

REVIEW

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On the dissertation

Project Theater in Bulgaria after 1989

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For acquiring the educational and academic degree Doctor,

academic field *Theater Studies and Theater Art, 8.4*

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In his dissertation "Project Theatre in Bulgaria after 1989" Ilko Ganev aims to explore and analyze an important niche of theatrical life in Bulgaria in the last three decades, which has not been the subject of independent research. Namely the project theatre, i.e. theatre performances and theatre events created through funding under various programs following applications with pre-prepared projects by the institutions or teams that implement them. The practice of project theatre, which has been widespread in Europe and the world since the Second World War and is becoming more and more established in this country, has attracted particular attention in the last two years, at a time of pandemic crisis, which has imposed the urgent need to support the activity and preservation of the theatre sector. Since its emergence in the early 1990s, project theatre and its principles, strategies and problems have been sporadically commented on in various program documents and journalistic materials, but have never been the subject of a comprehensive scientific study. Thus, the choice of project theatre in Bulgaria as the topic of this dissertation is already its own undeniable contribution.

This unquestionable contribution of the proposed research gains even more significance from the fact that it is prepared by a PhD student who successfully combines in his professional realization the activity of a theatre scholar and researcher with that of a practicing director and theatre manager, actively working on different projects. The dissertation clearly shows a good practical knowledge of the immediate situation of project theatre in the country, which is at the same time complemented by

a deep interest in the conditions and causes that have shaped it and in the recognition and analysis of the problematic and successful elements in it. It is this productive combination of an empirical knowledge of the object of study and an aspiration for its scientific investigation and comprehension that is another significant contribution of the work.

Ilko Ganev's dissertation is 130 pages long and consists of three chapters, an introduction, a conclusion and a bibliography including 82 sources in Bulgarian and English, divided as "literature cited" (26), "sources used" (19), "normative documents" (8) and electronic sources (29).

In the Introduction, the doctoral student states and defines the object of his research, and he also outlines the directions in which he will accomplish it. Ganev highlights the main characteristic and aim of project theatre - to create artistic artefacts that inevitably conform to market demands, but also - such as they are - actively participate in shaping the aesthetic horizon of this market. An examination of the aforementioned defining specificity of project theatre leads to the formulation of one of the main theses of the dissertation, - that "the function and tasks of public institutions should be redefined in the direction of fostering creative industries that derive from personal creativity, skill and talent, because they thus possess and unleash the potential for increasing social welfare" (p. 7). In other words, funding programs for theatre performances and events need to be designed and used as particularly effective tools for cultural policies in the performing arts, aimed at creating high quality theatre that is in demand by different audiences. After stating this main characteristic and goal of project theatre, Ilko Ganev notes that one of the main tasks that the thesis sets itself is to trace and make sense of the lack or existence of a clearly established strategic vision for the overall context of project funding and the implementation of theatre projects. Emphasizing the artistic quality and the innovative nature of the theatrical artefacts realized through project funding as its guiding strategic goal, as well as listing the most common compromises and deviations from them (attempts at balance, 'dealing with the situation' rather than supporting creative intentions, etc.) are another significant virtue of the proposed text.

In chapter one "The Beginnings of Project Funding for Theatre in Bulgaria. Borrowing Models and Practices. Policies till 2020" briefly, but concisely and without missing anything essential, the doctoral student for the first time in Bulgarian theatre studies aims to search for and examine the specific historical reasons and conditions for the emergence of project theatre in Bulgaria, as well as to trace the complex, controversial and uneven path of its development to date. Ilko Ganev accurately points to the aspirations and policies for the decentralization of theatre in Bulgaria after the political change in 1989 as the beginning of the idea and the first steps towards the introduction of project funding. The identification and clarification of the project-based

approach as one of the basic tools for reforming the fully centralized, subsidized and ideologically controlled by the state model of theatre life inherited from the communist past is among the most significant contributions of the thesis. It is the policies and first attempts of project funding that make possible the dismantling of the inherited monolithic theatre model and the return of aesthetic and institutional diversity in the Bulgarian theatre space.

Another valuable contribution of the first chapter is Ganev's proposed attempt to introduce a periodization of project theatre in Bulgaria. Three periods in its development are identified, defined by the political, socio-cultural and aesthetic movements in Bulgarian society during and after the transition years - 1989-1996; 1997-2009; 2010-present (p. (13)). Each of these periods is presented with its main characteristics and motives for differentiation - from the establishment and first steps of the project principle through the borrowing and adaptation of European models and good practices to the first monitoring of project activity in the country - the arrival in 1997 of a European expert team led by the British international advisor on the future of cities Charles Landry and his conclusion that it was necessary to reallocate public financial resources for the development of the theatre sector on a project basis, and the recommendation to the Bulgarian government, given the difficult financial situation at the time, was to do this at the expense of the state subsidy for state cultural institutes. The second period began in 1997 with this so-called "Landry Report" and continued until 2009 with the main focus being theatre reform (with controversial results), the aim of which was to combine government funding of state and municipal theatres with project-based forms and the development of an independent sector. The third period, from 2010 to the present, has continued and brought changes to project funding policies through so-called delegated budgets. This is the time of the cessation of private financial donors after Bulgaria's accession to the European Union and the increase of state financial support for project theatre.

In Chapter Two, "Donor Funders. Principles, Conditions, Impact on the Domain", the thesis traces chronologically one of the two main parties in the process of project theatre construction - the funding organizations and the financial donors. Here we must emphasize Ilko Ganev's detailed and conscientious study of the emergence, establishment, philosophy and policies of practically all funding organizations that have played a decisive role in the development of project theatre in Bulgaria - the National Centre for Theatre (established in 1993), the Soros Centre for the Arts at the Open Society Institute (established in 1994), the Swiss Foundation for Culture "Pro Helvetia" (established in 1999), the British Council Bulgaria, the French Cultural Institute, the Goethe Institute, the Italian Cultural Institute, the Cervantes Institute, the Sofia Culture Program (established in 2007), the National Fund for Culture (NFK, established in 2000), as well as a number of cultural funding programs in Varna, Plovdiv and other cities.

In the final third chapter, "Resilient Examples. Theatre Performances, Directors, Artists and Companies", the other side of the project theatre is presented - the main subsidized theatre institutions and independent organizations and companies that actively initiate and implement theatre performances, festivals and events. Again, most of the organizations and their policies and some productions created by projects are traced in the order of their emergence. The main directors and performers active on a project basis are also presented. Particularly valuable here is the study of documents and especially the official websites of the organizations and companies and their summary and presentation in the context of project theatre strategies. A more detailed examination of the emblematic performances and events initiated and created on a project basis and tracing their role and place in the overall cultural context and its possible change and renewal would add to the significance of this part of the research.

Among the most serious contributions of the dissertation, I would definitely like to emphasize again the careful and conscientious search, collection and study of the large empirical material related to the problem at hand - known, less known and completely unexplored archives of various institutions and organizations - subject of the research, a lot of diverse data, reporting documents of funding sources, tables with results of funding sessions and of realized stage projects.

The dissertation is written confidently and persuasively, with a very good knowledge of the extensive material studied and of much of the existing commentary and texts relating to it, and articulates its own research findings and contributions. Here I would also like to highlight the role of the doctoral student's supervisor, who is one of the proven specialists in the field of the thesis.

My main recommendation for the dissertation is that in a future publication of it as a book, the analysis and summary of the processes presented should be increased in some individual parts, and a more detailed discussion of emblematic artefacts of project theatre that contribute to the aesthetic diversity and optimization of the environment should be added.

In this regard, I would like to address a question to the doctoral student: Which performances, created on a project basis in the last three decades, have had a particular influence on the change of the Bulgarian theatrical landscape and with what?

I have no comments on the abstract and the other materials presented.

I am well acquainted with the work of Ilko Ganev as a student, whom I have taught History of European Theatre and Theory of Directing at the National Academy for Theater and Film Art "Krastyo Sarafov", as an active colleague in the theatre space in our country today, and recently as a PhD student in the Theatre Department of the Institute of Art Studies. During this time, my initial impressions of his interest and genuine curiosity in various aspects of theatre art were not only confirmed, but were

complemented by his communication and managerial ingenuity, collegial tolerance and dedication to research.

CONCLUSION: The proposed dissertation "Project Theatre in Bulgaria after 1989" is a very timely, necessary and well-done scientific study with undeniable practical applicability. I strongly recommend that its author Ilko Evgeniev Ganev be awarded the educational and academic degree "Doctor".

I vote YES.

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