

Review

By Prof. Dr. Veneta Doicheva, NATFA "Kr. Sarafov"

On the dissertation on the subject:

Project Theater in Bulgaria after 1989

By Ilko Evgeniev Ganev

For acquiring the educational and academic degree Doctor, academic field

Theater Studies and Theater Art, 8.4

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Ilko Ganev's dissertation studies a problem in the field of theatre practice, which is a relatively new phenomenon in the development of Bulgarian theatre. This is the emergence of a new idea for the creation of a theatrical product, which is born as a concept, organization, financing and distribution as a result of a separate and independent creative intention of agents in the field of culture. As indicated in the title of the thesis, this practice is researched after the year 1989, and the study examines in details the fact that this is the date of the birth of project theatre in Bulgaria. These features in the chronology oblige the researcher to apply a historicizing approach and to locate the emergence and unfolding of the phenomenon in the context of the general processes of this period. The author highlights this as his special task and manages to trace in what environment, conditions and territory the phenomenon of project theatre is formed. One more basic research requirement is stated as mandatory for the dissertation. This is the need to place the phenomenon in different horizons - funding, management, creative specificities, reception. And in this respect I. Ganev manages to combine the different research questions and to give his answers. These elements nuance the scope of the dissertation, although some of the thematic perspectives mentioned above dominate.

Following these general principles of the study, the author also decides compositionally his exposition. The dissertation is structured in an Introduction, three Chapters and a Conclusion, and together with the Bibliography and the sources used, it runs to 131 pages. The central part of the thesis are the three chapters, which have specific research objectives.

The Introduction clarifies the framework for understanding the concept of project theatre. Apart from the obvious meaning ("theatre funded on a project basis" - p. 2), the author proposes to enrich the scope of the concept's content and include in it the various realizations of theatre productions that are "outside the regular activities of

the organizations themselves" (state and municipal), and also all those created outside these territories, in alternative, free or non-theatre venues. What the researcher insists on is that they will be studied because of the principle of funding, which in these cases is specifically clear as donor funding and as the targeting of funds to an individual theatre project. Although many examples of project theatre, both in budget-subsidized theatres and in independent theatre organizations, are dealt with within this thesis, I would like to point out here that perhaps the idea of competitiveness, competition and justification of proposals for financial support should take precedence in the definition of this concept. Extraordinary funding, solicitation of an outside donor in the cases under study is a common marker, but its foregrounding diminishes the fact that is itself repeatedly (and correctly) pointed out - the organizations cited are of different status. Project inception appears to be the point of contact between them all as it puts them on an equal footing in the race for funding.

In fact, the presentation implicitly resolves this issue, as it traces in detail the history of the emergence and establishment of this new practice for Bulgaria. Chapter One, "The Beginnings of Project Funding for Theatre in Bulgaria. Borrowing Models and Practices. Policies till 2020" explores in detail the stages through which the practice of project funding has passed. The author refines the internal-historical division that characterizes the process of establishing project finance. Three sub-periods are identified, linked to different political-administrative factors that have a determining role in the modes, forms and sources of financing. These pages dutifully set out the kind of radically new reality that project finance realizes, highlighting the difference between the previous form of wholly and solely socialist state funding and the democratic state's desire and need to implement a new governance approach. From here the analysis begins to be interwoven with an intense contextual engagement with the dynamic political and economic life of the decades since 1989. On the basis of many documents we trace the establishment of new management structures within the Ministry of Culture (the creation of the National Centre for Theatre), the discussions around the imperative to reform theatre activity, the search for foreign models, the active reflection of external observers, and the testing of formulas for managing public resources in theatre in a cost-effective way. The author finds that, as a result of many years of effort, practice is moving closer to a model of decentralization. The project principle of financing is proving to be a nodal point in this process. It is caught up in a maelstrom of tests, changes and new regulations that are often controversial. The researcher highlights a problem that emerged early in the process of renewing the system and which is not being resolved but, in the author's view, is being chronicled. Drawing on the opinions of experts, he outlines the discrepancy between the formal requirements for defending and implementing a theatre project and ineffective feedback. This debate includes the insufficient evaluation of quality in aesthetic terms, the distorted use of administrative mechanisms and the frequent

emptying the project activity of content. Ganev outlines the specifics of the project inception in each of the three sub-periods identified. He establishes that the processes have something of an echo of previous historical moments. In the beginning, the state theatres were the active initiators of projects, attracting new and talented artists. The results were not delayed and the author points to numerous examples of innovative and artistically striking theatrical achievements. His observations lead him to the conclusion that in one of the most vulnerable points of project theatre - the sustainability of production - strong works are being created that transcend the relevance of time and are to date understood as the most representative phenomena in Bulgarian theatre since 1989. The names cited here are many and important. Clearly, the energy of renewal has been unleashed and the organizational and financial tools are proving adequate. In the later stages/sub-periods, the main problems appear to be the difficulties of managing state-funded theatres, and especially linking budgets to the incentive and revenue levers of individual bodies. The author traces the varied management choices and even the wanderings of the Ministry of Culture to devise an approach that balances public costs and benefits. This line of enquiry is important because, in line with the logics of state subsidy, a corresponding share is allocated to project funding.

The second chapter, "Donor Funders. Principles, Conditions, Impact on the Domain" analyses the emergence and specificity of different donor agents in the field of theatre. Again, the chronological principle is the main line in the study. The emerging structures that offer funding for theatre projects are indicated in turn. The first donor to emerge is the National Centre for Theatre at the Ministry of Culture, which began operating in 1993. Based on the center's records, the author notes that from the beginning and throughout the 1990s, applicants competed on an equal basis regardless of their status (state, municipal, private). At the same time as the National Centre for Theater, two donor organizations began to operate in Bulgaria and played a significant role in project funding. These are the Soros Center for the Arts and the Swiss Cultural Foundation Pro Helvetia. The characteristics of the activities of these two organizations, the principles of cultural policy they follow and the budgets they operate with are presented in detail. An important conclusion is the observation that in the 1990s the financial involvement of these donor organizations was remarkably greater than state funding. Although Soros and Pro Helvetia have gradually reoriented their activities to other parts of the world and their involvement in project funding has waned, their importance to theatre activity in Bulgaria is significant.

After the year 2000, new agents emerged with enormous potential for the expansion of the project based funding. Analyzed are the America for Bulgaria Foundation (active since 2008), which is a powerful factor in funding a variety of cultural and research projects, including theatre. Thanks to this support, important projects have been realized (American Season at the National Theatre (2010-2011), support for projects of the Central Puppet Theatre, Sfumato Theatre Workshop, Vox Populi

Documentary Theatre Studio). The cultural services of a number of European countries also have their own programs to support Bulgarian projects or collaborations. The dissertation traces the different realizations of support, which in terms of theatre are expressed in theatre tours, readings, workshops, co-productions. The French Cultural Institute supports alternative, dance projects and independent companies. Practically all of them support the presentation of their theatre productions in Bulgarian theatre forums (festivals).

A new source of significant funding for theatre projects is the Sofia Culture Program, which started operating in 2007. Its priorities include attention to first professional productions and debuts in the performing arts. The study also comments on donor initiatives in similar municipal policies in Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, etc. It is noted that, although in the direction of decentralization, this perspective of donorship is still poorly developed in the country.

The National Culture Fund started its work in 2000. It supports theatre projects through its Debuts and Mobility programs. Of note is the unforeseen increase in the NF "Culture" donor capacity since March 2020, when, in response to the forced shutdown of theatre activity due to the global pandemic of Covid-19, the budget to support artists in the independent sector received huge government grants. The research highlights a resurgence of a persistent problem in the implementation of this policy - little or no consideration of the aesthetic side of projects and outcomes.

The final chapter analyses "Resilient Examples. Theatre Performances, Directors, Artists and Companies". Here again, the thesis links the general trends in Bulgarian theatre with the most significant manifestations of creative achievements born out of the project-based approach. The practice of the Theatre Workshop "Sfumato" is highlighted, which is an example of laboratory theatre and the first theatre organization in Bulgaria to declare its independent aesthetic line. A steady trend is the support for individual projects that the theatre receives both from the National Centre for Theatre and from various donors. The theatre department at New Bulgarian University and the theatre attached to the department, like Sfumato, have been actively seeking and receiving support for theatre projects since the early 1990s. Other examples from the 1990s (the first private theatre "Dialogue" -1989) are mentioned as private sector organizations working on a project basis.

The La Strada Theatre and the Credo Theatre have been singled out for their significant contribution to theatrical life and their remarkable sustainable presence. They have an impressive biography, international recognition and a remarkably long life for some of their productions. The representative independent companies that work on a project basis include many names of prestigious artists and productions, predominantly from the decade of the 1990s and the beginning of the new century. Also highlighted are the sustainable companies DEN GRY Foundation, Legal Art Center (special accent is the participation in Plovdiv European Capital of Culture

2019), Derida Dance Center (an example from the field of dance theater), 36 Monkeys Organization, Panic Button Theater, Association "Actual Events", Brain Storm Project, Meteor Company, Vox Populi Documentary Theater Studio, Replica Theater, etc.

The analysis does not overlook the extraordinary pandemic year of 2020, which puts both the ability of donor agents to offer support and the capacity of theatre organizations to initiate creative projects to a huge test. The brief conclusion succinctly sets out the main developments relating to the potential for project theatre to be fundamentally freer and more alternative in its poetics.

My recommendations for the dissertation are in this paragraph. A future publication of this research could extend the analysis of the relationship between classical and project theatre through commentary on specific themes, imagery, discovery and aesthetic specificities.

The abstract and all required documents have been submitted correctly.

Ilko Ganev has publications on the subject in authoritative specialized publications. Undoubtedly, the research is an independent author's work in uncharted territory.

Based on all of the submitted materials, I vote YES for awarding Ilko Ganev the Education and Academic Degree Doctor.

Prof. Dr. Veneta Doicheva

Sofia

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