

# Panorama and Stages in Development Theatre in Bulgaria: An Introductory Overview

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From the end of the fourteenth century until independence in 1878, Bulgaria was a province of the Ottoman Empire. Bulgarian theatre as an indigenous art form and industry, therefore, appeared relatively late: its history only extends back to the 1830s.

In the early nineteenth century, in Bulgaria as elsewhere, theatre stood for vice and depravity, although its naive performances, in local schools and reading rooms, tended to end in patriotic hymns, synonymous of potential revolutionary activity, sometimes threatening civil order. The authorities, with the co-operation of a compliant press, would try to cancel theatrical performances, considered as a foreign and profane art form, mainly embodied in plays by Goldoni, Hugo, Molière or Schiller.

Dobry Voinikov (born in Shumen in 1833) founded the first Bulgarian theatrical company in Braila in Romania in 1865. Located outside of Bulgaria itself, the troupe could escape the jurisdiction of Turkish and Islamic law, as well as bypass the cultural hegemony of the Greek Orthodox Church.

From these early days, drama in Bulgaria has stood as a rebel art form, an element in cultural revival and significant in moves toward political independence. The education system also provided a fertile soil for the emergence of drama.

Vassil Drumev (1840–1901), also born in Shumen, is the other acknowledged father of drama in Bulgaria. His biography, like Voinikov's, emphasizes the provincial roots of the Bulgarian theatre and its particular relationship with two key themes: national independence and cultural revival. *Ivanko*, *Assassin of Asen I* testifies to Drumev's interest in national history, while Voinikov's *Civilization Misunderstood*

(1871), the other original Bulgarian play written prior to the Russo-Turkish war, is a comic satire stigmatizing the élite's fashion for embracing all things French and disdaining solid Bulgarian values. Both *Ivanko* and *Civilization Misunderstood* are considered as landmarks in the early phase of an authentic Bulgarian drama and, as such, may still be revived from time to time.

## National Independence

The death of Voinikov in 1878 coincided with independence from Ottoman rule and new steps were taken in the development of drama, with theatre being used as a medium with which to explore nationhood and national identity. Voinikov and his followers believed that a popular and historical theatre gave every spectator the possibility to shape his/her own image, to comprehend the deeper meaning of their human mission, and to acquire a sense of national duty and responsibility.

Ivan Vazov (1850–1921), a poet and novelist, stands out as the dominant influence in the period from independence to World War I. He wrote several original plays, including *Job Hunters* (1903), a satire on contemporary careerism and ambition, but most of his plays, for example, *Khushove* (1894) and *Under the Yoke* (1910), are historical and patriotic and were adapted from his novels. Known as the 'people's poet', he constantly expressed his anger at the mediocrity of the plays produced within Bulgaria and insisted on the need for new dramatic perspectives, and of closing down a five-century long chapter of domination and suffering. His quiet, stubborn perseverance was soon to be rewarded

by the emergence of a nucleus of talented actors and directors, educated in Europe and Russia. Two theatre companies, Foundation (founded in Sofia at the Theatre Osnova in 1888) and Tears and Laughter (created by Vassil Kostov Nalburow in 1892 and directly inspired by the work of Vazov) led, in 1904, to the founding of the Bulgarian National Theatre. Under the directors Pencho Slavejkov and Peyo Yavorov the company moved into the heart of Sofia in 1907.

Characterized by artistic and intellectual unrest, the first two decades of the twentieth century saw the sudden development of various underground trends which blossomed into dramatic literature as an independent art form throughout the country. Theatre had moved to the centre of the country's cultural life and three names dominate the period: Anton Strashimirov (1872–1937), Petko Todorov (1879–1916) and Peyo Yavorov (1878–1914). Todorov was mainly a novelist, but he also invented a ballad-like genre combining folk myths with realistic characters. Javorov, combining various artistic talents, became artistic director of the National Theatre in 1907, and remains celebrated as the author of *At the Foot of Vitosha Mountain* (1911), a major dark play of protest against violence.

If Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg and Hauptmann were representative of foreign influences in

Bulgaria, a national dramaturgy had by the early years of the twentieth century firmly and fully developed.

### **From the inter-war years to the swinging fifties**

The combined influences of the German expressionist movement and Marxist aesthetics, years of training in foreign countries (mostly in Russia and Germany) paved the way for the introduction of directors as the central figures in the interpretation of text, emphasizing the necessity of directorial techniques in the staging of drama. Geo Milev (1895–1925) and Hrisan Tzankov (1890–1971) were both influenced by Max Reinhardt. Appointed director of the National Theatre (1924–44), Tzankov tried to synthesize music, dance, poetry after Wagner's ideal model. In 1925, Nicolai Ossipovich Massalitinov settled at the National Theatre where he remained in power for four decades (until 1977). He introduced the techniques of Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, and established the principle of a training school for actors, thus co-operating with local actors. As a consequence, new levels of performance were achieved.



**Figure 1.** Theatre Osnova, Sofia.

The mid-1920s marked the beginning of a troubled era in Bulgaria, and led to a series of catastrophes in theatre. It started in 1923 with the destruction by fire of the National Theatre Building. An abortive uprising against the regime (also in 1923) introduced the blacklisting of many theatre professionals, a situation aggravated in 1925 by an assassination attempt against the Bulgarian Tsar and followed by a massive purge of hundreds of intellectuals, among them Geo Milev, the avant-garde modernist poet and director of the National Theatre.

In 1929 the National Theatre was, however, rebuilt, on its former site, to the highest and most modern specifications and with a capacity of 1150. The theatre saw significant productions by the directors Massalitinov, Danovsky, Tzankov, and Fol and companies that included the actors Kostov, Yovkov, Stoyanov and Tenev. Actors and directors joined forces in the creation of a new training school for actors. In this context Todor Pavlov worked to lay the foundation of Bulgaria's socialist theatre.

The theatre building was renovated in the 1970s and, at that time, was rededicated to Ivan Vazov. At the beginning of World War Two, theatre in Bulgaria remained characterized by the emphasis on directorial technique. The development of dramatic art in Sofia, Pleven,

Burgas or Varna was mainly asserted as revolutionary and political.

Gyorgy Dimitrov (1882–1949), secretary of the Workers' Trade Union, founded the Bulgarian Artists' Union in 1919 advocating, on the basis of social democratic principles, better relationship between the state and the individual, and paving the way for the development of experimental theatres such as the Theatre Studio (Teatar Studia, Isaac Daniel, 1894–1942) and the Experimental Theatre (Opiten Teatar, Stephen Sarchadjiev, 1912–65), promoting artistic development through workers' associations and theatres in the 1930s. Politically committed, the company of the Blue Shirts (Sineite Blouzi) appeared in Sofia in 1930.

The Bulgarian Socialist Revolution (9 September 1944) encouraged professional artists to think and to perform in revolutionary modes. Directors and playwrights initiated work in close collaboration, shaping new perspectives in modern drama. At the National Theatre *The Fight Goes On* (1944) by Krum Kuliavkov, directed by N. Massalitinov, was the first of many team-productions—including *We Are Not Angels* by N. Yordanov, directed by A. Shopov, *The Poet and the Mountain* by I. Teofilov, directed by L. Daniel, *The Prosecutor* by G. Djagarov, directed by E. Halachev, *Romeo*



Figure 2. Theatre Osnova, Sofia.



**Figure 3.** Playbill announcing a performance of Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, 18 February 1890, at 8 p.m. by the Osнова Company. The play was adapted by Guenediev. As was customary then, a military band was due to play during the interval.

and *Juliet, Petroleum* by I. Radoev, directed by A. Shopov, *The Old Man and the Arrow* by N. Russev, directed by M. Andonov.

The theatre of Burgas became part of the national heritage. State-subsidized, headed by Stefan Karalambov, the company devoted most of its efforts to the production of Bulgarian plays. Generally state support was granted to encourage the development of a national, state-controlled repertoire, with the opening of new playhouses (six in Sofia, and thirty-five elsewhere in the country); some of them were soon to become major companies or theatres (like Varna, for example). It was hoped and believed that theatrical experience would thus become part of every citizen's cultural life.

Western plays remained ignored, as the focus

was firmly on national plays and their representation of the revolution, including propagandist pieces from the Soviet repertoire. Imbued with social and moral concern, they proved emotionally effective.

The need for actors, directors, critics and puppeteers was growing fast, and the Bulgarian State Theatre Academy (VITIS) was founded in 1946 to meet them. The National Youth Theatre, directed by Liliana Todorova and Georgui Kostov, was created in 1945. It was to fulfil a double role: to educate and to develop story-telling.

State goodwill and concern for culture expanded throughout the 1950s. Associated with the development of local theatre (Plovdiv, Plevae, Ruse), Tacho Tanev initiated a new approach of Gorky's work. Hristo Hristov concentrated on an epic production of Plovdiv's *People's Life*. V. Tzankov produced Ivan Radoev's first play, *It's a Small World* (1956) in Burgas. The national interest in cultural aspects culminated in 1957 when the State Theatre of Satire opened in Sofia and the cultural newspaper, *People's Culture*, initiated weekly publication.

### Winds of change, 1960–1980s

By the end the 1950s theatrical activities had become part and parcel of the Bulgarian way of life. The young socialist regime had given the impulse, the audience proved willing to respond, but creativity somehow remained hampered by dogmatic interpretations. Stalin's death in 1953 enabled eager dramatists to acquire more independence, and socialist realism gave way to a new approach of rationalization and understanding between individuals and society. From the 1960s onwards, the State Theatre of Satire was to become the focal point of new trends and more relaxed aesthetics. The 1960s opened a new phase, vital and more enlightened. A series of innovative productions followed: V. Petrov's *When the Roses Dance* was produced by Grisha Ostrovsky for the Theatre of Satire in 1961; and M. Andonov directed a superb ensemble production in Y. Radichkov's *Tumult* in 1962.

During this period directors began to favour





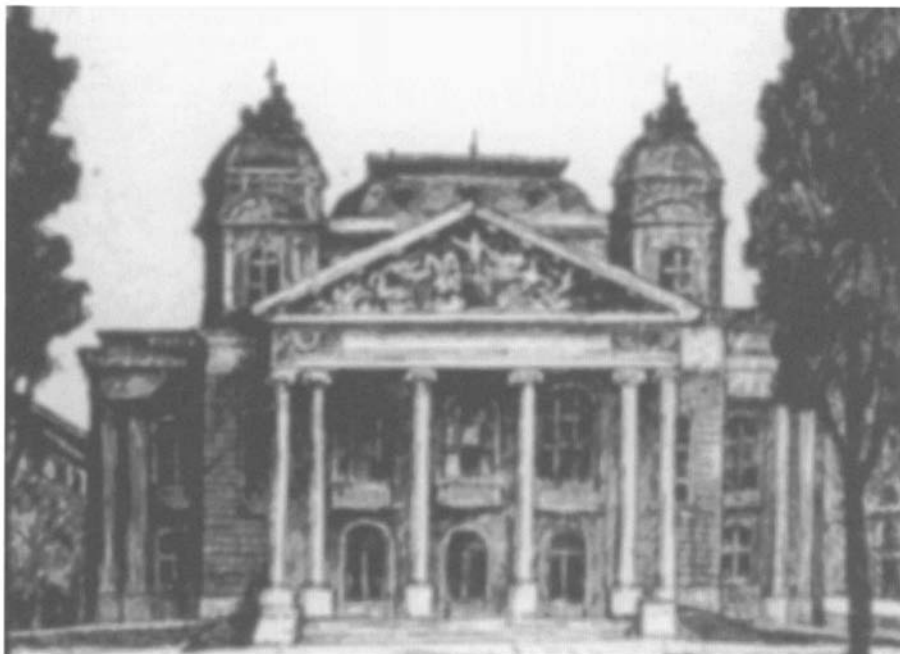
**Figure 4.** National Theatre, Sofia. An early twentieth-century photograph.

small, flexible theatrical spaces, neglecting the traditional proscenium houses. Lighting designers came to the fore, reinforcing the role of metaphor and emotion more adapted than crude realism to intimate spaces. Theatre 199 (Teatar 199), with a 199-seat auditorium, opened in 1960 as the first fringe playhouse in Bulgaria.

Valery Petrov and Ivan Radoev moved Bulgarian drama away from realism and moralizing to a more lyrical approach. Petrov blended reality and fantasy, allowing imagination to deal with individual human issues, feelings and emotions (for example, *When the Roses Dance*, *Snow*, *Improvisation*, *Musketeers' Words*) that proved equally appealing to children and parents.

Radoev's unconventional poetic satire focused on the contradiction between appearance and reality, morality and demagoguery. Across a range of texts (including *A Small World*, *The She-Cannibal*, *Miracle*, *The Hedgehog*, *Upi*) he showed how modern, mechanized ways of life induce human beings to resort to supercilious arrogance and anti-social relationships.

The new emphasis on a metaphorical approach to reality boosted the development of pantomime and puppetry groups, a traditional form of expression scattered throughout the Balkans. A school of puppetry, Kr. Sarafov, opened within VITIS under the direction of Atanas Ilkov and Nikolina Gueorguieva. The



**Figure 5.** National Theatre, Sofia. An early twentieth-century etching.

Studio Pantomime of Velyo Goranov and Vassil Indjev soon asserted its fame.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Bulgarian artists explored the memory of the nation, questioned its values, turned back to folklore as the evidence of carnival in nature, and restored plays for puppets. Historical subject matter was used as a pretext to deal with contemporary issues, such as in Nedyalko Yordanov's *Gonzago's Murder* (1987). Three names dominate the theatre landscape of that time: Radoev, Yordan Radichkov (born 1929) and Stanislav Stratiev (born 1941). Most of their plays were first produced in Sofia, at the National Theatre of Satire which emerged as the leading playhouse in the country.

Radichkov is probably the most significant playwright to portray, in visual terms, the trauma caused by the co-existence of past and present. His characters embody a rich, living, national memory deeply rooted in folk tradition. Most of his plays are based on a blend of reality and fantasy, incorporating both history and modernity; hence a display of unavoidable clashes dealt with in good humour, carnival-like jokes or metaphors. Radichkov's theatre appeals both to emotion and intellect, keeping the audience at a distance, devising a multiple

theatrical time as a link between the living and the dead, breeding down-to-earth heroes whose virtues echo the ordinary citizen's quest. *January* (1975), *Lazaritza* (1978), *Trying to Fly* (1982), *We, the Sparrows* (1991), *The Fall of Icarus*, *Crazy Grass* (both 1993), and *The Good-Natured Grass Snakes* (1994) are written for the stage, for the puppet show or even for radio drama, yet they all bring out part of that remote province buried in the ordinary human being. Radichkov's fables combine the grotesque and the complex, deconstructing, with generosity, his long-suffering heroes. His gentle smile warns off the dangers of pseudo-innovations, asserts the vitality of a crossroads territory where wolves and sheep occasionally meet.

For his part, Stratiev sports a grim smile. His plays also deal with the metaphor of the crossroads, but his perception is different, stating that society has come to a standstill and does not know which way to move. The generosity of human intercourse is resolutely hidden behind sarcasm, a parody of relationships in a social void. His dramas are peopled with self-centred, Bosch-like grotesques, frozen in outrageous deformities. Things must improve, yet they will not do so unless people begin to think by and for themselves, instead of accepting the

rules political leaders establish in their names. *The Roman Bath* (1974), *The Suede Jacket* (1976), *Bus* (1979), *The Balkans' Syndrome* (1986), *Mammoth* (1989), *The Bulgarian Model* (1991), *Other Types of Exercises* (1993) or *On the Other Side* (1996, radio play), all tend to reinforce the idea that liberty cannot be taken for granted. It makes or breaks, to be at liberty implies an individual, active process and liberty begins at home.

Those new perspectives soon appealed to Western audiences, and both Stratiev's and Radichkov's plays were eagerly translated into French, German and English.

### In search of an audience: Bulgarian theatre in the aftermath of 1989

After the collapse of the Communist Regime on 10 November 1989, the repeated cancelling of performances due to lack of audience became a common plight in Bulgarian theatres. Almost immediately the socio-political crisis developed into a cultural crisis.

The system of state-subsidized theatres and companies had long been questioned: state subsidy meant the existence of large companies and implied equal pay for all actors, playing or not playing. Star actors claimed both fame and financial reward but playing actors also expected more pay than the non-playing members of the company. The demand was met with drastic budget cuts (1990–2), affecting all companies in the national and provincial theatres: the theatre community dubbed it the 'Sturm und Drang'. Yet, subsidies continued to be distributed according to theatre staff numbers. Financial difficulties plunged the artists into social unrest, compelling them to take steps. In February 1990, a new company of twenty-five staff members evolved from the large Sofia Theatre (a company that had had seventy-eight artistic staff) and founded a 220-seat playhouse, the Small City Theatre, also known as Beyond the Canal. Led by two well-known theatre personalities, the popular actor Rousi Chanév and the director Borislav Chakrinov, it became the favourite meeting spot of the local intelligentsia. One of its first productions was Jarry's *Ubu*, a play banned from

Bulgarian stages until 1989, but secretly cherished both by the audience and the new authors equally drawn to the grotesque and absurdist techniques.

Fundamental changes occurred almost immediately. The role of the Ministry of Culture thus became increasingly limited as directors of theatres were selected among competing applicants by a committee evaluating their projects. By 1992 theatres had virtually become autonomous, all the more so as a quota of Bulgarian plays was no longer an obligation. Private companies appeared, although admittedly most of them existed on the edge of bankruptcy in spite of the national effort to promote cultural sponsorship as a way of evading taxation. While eleven private companies from Sofia—including Dialog, Alternativa, Manifaktoura, Pantadans (a pantomime and dance company) and La Strada—participated in the 1992 first festival of independent theatre, most of them were soon to disband. Experienced directors generally preferred to remain within the less risky state-owned theatre system.

The National Theatre found a new popularity through experimentation and the creation, in 1989, of a successful workshop project, *Sfumato* (Air), led by Margarita Mladenova and Ivan Dobchev. *Sfumato* acquired fame by producing plays by Chekhov and Radichkov featuring young actors from the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts (renamed in 1991 the Sarafov Higher Institute for Theatre Arts) to show their new talent. In the 1990s, several drama schools blossomed, among them, the Private Theatre School for Higher Education is worth mentioning.

By 1993, the audience had gradually found its way back to playhouses, thanks to a low-price policy. A breath of fresh air invaded the Bulgarian stages, blowing in new names: for example, Yordan Yovkov with *The Sin Called Kutzar*, (1991) and *The Sin Called Zlatii* (1992), Margarit Minkov with *The Fireplace* (1989) and *When Painters Meet About their Painting* (1996), Peter Marinkov's *Requiem* (1990), Konstantin Iliev's *Nirvana* (1996), Kamen Donev's *Pay Attention* (1998), and Kiril Merdjansky's *Tiresias* (1998). The theatrical event of the decade, however, will probably remain *The Rise and Fall of Stefan Stambolov* at the Army

Theatre in 1994. Stefan Tzanev's revisiting one of the most controversial political figures in Bulgarian history was produced by Elisabeta Bam, a vanguard theatrical group directed by Boyko Bogdanov.

Elisabeta Bam is one of those new companies with a bold international perspective (they have appeared both in Barcelona and Avignon). Indeed, the Avignon festival is now regularly visited by companies from Bulgaria. Hristo Boychev, a candidate in the last presidential elections, had his play *Colonel Bird* shown there in 1999.

Hristo Boychev belongs to that generation of new young playwrights which appeared and asserted itself in the 1990s, in the wake of the 1989 political upheaval and in the midst of considerable socio-economic changes. If their theatrical codes are different, they nevertheless share similar concerns and worries about the world. The absurdist trends in Boychev's plays may contrast with Dobрева's subtle analysis of personal relationships and Iliev's unconven-

tional and unbridled imagination, and mixing of black farce with reality. However their vision of a dysfunctional world may herald new and exciting trends for the future of Bulgarian theatre which has undoubtedly experienced a revival over the last few years. In spite of new budget cuts to the national theatres, there is an energy in new Bulgarian drama that will not easily fail.

From the very beginning, Bulgarian theatre critics considered that their role was to be that of active partners, to prove 'supportive' rather than 'critical' through analysis and debate. Two weekly newspapers deal with theatre on a regular basis, *Kultura* (Culture) and *Literaturen Forum* (Literary Forum). Since 1966 plays have been more easily published (through *Narodna Kultura*), but the system of publication still has some way to go before it can more fully contribute to the reputation of Bulgarian drama abroad. It well deserves that effort as Bulgaria's is one of the most imaginative contributions to play writing in the Western world.