

## **REVIEW**

**By Prof. DSc Kamelia Nikolova**

On the habilitation work

### **Model of Functioning of the Bulgarian Theater in the Period 1944-1989**

Presented for participation in the competition for

The academic position of ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

On Theater Studies and Theater Art (History of the Bulgarian Theater)

Professional direction 8.4 Theater and Film Art,

For the needs of the Theater Department

Institute of Art Studies, BAS

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With only candidate

**ROUMYANA PETROVA NIKOLOVA**

The habilitation work "Model of Functioning of the Bulgarian Theater in the Period 1944-1989" by Dr. Roumyana Nikolova as well as the rest of the publications she has presented fully comply with the minimal national requirements for the position of *Associate Professor*.

From the materials presented for participation in the competition my attention in this review will be mainly focused on the habilitation work "Model of Functioning of the Bulgarian Theater in the Period 1944-1989", published in a book format by "Prof. Petko Venedikov" publishing house, Sofia, 2020 as well as most of the mentioned publications, expert and teaching activity and, in particular, the overall research work of Roumyana Nikolova, carried out after 2007, when she was awarded the educational and academic degree of Doctor.

The habilitation work "Model of Functioning of the Bulgarian Theater in the Period 1944-1989" by Roumyana Nikolova is the first of its kind academic research in theater and cultural studies in our country. The issue of cultural policy towards the theater during the communist era in Bulgaria and the imposed complete change of the existing theatrical model in the country after the radical political turn in the autumn of 1944 was commented periodically in different theoretical and historical studies, but always as part of a wider problem. For the first time in Bulgarian theater studies Roumyana Nikolova undertook to follow it independently in her habilitation work. In itself, this intention is already an indisputable contribution of the presented text.

However, Roumyana Nikolova's impressive research effort is much more than that. It not only sets itself the difficult task of studying and describing in detail the process of ideological discipline and transformation of the theater into a political propaganda institute (together with the activation of the same process in other arts and in all spheres of public and cultural life) but does it on the basis of the party, legislation and program documents produced for its implementation. Roumyana Nikolova has devoted a lot of time and a large part of her research activities over the last more than ten years to the search, research, classification, selection and analysis of this huge array of documentary material. The result is impressive - in her book, presented as a habilitation thesis, she manages to build a coherent, detailed and clear account of the abrupt change of the existing and the establishment of the new model of theater in Bulgaria in the period 1944-1989 in order to subordinate it to the then imposed ideology, by extracting entirely from the studied documents the ideological and political guidelines and the prescribed specific steps for their administrative, personnel and creative implementation. Such a research methodology is extremely labor-intensive and requires serious specialized and contextual knowledge, but it helps the author to make the most objective and conscientious trace of the history of Bulgarian theater in the still little studied period 1944-1989. That is why I would place the research methodology chosen and skillfully applied by Roumyana Nikolova among the most significant academic contributions of her habilitation work.

The book is structured in 5 chapters, framed by preliminary and concluding notes and has a volume of 287 pages. There are four appendices to the main text, in which basic documents commented in the exposition are published. The study is provided with a bibliographic list of cited and used literature, including 70 titles of books and articles; an inventory of 14 funds in the Central State Archives, from which archival materials have been studied and used, and a list of 54 more important cited documents.

An important starting point of the research are the "Preliminary Notes", where Roumyana Nikolova clarifies her choice of methodology and her decision to "build a story about the model in which the Bulgarian theater was set [in the period 1944-1989], using mainly primary documents" (page 7). Here she specifies which places, storing such primary documents, she will use and motivated her choice primarily of the Central State Archives (CSA) and its funds with materials on the structures that administered culture and in particular the theater during the period - the Council of Ministers, the BCP, the Committee for Science, Art and Culture, the Ministry of Culture (its various restructurings and names are noted), as well as the Union of Artists, individual theaters and others. In the preliminary notes Roumyana Nikolova confirms her adherence to the periodization of the commented period - 1944-1956, 1956-1968, the 70s and 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, already established in most of the latest studies, especially highlighting the border years 1948, 1956, 1968, supplementing the widely known facts related to them and with events and documents that directly determined important directions and

restrictions in the field of theater. The author also briefly characterizes each of the mentioned periods from the point of view of the stages of imposition and functioning of the new ideological model of the Bulgarian theater. The author points to the years between 1948 and 1954/55 as decisive for the first period, when the state apparatus imposed the communist ideology in the country most purposefully and by all means, on art and culture, respectively on the theater, were completely restructured and subordinated to the centralized government. Thus, until 1956 the model of the Bulgarian theater was established and, as the author accurately summarizes, in the following periods until the political turn in 1989 it did not undergo basic changes, and the resistances and breakthroughs in it appeared as separate facts in the field of creative practice (performances, texts, groups of people with similar ideas). In the next five chapters of the habilitation work each of the mentioned periods is studied on the basis of numerous researched documents.

The first chapter "Formation of a New Theatrical Model 1944-1956" is key to the study. The author gradually and precisely follows the radical change of the theatrical model in the country. Roumyana Nikolova considers this change and the rapid construction of the theater as an institute for propaganda of the new ideology first as changes in the way of its management and creation of bodies and procedures for its control and then as impact of these changes on the artistic image of the stage practice. Especially valuable and little known so far is the rich objective information obtained from the studied documents of the period, about the establishment, functions and determining importance of the newly established after the Fifth Congress of the BCP (December 18-25, 1948) Committee for Science, Art and Culture, which fully takes over the management of the theater in the country, and the dissertation comprehensively describes all its powers and administrative changes - nationalization of theaters, expansion of the theater network, opening and closing of theaters, introduction of a planned principle of work in theater institutions, control over the repertoire policy through the Repertoire Bureau created for this purpose, etc. Many more facts and data could be mentioned, that were presented in this chapter, which are of key importance for the objective and comprehensive study of the first defining decade in the development of Bulgarian theater after 1944, but as a *particularly important contribution* here I would certainly emphasize the detailed consideration of the imposition of socialist realism in the theater and the complex measures taken to create a new, socialist Bulgarian drama through conscientious and comprehensive presentation and analysis of the sought-after documents. Also contributing to further studies of the period is the motivated conclusion made by Roumyana Nikolova that in these first formative years of imposing the theatrical model in the country the main attention and control of those in power was focused on drama and, respectively, on the repertoire while in the following periods this situation is preserved, but the control extends more and more to its realization, i.e. to the director and the production.

During the turbulent and complicated period for the theater (and Bulgarian culture in general) between 1956 and 1968, two chapters were dedicated in the habilitation work. The second chapter, "The Changing Cultural Policy in the Period 1956-1968", traces - again on the basis of carefully researched and studied basic documents from party congresses, ministerial decrees and administrative provisions and instructions - the impact of the April Plenum of the BCP of 1956 and the official condemnation of the cult of personality in the administration and artistic activity of the theater. The next, third chapter "Breakthroughs in the Normative Aesthetics of Theatrical Socialist Realism in the Period 1956-1968" focuses specifically on emblematic for this period personalities, drama texts and performances that aim to seek opportunities for enrichment and diversification of theatrical language. Particularly interesting and of great cognitive importance here is the following through the discovered documents and quoting key places from them of important for its time discussions about expanding the boundaries of socialist realism, the "Bourgas Four" and the scandals around it, the show "Improvisations" based on texts by Radoi Ralin and Valeri Petrov in the Satirical Theater and other emblematic for the period events and breakthroughs of the official canon. Already established by a number of new studies of theater in the period from the mid-50s to the late 60s of last century, the idea of alternation in cultural, and specifically in theatrical life, short periods of liberalization and stagnation, as well as change Roumyana Nikolova convincingly confirms the strategies and methods for control of artists with excerpts and quotations from the researched documents. Undoubtedly a *very valuable contribution* of these two chapters of the study is the detailed presentation and current commentary of the sought-after and researched authentic documentary recordings of discussions of banned performances, discussions on directing, quality of drama, the necessary repertoire, etc. which were known mostly from secondary sources and mentions in later texts.

The last two chapters look at the situation in the Bulgarian theater in the 70s and 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the prism of the twisted and growing over time sentiments for reform and for (albeit selective and controlled) opening of the established in the period 1944- 1956 closed and ideological theatrical model of what is happening on the European and world stage. Following in detail the discussions, the specially initiated professional meetings and, most of all, the program documents for reforming the theater sector produced by them, these two chapters objectively and impartially lead to the conclusion that the political theatrical project of the communist state and the model of Bulgarian theater is gradually exhausting itself, and its latest calls for reform, which in fact deny it, are also a sign of its end.

Apart from the indisputable merits of Roumyana Nikolova's habilitation work, which I have highlighted so far - academic objectivity, exceptional research integrity, ability to analyze theatrical facts and processes in a broad socio-cultural context, as well as great cognitive value and practical usefulness - I would like to emphasize another

important quality of it. This is the awareness of teamwork, a quality that I value very much and that is quite necessary in any research team. Roumyana Nikolova's text was conceived and written with the clear intention of being open to the work of the group of theater researchers at the Institute of Art Studies, to which she belongs; to be as useful and supportive as possible in subsequent studies. A really rare quality for individual academic work that must be admired.

I am well acquainted with Roumyana Nikolova's work as a student, where I was a lecturer in History of European Theater and Theory of Directing, then as a supervisor of her dissertation, prepared at the Department of Theater Studies at NATFA "Krastyo Sarafov" and for a long time now as a colleague in the Theater Department of the Institute of Art Studies. Over the years, my initial impressions of her seriousness, depth, and scientific curiosity have not only been confirmed, but have been complemented by her collegial tolerance and dedication to research.

CONCLUSION: From the habilitation work and the other materials presented for the competition, as well as from my personal impressions of Chief Assistant Dr. Roumyana Nikolova, I am quite convinced that she fully meets the requirements for the academic position of Associate Professor at the Theater Department at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. As a member of the academic jury, I will vote in favor of her.

I vote YES.

May 31, 2020

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