

REVIEW

On Petar Denchev's dissertation

Use and Function of Space in the Theatrical Performance

from 1968 to the Present Day

by Prof. DSc Nikolay Yordanov

The key object of Petar Denchev's dissertation is the theatrical space both as an aspect of historical development in the Bulgarian stage practice and as a theoretical problem for the study of the performance.

The work presented for defense is structured in five main chapters, each of which has its own subsections. There is an introduction and conclusion covering the main conclusions of the dissertation, a bibliography, as well as publications by the author related to the researched topic. Together with the bibliography, the total volume of the work amounts to 335 standard pages.

The first impression that one gets when reading the text is the wide theoretical and historical horizon to which the author's gaze is directed. In most cases, and as a whole, it can be stated that the author proves his erudition and analytical potential to cope with such an ambitious task.

The first chapter is essentially a historical-theoretical laying of the foundations of the study offered to us by Petar Denchev. He describes theatrical space as *a place and territory* in which historical consensuses on urban and architectural structure, on theatrical codes and individual creative insights, but also on social interaction and social hierarchy are intricately intertwined. P. Denchev defines the artistic space that the theatrical performance builds as follows: “the space in the classical theater is a space of the plot, dominated by the logos, expressing linguistic reflexes” (p. 32), while “The artistic reality after the performative turn works with the real, authentic images... This return to the “found” reality ..., represents a change of the ways of transfer of the images from reality to fiction.” (p. 33). These definitions become the basis for the author's entire study.

Chapter two of the dissertation lays down the historical development of the ideas and constructions of space in the theater. Here, too, the author's view is as broad as possible - he presents the basic changes that have taken place in the European scene from antiquity to the present day. In following these changes, the author demonstrates a rich erudition and knowledge of basic historical research on stage space. This 60-page section of the paper has a significant degree of autonomy over the entire study.

Chapter three of the paper focuses entirely on the Bulgarian realities. It offers a historical analysis of theatrical development in view of the researched topic from the

first theatrical events to the end of the Second World War. Although a chapter on the post-war period up to the end of the 1950s is added, which examines the aesthetic consequences of the radical social upheaval after 1944. The author follows the same punctuality as in the previous part of the study, presenting historical developments, the main names of directors and scenographers who change the understanding of the stage space, as well as emblematic performances from the years under consideration. A certain compositional restructuring could be desired here, as the last subchapter contradicts the title of the chapter, and the time after 1944 is a completely new historical period. In a sense, the subchapter on ideological culture of the second half of the 1940s and 1950s is much more logically linked to the next chapter of the work, which examines the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and it can play the role of outlining the new theatrical model of socialist realism from which the most creative directors and scenographers have been pushing back over the last three decades of the regime.

Actually the fourth chapter is the beginning of the consideration of the period after 1968, which is the main interest of the author. Along with the fifth chapter, which is dedicated to the 90s of the last century and the first two decades of the new one, it dissects the historical time in which the creative tandems between directors and scenographers, object of the present work, are laid.

Chapter four starts with a presentation of the debates of the 1960s, when new trends in theatrical production met with accusations from the normative aesthetics of "formalism." A special place is dedicated to the directors of the so-called Burgas group, which actually manifested a new stage language at the very end of the 50s. The development of the creative tandems between Leon Daniel and Mladen Mladenov, Venelin Tsankov and Mihail Mihailov, Metodi Andonov and Ivan Kirkov/Stefan Savov has been carefully followed. After their presentation, P. Denchev follows the logic of the emergence of creative tandems, introducing successive figures and performances that formed theatrical achievements in the years between 1968 and 1989. In the 70s, the creative tandems between directors and set designers such as Nikolai Lyutskanov - Georgi Ivanov, Lyuben Groys - Georgi Nozharov, Panteley Pantelev - Svetoslav Genev, Slavi Shkarov - Neiko Neikov, Mladen Kiselov - Stefan Savov and others have been subject to study. And in the 80's the most radical breakthroughs in normative theatrical aesthetics were considered through the work of directors and scenographers such as Stoyan Kambarev and Violeta Radkova, Vazkresia Viharova and Zarko Uzunov, Elena Tsikova and Krassimir Vulkanov, Ivan Dobchev and Vyacheslav Parapanov, and others. Along with the emphasis on personalities and productions, the work offers a more panoramic view of the development of theatrical scenography both as thinking of the set and as concrete spatial solutions. In this chapter, the author uses reconstructions of theatrical performances, based on memories, reviews, archived photographs and sketches.

The fifth, final chapter of the study covers the three decades after 1989 or the time of the postmodern stage space, as the author defines it in the subtitle of the chapter. In it, along with the ongoing creative path of the most interesting directors and scenographers, the author presents new figures that push forward the development of Bulgarian theater such as the tandems between Yavor Gardev and Nikola Toromanov, Galin Stoev and Marina Raichinova, Alexander Morfov and Elena Ivanova, Lilia Abadjieva and Vasil Abadjiev, Margarita Mladenova and Daniela Oleg-Lyahova and others. Presented also in this chapter are the latest developments of ideas and practices for the theatrical space, related to the names of the youngest generations of directors and scenographers, some of whom left the conventional stages and worked in an alternative environment.

Viewed as a whole, the dissertation of Petar Denchev conscientiously and with methodical sequence reveals the changes that historically occur with theatrical space in both the European and the Bulgarian theater. The research is focused, of course, in a strictly defined historical period and it manages to reveal the processes of development of the Bulgarian theater in more than half a century of its recent history. The chosen perspective on this historical development - the tandems between the director and the set designer - is completely adequate to the specifics of the stage practice and illuminates in an interesting way our understanding of it. Along with the demonstrated theoretical and historical knowledge, the author has studied numerous archives, memoirs and critical reflections on the performances that come into the field of view of this study. The dissertation with understanding presents basic theoretical, historical and critical views of Bulgarian theater researchers.

Undoubtedly all this is a contribution to the history of Bulgarian theater while the thematic focus of the studied problem has not been so systematically researched up to now.

Some editing and corrections could be useful to the presented dissertation, especially if it has the ambition to be published later as a monograph. First of all, the historical overview of the world theater, as well as of the Bulgarian theatrical practice, until the beginning of the researched period are too long in relation to the chapters, which shed light directly on the time period indicated in the title of the dissertation. This obvious disproportion could be changed either by expanding the last part of the study or by reducing the exposition in the first, second and third chapters of the text.

However, this is only a note for a future monograph - in its current volume the text twice exceeds the required volume for a dissertation. Moreover, I want to explicitly emphasize that it is a valuable study of a significant problem in the history of Bulgarian stage practice, as well as that it analyzes an important aspect of the theory of performance, such as the problem of theatrical space. The author demonstrates a very broad theatrical culture and excellent knowledge of theatrical practices and theories.

All this gives me reason to conclude that the presented for defense dissertation of Peter Denchev *Use and Function of Space in the Theatrical Performance from 1968 to the Present Day* is a serious and significant study and has all the qualities its author to be awarded the educational scientific degree Doctor.

I am voting "YES".

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