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In Our Theatre – A New Berlin Wall

Or The Matrioshka Dolls of Restoration against the Effort for Change

Three years ago Andrey Zholdak made a casting in Sofia for his production of *The Inspector General*. This was a project of the Theatre of Satire in Sofia, where 40 years ago (in 1966) Gogol's play directed by Metody Andonov turned into a true cultural event, which has stayed as emblematic signature and repertoire title for the Bulgarian theatre stage. The production outlined satirical actors, which today are doyens of the Theatre of Satire in Sofia – Georgi Kaloyanchev, Stoyanka Mutafova, Vassil Popov... The production left out the psychologism, the mere depiction of life, the simple quantity narration. The satiric actors have formed a new language – metaphorical, flamboyant, and compendious. In the beginning of the new century, Zholdak decided to juxtapose this signature production against his own specific satirical style and his own interpretation of *The Inspector General*. His idea is to divide the stage in two as if split by an imaginary wall. On the one part of the stage the history-making production of Metody Andonov with the old costumes and sets had to be set up, and the actors from the seventies, today at their old admirable age, to play the act in exactly the same way they did back then over 40 years ago. On the other part – Zholdak's intention was to roll out *his* interpretation of Gogol with young actors. In his mind these should be simultaneously performed versions of *The Inspector General*, separated with a conventional invisible screen. This screen in fact is the New Berlin Wall, the new watershed between two ages – the totalitarian and post-totalitarian; between two types of theatre - the one of the Aesopian language and the other of today – of Aristophanes' tongue: extreme, brilliant, unbridled. The explosive mix of the two worlds, the trespassing of the imaginary wall leads to chaos, to bad taste. I am telling all this not only because unfortunately Zholdak's idea could not come to life, but mainly because it particularly well outlines the situation 17 years after the beginning of the change.

The peculiarity of the events at the end of the XX c. brings about an additional touch to the typical processes, flowing at the sundown of the old century and the rise of the new one: the familiar drawing of the line, reassessment, and in art – birth of new ideas, new forms, new destinations of exploration and evolution, a new theatre language. The question now is what is born today, during the first decade of the XXI c., what are the specific signs of change and the profiles of the new theatre stage leaders?

Today the self-censorship is stronger, because the audience is much more intrigued by the entertaining, the taste is lenient, and the culture of poverty is fed mainly by commercial produce. The censorship is economic, and even the most shining amongst our authors are hiding in the shade of the state owned theatre houses...

The generation, who is connected with the winds of change in Bulgaria and who bears the scars of repressive censorship as well as the extreme experiment of theatre form (Ivan Stanev, Vazkressia Viharova), already pertains to our recent history. Their rebellion was synchronous with the first years of change, with the enthusiasm of destroying the old value system and the denial from the means of expression, used by the previous theatre generations. This generation cast off the hegemony of the psychological realism, habituated the liking to the until very recently forbidden Beckett, Ionesco, and later Pinter, started educating the young in new theatre techniques, arose the interest of the audience to various forms – the street theatre (La Strada of Stephan Moskov), the post-modern study of tradition and theatre classics (Stoian Kambarev, Vazkressia Viharova and the Elizaveta Bam theatre company of Boyko Bogdanov).

With the years though these theatre personae beat the blazed trail of rebels to conformists, inscribed themselves and became leaders in theatre structures, connected most of all with the traditional theatre, yielded to the temptation to stage purely commercial productions, which leveled them with the average *modus vivid* in theatre (Boyce Bugbane and his “Doctor” at the Salsa & Smith Theatre House in Sofia). It turned out that the ardently defended at the start of their careers author theatre, created by adherents, who master a new theatre technique, today is *causal permute*.

The experimenting enthusiasts of yesterday, the new leaders of the Bulgarian theatre stage today are part of the conventional theater apparatus. The alternative authors, descending from the state-owned structures, are now the face of those same representative institutions. Apparently, a cycle of post totalitarian change on the Bulgarian theatre stage has ended. Today on it the realism theatre productions co-exist with the theatre of vision, with post-modern collage, with the street theatre... Despite all the restoration in our cultural landscape is clearly discernible - in it alternative spaces, new rebels, new challenges are void. Calm, but no new ideas, no creative competition among the leaders in our theatre. To that – even the experiment theatre company Summate is state-owned – a sheer absurd of post-totalitarian nature. Or even worse – a remake of the Bulgarian State Theatre of Satire from the time of Socialism, when the authorities subsidized a theatre in order to be able to control the extent of its criticism. Today Summate created the phenomenon *conventional experiment*, self-created itself as a pseudo-experimental company. After serious actors, connected with some of its most brilliant productions as Svetlana Yancheva, Vlado Penev, Joretta Nikolova and others of their standing left, students and beginners treaded the boards of Sfumato and stage directors and founders Dobchev and Mladenova began teaching contemporary acting practices, which fall out of the Bulgarian National Academy of Theatre and Film curriculum.

This way Sfumato turned into a College Theatre number two, which nevertheless claims a long line of professional theatre productions. It was exactly there, where a most troublesome practice emerged of using the young actors as puppets in the futile theatre attempts of Mladenova and Dobchev. I say “futile” for the practice established by the latter two changed absolutely nothing on our theatre landscape, which can well be seen by their fiasco productions on the stages of the professional theatre companies. Today the model of the over-paid experimenter, personally well connected with the European

festivals agenda, is a sleepy hollow and is repulsive in its attempt to copy some of not-the-most creative cultural models of Europe.

The effort Ivan Stanev to be recalled on the Bulgarian theatre ground (with *The Trench* staged at Sfumato – a production so schematic and feeble in its construction) showed that he has set himself aside even from his own generation in theatre – Moskov, Viharova, Bogdanov. Unlike them, having treaded their way until today, when they are conventional authors, Stanev manifests himself as a foreign substance, from his rebel years through the eighties, staying conservative and infantile in his attempts to firmly get a grip to his ideas and methods dating back 20 years ago. However, in 2006 his predilections for the above have neither social, not even theatre resonance.

Other characteristic transformations of pseudo-innovation during the last years are the recurrences of cultural infantilism (Marius Kourkinski) and the aggression of the theatre yuppie (Yavor Gardev). A part of the persisting young theatricals decided to do it their own way by copycatting aesthetics and visions from productions they attended in Europe and this way self-proclaim themselves innovators (Lilia Abadjieva). At that they tastelessly mixed the efforts towards innovation with the coziness of the guaranteed in advance big theatre stages. A rational, but unsound move of the present day theatre innovators.

It is clear that the cultural situation in Bulgaria at present is stagnated. The described above metamorphoses and relapses on our theatre landscape are in their true essence variations of the Matrioshka dolls of restoration and pseudo-change. We remain in anticipation to new radical reformers to tear down the new Berlin Wall, which in fact tears us apart from the spirit and dynamics of the theatre renewal of the XXI c.