

Ninety-Five Years of National Theatre in Sofia

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In 1892, after a few unsuccessful attempts at setting up some sustained theatre activity, about fifteen actors came together to start a theatre company which they called *Sulza i Smyah* (Tears and Laughter). In contrast to previous attempts, the company was more fortunate. In spite of all the difficulties it had to face, it managed to achieve a leading role in the cultural and artistic life of Sofia, the then young capital of Bulgaria, which, during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, had striven to become the intellectual as well as the administrative centre of the recently liberated country.

For twelve years, *Tears and Laughter* attracted the best Bulgarian actors and performed shows which were good enough for it to dare request from the Government that the National Assembly should grant it the means to build a modern theatre to house the company. As they were encouraged by such a decision, the actors decided that, from the beginning of 1904, *Tears and Laughter* would be called *Naroden Teater* (National Theatre): there is a play on words in Bulgarian because *Naroden* means 'popular' as well as 'national'.

Therefore 1904 has been considered as the birth date of the institution. In the meantime, the building of the new theatre, according to the plans of the Viennese architects Fechner and Helmer, was completed and officially inaugurated in 1907. As initially agreed, the State took responsibility for the financial maintenance of the National Theatre while retaining some means of intervention in its artistic direction, although the institution formally enjoyed complete autonomy.

During the first half of our century, the National Theatre firmly established itself as the representative of Bulgarian theatre, almost without any rivals in its field, becoming the reference as to rules and tastes in the choice of the repertoire. The most remarkable writers of the time were in one way or another linked to its development. The greatest poets, Pencho P. Slaveykov (1866–1912) and Peyo Yavorov (1879–1914), the novelist Anton Strashimirov (1872–1937) were at the helm of the National Theatre until the beginning of the First World War. The patriarch of Bulgarian literature, Ivan Vazov, wrote all his plays as well as the adaptation of his novels for the National Theatre.

Since the National Theatre probably enjoyed the best working conditions, it became the place where most Bulgarian plays, and this remains true to this day, were given their baptism of fire. Among them, one should mention the metaphorical and poetical drama of Petko U. Todorov (1879–1916) who, strongly influenced by Ibsen, integrated myth and folk motifs in his drama.

The light comedies of Stefan Kostov (1879–1939), an eminent ethnographer, satirized the public and political mores of the time. The plays of Yordan Yovkov (1880–1937) were inspired by his inimitable short stories and demonstrated his faith in the redeeming force of Beauty.

Initially the National Theatre was a direct emanation of the *Tears and Laughter* company, but as it grew larger, it attracted actors who either had been professionally trained abroad (in Russia, Germany or France), or whose talent had been spotted on amateur stages. The most eminent representatives of the founding

generation, those who built bridges between amateur theatre and professional theatre, were Vassil Kirkov (1870–1931), a romantic actor with a volcanic nature and an impressive stage presence, Sava Ognianov (1876–1939) whose monumental way of acting is still remembered today, Adriana Budevskva (1878–1955), the first great tragic actress on the Bulgarian stage, and Rosa Popova (1878–1949), her no less famous rival. The period which began with the inauguration of the new theatre in 1907 and ended with the involvement of the country in the First World War, has been acknowledged as a time of soaring development: new talents appeared like a constellation of stars and impressive shows were staged. They were the fruits of an experience generated by original creation, enriched by the influence of reforming ideas from Russia or Western Europe.

Those initial years were characterized by efforts to combine the best influences of European standards, with the desire to create a specifically national identity; and the search for that identity became stronger and stronger.

The poet and playwright, Pencho P. Slaveykov, who was the theatre's first director for less than a year, wrote a study entitled *National Theatre*, in which he defined the main problems facing the institution. The first concerned the position of the artistic director. At first the National Theatre tried to find someone with the creativity of a true *metteur en scène* and the authority and know-how of an administrator. As it was impossible to find such a person within Bulgaria, owing to a lack of trained professionals, one looked abroad. But one foreigner followed another in this key post. Until the mid-1920s, and in spite of its great successes, the National Theatre remained a theatre of powerful individual actors, who refused to embrace the notion of ensemble performance, which was then the new trend in leading European countries.

The repertoire of the emerging National Theatre was an eclectic, if sometimes muddled, mix of classical and contemporary playwrights: next to Shakespeare, Molière and Schiller, one could find Ibsen, Chekhov and Sudermann, as well as the most sensational plays from the current European drama production.

After the First World War, the National

Theatre appeared to be affected by some kind of weightlessness: not knowing what way to choose, having run out of ideas, it seemed exhausted. In the press, there were accusations of conservatism, and its relationships with its audience lost their former serenity. There was the need for a new generation to take over, and it proved to be a painful operation. By the mid-20s and until the end of the 1930s, a younger generation of actors—who worked closely with some great stage directors—gave the theatre a fresh lease of life. The major figure, whose influence was primordial and long-lasting, was Nikolai Massalitinov, an actor from the Moscow Art Theatre who emigrated to Bulgaria in 1925 and who was later appointed artistic director of the National Theatre, surrounded by some Bulgarian directors such as Hrisan Tzanov, Alexander Ikonografov and Nikolai Fol.

Massalitinov introduced Stanislavsky's working methods, thanks to his sound knowledge of acting and his faculty to achieve psychological realism on the stage. His school in Sofia taught most of the actors who soon formed the new nucleus of the group. Vladimir Trandafilov, Gueorgy Stamatov, Ivan Dimov, Konstantin Kissimov, Zorka Yordanova and Petia Guerganova were among the new names most often linked to the great successes of the National Theatre: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Molière's *Le Malade imaginaire*, Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness*, Corneille's *Le Cid*, to mention the most memorable productions. Krestio Sarafov, with his powerful vocal range, was and remained the leader of the group. He graduated from St. Petersburg in 1899 and was widely acclaimed for the next fifty years as the supremo of the Bulgarian stage.

Massalitinov directed all the Bulgarian and Russian plays performed at the National Theatre for over two decades. He achieved a painless but effective reform which succeeded in bringing out the best aspects of the theatre tradition while enriching it with a sense of vision and a modern approach.

Nevertheless some niggling questions are asked concerning the period: to what extent did Massalitinov's indisputable merits contain some negative aspects? In other words, to what extent have the new principles deprived the National Theatre of any contact with the vari-

ous modernist trends and estranged it from the pluralism of ideas, methods and styles?' One could answer that the 1930s was a period of stabilization and new development for the National Theatre. Its repertoire included plays by Strindberg, Pirandello, O'Neill, Wilde and Shaw while maintaining a basis of plays by Shakespeare, Molière and Schiller. It can be considered as the happiest time in the country in this century, not only in the economic field but in cultural matters as well.

After the end of World War Two and its aftermath of destruction, including severe damage to the building of the National Theatre, ideological authority was rapidly established over the arts as a direct consequence of the new political order. The stage was not spared, obviously, by such a process. Bulgaria was tied to the Soviet bloc so that henceforth most plays in the repertoire were related to the political orientation of Bulgarian and Soviet playwrights. Their staging was not linked on principle to specific artistic achievements. A group of four stage directors gathered round Massalitinov who was no longer artistic director but continued to direct plays mainly by Russian playwrights such as Gorky, Chekhov and Ostrovsky. Those four directors, Boyan Danovsky, Stefan Sarchadjiev, Krastu Mirsky and Filip Filipov, formed a team which, in the next fifteen to twenty years, determined the orientation of the National Theatre, although Danovsky left the group in 1950. Those young directors, who had been trained abroad, mainly in France and Germany, had very different personalities as well as different aesthetic conceptions.

Sarchadjiev stood out thanks to his keen artistic sense, his belief in a clear-cut theatrical form and his clever visual conception of a production (*Fuenteovejuna* by Lope de Vega, *An Italian Straw Hat* by Labiche). Mirsky was more severe and even more formal at times, but he directed grandiose productions (*Don Carlos* and *Mary Stuart* by Schiller) but he lacked a sense of humour. Filipov had a passion for spectacular productions: he considered himself as the true disciple and successor of Massalitinov, and he scored his greatest successes thanks to his collaboration with comic actors (*Woe to Wit* by Ostrovsky and *Hunting for a Position* by Ivan Vazov).

In the early 50s, the National Theatre company grew larger with the addition of young actors who had trained for two years at the new School of Dramatic Art which became the state-subsidized National Theatre Academy. For the next two decades, this new generation of actors gradually took on its shoulders the main bulk of the repertoire. The new theatre stars rose from its ranks: Apostol Karamitev, Andrei Chapirozov, Mila Pavlova, Margarita Duparinova, Assen Milanov and Stefan Getzov. Through a fortunate coincidence, most of those actors were cast by the Russian director Boris Babochkin in Gorky's *The Petty Bourgeois*, in which they worked with the established stars. Later, some of them went on to ensure the success of such plays as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* and Zidarov's *Ivan Shishman*.

In the 1970s new names appeared in the company but conservatism pervaded the atmosphere more and more. The lack of new ideas in the productions combined with conservatism may explain why there were less and less remarkable successes in the repertoire. In spite of the achievements of actors such as Naum Shopov, Stefan Danailov, Velko Kanev or Georgetta Chakarova, stagnation was visible. Following the impressive production of Valentin Raputin's *Final Deadline* in 1980, it is true to say that for almost ten years, no production of note was staged at the National Theatre.

The political changes in Bulgaria at the end of 1989 had a profound impact on the life of the National Theatre. Expressing their will through an unprecedented move, actors and directors asked for the resignation of the director who had filled the post for fourteen years. His departure brought about changes in the structure and composition of the company as well as among stage directors and the character of the repertoire.

Today, ten years on, the positive consequences of the change of directorship are obvious. The National Theatre has recovered its vitality, which has been confirmed by five awards 'for the best production of the year' given to recent National Theatre productions: *Twelve Angry Men* by R. Rose (1991), *Lorenzaccio* by A. de Musset (1992), *Vassa Jeleznova*

by Gorky (1993), *Don Quixote* after Cervantes (1994) and *The Lower Depths* after Gorky (1998).

Owing to the new spirit instilled into its artistic policy, the National Theatre has enjoyed a growing interest from its audience, particu-

larly the young. On the eve of its centenary, the National Theatre has proved that it has the energy and the determination to welcome the new century, confident that it will faithfully fulfil the mission assigned to it by its founding fathers.