

REVIEW

By Prof. DSc Kamelia Nikolova

On the competition materials for acquiring the academic position of Professor in Film Studies, Film Art and Television (History of Bulgarian Cinema and Cinema Culture), professional field 8.4. Theatre and Film Art, for the needs of the Screen Arts Department Institute of Art Studies – BAS) announced in the State Gazette (issue 47 / 04.06.2024) with one candidate Assoc. Prof. DSc ALEXANDER DONEV

For the competition announced for the needs of the Screen Arts Department of the Institute of Art Studies at BAS Assoc. Prof. DSc Alexander Donev has presented his academic research work *Zlatan Dudow. The Straight Path to Cinema. From Tsaribrod via Sofia to Berlin*, (published by the Institute of Art Studies, BAS, 2023) and seven academic studies and articles presented at important academic conferences and forums and published in collective studies or other prestigious publications.

In all the presented texts Alexander Donev clearly states his interest in the history of Bulgarian cinema and especially in the little explored or not explored at all areas, directions and personalities in it. A distinct feature of his research is his aspiration to doubt existing clichéd narratives and categorizations and to seek the facts and developments hidden behind them. At the same time, thanks to his rich erudition and knowledge in fields adjacent to cinema such as theatre, other arts and history, he places the object under scrutiny in a much broader historical and cultural context. A particularly convincing manifestation of the above characteristics of the research strategy of Alexander Donev is his book on Zlatan Dudow (1903-1963).

The decision to prepare a detailed and objective biographical study of the life and career of the so significant but little-known and almost forgotten German film director from Bulgarian origin, who played an important role in the history of German and European cinema between the two world wars and established himself as a major figure in GDR film production until the early 1960s would certainly point out this thesis one of the undisputed contributions of the proposed research work.

Alexander Donev set himself the difficult task not only to investigate, complement and update the existing three main biographical books on Zlatan Dudow, but to start his research from the very beginning by trying to conscientiously and with respectable consistency retrieve all extant data and materials about him. The three biographies of Zlatan Dudow are by the East German film critic and historian Hermann Herlinghaus, based on the author's conversations with the director and published in 1965 after the latter's unexpected death two years earlier in an automobile crash, the publication *Zlatan Dudow (1903-1963)* by the French researcher Yves Aubry from 1970 and "Zlatan Dudow. A Creative Portrait" by the

Bulgarian film critic Alexander Grozev which published in 1970. Donev points out that the above-mentioned biographical texts do not differ much and the last two almost fully reproduce the text by the German critic. In the spirit of the imposed ideological doctrine in Eastern Europe and, respectively, in Bulgaria and East Germany (GDR) after the Second World War, the main aim of the three biographies is to outline the profile of Zlatan Dudow as a consistent and purposeful anti-fascist and communist, who built himself up in the 1920s and 1930s and legitimately became one of the founders of the East German cinema of socialist realism from the late 1940s to the early 1960s.

To abandon this cliché about Zlatan Dudow by replacing it with a presentation of the director's complete life, full of life and historical vicissitudes and devoted to cinema, is one of the two main aims of Alexander Donev's monograph. The other is no less important and consists in the desire to overcome the long-standing creative injustice associated with Zlatan Dudow's most significant work (both in his own professional biography and in the history of German and European cinema), the 1931 film *Kuhle Wampe* ("Empty Stomachs"): *Or to Whom Does the World Belong?*) („*Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt?*“). In the history of European cinema, the film is accepted as the first manifestation and the progenitor of political cinema that promoted communist ideas outside the targeted propaganda film production of the then Soviet Union. Innovative as a theme and as a cinematic work "in 99% of the cases", as Alexander Donev says, is attributed to Bertolt Brecht, who in fact is only one of the three authors of the script and was invited to do so by Zlatan Dudow, who is credited with the conception and creation of the initial version of the script and is the director of the film. The formulation of these two important cases, their problematization and the focus on their revision and rethinking is another undeniable scholarly contribution of the text.

To realize these two main intentions Alexander Donev undertook, as already mentioned, to track down all the documents and data related to the life and work of Zlatan Dudow and to build on them a new, detailed and as objective as possible biography of the director. He has a clear understanding that this is a long process, insofar as it involves searching for and researching documents in archival funds and other sources and institutions in several European countries, such as Bulgaria, Germany, France and Switzerland, where Zlatan Dudow resided at various stages of his life. This led him to the legitimate decision to realize his intention as a larger biographical work, from which the monograph proposed for the competition, *Zlatan Dudow. The Straight Path to Cinema. From Tsaribrod via Sofia to Berlin*" is the first part.

In this first part Alexander Donev traces the first 22 years of Zlatan Dudow's life - the time since his birth in January 1903. His early childhood and adolescent years here, through his family's settlement in Sofia and especially his defining time at the Third High School for Boys in the capital, where he received his secondary education, to his departure for Berlin in November 2022 and the ambitious young man's first years in the great European city, where he set out to realize his dream of pursuing a career in film and theatre.

I will highlight a few particularly significant, in my opinion, in addition to the above-mentioned contributions, in the monograph as the first part of its author's intention for a comprehensive biographical study of Zlatan Dudow's life and professional career.

An important centerpiece of the study is the book's first and most voluminous chapter, entitled *Zlatan Dudow - Overlooked and Underestimated* (19-52) and described by the author as “something of an introduction”. In fact, it is detailed and written based on serious research and in-depth knowledge of both Zlatan Dudow's legacy and the narrower context of the development of European and German cinema from their emergence until the 1960s, as well as of the overall socio-cultural and political context of the time in question. I would single out as the most important contribution here the study of the authorship of the film *Kuhle Wampe* (screenwriters Zlatan Dudow, Bertolt Brecht and Ernst Otwald, director Zlatan Dudow) and specifically the reasons for the inaccurate view that the film is the work of Bertolt Brecht.

Among the many interesting and useful facts, some of which are researched and referred to for the first time, I would of course highlight as a particularly contributory quality of the study the recollection and elucidation of a little commented but extremely defining principle in the creation of many of the experimental and avant-garde works in the field of epic and political theatre and art, and, as the monograph makes clear, in the formative 1920s and 1930s talking cinema. This principle was introduced by Erwin Piscator and then, in 1927, taken up by Bertold Brecht during the creation of the dramaturgical adaptation *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk*, based on Jaroslav Hasek's unfinished novel of the same name, for Piscator's celebrated play of the same name. We are talking about the so-called “dramaturgical collective” - a collective of playwrights who created the adaptations for Piscator's epic theatre and to which he invited Brecht, and subsequently Brecht continued and developed this collective way of preparing texts in his performances. Alexander Donev accurately points out that this is the way the script for *Kuhle Wampé* was made. And Zlatan Dudow himself had previously been a similar co-writer in the making of the adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* (not for nothing did Peter

Uvaliev, in his BBC radio talk about the film in 1987, recall that the complete collected works of Brecht listed the myth breaker Zlatan Dudow under the title *The Threepenny Opera*). In elucidating the principle of the "dramaturgical collective" that the two friends and collaborators Brecht and Dudow used in their work, Alexander Donev carefully but clearly points out another defining fact about Brecht's "seizure" of authorship of the film alone. Apart from the notoriety gained just then with the premiere of his 1928 production of *The Threepenny Opera* and the compliance of the team preparing the film with some new censorship rules that had emerged (detailed in the study), a key reason remains nevertheless the traditional behavior of the iconic theatre director in this respect. Brecht as a rule worked with a collective of authors, but then his works bore only his name.

Another important contribution of the text is the broad interdisciplinary approach to the examination of the early years of Zlatan Dudow's life and first steps towards cinema and theatre, in which, along with the specific data on the object of study, other particularly significant and useful for further research cultural fields and interrelations are presented - the community of Bulgarian students, intellectuals, writers and actors in Berlin and Munich, the formation of their different political and aesthetic views, which also determined their subsequent development.

Finally, the monograph also impresses with its author's consistent, detailed and professional research of many archival materials and documents in several holdings such as the State Archives Agency, the "Archive for Cinema and Media Art" of the Academy of Arts in Berlin, the National Archives of France, the Archives of the French Cinematheque and the Paris Prefecture.

After all that has been said so far, as well as from the other materials submitted for the competition and from my personal impressions of Assoc. Prof. DSc Alexander Donev as a proven professional in the field of film studies, film criticism and film distribution and management, I am convinced that he is a worthy candidate for the academic position of "Professor" in Film Studies, Film Art and Television at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and I support his candidature to the Scientific Council.

31 October 2024.

Prof. DSc Kamelia Nikolova