

REVIEW

By Prof. Dr. Stanimir Trifonov

For the participation of Assoc. Prof. DSc Alexander Donev Angelov in the competition 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, announced in the State Gazette (issue 47 / 04.06.2024) for the needs of the Screen Arts Department of the Institute of Art Studies in accordance with ord. N419 from July 1st, 2024, of the director Prof. Dr. Joanna Spassova-Dikova

In the last few years, the growing number of academic publications dedicated to both contemporary Bulgarian cinema and its history has been noticeable. In this reflective context, the monograph of Assoc. Prof. DSc Alexander Donev, “Zlatan Dudow – The Straight Path to Cinema. From Tsaribrod via Sofia to Berlin”, which is the main element in the respectable set of documents of Mr. Donev as a candidate in the competition is quite impressive.

I became acquainted with this unique work a few months ago on another occasion, but even then, I was deeply impressed both by the object of the study and the way it was created.

In the overall silence during communism, and after its end - past the euphoria of the change of epochs, the personality, theatrical and film works of Zlatan Dudow remained marginal, even unknown. And we cannot but congratulate the author with gratitude, because his research efforts are not only successful, but also because he has returned to Bulgarian cultural history a unique European figure. The work is a contribution not only to the author's academic and administrative career, but also to our entire film historiography.

Already at the level of architectonics the composition stands out for its originality. The placement of Peter Uvaliev's essay even before the emotional preface is proof of Al. Donev's wish "to stay in the shadows" and give space to our celebrities to be the first to introduce us to the topic. He sticks to this principle until the very end of the text, which is not only a sign of principle and taste, but also modesty.

In the introduction, he reasonably elucidates the causal links between oblivion and neglect of his object of study. From here (and to the conclusion) the author will analyze in detail two mutually conditioned dependencies between the complexity of the eras (before and after World War II) and the personality of Zlatan Dudow.

The main section "The Straight Path to Cinema" strictly adheres in its structure to the life chronology of Dudow's biography. Serious space and attention are devoted to both his family history and the tragic historical fate of Tsaribrod as a Bulgarian settlement. But these are not local history enumerations of bare facts, but action-oriented analyses of the individual's eternal connection to his clan and birthplace. Even landscape details are actively included in the evidence on the subject.

And when the exposition reaches Dudow's meandering family history, then the reader accumulates knowledge through which he will later explain why the hero acts one way or another in his life path. Despite the lack of some biographical details, Al. Donev builds convincing hypotheses that are in line with the logic of Dudow's life. The study of a huge mass of our and foreign archives, literature and films used have allowed the absent facts to be logically and convincingly assumed and incorporated into the text.

After life in Tsaribrod, Zlatan Dudow's years at the uniquely mythological Third Men's Gymnasium in Sofia are extremely important to me as a reader. It was there and then that the genes embedded in life in Tsaribrod began to develop and form the personality, accompanied by wanderings in personal quests and powerful influences of powerful figures from Bulgarian and European current reality, who were teachers at the high school. The author's narrative is so detailed and convincing in its synthesis of the facts that it would be insulting to embark on a "retelling with elements of reflection".

The next four subchapters continue the original research method in a dynamic and fact- and hypothesis-supported manner. Handling the archives and memories of Dudow, Al. Donev manages to intriguingly develop the elements of the hero's life; the second is to unravel the socio-cultural context of Europe before, during and after the horrific war. And above all, how Zlatan Dudow develops as a person and an author in various dramatic situations.

The exposition successfully merges or moves in parallel both the protagonist's social and professional activities and his intimate relationship with his family. I should note that I have deliberately used terms from literary studies, since Mr. Donev has constructed his text as a documentary biographical novel, which only makes it more communicative, but without harming its scholarly manner.

It is perhaps appropriate here to note the author's attitude towards his "predecessors". As he himself informs us, two others before him had dealt with Dudow's personality - a pollster-biographer from the former GDR and a Bulgarian critic who wrote an extensive essay on the subject. Al. Donev treats both his colleagues and their works respectfully, without revisionism and with understanding of the socio-cultural and political context in which they wrote. In this way he creates an intellectual bridge and a kind of continuity that is rare in our jealous industry. This seemingly 'insignificant' detail is telling enough about the level of the candidate's professional ethics.

The period from 1922 to 1925, during which Zlatan Dudow resided in Germany, occupies a central place in the scholarly and historical research. For many decades now, scholars have focused on the period between the two world wars in Europe. This era (though it lasted only some twenty years!) was so dynamic, dramatic, and prolific of great events in science and the arts that historians and art historians will be studying it and adding to our knowledge of it for many years to come. My contention is valid with particular significance for Germany, which, after the end of the Empire and the collapse of the Weimar Republic, would experience the emergence and rule of National Socialism. Today it is hard to imagine the civilizational shock Dudow received by being caught up in this maelstrom. Although he seems to have been prepared by his great teachers from the Third Men's Gymnasium, the actual reality exceeds his expectations. His search and rift between theatre and cinema in his attractions is accompanied by contacts with leftists and communists, further aggravating his existential choices. And, I think, probably only his Balkan resilience saved him not only from persecution, but also from professional failures both in those years and later. We should not, of course, underestimate his personal qualities, intellect and talent. Moreover, during this period many Bulgarian intellectuals resided in Germany, and this created a peculiar Bulgarian context there. Many of them succeeded, others did not, but almost all of them would pay dearly and too dearly after the war for their youthful intellectual drive...

In these years Zlatan Dudow wrote (and translated) texts that can be defined as fundamental for Bulgarian film theory. Despite the inevitable influences, they open an unknown section in Bulgarian intellectual life. All this Mr. Donev carefully analyzes and then generalizes to the point of making his character's contributions relevant. This aspect of Dudow's activities is of great importance for the development of Bulgarian film periodicals; his collaboration with our publications of the time organically linked them to European film thought.

The monograph has a very elegant filmic finale; it ends “openly” as a series and leaves us with increased interest and attention to await the next series: “a sequel follows”.

It is proper here to give an adequate assessment of the application that Al. Donev has made. It consists of texts about Dudow, as well as his own materials, accompanied by facsimiles. Such a move not only makes archival sense, but also eases the reader in his attempts to create a fuller picture of the hero. And, not least, it proves the enormous research effort that the candidate has made.

Fairness demands that I share some of my disagreements with some of the author's terminology. For example: Mr. Donev knows very well that the contemporary Bulgarian historiography defines the June and September 1923 revolts as terrorist acts against the state and the constitutional order in the Kingdom of Bulgaria. The use of the term "uprising" contains a large layer of positive connotation, which is inappropriate in this case.

But my general assessment of the monograph is more than positive for all its aspects: from the research, analysis and synthesis of the facts to the narrative skill that evokes associations with the talent of the great Todor Andreykov.

Not only the academic canon, but also necessity demands that we mention the references accompanying the main scholarly text. They make it clear that Al. Donev covers and overlaps all the requirements, which becomes an additional catalyst for his success in the announced competition.

Only chronologically, and not in order of importance, I would like to pay special attention to a few more aspects of the candidate's presence in the contemporary Bulgarian cultural field. For some the adjective "complex" may sound clichéd, but in relation to what Mr. Donev has done it is quite adequate. Since I have known him since I was a student at NATFA (and that is almost forty years!), I have the claim to be a direct witness to his scientific, artistic and career development. During these years he has continuously worked with enviable success in a variety of fields.

It makes sense to start with his direct specialty - cinema studies. Al. Donev wrote for various publications since he was a student, then everything grew, and it is obvious from the attached reference what he wrote - his bibliography is impressive.

I will not miss his experience as a screenwriter, producer, playwright and consultant for several feature films and documentaries. He even wrote the first Bulgarian private music video “Doll” for the band Atlas. In general, he has the unique ability to combine the critic, the theorist and the author.

Over the years, he also held various managerial and administrative positions, where his place and role were more than tangible: director of the publishing house *Narodna Kultura*; executive director of "Sofia Film"; director of IA "National Film Centre"; executive director of "Audio Video Orpheus". How many people from our profession could provide such a list as part of their biography?

I assure you - I could go on and in detail describing the different faces of a multifaceted and diverse scholar and creative colleague of ours, but this is hardly necessary as all members of the esteemed scientific jury know him well.

After reading the materials and scholarly works presented in the competition, analyzing their significance and the academic and applied contributions contained in them, I give my fully convinced positive assessment and recommend the Scientific Jury to propose to the Scientific Council of the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences to elect Associate Professor DSc Alexander Donev Angelov to the academic position of Professor in the field of higher education 8. Arts, professional field 8.4. Theatre and Film Art, scientific specialty Film Studies, Film Art and Television.

I categorically vote "FOR"!

Prof. Dr. Stanimir Trifonov

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