

## REVIEW

By Prof. Dr. Veneta Doycheva, NATFA "Krastio Sarafov"

on the dissertation *Use and Function of Space in the Theatrical Performance  
from 1968 to the Present Day*

by **Petar Borislavov Denchev**

for receiving the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in Theater Studies and  
Theater Art, 8.4

Scientific adviser - Prof. DSc Kamelia Nikolova

The dissertation studies a problem that covers a bunch of questions, not just complex and raising new questions but in its essence related to the fundamental base of theater aesthetics. The author emphasizes this from the very beginning of his work and to a large extent subordinates the whole research to the elucidation of the rich directions through which the category of space in the theatrical phenomenon can be made meaningful. Consistently and argumentatively, he introduces the various aspects of the understanding of the problem of space and demonstrates an excellent ability to perform two research operations synchronously - to present each question in its broad outline and to indicate the clarifying concretizations. Thus, the whole presentation traces both the thinking about space and the practice of spatiality in the theater. This double analytical effort (of theoretical and practical terms) occurs in the perspective of historical dynamics and gives the research work solidity and density. The author is informed both about the facts of theatrical history and about the main ideas of the theory of/about the theater and confidently handles a huge array of materials relevant to the problem. It is important to note that Denchev refers to various sources - works of art (plays from virtually the entire history of European theater), theoretical works (research on theater, drama, acting, directing, scenography), historical research (dedicated to the European and the Bulgarian theater, as well as more general works on political and social history), numerous author's testimonies (critical reviews of performances, as well as documented by him personal statements of artists, directors, artists and researchers), documents (photos, personal archives of artists and theater troupes, chronicle-documentary publications). It should be especially emphasized that the author is able to read and interpret his sources and extract from them the necessary information. The balance between the different research fields has been made successfully and the often mentioned characteristic of the interdisciplinary approach here is filled with content. Another contribution of the dissertation dominates the entire presentation and gives it a specific authorial character. This is the tendency towards a

philosophical attitude towards the researched problem. In the dimensions of the search for what is the "use and function of space" in Bulgarian theater, the principles of philosophical attitude are expressed in a consistent and careful separation of the links that are built between the ideas of spatial occurrence and the achieved theatrical imagery. A significant part of this issue is the reception of the theatrical event, largely determined by the types of spatial organization.

Stepping on these grounds in the research approach, the author structures the exposition in a corresponding logic. In the first two parts, Denchev introduces his working concepts, which bring together a wide range of problems analyzed by previous researchers. Its purpose is to reach his own definition of the category of space in the theater. In a synthesis of the views of theatergoers, philosophers and humanists, he proposes to think of space as a "metacategory": "Space in theater is imposed as a metacategory that includes equal, in a single flow of time, representation and observation; respectively - those who make theater and watch it." (p. 12) This basic principle, from which the researcher starts, deepens in clarifying the reasons, thanks to which, one or another space can be thought of as "theatrical". In this point the author develops an analysis of factors such as: sensibility (subjective perception of the viewer) and fiction (built by the director and set designer field of action in figurative concreteness). It is this combination of individual attitudes and cultural and social conventions that brings out the figures of the director and the set designer as the main agents for building the theatrical space that the dissertation explores. Thanks to the connection indicated as an extremely important factor for the existence of the theatrical phenomenon (directing - scenography), the author points out serious examples of stable partnership relations between theatricals with these two professions in Europe and in Bulgaria.

The study offers a detailed commentary on the use of space in theater in a historical perspective. The second part of the dissertation clarifies in detail the ideas and practices that the great historical epochs and aesthetic schools go through to express their values and figurative principles, analyzed here from the point of view of space. In these pages the author's ability to highlight both the artistically specific and to make his own characteristics of the experience of the space by the artists and the audience is evident. Another important idea stands out as a result of the historical overview. The author observes that the basic ideas and uses of space exist as variants at different historical moments and awaken to new life sometimes after a long time, due to the emergence of unexpected social and cultural circumstances, or rediscovery of their principles by new creative personalities.

From these approaches of theoretical and historical character the author reaches the central part of his research. The study of the Bulgarian specifics of the problem of space in the theater follows the same historical principle. The situation has been consistently clarified from the first attempts to the developed theatrical activity until

the Second World War. P. Denchev points out the intensive development of the Bulgarian practice, related to the professionalization of the theater and the difficult gaining of self-confidence in all theatrical professions. From the point of view of the researched issues, he characterizes the attitude towards space as first following the popular European practices and subsequent infiltration of certain innovative ideas. In the decades before the Second World War, the "director's question" stood as a major problem, and going through its solution, the theater must find different aspects of the stage space. The author points out the critical activity of Sirak Skitnik, Boris Espe, Geo Milev, Lyudmil Stoyanov, Isak Daniel, who present new directions related to the need to reform the aesthetics of general theatrical thinking. He carefully notes that the new ideas are related to European influences in the direction of the anti-realist principle, seeking a more universal imagery. During this period, according to the researcher, it is difficult to argue for established creative partnerships between directors and set designers. An exception is the case of Hrisan Tsankov and Ivan Penkov, defined as "proto-tandem". The artist Max Metzger, who works with different directors and follows a free and unparalleled line in his spatial decisions, is also analyzed as an interesting creative figure.

The period after World War II is analyzed through a focus on the generally different political system that was established in Bulgaria and the dependence of all arts on the dictates of the doctrine of socialist realism. The theater faced its new challenges in the situation of subordination and control by the state. P. Denchev singles out as a leading problem related to theatrical imagery the mandatory imposition of admissibility prescriptions, which in relation to the stage space accept only the parameters of the literal copying of reality - a fact which he binds to the officially imposed philosophical Reflection Theory (in Bulgarian its defender is Todor Pavlov). The researcher provides his definition of the theatrical aspect of the obligatory realistic interpretation of the world in socialist aesthetics: "virtual" space, i.e. "The space that claims to be realistic, but is constructed only of "desirable" figures" (p. 167). Based on a skillful analysis of the official opinions on socialist realism, expressed in articles in the press in the 1940s and 1950s, and contemporary interpretations of this doctrine, P. Denchev has a solid theoretical toolkit to study in detail what the thinking about space in the Bulgarian theater in the decades after the Second World War is moving.

In his observations on the problem, the author introduces another research thesis through which he points out that in the years of the socialist state the processes in the theater were heterogeneous and could not be united by a common name. The internal divisions of the period, connected with the political processes and with echoes of events on the international scene, also determine a process of gradual shifting of the dogmatic layers and manifestations of aesthetic resistance.

The central parts of the dissertation consider the interpretation of space as a trend that intensifies the searches that began in the 50s in the field of conventionality, theatricality and metaphor. The significant contribution of the directors from the "Burgas Four" to the processes of renewal and original imagery is also indicated as an important moment in the line of the beginning of the formation of strong partnerships between director and set designer. From now on, the researcher studies the decades of the 60s, 70s and 80s and points out the movements of ideas that engage the attention of creative tandems and are expressed both in their direct staging work and in articles and discussions in the specialized press. A huge number of performances and stage interpretations in theaters across the country have been conceived. Names could be given, but there are many examples to work with. The author traces tandems, which sometimes have a long existence and fruitful results. The activity of some creative personalities is so intense that they form new partnerships, and the reason for this is the system of theatrical organization, which connects the director and the artist with colleagues from the troupe to which they belong. The existence of lasting creative tandems is cited as evidence of the stabilization of directing as a leading component in the theatrical process and as a factor that expresses important messages and manages to overcome political constraints through its own interpretive meanings. The space is increasingly decided in the direction of emphasized plasticity, dynamics of plans, constructivist findings, combination of stylistic borrowings and quotes, open play with the realities of the stage, mixing of epochs, consolidation of the suggestion of diverse materiality, inclusion of photos of different sizes, collages, independent work with light. Within the limits of these decades, there was a gradual saturation with emphasized spectacle, playfulness, attempts in the field of theatrical deformation, parody and political criticism. Again, the pair of director-scenographer figures are a leading factor in overcoming the limitations coming from the official authorities and thanks to their ingenuity the theater becomes a place of active dialogue with the audience, where the Aesopian language speaks with new intensity. Processes are outlined that show a definite departure from the realistic beginning and various variants of solutions that solve the space as an environment possible in all directions of fantasy. The first manifestations of assimilation ("occupation") in various places (in the theater building or outside) are highlighted, which are transformed into theatrical and thus actively comprehend the connection between physical, semantic and stage space.

Logically, the study came up to the changes in political life that occurred after 1989, which radically overturned all aspects of theatrical life. As the most important change that has occurred in the use of space, P. Denchev points out the "occupation" of many different places and their transformation into specific terrains for unique theatrical actions. This process is traced in the logic of turning the theater building, stage and hall into unexpected connections of transformations of the spectator and stage field. All the possibilities of the architectural space have been mastered, new points of view

have been built, new interactions have been created. The movement in this direction leads to a new phenomenon - directing space. The last decade of the twentieth century and the transition to the twenty-first is a time dominated by the ideas of postmodernism. The demand for the effect of proxemics as a specific theatrical effect is intensifying. Another fundamental novelty is highlighted and this is the "emancipated space" defined by P. Denchev (a name that he adapts starting from site specific-theater). In the line of this spatial use, performances appear that assimilate an authentic non-theatrical environment and build an imagery connected with the characteristics of different real places.

The dissertation and the abstract undoubtedly represent an independent, in-depth author's research on an important aspect of theatrical art. The originality of the mentioned observations, the breadth of the included ideas and independent definitions of tendencies, personal creative tandems and theatrical facts undoubtedly give the work a modern critical color.

The volume of the research (332 pages), the voluminous bibliography in several languages (98 sources) and the publications on the topic in authoritative editions confirm the characteristics of the dissertation as an in-depth scientific work.

Based on all this, I am convincingly voting with YES for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Petar Denchev.

Reviewer

Prof. Dr. Veneta Doycheva

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