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REDIRECTING NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION BY THE COMMUNIST REGIME IN BULGARIA 1944–1950

1. INTRODUCTION: PROBLEM, METHOD, SCOPE, RESEARCH AIMS

On April 22, 1944 Racho Stoyanov's play "Maystori" ("Artisans") premiered at the "Napredak" ("Advancement") community center in the city of Pirdop. It is more than striking that in the tumultuous political spring of 1944, when the allied air raids on Sofia became a daily routine, 28-year-old Krastyu Mirski, who had just returned from Köln, chose to stage no other play but "Maistori" in making his debut as a director. The play premiered in the city of Pirdop, as the National Theater was evacuated there after twice being hit by bombs, which demolished the theater's stage.

This was the National Theatre's second production of "Maystori", taking place some 17 years after it first opened in 1927, staged by director N.O. Masalitinov, whose name will forever be associated with the establishment of Bulgarian national theater and drama. The play, which had 31 performances, was also staged by the rest of the theaters around the country, thus marking a rare happy moment in the history of theater, where a play's popularity with the general public matches the critics' response to it. The tragic story of two artists, woodworkers Nayden and Zhivko, who, out of love for Milkana, dare each other to prove who the better artisan is, was staged not only by professional theaters during the 1930s, but was also a favorite among Bulgarian teachers. Masalitinov's production has taken on mythological dimensions, making the play quite famous, as his theatrical stylistics achieved a unique blend of popular culture and pastoral symbolism that epitomized the image of Bulgarian society.

We are not aware of the reason why young director Krastyu Mirski, who studied acting in Paris, directing at the Imperial Academy of Music and the Performing Arts, Vienna, and theatre studies at the University of Cologne, should have chosen "Maystori" among other plays to make his directorial debut. We have not found any documents in his archive that give us a possible clue. Yet, the answer is most probably to be associated with the cult of national culture in the countries where he did his performing arts-related studies, all of which single out national drama as the symbol of theater. Such an explanation is also facilitated by a similar policy of promoting national mythology known as the

“native” arts movement, which was pursued in Bulgaria most markedly during the 1930s in the sphere of art in general and of theater in particular. Therefore it was only logical for the young director, having recently returned to his native country, to choose no other play but “Maystori”. But why would the new (communist) authorities allow this directorial debut to be featured in the National Theater’s first season under the new government, when the rest of the featured plays were almost exclusively Russian and Soviet? The season opened under an entirely new management. The theater’s managing director became Trifon Kunev, chairperson of the Union of Bulgarian Writers, a non-fiction author, poet, and agricultural party member. The National Theater’s assistant director, Hrisan Tsankov, was evicted from the capital, as he was related to right-wing politician Alexander Tsankov, nicknamed “The Bloodthirsty”. Some of the actors were also shown the door, whereas the national mythology and productions promoting it were branded “fascist”, “nationalistic” and “reactionary” by the promoters of the new communist ideology. So, was including “Maystori” in the theater’s new line-up a mere coincidence? Can we attribute the play’s “sneaking” into the line-up solely to agricultural party activist Trifon Kunev’s fondness for the Bulgarian rural scene?

“Maystori” premiered in Sofia on December 23, on the eve of Christmas Eve, at the “Balkan” Theatre, where plays were preformed while the National Theater’s beautiful red building was being restored. This was actually the second performance of the national theater for the 1944/45 season, put up straight after Gorki’s “Adversaries” (staged by Masalitinov). We focus our attention on the former for several reasons.

First, this was the only Bulgarian play, besides “The Fight Goes On” by Krum Kyulyavkov, head of the “Agitation and Propaganda” Department at the Bulgarian Communist Party’s Central Committee, included in the theater’s line-up for the season, which featured mainly Soviet and Russian plays. Second, it was the first time since 1907, when the building of the National Theater was inaugurated, that the season had been opened with a Russian, and not a Bulgarian play. Third, as this was a directorial debut, the cast was entirely new, with young Margarita Dupartinova debuting as Milkana. This was a novelty for a “star-studded” theater, where actors played their signature roles for a long time; moreover, the play’s 1927 cast still formed the core of the theatre’s troupe. Even though the play had 20 performances during this season, it was hardly covered by the media. Two out of the total of three reviews were actually written by old admirers of the 1927 play and production, namely Mitso Andonov and Vasil Stefkov.

The production was not performed during the next season, which, as a matter of fact, opened with a Bulgarian play, namely “The Feat” by Asen Raztsvetnikov, staged by Masalitinov. The 1946/47 season, however, opened with “Hashove” by Ivan Vazov, directed by the young debut director of “Maystori”, Krastyu Mirski. He would stage “Hashove” again in 1963 and then in 1976.

The performances of both “Maystori” and “Hashove” became part and parcel of the theatrical tradition and symbolism of national mythology, which had already established itself in the period between the two world wars.

What has happened to this symbolism? Has it vanished with the establishment of the new symbols of communism? If, as Hobsbawm contends, “national identification and what it is believed to imply, *can change and shift* in time”, then the question I have asked myself in this research is as follows: “How did the communist regime change and shift national identification?”

1.1. RESEARCH MATERIAL

My research material was derived mainly from the National Theatre as a central topos in the overall theatrical discourse in Bulgaria during the period.

First, because the National Theatre is the national representative institution, and it stands for the symbolically presented national cause, it embodies and therefore creates the national public images and perceptions of the world. The National Theatre represents and implements policies of the state mode of representation but also of self-identification - the communist regime that is manifested through it. Setting the pace also determines the reactions of the other theatres to it, and of alternative modes of understanding the representative national image.

Second, the National Theater is the model theatre for other theatres in the country until 1944 and directing it means creating a paradigm for distribution. In this sense, its structures are used directly to influence others throughout the country. By the end of 1950 it is also the theatre with the strongest social influence and standing for the new elites. I have not explored the so-called “Workers’ theatres” or “amateur companies” because they have already been studied in the context of the popular culture of communism (Research Project, Ivan Elenkov, CAS) and because they function as an honest ideological tool to influence and seek to create public habits and attitudes (and not to transform those already existing).

1.2. THE METHODS

The study follows the methods of comparative analysis, historical reconstruction and discursive analysis. The structure of theatrical discourse also sets areas of study that I will follow in my work: the repertoire, the show with its aesthetic paradigm and reception, the audience, the media, etc. As a theoretical tool, I use Victor Turner’s thesis on the relationship between social drama and cultural events (e.g. stage drama).

1.3. THE SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

The scope of the research I will be presenting here today includes a survey of the functioning of the National Theater up to 1952. I used such a chronological restriction for several reasons. First, because this was the time of brutal institutional terror, both ideological and physical. Second, because following the institutional strengthening of the communist regime, which was completed by the end of 1947, and the enactment of the so-called Dimitrov constitution, mechanisms for institutional control over the theater were fully in place. Third, because circa 1952 the “socialist patriotism” doctrine was already being formulated. So I am interested in how the notion of the national identity and cause was changed and shifted in the very period up to 1952.

1.4. THE AIM OF THE STUDY

Therefore the study is not intended to offer an interpretation of performances from the period or of the plays written and performed within it. Neither does it intend to propose a history of theatre from the beginning of communism. Its focus will be the research and analysis of changes in theatrical discourse at the moment when there was a break in the strategies of representation of the nation in the period between the two world wars, and transforming them along new lines, images and paradigms that then enter and participate in social communication. Thus, the aim of the study is to understand the structural changes in the social world of early communism through the aesthetic strategies and collective life of the theatre.

2. THEATRE AS AN IDEOLOGICAL MEDIA: REPERTOIRE AND THEMES

Theatre, like the rest of the arts, was used by the communist regime as an ideological medium. According to the communist utopia, government investment in the creation of a comprehensive theatre network throughout the whole country was supposed to give the population access to this type of art. Thus, the state was granted full control over its production and the means of affecting the audience. The deal was access to art in exchange for influence. Theatre managements and troupes, internal organizations and repertoires were institutionally controlled through unions of artists and relevant government departments (ministries). Cadres and repertoire were the two key tools of the regime in its exercise of ideological control. Cadres were granted privileges and power in exchange for the inclusion of specified plays in the repertoire. In 1946, one of the first decisions of the People’s Culture Chamber, for example, concerned the opening of a special store for members of artists’ unions, and the provision of access to recreational facilities for

these members. The deal was money, prestige and power in exchange for ideological control and influence over the general public/society. Repertoires also played a central role up to 1944. Debates over the repertoire of the National Theater were always heated. Yet, let us take a brief look at the process of making up and regulating repertoires during the communist era.

Repertoires were made up and regulated through a thematic filter. The principle of national quotas, namely Soviet+socialist, modern and classic, was already introduced by the Allied Control Commission to be politically regulated by party and governmental relations between the different members of the commission. But the most decisive factor in making up the repertoire was the thematic filter. The latter regulated the choice of plays, playwriting and stage interpretations. The so called “themes” guided playwrights in their choice of specific plots when they were setting about to write new Bulgarian plays.

These themes would be developed and imposed again and again at each and every party congress to be later “passed down” along the party hierarchy, as well as to the respective relevant organizations through culture congresses, congresses or plenary sessions of various unions of artists, etc. I am interested in these themes in so far as they were formulated in the early communist years. It is through them that key images of the national symbolism of the period between the world wars were changed, shifted and semantically transformed into new images, thus being rendered legitimate. We recognize clearly defined themes, formulated as early as the period up to 1952, in the first several seasons of the National Theater under the new government, themes to be just broadened in scope later, also through the addition of nuances to acceptable plots. Central themes were imposed as early as the time before 1952, the year in which the National Festivals of Bulgarian Drama and Theater were launched.

The first Theatrical Festival of Bulgarian Drama took place in 1952 in Sofia, with just seven participating theaters based outside the capital city. The second festival of this kind took place in 1959. The event took place at both the regional and the national level, and all Bulgarian theaters participated in it. Upon completion of each phase, awards were given for best direction, acting, scenography, music, etc. Typically, theatrical festivals took place every five years, always commemorating a major anniversary of the communist regime’s coming to power on September 9, 1944. Each theater outside the capital city participated in the festival with the performance of two plays by Bulgarian playwrights, chosen out of the theater’s repertoire from the past five years. Productions singled out as the best were later presented on stages in the capital city as well. Thus, Bulgarian playwriting and theater were channeled into a system of control and production. So it is of particular importance to us to establish what were the recurrent themes in repertoires imposed as early as 1952, as those themes would be tolerated and distributed through the aforementioned network.

First, there was the main theme of *revolutionary fight*, which monopolized *the past and history*. This main theme was broken down into several sub-themes:

- the theme of *anti-fascist resistance*;
- the *fight for Bulgarian national liberation*;
- the victory of the *socialist revolution* in our country, as well as in the Soviet Union (which was the example to follow), and
- the theme of the *fight against bourgeois society* in Bulgaria and world-wide.

From the vantage point of ideology, plays dedicated to this theme were supposed to present History as a strictly defined, systematic line of developments leading up to the imminent victory of communism.

Second, there was the theme of the present, called the *contemporary theme*, which was of key importance to ideology. It monopolized the themes concerning the *present*. Conflicts within this thematic line were also supposed to be resolved in view of the indestructible, bright ideal. The *contemporary theme* became a main theme following the April Plenum of the Bulgarian Communist Party Central Committee of 1956¹, as was reflected by the system of national theatrical festivals, new Bulgarian playwriting, and the drawing up of repertoires. It was constantly brought up and “further developed” at all party congresses. Within the framework of the contemporary theme, there appears the so called “*production theme*” concerning plots elaborating on the daily work routines not only of the working class, but also of all working people. Here the image of the communist underwent constant transformations.

Third, there was the equally important main theme of celebrating the “socialist lifestyle”, which is presented through *criticism and unmasking of bourgeois lifestyle*. The theme covers both the past and the present. Considering the “scientific truth” that the latter lifestyle was doomed, the ideological filter showed relative leniency towards playwrights’ interpretations of this theme. It is mainly in relation to this theme that classic plays, both Bulgarian and foreign, were allowed freely to go through the ideological filter.

According to Victor Turner, “stage drama is a metacommentary, voluntary or involuntary, explicit or implicit, on the major social dramas of a certain age (wars, revolutions, scandals, institutional changes.” (Turner, Victor : 1988) Therefore, it is through changes in the repertoire, as well as through the writing of plays that firmly established themselves, that we could follow the “voluntary or involuntary commentary” on the social structure and their influence on stage drama.

1 “First of all, we should concentrate on the contemporary theme, which is becoming more and more common. In the wake of April, 1956, a planned approach was introduced putting a conscious focus on the issues faced by contemporary society”, we read in “A Time for Renewal and Profound Artistic Creation (The April Plenum and Theater) in: Сп. Театър [Theater Magazine], 1981, issue No.4, editorial

* * *

As early as the time of the National Front government, it became clear that drama was a main ideological instrument for exerting influence on the audience, and therefore on society. In his article “Theater and the Politics of Theater”, written a few months after power changed hands (Theater Magazine:1945), Kroum Kyulyavkov stated that requirements theaters were expected to meet concerned repertoire, cadres and the organization of theaters. Influence and control over repertoires were institutionally exerted in a complicated and rather controversial way up to 1948, the year of the creation of the Science, Art, and Culture Committee. Prior to its establishment, influence was exerted by the People’s Culture Chamber (1945), the People’s Culture Directorate at the Ministry of Propaganda (of Information and the Arts from 1945 on), the “Agitation and Propaganda” Department at the Bulgarian Workers’ Party (Communists) Central Committee, and the Union of Actors and Theatrical Workers.

The repertoire for the first season under the new government, for example, was determined by the People’s Culture Directorate at the Ministry of Propaganda, yet, at the end of the day, the overall cultural policy, including the repertoire policy, was overseen by the Allied Control Commission, chaired by Marshal Tolbukhin. There were no clear procedural guidelines on the repertoire’s make-up, nor do we find documents showing a clear-cut strategy concerning that issue. We can also assume that the personal influence of leading figures such as Kyulyavkov, the National Theater’s director, Trifon Kunev, the head of the Peoples’ Culture Directorate, Konstantin Petkanov, etc. also affected the choice of plays. One thing is clear – the final sanctioning came from the Allied Control Commission, which banned two productions at the beginning of the National Theater’s second season under the new government in December 1945, namely “The Watchmaker and the Hen” by Kocherga and “Dr. Lilli Wanner” by Friedrich Wolf, as the former allegedly painted a distorted picture of the new Soviet reality, and the latter exaggerated the moods of disagreement with Fascists among the German people (Simeonova, G.:2003).

One of the banned plays, namely “The Watchmaker and the Hen,” is a comedy.

3. THE PERFORMANCE: AESTHETIC PARADIGM AND RECEPTION

3.1. COMEDY: TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE PRESENTATION OF BULGARIAN CUSTOMS AND MANNERS THROUGH THE VISUAL CODE AND THROUGH THE BIOGRAPHIES OF THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS AND ACTORS

Comedies were hardest to get into the repertoire, as evidenced by a survey of the first several seasons of the National Theater under the new government, which clearly illustrates the painstaking care with which comedy was subjected to ideological regulation. Looking at the National Theater's repertoire for its first "National Front" season, we establish that it features just one comedy, namely "Scapin's Deceits" by Moliere, staged by the young Stefan Syrhadzhiev. This was allowed most probably because Moliere's plays were performed in all Soviet theaters, as stated in the show's program. I would like initially to focus on comedy, as the genre is among the major instruments for transforming images and messages. Comedy, for example, was never an option when it came to work on the theme of the revolutionary fight – neither as the genre of the play to be staged, nor as an interpretational tool to be used by the director. The use of the genre of comedy was extremely closely monitored when it came to work on the contemporary theme. Its use was most admissible when it came to unmasking bourgeois lifestyles. This is already clearly seen in the seasons up to 1952.

Shakespeare and Moliere were presented as spokesmen of the people's spirit and denouncers of bourgeois vices. As F. Filipov wrote in the program for one of his productions, "today Shakespeare commands greater respect in the great country of socialism and in countries of people's democracy than he does in his own country. A new life is being built in the Soviet Union, a new progressive culture, and Shakespeare, as shown by his works, has always sided with those who fight against social norms putting human development in bondage, with those building a happier life".

The question concerning work with the classics is extremely complicated, and I am posing it here only for the following reason: if classical comedy is used so categorically to legitimize new ideas, what do national images and plots look like in the genre of comedy?

As already mentioned, up to the late 1940s, the relative share of comedies in the repertoire was quite small as compared to the share of dramas and tragedies. Such a distribution fully matches the gravity of the changes that took place in Bulgarian society. (The reverse phenomenon occurred in the early 1990s, just as a "jolly wave" "overtook" Bulgaria following World War I, heralding the introduction of popular culture into Bulgarian life.) Bulgarian comedy found its way into the National The-

ater's line-up in 1946 in the shape of "Mother-in-law" by Strashimirov. The play was staged by Alexander Ikonografov, a director who had come back from Paris in the early 1940s to promote modernist dramaturgy. His production of "Mother-in-law" marked the opening of the 1946/47 season at the "Balkan" Theater, which had become an annex of the National Theater after the restoration of the latter's building. The play was performed exactly four years after the last performance of Hrisan Tsankov's celebrated production, which opened in 1931.

Comparisons between the two productions were inevitable, as far as both the actors and the audience were concerned.

Tsankov was a modernist, a director whose "neurotic-expressionist" style did not easily establish itself with theatre professionals and the audience. He was the other central figure on the Bulgarian theatrical scene, together with Masalitinov. Staging Bulgarian plays during the 1930s, he contributed to the representation of the comprehensive stylized romantic-passionate image of the Bulgarian nation, shown on stage during the aforementioned period. His productions of "Hashove" and "Mother-in-law" (1931) became instant hits. They were included in the National Theater's line-up for its tour of Germany in 1941, where they received a rapturous welcome. All this, coupled with the fact that he was the brother of Alexander Tsankov, Bulgaria's Prime Minister after the coup of June 9, 1923, make it clear why there was no longer any room for his productions in the theater's new line-up. He himself was evicted from the capital city, narrowly escaping the "Belene" forced labor camp. Yet the memory of his theatrical productions stayed with both theatre professionals and the general public.

Comparative analysis shows that the most important thing for Tsankov was the blending of "images, exemplifying the most typical characteristics of Bulgarians of all times and social strata" with "massive human characters". In other words, "the transition of what is purely Bulgarian into what is universally human" (Tsankov, Heritage: 2003). He showed what is "purely Bulgarian" through the specific way of life he portrayed, the imagery used in his productions and the patriarchal relations within the Bulgarian family and society in general. The director also focused on the conflict between the urban family of the son who adopts a modern lifestyle and the backward countryside-style behavior of the mother-in-law. In other words, he outlined the conflict through a juxtaposition of urban and rural culture set against the background of the modernization of Bulgarian society. It is this updating of the conflict that assured him the warm response of the audience, which was becoming more and more interested in popular culture during the 1930s. The farcical performance on the part of the actors and the performance's pace brought the play closer to the "universally human", classic form of the comedy of manners. Kisimov, cast as the son (Velcho-Svilen) created one of his signature roles as the Bulgarian son under his wife's thumb.

Ikonografov replaced the whole cast to avoid associations with the cast of Tsankov's production, and although he was a modernist himself, he was forced to act in com-

pliance with the new political reality. He was assigned the play's production after he staged several Soviet and Russian plays during the first season under the new government. Ikonografov chose *grotesque over farce*, showing relations within the family as typical for *the petty bourgeois family*. He aimed to show that the "Bulgarian lifestyle requires reforms, and so does our social order". That is why he replaced the ethnographic precision of the set, which revealed the provincial-urban interior of the home, with the abstract outline of the grotesque. Forced to get used to depicting the "new socialist lifestyle", he showed patriarchal customs and manners as typical for the petty bourgeois family, distancing himself from the presentation of the set as "Bulgarian". As was written in the program, Ikonografov's production "has nothing in common with those productions, which stayed away from social issues and were wrapped in the veil of Bulgarian ethnography". "Those productions" is, as a matter of fact, a reference to Hrisan Tsankov's production.

Snapshots of Ikonografov's production present a caricature of the mother-son duo. Analysis of critical reviews reveals that such an image was not received equally positively by all critics, who were supposed to ensure a proper ideological interpretation. The grotesque outline of images, which were transformed from "purely Bulgarian" into "petty bourgeois" to be revealed as a thing of the past and typical of the bourgeois lifestyle, did not meet the new requirements regarding realistic presentation. As will be revealed further in the text, "the veil of Bulgarian ethnography" fully covered the realistic stylistics of the other productions. Ikonografov was accused of failing to depict "well-rounded" characters. Yet his production was popular with the audience. In just two years (until 1948) it was performed almost twice as many times as Tsankov's production had been in 10 years, namely 41 vs. 25 times. Therefore, "our new audience, comprised exclusively of the working masses of the people", as Ikonografov wrote in the program, sees *the new image of the Bulgarian mother-in-law as a grotesque thing of the past, leading a "petty bourgeois lifestyle"*.

The rural "origins" of this image kept their positive connotation, though. The next production of "Mother-in-law" in 1968 went back to such a portrayal, as well as to the realistic depiction characteristic of the comedy of manners. It was directed by Krastyu Mirski, a name we are already familiar with, an artist we shall encounter once again in analyzing the formation of a national symbolism.

The 1946 production introduced the *already familiar characters of "Mother-in-law" under the theme of unmasking the bourgeois lifestyle*. The "national in form, yet socialist in content" formulation was introduced from communist party later (1949), but it was the logical culmination of groundwork done in the very first years of the communist era.

Another aspect of the aforementioned groundwork was to be seen in productions of *contemporary Bulgarian drama*. It was also related to the theme of "unmasking the bourgeois lifestyle", but this time in a contemporary setting. The author of the specific play we have in mind is Krum Kyulyavkov, who is already familiar to us as

a writer and activist in the “Agitation and Propaganda” Department of the communist section of the Working people’s party, as well as the initiator of the establishment of the *National Culture Chamber*. The play, called “The Borsanovs”, was staged after “Mother-in-law” in 1947 by Stefan Sarchadzhiev. It is about the family of the Fascist Borsanov, who, not managing to escape from the country following the victory of the people’s government, sneaked his way into top government positions, only to be unmasked by the people’s police. It is the primitive plot of this comedy that we are interested in here, as the play was staged by Sarchadzhiev, who was already established as a director, having staged classic comedies (Moliere) and dramas (Lope de Vega), which showed the power of the people in the spirit of the new ideological rhetoric. In other words, he legitimized the ideological pathos of Kyulyavkov’s comedy through *realistic theatrical stylistics*, thus appealing to both the audience’s and the actors’ tastes, as well as through the very genre, which he defined as “realistic satire with farcical nuances”.

As was stated in the production’s program, Borsanov was the modern-day Golemanov: “Borsanov, the main character, is a well-known racketeer and crook, a Fascist and ruthless merchant, a distant “grandson” of Aleko Konstantinov’s Bai Ganyo, exhibiting some of the features of Kostov’s Golemanov”. Parallels to the latter drew everybody’s attention. The director put them at the center of his production, as it was Golemanov’s character that painted a convincing picture of the image of the adversary, the bourgeois, who needed to be unmasked. In other words, *it was the very familiar image of the “Bulgarian-style” politician from St. L. Kostov’s play that became the stereotypical image of the Bulgarian bourgeoisie*. There were conspicuous similarities in the overall visual code used in the production of “The Borsanovs” and the one used in Masalitinov’s famed 1929 production of “Golemanov”. Actor Petko Atanasov played the role of Borsanov in almost the same style as actor Krastyu Sarafov had played the role of Golemanov – his hand in his vest pocket, flaunting his big, well-fed figure, which came to epitomize *the Bulgarian bourgeois politician*. Owing to Sarafov’s performance, the comedy became an instant hit during the period between the two world wars. Golemanov was his signature role, remembered by both the audience and theatre professionals, Sarafov himself remaining among the leading stars of the theater. It was Sarafov again who played the leading role of communist Simo in “The Fight Goes On”, another play by Kyulyavkov, staged by Masalitinov in 1945. Comparisons between the stylistics and imagery of “The Fight Goes On” and those of Yovkov’s comedy “An Ordinary Man”, staged by Masalitinov in the 1930s, indicate that the realistic presentation of the urban environment and the lifestyle of the Bulgarian household was still there, yet this environment was inhabited with new characters. Both Masalitinov and Sarafov are associated with the creation of Bulgarian comedy. It is curious that Kostov’s comedy “Golemanov” was staged as late as 1953, with Petko Atanasov in the role of Golemanov, i.e. the same actor who played the role of Borsanov. His understudy was Peter Dimitrov, director of the National Theater between 1945 and 1947, a communist, who was among the initiators of the establishment of the

Union of Actors and Theatrical Workers (1919), which is why he chaired the new union in the period between 1945 and 1965. The National Theater's next production of "Golemanov" was in 1977, with Stefan Getsov in the leading role. The latter was among the theater's stars, and was close friends with communist party leader Todor Zhivkov, one of his signature roles being that of communist ideologist Georgi Dimitrov. A review headline is the best manifestation of the complete transformation of Golemanov's character from the epitome of the Bulgarian politician (during the 1930s) into the epitome of the Bulgarian bourgeois politician (during the 1970s), namely "The Verdict Is Not Subject to Appeal".

To sum up: through the genre of comedy, through actors' and directors' biographies, the visual code of the theatrical production and its stylistics, screened through the mandatory filter of themes allowed into the repertoire, *the images that epitomized Bulgarian customs, manners, lifestyle and character during the 1930s* were transformed into images that epitomized the Bulgarian bourgeoisie.

Unmasking the flaws of Bulgarian society's lifestyles of the past and the present became the permanent ideological task of comedy in the establishment of a "socialist lifestyle" as the major aim of the communist state (Brumbauer).

Comedy's national elements turned into an ornament, into the "form" of "socialist content". And since both were of key importance for the ideology of the new culture, they were permanently kept within the register of what was serious and dramatic. Therefore, *what was comic was kept within the bounds of satire as a rule.* Allowing comedy to simply take a turn in the direction of entertainment and popular genres, which was the case, for example, with Tsankov's production of "Mother-in-law", would have undermined the serious nature of both "national form" and "socialist content".

The most intriguing effect of the process of changing and shifting the symbolism of the national image and cause up to the early 1950s was leaving the village as a cultural symbol out of comedy, even though comedy had been associated with this symbol since Voynikov's "The Phoney Civilization". *The conflict between the city and the countryside was resolved and the village came to have an unequivocally positive connotation in the presentation of the new national image.* "The veil of Bulgarian ethnography" in the presentation of the village "covers" Bulgarian dramas dedicated to the theme of the "revolutionary fight for the victory of communism" and the theme of "unmasking the bourgeois past". This effect is to be seen in the staging of Karaslavov's "Daughter-in-law", as well as in the productions of plays by authors from the Balkan region. Yet, most importantly, the pastoral image of the Bulgarian village served as the background for transforming the image of the 1930s Bulgarian into a monumental romantic hero, a fighter for national liberation and a new world. This transformation process was most clearly manifested in Ktasyu Mirski's productions of "Hashove" (1950) and "Daughter-in-law" (1946), Masalitinov's productions of "Queen Theodora" (1945) by Magda Petkanova and "The King's Mercy" by Kamen Zidarov (1948).

3.2. MELODRAMA: NEW TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE PASTORAL IMAGES OF THE BULGARIAN WOMAN AND THE BULGARIAN MAN. THE ROMANTIC HERO AS THE NEW POSITIVE, HEROIC FIGHTER FOR THE FREEDOM OF THE HOMELAND AND FOR A NEW WORLD

Between the two world wars, the theatre participated in the process of building a national mythology by reincarnating the image of the homeland as a stylized pastoral picture. The central characters were the Bulgarian man – hard-working, talented and committed to his home/motherland, and the beautiful Bulgarian woman – the quiet keeper of the home and muse of the artist. Emblematic figures of this stage reincarnation were the chief director of the National Theatre Nikolay Masalitinov, playwrights Yordan Yovkov, Racho Stoyanov and Ivan Vazov, scenographers Alexander Milenkov and Ivan Penkov, as well as the stars of the theatre: Petya Gerganova, Nevyana Buyuklieva, Vladimir Trandafilov, Georgi Stamatov, etc.

In the pastoral picture of all things Bulgarian, another *central figure* was the one of *the Bulgarian man as patriot and rebel*. It was imposed through Vazov's historical drama and the drama of everyday life of the 1930s, staged by Masalitinov and Hrisan Tsankov, too. In the whole picture of the national myth presented on stage, an important role is played also by *the ethnographic image of the Bulgarian National Revival house, both the interior and exterior, as well as the costumes*.

Comparative analysis of performances staged by different directors and authors of the 1930s proves that it is difficult to single out a unique director's, scenographer's or actor's manner in presenting this "picture". For instance, in "Kara Tanas" (1936), a play by Stefan Savov about the anti-Ottoman liberation movement, it was difficult to distinguish the neurotic, modernist style of director Hrisan Tsankov, for which he had often been ridiculed by the more conservative reviewers. The poet Kiril Hristov, for example, said that in his performance of "When Lightning Strikes", a play by the famous Bulgarian poet Yavorov (41), "the old women ran around the stage like mad". His production of "Kara Tanas" could have been confused with "Tatar Khan" by Nikola Ikonov – a play, also set in Ottoman-ruled Bulgaria, staged in 1940 by the traditionalist Masalitinov. In other words, *the ethnographic and pastoral visual discourse of the national mythology absorbed the individual manner of each of the directors*.

As a whole, during the 1930s and in the early 1940s, the presence of Bulgarian drama in the repertoire of the theatre was politically supported, and in its plots, History acted the main part. These plays follow the pattern of the so-called well-made drama and of Vazov's historical "tsar's play", also staged by Masalitinov (1933). It was him again who staged, in 1935, the first Bulgarian play of the season, "Ivanko" by Drumev (1935). In brief: in the opinion of both theatre professionals and the audience, Masalitinov was lastingly connected with the building of the national image of Bulgarian theatre and drama.

Since the overall nationalistic policy was declared reactionary, the inclusion of Bulgarian plays in the repertoire of the theatre was thought over very carefully after 1944. Yet *the first of them took up the historical theme again, though filtered through the idea of struggle for national liberation and socialism*. Analysis of two of such plays featured in the 1945 and 1946 repertoire shows a very interesting process of change in the whole discourse of the presentation of the national image already described. These are “Queen Theodora” by poet and prose writer Magda Petkanova and “The Feat” by poet Asen Raztsvetnikov.

Both of these were Masalitinov’s productions. Comparative analysis of the visual-plastic images of the performances of “Queen Theodora” and “Ivanko” (1935) or of Vazov’s “On the Road to Ruin” (1933), also staged by Masalitinov, demonstrates the almost complete preservation of the stylized image in presenting the Bulgarian tsar’s court. A comparison of “Tatar Khan” and “The Feat” – despite the drastic difference between the dramaturgical style of Nikola Ikonov and the style of poet Asen Raztsvetnikov – also reveals striking resemblances. Thus, for theatre professionals, and for the audience respectively, there was no change in the general receptive attitude to the image of Bulgarian history.

On the other hand, the leading roles were played by the same actors who were constantly associated in everyone’s mind with the images of the Bulgarian man and woman, including Nevena Buyuklieva, Petya Gerganova, Vladimir Trandafilov, etc. Buyuklieva and Gerganova were understudies for the roles of Albena and Boryana (Yovkov); they acted in “Tatar Khan” and “Kara Tanas”, as well as in “Milena, a Maid from Skopje” by Stefan Savov and also in “On the Road to Ruin” by Vazov. Trandafilov played, for instance, the part of Zhivko in “Maistori” (Artisans) by R. Stoyanov. It was he again who played the role of Ivanko the Rebel in the eponymous play by Drumev. He played the leading part (Radil) of the hero -- a participant in the April Uprising -- in Raztsvetnikov’s play, which opened the 1945–46 theatrical season. Apart from that, Trandafilov established himself mostly through his romantic roles. So he acted within an admissible register, and also, he kept working with the same director. The stage performances remained within the same stylistics. It is difficult to recognize Dechko Uzunov’s unique impressionist style in the artist’s portrait of Georgi Dimitrov. Yet it was difficult to forget the “romantic” figure of Trandafilov in the role of Simo in “The Fight Goes On” by Kyulyavkov. This is the register in which the audience perceived him. Thus the image of the fighter for national liberation and socialism inherited, without any conflict, the symbolic capital of the Bulgarian romantic artist and fighter.

Masalitinov staged “Queen Theodora” and “The Feat” in the genre pattern of melodrama, which was the established approach to gaining the heart of the audience, having been experienced by him in staging most of the Bulgarian historical plays. The role of Sarah, the rival of Queen Theodora, was played by Petya Gerganova. She also played the role of Sarah in Vazov’s play “On the Road to Ruin”. A compara-

tive analysis of critical reviews and the visual documents demonstrates striking resemblances between those two images and performances.

It is a fact that both performances were successful. “The Feat” was performed 21 times during the season, and “Queen Theodora” 31 times. The success among spectators, especially of “Queen Theodora”, was acknowledged by critics, though it was not received positively by everyone. There was a heated exchange between critics in the press. The melodramatic plot, where Queen Theodora was left by King Alexander for his mistress Sarah, was meant to reveal the drama of the woman, and not the drama of the king. Yet, such an emancipatory pathos, which *was supposed to respond to the notion of the changing role of women in the new “socialist lifestyle”, was not received positively at all.*

Tenyu Stoyanov, secretary of the journalist section of the *National Culture Chamber*, even proposed that the theatre board at *the Chamber* should consider the future of the performance and substitute it with the Soviet play “Another Man’s Kid” by Shvarkin, because it showed how Soviet people fought bourgeois family prejudices and the way the new partner of the actress, Manya, accepted the latter’s child. The arguments of Slavcho Vasev and Kamen Zidarov – the advocates for “Queen Theodora” – supported the Bulgarian play and the good presentation of the historical theme. It is interesting that the author’s emancipatory pathos completely disappeared in the reception of the performance, *and the images of the Bulgarian woman and the Bulgarian man kept their sentimental-romantic aura.*

It is no accident at all that the solution to the ideological contradiction sensed by the communist reviewer Tenyu Stoyanov was found by none other than his opponent, Kamen Zidarov. He became director of the theatre after the case of Ivan Tsankar’s play “The King from Beytanovo”. The Slovenian play was removed from the line-up as soon as Cominform adopted its famous Bucharest Resolution leading to the expulsion of the Yugoslav Communist Party, namely at the end of June, 1948, between the 1947/48 and 1948/49 seasons.

Season 1948/49 opened with Kamen Zidarov’s play “The King’s Mercy”. It tells the story of Irina Radionova, who saves King Ferdinand’s life in an accident. Her son, Doychin Radionov, has participated in the soldiers’ mutiny in the King’s Army during World War I, and because of that he is sentenced to death by the king. The mother asks the king to grant a pardon to her son, but he refuses her. So Doychin is shot dead. Written in the pattern of the “king’s play” and in the genre of melodrama, Zidarov’s play *turned the good king’s image into a negative one and added new pathos to the image of the Bulgarian mother.*

The role of Irina Radionova was played by the actress who had played the role of Queen Theodora, namely Nevena Buyuklieva. The spectacle was again directed by Masalitinov.

The genre of melodrama, the historical play, the romantic characters and the well-known visual-plastic code, which used to embody all that was native to Bulgaria during the 1930s, entirely took on the ideological pathos of the fight for a new world.

The spectacle became an instant hit. By 1954, it had been played 85 times in total. And during the 1968/69 season, it was staged at the Moscow Art Theatre by Kras-tyo Mirski. The latter had his directorial debut with “Maystori” (Artisans) in 1944 and was the first name elaborated on in this text.

In his spectacles, *the Bulgarian man finally obtained the features of a romantic hero, a fighter for national liberation, as well as the monumental silhouette of the new positive hero.* Season 1946/47 opened with “Outcasts” by Ivan Vazov. The entertaining, comic side of the play was pushed aside, the outcasts fighting for national liberation being depicted with an emphasis on their passion and heroism. Mirski staged the play two more times, in 1963 and in 1976, when the actors playing the roles of the Bulgarian fighters for liberation were already in their 50s. That put the last touch *to the stylized timeless image of the communist as a fighter for national freedom.*

4. GENERAL CONCLUSION

History, the “historical theme”, favored as early as the time of the Bulgarian National Revival drama, remained a “trade mark” for a big part of Bulgarian dramaturgy.² *The ideologized view of Bulgarian history is of importance not only to contemporary “historical play” writing, but also to the process of establishing the Bulgarian dramaturgical and theatrical tradition.* Bulgarian history is divided into various stages: the nation’s coming of age, the fight for national liberation, the nation’s attainment of revolutionary maturity, the fight against the bourgeoisie, and the victory of the socialist revolution.

Yet *the process of expropriating history from the political ideology of the 1930s, which introduced the pastoral picture of Bulgarian identity of the 1920s into historical plots about Bulgarian glory during the 1930s, is of equal importance to ideologists during the early communist era.* Moreover, we saw how such an expropriation occurred in the very first years of communist institutional strengthening. It is important to emphasize that the process of transformation of national images involved all the elements of theatrical discourse. The actors, the directors, and the artists, who remained at the core the National Theatre’s troupe and were symbolically and biographically connected with the stage transformations of the new images, as we saw above, “lent” their symbolic capital (Bourdieu) to them.

2 Ivan Radoev’s ironic appeal to playwrights before the 1964 National Theatrical Festival was not enthusiastically received. Asked “What is it that you would rather not see at this festival?”, he answered: “Historical plays! Even when they are said to sound modern! Playwrights, do not panic novel writers – there are only a couple of Third Bulgarian Kingdom kings that have not been written about. What are these novel writers going to do afterwards?” – In: Народна култура [Narodna Kultura newspaper], 1963, issue No 6, p. 1.

Similarly, the new “actors” on the theatrical scene – producers, authors, critics, and their relatives and friends – were also related to the process of building the new images. The latter’s reception by the audience, which would grant them “social life and legitimacy”, finally leads up to the question, “what was this audience like?”

We hardly have any evidence concerning its composition and responses, other than the information we can obtain from the media. The memoirs of drama critics, though, reveal that for the most part it was a new audience. This is evident in a story told by Liliev, a symbolist poet and staff playwright at the National Theatre between 1934 and 1960, concerning Petya Gerganova – one of the actresses who, as we saw above, played a crucial role in building the melodramatic-regal patriarchal image of the Bulgarian woman. Before appearing on the stage, she looked at the hall, exclaiming passionately: “Oh, where is my faithful audience?” Liliev answered: “Your faithful audience, Mrs. Gerganova, is in the Belyane forced labor camp.”

The new audience of the theatre perceived both the spectacles and the whole theatrical ritual as a privilege, yet also as a pattern for making theatre. So, it is this audience that remembered for the longest time and passed on the transformed national image. The way that happened was the most important element in the process of changing and shifting the national image: the discourse, the type of theatricality, the way of performing.

The whole realistic style of acting, which dominated the attitudes both of making and perceiving theatre between the two world wars, was not just preserved. It was set up as the only possible stage norm by the doctrine of socialist realism. The so-called “Stanislavski method”, declared to be the official teaching method in the Soviet Union became an official method in Bulgaria, too.

It was the realistic theatrical style, supported by the traditionally strong romantic-sentimental pathos of the actors’ play, that guaranteed an effective regime of identification with the audience. Realism, in the words of the French literary critic Gérard Genette, derives the power of its influence from its relevance to the behavioral norms of the extra-artistic reality. To this effect, it is realistic theatrical discourse that assures the most efficient transformation of images and influence on the audience through the regime of identification with the characters and the way they act on stage.

The radical change in the repertoire did not automatically lead to a radical change in the visual-plastic imagery, in which the new, “socialist in content” and “national in form” images were being presented. *The “formal” element in presenting national images in the pre-war period was preserved.* And this element is far from being innocent, if, as Adorno contends, “aesthetic form is sedimented content” (Adorno: 1970).

That is why, even after the fall of communism, we can still see something more than a sign deprived of its signified component in the form, ornamental and worn out by ideology, of the passionate-heroic image of the Bulgarian. In it, new symbols appear, in which the new, strongly contradictory images of the national are being recognized.