

# OPINION

By **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Asen Terziev**, NATFA "Kr. Sarafov"

On the dissertation of **Ilko Ganev**, doctoral student at the Institute of Art Studies –  
BAS on the subject:

## *Project Theater in Bulgaria after 1989*

For acquiring the educational and academic degree Doctor, academic field  
Theater Studies and Drama, 8.4.

The title of Ilko Ganev's dissertation *Project Theater in Bulgaria after 1989* clearly formulates a problem that up to now has barely been researched enough in our country but which in general has not been discussed properly. Of course, the main reason for this, as is clear from the chronological marker in the title, is that this is a relatively new phenomenon in contemporary Bulgarian theatre, which began after the great political changes of 1989 and the fall of the socialist regime. On the other hand, from today's perspective, the passage of a little more than three decades forms a sufficiently concrete and not insignificant historical framework in which enough facts have been accumulated to require this phenomenon to be studied and understood independently. In this context, Ilko Ganev's dissertation has an undeniable contribution, because it is the first comprehensive analysis of the tendency in contemporary Bulgarian theatre to produce performances based on the project principle.

I hasten right here to point out the two strongest qualities of the text - its precision and its originality. Ilko Ganev has had to familiarize himself with a lot of normative documents regulating theatrical production in the country, to check various statistical data on theatrical production (funding, audiences, etc.), to trace the policies of the numerous programs of the various state, municipal and private institutions that have supported and are supporting project proposals in the field of theatre, and last but not least to study and present the different philosophies and aesthetics of the various forms of theatre that have emerged thanks to the project principle. This eclectic collection of facts coming from different spheres of human knowledge and competences (cultural policy, economics, sociology, theatre studies) Ilko Ganev has managed to arrange and combine in a well thought out and well-argued presentation, achieving a very good balance, in which the different aspects are coherent and no one dominates - a problem that is unavoidable in project theatre and always threatens to exacerbate attempts at critical discourse on it into a tense argument between artistic, social and financial arguments. The main difficulty in dealing with the rich empirical material that Ilko Ganev has researched and cited (individual published articles, conference papers and speeches, opinions from interviews and manifestos) is that they all capture only particular aspects of the problem and are in most cases heavily refracted through the

subjective attitudes and biographies of their authors. A quality of Ilko Ganev's text is that he has managed to present them with sufficient distance and impartiality, but also to link them in an original and polemical critical analysis, from which one can see the ability to provide insight into the complexity of the difficulties, as well as authentic interest and concern for the fate of contemporary Bulgarian theatre.

The structure of the text is well thought out and explicit. In three consecutive chapters Ilko Ganev examines project theatre through three main perspectives. The first chapter describes the socio-cultural historical context on which the idea of project theatre funding emerged, marking a new stage in the production of theatre in Bulgaria. A convincingly defended periodization of project theatre is also proposed here, which chooses to divide the decades after 1989 into three chronologically asymmetrical sub-periods (the first covering 8, the second 13, and the third 10 years), in which the principle of differentiation is through the changes that have occurred. In this way, the periodization brings to the fore a curious parabola in the development of project theatre. It begins very enthusiastically and radically with the energy for renewal and a break with the controlling practices of the totalitarian state and is obsessed with ideas of decentralization and independence, but gradually, and especially strongly in recent years, it reverts back to an increasing dependence on the state with its cultural policies. This is the strongest chapter in the study and constitutes its meaningful center, in which the problems arising between the two main sides of the project theatre (generally speaking, the funding institutions and the beneficiaries) are outlined. There are so many accurate observations, cogent diagnoses and hits in Ilko Ganev's analysis here that I will only mention one quality of them that I find particularly important. The author never loses focus of the complex and often conflicting cross between economic, political and artistic interests and comments on both their positive and negative aspects. The most striking manifestation of this is the apparent, and traced in the text, contradiction between improved financial stability for theatres and formations (on the one hand) and strong commercialization or indifference to public success (on the other).

As I have already mentioned, the second and third chapters are devoted to the two main sides or, figuratively speaking, the two main teams in the project theatre. Logically, it starts with those on whom the very existence of project theatre depends - the funding institutions and organizations - and in chapter two a picture of their, also diverse and often changing, landscape is presented. The main sponsors of theatre in Bulgaria are presented in a succinct but precise form, some of them disappearing, others changing and continuing to exist: from the establishment of the National Centre for Theatre at the Ministry of Culture, through international institutions and foundations such as the Soros Center for the Arts, the Pro Helvetia Program, the America for Bulgaria Foundation and foreign cultural institutes with offices in Bulgaria, to the emergence of contemporary, local arts support programs in the municipalities of major cities such as Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna. The last third chapter

offers an overview of the changing landscape of more or less stable formations making performances on a project basis with their diverse stage aesthetics. To these two chapters is my only recommendation to the work. The dissertation analyses professionally, thoroughly and seriously a significant problem for contemporary Bulgarian theatre, which I think deserves wider publicity than the narrowly specialized academic circle. I find the text to be a very solid basis for the publication of a book, which is badly needed in the Bulgarian context, and I think that this can be done if a general editing of the last two chapters tries to overcome, as far as possible, the compendium-like enumeration of different institutions and formations, and reconsider their order and hierarchy (for example, it is not clear to me why the Brain Stop Project is introduced almost towards the end, and the Based on Actual Events Association is given almost as many pages as the Sfumato Theatre Workshop).

In conclusion, I find the dissertation to be a necessary, original and thoroughly conducted study that impresses with its precise and multilayered analysis. I recommend that its author, Ilko Ganev, be awarded the educational and academic degree Doctor.

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