provides ample opportunity to apply diverse approaches to the topic. Saying how significant this discourse is would be an understatement, yet this discussion has never been fully held in Bulgaria, and any conversation focusing on theatre might be even belated.

Bulgarian society has never prioritized exploring the past and overcoming social trauma, instead myth making and glorifying the past have been making waves in the last 20-odd years.

The topic is even more relevant now not so much because there is any imminent threat for a similar regime to make a comeback, but rather because of the dangers posed by current hybrid political realities. It seems that the lack of an integral approach to the topic in Bulgaria, on the one hand, is a result of the totalitarian regime's dire legacy, but on the other, it may stem from a very reductive understanding of culture within the framework of political events. Therefore, I'd like to focus on strategies of personal resistance that usually remain neglected in the grand historical narrative. While we cannot certainly reject the axiomatic premise that a totalitarian regime perceives culture only in terms of political ideology, we may still share numerous examples that do not match that historical template. A certain idea has gained common ground over the years, the idea that culture in totalitarian socialism existed between propaganda and everyday survival not only on a formal level (government, communist party, ideology, etc.), but even in its informal expressions.

This, of course, does not hold true, especially because of the numerous examples that come to mind whenever we look at certain historical periods. It seems that such superficial ideas stifle any attempt to think freely about personal strategies for creative survival, personal development, or ways of finding any relevant rift within the ideological environment and partisanship. Yet, I also favour the use of personal stories to construct grand historical nar-

ratives. I believe this is not just an approach of exploring certain 'cases' but it is also an opportunity to really perceive and capture in the most friction-free way the zeitgeist of processes we can only register in hindsight. This is particularly important in a discussion of the Cold War period, when different ideological concepts collide at the level of political blocs, and at national and local levels. That's why, every single personal discourse is valuable (given that we are able to interpret it) because it also reflects the grand narrative, artists' personal stories along with art and processes impacted. I certainly do not contend that there was ideology, on the one hand, and art (as well as individuals), on the other, that perfectly matched a well-oiled machine of subordination and resistance. In a sense, ideology built the era, but art too created it. Therefore, even when we talk about personal resistance, we must observe individuals even more closely.

In the context of these reflections, it seems today it is far more important to delve into what events entailed rather than read the records kept about them. What do I mean by that? Written records are often considered more useful than processes, and I believe this is where the historical-analytical approach fails. However, such an approach essentially requires that we understand the political intentions of the new regime in Bulgaria (back then), that is, what exactly the regime planned to do with its subjects who were the target of political and social engineering.

Therefore, I far more appreciate the idea that processes should be observed as human processes rather than as some impersonal toolkit of institutions, facts and written records. If we rely on written records alone, at one point we are faced with precisely the regime's main paradox – why did people profess to do certain things yet they did something completely different. I think this is the best argument why I'd rather embrace the subjectivization of viewpoints. To illustrate my objectives and rationale, I would like to use director Venelin Tsankov's professional biography. He left written testimonies of his resisting the dogmatic environment of Bulgarian theatre from the mid-1950s and early 1960s. Tsankov's work was largely associated with striking artistic expression in theatre. He was in search of stage expression not just in the visual, pictorial aspect of a theatre performance, but also in the actor's body, in sculpting actors' figures in dynamic pictures. On its own, his style proved to be his biggest advantage, making him a highly influential director in Bulgaria's post-war period. Yet, his style caused him constant criticism, persecution and dismissal that plagued his long career during the

regime. Tsankov himself was an ideal representative of personal resistance; he belonged to a generation that was placed, metaphorically speaking, in a regime that made them commit transgressions. Thus, in his career, Tsankov was forced to quit theatre three times – first at Varna Theatre, then at Burgas Theatre, which he headed when the legendary Burgas Four worked there, and later at the National Youth Theatre in Sofia. In order to express itself, Tsankov's generation inevitably had to break away from the well-established idea of what socialist realism in Bulgaria was.

Artists committed to that authentic creative expression in an attempt to try out different expressive techniques on stage rather than embrace any act of direct political subversion.

On multiple occasions Tsankov argued in favour of using a diverse range of theatrical means, namely the violation of the dogmatic, for example in his article *Unconventionality and Interaction of Traditions*[1], published in Theatre Magazine in 1962. In his article, Tsankov explained in detail why unconventionality was necessary in staging theatre performances though it was considered controversial (and it was certainly not tolerated at the onset of the regime) according to the dogmatic interpretation of socialist realism. Yet, Tsankov also opposed any trivialization of the ideas of realism: 'Modern theatre requires an actor to come back to reality successfully whenever needed and life-like specifics of acting should not be dissuaded by the fact that the performer has just stepped out of character. The unconventionality of contemporary acting requires performers to move quickly from one scene to another, even up to 60 times in a single performance, even in the most diverse and conflicting situations.'[2].

In his article *About the Narrative of Scenography*, Tsankov did not just defend his personal aesthetic choices, but he went on to argue for the general need for aesthetic plurality, claiming: 'Today, stage unconventionality is already an integral part of Bulgarian theatre. Until recently, its use would always cast doubt on the realistic value of each performance. Now it is well established and its recognition as a realistic technique is of great importance. In fact, its use heralds the victory of novel contemporary trends over conservatism

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1 Tsankov, Venelin. Uslovnost I vzaimodeystvie mejdu traditsiite. – Teatar, 1962/ № 8, p. 16-20.

2 Ibidem, p. 19.

and backwardness.'[3] It seems that Tsankov made a rash assumption that unconventionality was an integral part of Bulgarian theatre, given the consequences he faced when he staged *Romeo and Juliet* at the National Youth Theatre in Sofia in 1964.

He was fired and he could not have a job as a theatre director for a long time.

Moreover, Tsankov's article prompted scenographer Georgi Ivanov to comment in Theatre Magazine, approving of the director's views on the use of real materials in stage props: 'Tsankov rightly highlights the trend for the literal use of raw materials in stage design. Now there is a need for wood to be used in its natural grain texture, iron is now real iron, it is no longer made out of cardboard sprayed with bronze, lining is made out of real materials in their original texture. […] There is now respect for real material in props design.'[4]

Bulgarian communist authorities found Tsankov problematic for his failure to embrace a dogmatic interpretation of socialist realism. At the very start of his career, he staged *Hamlet* at Varna Theatre (season 1955 – 1956) and then he had to quit. Later that happened again at the Youth Theatre in Sofia. Lubomir Ognyanov's article *Hamlet?... By Shakespeare?* in Narodna Kultura Newspaper provides valuable feedback on why Tsankov's *Hamlet* was considered inappropriate and incorrect. The article reflected Ognyanov's position after the performance toured the National Theatre in Sofia: 'Whether staging Shakespeare or any other playwright, one should aspire for a general realistic depiction of the writer's views, times, trends, etc. This realistic depiction may be achieved by visual stage illusion and the so-called justice to life, or the audience may be encouraged to understand the play through succinct hints and stylization – this is all a matter of style, idiosyncrasy, and vision. […] Venelin Tsankov breaks free from the tradition of using illustrative visuals in the set and avoids the 'lifelike plausibility' of mise-en-scène, gestures, and facial expressions in favour of laconic stylization.

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3 Tsankov, Venelin. Za stsenichno-dekorativniya razkaz. – Izkustvo, 1962/ № 7.

4 Ivanov, Georgi. Problem na izobrazitelnoto reshenie na spektakala. – Teatar, 1964/ № 6.

[…] The entire performance is influenced by impulsiveness, by abrupt, unexpected transitions from one state to another, from one line to another, from one pose to another, from one place to another.'[5]

Narodna Kultura Newspaper published an almost page-long analysis of the performance, discussing in great detail its shortcomings and acting, or rather, according to the article's writer, the failure of acting. Still, the author added that the performance exuded an idiosyncratic style indicative of the director's innovative thinking. However, the critic argued that the performance neither gave credit to the author's rationale nor complied with paragons of correctness in theatre. For example, the article commented that 'the director makes actors run along his structure of a staircase, follows them throughout with beams of light amid the general darkness typical of the whole production. He makes actors turn around and about, twisting them on the stairs and the levels and around the make-shift props in ever new poses and positions – and in the midst of the hustle of this mise-en-scène, the individual is long gone. This seems odd: the minimalistic set of props and lighting supposedly projects the actor, the individual, but in fact only the set is lit since performers have become part of it.'[6] The author made a point that stylization fell short of his expectations, he further complained about dynamics and the broken, and neurotic rhythm of the performance. It seems as if the article's author described a performance entirely compliant with Appia's views on the use of space.

As a result, Kamen Zidarov condemned the performance as false innovation and Western mimicry: 'The situation is beyond repair. *Hamlet* came to Sofia and it was performed at Sofia National Theatre. And it is good it came so that the stupid legend is exposed! It is not difficult at all for experienced theatre professionals well versed in texts in old theatre magazines from the West to see where that 'cistern' appeared from; it was placed in the middle of the stage, with all actors moving around it, making sure they did not bump into it and fall off the staircase. And Hamlet (played by Kondov) – he was the director's creation and vision! Not even a shadow of the person epitomizing the ideas of the Renaissance...'[7] That criticism entirely indicative of the period

5 Ognyanov, Ljubomir. "Hamlet"?... Ot Shekspir? – Narodna kultura, 13 April 1957, № 12, p. 6.

6 Ibidem.

7 Zidarov, Kamen. Blajena Arkadia na teatralnite novatori. – Teatar 1965/ № 77, 6–11.

made it impossible for Tsankov to stay at Varna Theatre, yet the performance has since been praised as culturally significant. Vera Dinova – Ruseva in *Bulgarian Scenography* (1975) wrote of the performance as a milestone in the use of space. Tsankov came full circle when he directed *Hamlet* again at Varna Theatre in 2002 to mark the end of his career.

Tsankov's staging Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* at the National Youth Theatre triggered yet another rift and the director had to quit the theatre again. That performance was striking in its modern reflectiveness and the director's fine skill to look for the social dimensions of characters. This was mostly achieved through the use of particular leaps in time as it remained deliberately ambiguous whether what was happening on stage was taking place in the play or in the present[8].

Tsankov's integrity needs no comment, yet I would like to point out that he never stated any political opposition to what was going on in this country (though he also never claimed he was a proponent of left-wing ideas). He was focused on his professional career and followed his calling to measure up to European examples. He drew on their influence too – Italian Neorealism, visual theatre, fine art.

With Tsankov's story we really see how repression responds not to any political threat, but rather to the politicization of certain elements of creative behaviour and art – both in Tsankov's *Hamlet* and in *Romeo and Juliet*. That's why, his biography may well serve as a paragon of personal creative resistance that incorporated both the grand historical narrative with its processes and the personal story beyond everyday survival and ideology into a broader framework of what was permissible or not in the regime back then.

Translated by Kristana Ivanova

[8] According to: Topaldzhikova, Anna. Razrivi i novi posoki. Balgarskiyat teatar ot sredata na 50-te do kraya na 60-te. Sofiya, 2009, p. 268.

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