

OPINION

From **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Asen Terziev**, NATFA "Krastio Sarafov"

On the **Petar Borislavov Denchev's** dissertation *Use and Function of Space in the Theatrical Performance from 1968 to the Present Day*

For receiving the educational and academic degree Doctor in academic specialty
Theater Studies and Theater Art, 8.4

Petar Denchev's dissertation is a study of the problem of space in the theatrical performance. This focus is clearly stated in the title, but the richly illustrated text itself, covering a total volume of 338 pages (including the title pages and the bibliography), goes beyond the previously stated chronological framework. The ambitious research was conducted in parallel in a philosophical, aesthetic and cultural-historical aspect and does not focus only on the time period after 1968, to which about 1/3 of the text is dedicated. It traces huge periods in the history of both Bulgarian and European theater, starting in both cases with their principles widely accepted among theater researchers. Thus, the roots of European theater date back to Antiquity and Ancient Greece, and the roots of Bulgarian - from the era of the Bulgarian Revival. Similarly, again following the division accepted by most theater researchers, the dissertation follows the logic of the great periods in theater history - the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Classicism and Baroque, Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernism and Post-Modernism, along with their internal divisions and trends. The entire second chapter, *Modeling Space*, is concerned with filtering the problem of theatrical space through the logic of this chronological order. The text impresses with the author's good erudition, whose story demonstrates a solid knowledge of the facts and confident navigation in the analysis of the transitions from era to era. In this broad review, Petar Denchev not only points out facts, but highlights important moments and seeks answers to complex questions. He not only emphasizes the strong connection of the theater with the urban culture, but thinks of the theater as an urban phenomenon (pp. 50-51) and traces comprehensively and in detail the births and disappearances, revivals and new appearances of various theatrical lines of argument - from the hillsides and *agora* of the ancient Greek polis with the appearance of the first theatrical facilities, through the theatralisation of churches and squares in the medieval city, through the subsequent appearance of indoor theaters in the late Renaissance and national theaters of the Enlightenment, to leaving the theatrical buildings in modern and postmodern times. Here it is important to note that Petar Denchev's story is by no means just a story about the development of stage architecture or scenography, because in parallel with it he traces the important fluctuations in how the theater space is constructed and thought in abstract and purely artistic plan, as fiction. Through the prism of the classical concept of "mimesis" and

the modern concept of "proxemics" (both concepts are presented in the first chapter) Peter Denchev commented on the ever-changing understandings of theatrical space - how it is shared, common, social space in which viewers and actors can be mixed, and to what extent it is an ideal, aesthetic space, abstracted with the help of various artistic strategies such as perspective.

As I have already mentioned, Petar Denchev tried to introduce and problematize this complex understanding of theatrical space in the first chapter *The problem of space*. In it, he considers it "... as a metacategory that includes, equally, in a single flow of time, representation and observation; respectively - those who make theater and those who watch it." (p.12). Initially, he filtered the problem through the prism of physics and metaphysics and quickly sketched the different understandings of space in the two iconic contemporaries - Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz, then the focus shifted entirely to the philosophical side, avoiding the notions of some iconic Plato period figures of the cave, the essays of Bertrand Russell, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard. Phenomenology is also mentioned as an important aspect of the philosophical understanding of space, and here I think that the text would definitely be enriched if we add a comment to one of the most emblematic works in this field - "Poetics of Space" by Gaston Bachelard. In this case, however, such an omission can be justified by the fact that philosophy is used only as a possible perspective, and not as a basic or unique one.

The focus of the dissertation is primarily empirical and it is developed in the third, fourth and fifth chapters, which are devoted to the problem of theatrical space entirely in the Bulgarian context. Here Petar Denchev, in addition to continuing in a way analogous to the previous chapters with a precise and chronological historical analysis, but also now completely shifts the attention to the empirical side of the problem, which was also formulated at the beginning. For the author, from an aesthetic point of view, the appearance of the theater director from the end of the 19th century as a modern, emancipated and independent creative figure is very important, and for the very topic of the dissertation of importance is the tendency for the formation of couples between the set designer, and the director sharing common artistic pursuits and then begin to work often or exclusively together (pp. 34-35). The three chapters dedicated to the Bulgarian theater impress with a very good and in-depth knowledge of the subject. For this purpose, Petar Denchev, in addition to studying a very large number of existing studies by Bulgarian specialists and materials in the press, also collected a wealth of illustrative material and conducted special interviews, so necessary for the reconstruction of the performances. Petar Denchev situates the in-depth problematization of the theatrical space in the Bulgarian context in the interwar period, mostly through the work of directors such as Geo Milev, Nikola Masalitinov, Isak Daniel, Hrisan Tsankov and their set designers. The author highlights two important phenomena to which the last two separate chapters are dedicated - the emergence of sustainable creative tandems director - set designer in the 60s, 70s and 80s of the

twentieth century in the fourth chapter, and the curious moment of "occupation" of various spaces both in the theater buildings themselves (ceilings, foyers, interiors on the stage, etc.) and outside the theater (streets, buildings) in the 90s of the twentieth century, in the last fifth chapter of the work. The text of both chapters is very detailed and encyclopedically comprehensive. A large number of artists and performances are listed, and here my only recommendation would be for a subsequent re-organization of the text (if the author would like to publish it), which will be able to underline even more clearly the leading highlights and trends.

In conclusion, I find the dissertation as a very thorough and detailed research, which impresses with rich knowledge of world and Bulgarian theater and erudite analysis. I recommend that its author, Petar Denchev, be awarded the educational and scientific degree "Doctor".

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/ Assoc. Prof. Dr. Asen Terziev /