

## AESTHETIC CHALLENGES TO THE BULGARIAN THEATER AT ITS ENCOUNTER WITH MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA AT THE BEGINNING OF 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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***Abstract:** Modern Bulgarian drama appeared mainly as a result of the interaction of two factors – the change in the spirit of the new generation and the aesthetic influences coming from abroad. It inherits from the European modern drama characteristics which function as artistic constructs, the most important ones being abandoning the traditional forms; breaking the dominant routine of realism; proclaiming individualism in literature and freedom in art; following the trend towards everything new, peculiar, even mystical; the author has a new type of self – esteem, a new understanding of the world and aesthetics; the protagonist is an individualist, speaks an exuberant language, his/her thoughts are directed towards the inner self, does not share any social ideas and does not recognise them as important, s/he is ready to make sacrifices to preserve their spiritual sovereignty, protests against the deep moral degradation of social, spiritual and even literary life, has burnt all bridges that lead back being certain the future belongs to them.*

*Since the demarcation line of the concept of “modernity” shrinks and expands, in aesthetic and formal terms, depending on the receivers’ intuitions, it is appropriate to specify that we accept P. Sondi’s view of modern drama which is related to a model of writing drama in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century created and defined by Ibsen, Strindberg, Maeterlinck, and Hauptmann’s dramas.*

***Keywords:** theatre, aesthetics, modern European drama*

### INTRODUCTION

Striving for modernism, the Bulgarian drama from the beginning of the 20th century is seeking ways of establishing itself in the national literary context. On one hand, like the western modern drama, it is in possession of man. This is beneficial but it is not sufficient. On the other hand, it turns to “old” sources of power (where it feels at ease) – old tales, legends, myths, to find help, strength, to veil and at the same time, unveil the impenetrable darkness inside itself. On the threshold of the new century, man is facing a change. So is art (respectively literature). No other sphere of life is as indicative of this change as art. Depicting the individual in his uniqueness and originality is imposed as a new imperative in art. The modern self-determination of the individual is determined by the feeling of his own equality, autonomy, independence (Legreaux 2006: 89).

In the age of modernity, it is not only society, religious life, state, morality, science and art that become the corresponding incarnations of the subjectivity principle. As a cultural phenomenon, literature too is involved in the anti-positivist orientation and proclamation of aesthetic freedom. At the same time, it seeks a dynamic balance between possible responses, relevant to the subjective experiencing of the world and the established imperatives of society – solutions of the existential drama of man through “emerging from one’s own abyss”, in the words of Jose Ortega y Gasset, i.e. creating one’s own story of history and one’s own picture of the world (Lebedova 2008: 9). On the border between centuries, cultural awareness unwaveringly overcomes the limits of existing norms. Conceptual changes are taking place: the critical instruments, the culture of tools, the art of speech are changing .... the new aesthetic theories are mastered most naturally, the philosophy of the saints of “amorality” Schopenhauer and Nietzsche permeates (Kirova 2003: 304).

The forms of the modern Bulgarian drama are determined by the subjectivity principle. The encounter between the traditional and the modern in some Bulgarian authors is not easy, it is embarrassing and they find it hard to fit into the new hierarchy of values, into the cultural

standards, set by the reflections of the free creative person, who has his own world (carries the optimistic self-consciousness of the man from the failed Renaissance on the peninsular) (Kirova 2003: 304). A new system of norms, conventions, values, artistic tools is being built. Modernism feeds the subsequent “isms”, starting with symbolism. Gradually, the symbol turns into a centre of artistic reproduction of the world. Symbolism intensively seeks the meaning of individual existence not only in the field of drama; it ignores traditional notions, metaphors, images. But for some writers, Bulgarian literature has not inherited traditions and that is why in its development it absorbs various influences and it is not only symbolism that serves as the avant-garde of modernity. „In the Bulgarian reality [Konstantin] Konstantinov discovers some amorphousness. „In our opinion – in Bulgaria there do not exist strictly shaped ideological literary currents. We have been living a cultural life for only 3 decades, and there are so many misunderstandings, surprises in our political stride! [...]” – (Konstantinov 1914. Cit. Dushkova 2012: 25-26). For Konstantinov, the Bulgarian literature has sprouted without traditions, exposed to numerous influences and it is impossible to indulge in a single literary trend (Dushkova 2012: 26.)

### EXPOSITION

The drama is rapidly Europeanised in theme, style, poetics, searching for freedom of creative self-realisation. Its movement in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is cultural testimony for the loans and external influences intricately interacting with established models and more sustainable ideas of the objectives of art in the conditions of openness and opportunities for a free choice of samples of other people’s experience. But one leading idea unites staggers, preferences, energies – for levelling up with the others, and self-proof. In drama (just like in poetry) both the justification for the historical heroism of the past, and the indications for practicing a full-blooded civic life at the dawn of the new century can be found. These circumstances are deposited in the essential features of its artistic identification.

When he was briefly the director of the National Theatre (1908-1909), Pencho Slaveykov directed three plays –Anton Chehov’s Uncle Vanyo, Gerhardt Hauptman’s Lonely people and Max Halbe’s Youth. The choice of the unknown Halbe was the result of his popularity in Germany as Hauptman’s follower in drawing mental charts of the complex quest of modern man in a world contrary to his nature. By including such dramas in the theatre repertoire, Pencho Slaveykov applied the cultural strategy of the Thought circle for artistic renewal and independent art policy for a national not people’s theatre. Halbe’s play rearranged the positions among the playwrights and elicited vigorous responses, which reflected attitudes and intuitive thinking about the directions of development of the Bulgarian drama genre. Anton Strashimirov determines it as a play of mood and expresses doubt about its adequate staging: ... we will not have actors to achieve the modern tragedy of the soul – a key to modern drama ... (Strashimirov 1910: 650). Konstantin Mutafov’s comments put it as a text – an example of the discrepancy between Slaveykov, who was ahead of the taste of the audience, and the dangerous, risky prescriptions of new tendencies in the drama and theatre, which are still out of reach for Bulgaria (Mutafov 1910: 74). In his concept of art, Slaveykov includes not only samples of problematic modern drama, but also classic texts of world drama, and most of all Shakespeare’s works. The law maker in literature also tries to impose certain conventions and outlines the parameters of universalism in the messages of the drama text. He thinks of it as complete, independent, developed artistic taste, requiring intellectual efforts. Theatre as an artistic language and idea should be modernized, in order to achieve artistic value. From this position, Slaveykov declares that Bulgarian drama does not possess highly artistic works and for that reason should not be allowed even as an experiment. His aesthetic maximalism confronts him even with the professional opinion of one of the builders of our national theatre – the art director and chief producer, the Czech Joseph Shmaha.

As Head of the Theatre Department in the Democrat newspaper, in the Literary Notes section, Yavorov defends the view of theatre Europeanization and modernization, drawing from the aesthetic platform of the Thought society. His analytic observations show deep recognition of the specific drama poetics: ... I have analyzed the works of Ibsen, Shakespeare, Hauptmann out of

my personal interest, eagerly awaiting to detect their peculiarities, their retreats, etc. (Arnaudov 1916: 49).

The travelling Contemporary Theatre introduces foreign modern drama into its repertoire for the first time. To a large extent it inspires the preferences of Tears and Laughter troupe to the dramas of Ibsen, Gorki, Strindberg. According to Kr. Tosheva, introducing these authors is rather a ritual of inclusion to the Western European and, particularly, the Russian drama in seeking diversity of ideas, aesthetics and messages of the drama.

From the repertoire plan of Contemporary Theatre (1904 – 1912), it can be seen that Bulgarian authors were staged as if by chance. These were Iv. Vasov (Borislav, The Queen of Kazalar, Placemen) and Yavorov (In the foothills of Vitosha). Not a single Bulgarian symbolist play was staged. Among the many foreign specimens, purely quantitatively, eight performances on Ibsen's texts, four on Strindberg's, two on Maeterlinck's, four on Przybyszewski's, two on Hauptmann's, three on Sudermann's stand out. In the programmes the most preferred authors were A. N. Ostrowski, P. Giacometti, B. Balucky, L. Andreev, M. Nordau. In this theatre were staged Schiller's Wilhelm Tell, Tolstoy's The Living Corpse, Dostoyevski's Karamazov Brothers, Gogol's Auditor.

From the variety of foreign titles in the theatre poster of the National Theatre it becomes clear that the "discoveries" of Contemporary Theatre – Ibsen, Gorki, Hauptmann and Sudermann, albeit more timidly, penetrated there as well. In the repertoire of the troupe the titles from the European drama are divided into three streams – classical, modern and contemporary European (foreign) drama. The pages of Democratic Review from 1912 presented to the reader the newly published book of Peter S. Kohan Modern Western European Literature, which, according to the author, who did not sign in the announcement, acquaints us with the luminaries of modernism – Nietzsche, Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Schnitzler, Oscar Wilde, Octave Merbau, Przybyszewski and Knut Hamsun as creators of that literature, which is a passionate cry for the liberation of the individual, insane protest against the pressure of society, an uprising against patterns.

The works of European drama are accommodated in the Bulgarian theatrical life with an indisputable "commitment – "Gorky's At the Bottom, Ibsen's dramas Ghosts, John Gabriel Borkman, Nora), Hauptmann's (the Weavers), Herman Sudermann's (Honour), Stanislaw Przybyszewski's (On Happiness). Presenting these plays, the National Theatre, formally meets the expectations for orientation towards the modern repertoire, outpaced, and to some extent, temporarily rivalled by the private Contemporary Theatre (1902 – 1912), in whose programme the idea for в чиято програма стои идеята за reforming the performing arts through contemporary drama (Tosheva 1997: 37).

Thus, in the communication and convergence of the Bulgarian modern drama with the modern aesthetics of the European texts, what stands out clearly is the presence of the early European modern playwrights Ibsen (1828 – 1906), Chehov (1860 – 1904), Strindberg (1848 – 1912), Maeterlinck (1862 – 1949), Hauptmann (1862 – 1946), Przybyszewski (1868 – 1927). The influence of the European drama settles in the aesthetics and language in the various "stages" of domestic production – premodernism, Nietzschean type of drama, late modernism (avant-garde) between and post - war (the 1920ies – 1930ies). In the discourse of the last stage are included the psycho analysis theory of Sigmund Freud and the mental phenomena of Carl Jung. The new theories are attractive not only with their modernity, but also with their challenge because they re-direct the aesthetic quests, aid the process of drama becoming deeper and more psychological, show techniques for enriching the creative vision with new ideas, themes, motives at a literary time when symbolism was an emblematic expression of modern discourse.

An important manifestation of modern drama is the multifaceted consideration and analysis of man and interpersonal relationships. It promotes ideas for living in the realms of art. According to V. Vasilev, Modern drama is that, which speaks not to all but to each person individually. A new experience of the soul for man that is supposed to Един нов душевен опит за човека, който трябва to transform him, to snatch him from himself, to make him another person: to transfer to, live in and understand another spiritual world, i.e. to become more humane for others and better

for himself. The reader and spectator should become aware not of the mob, but of the individual. It is not the strings that can be tuned in and out of tune by every person and every event that the modern drama should hit, but rather the foundations of each individual's soul. These are plays of the mood – they sneak into your soul and conquer it. Such are the dramas of Maeterlinck – Under their poetic magic, philosophy and thought is filtered. Under the magical mesh of feeling, the idea hides its rational roots, blunts its assertiveness, seems to become something secondary – unacceptable even – and is no longer so dangerous ... The secret lies in pure emotionality, where the play is displaced and which turns the idea into feeling, the posture in rhythm and the rhetoric in sensitivity (Vasilev 1924: 243-244).

One of the aesthetic challenges of modern drama is the game of/with time – depending on the requirements of the play, it “stretches” and “contracts”. Within the framework of artistic conventionality, time is a colourful entanglement of yesterday, today and tomorrow, always and never. With Ibsen, for example, the past is not a function of the present, but rather the present is an occasion to invoke the past. His characters go back and talk about the past as ideological philosophical constructs; they do not stay with the event and its motivation, but let time come onto “the stage”, coloured by them. Ibsen's reception on the Bulgarian stage is mixed: ... Ibsen is still a stranger to us... In his depth, in his ideology, the Ibsenian rhythm, so inherent in all his works, could not be felt... (Minev 1927: 19-21). ... Ibsen himself is strongly loved, read and staged in Bulgaria. Together with other Northern playwrights like Björnsson, Strindberg and Brandes, Ibsen was first brought to the stage by our great tragic actress, Ms. Roza Popova ... heading her own theatre, - she breaks with the old, false, romantic repertoire in one swoop... and immediately stages Ibsen's „Nora” ... In literature – much later than on stage – Ibsen was introduced by the late Petko Todorov with a special study about him – incomplete, of course, but quite good for its time... (Furen 1928: 23).

Maurice Maeterlinck's drama is charged with powerful mental tension of the dramatic action, reaching paroxysm, with external and internal force. He is one of the “favourites” of the Bulgarian modernists. Kalina Lukova outlines three levels of assimilation in the Bulgarian culture – copying, imitation, borrowing. She comments on the position of Ivan Andreichin, concerning the expansion of the language boundaries through the decadent style of his article „Moris Maeterlinck and the decadence in literature” in Thought journal (1899) (Andreichin 1899: 52, 56). In her studies of Strashimirov, K. Lukova displays the indisputable interpretive code for unravelling the symbolist dramas of Strashimitov – Maeterlinck's dramas. Taking into consideration the traditional negativity towards them, the researcher interprets then through Maeterlinck's symbolic “theatre of death” (Lukova 2007: 266).

Staging Strindberg (1849 – 1912) is a test for the National Theatre. His texts loom as a conundrum for the reader and the director. The individual readings report differences in the parameters of dramatic expression. For theatre critics, Strindberg is primarily a symbolist and his dramas are a mystery of the naked soul (Minev 1927: 20). For the director Hrisan Tsankov, he is a philosopher eclectic, who prefers the format of the neoromantic play. In it, though, realism, sentimentalism and sensuality meet, mixed with the explosive transcendence of characters and events, inherent to the expressionists.

Geo Milev translated about 25 dramas, among which Ibsen's “Per Gunt”, Maeterlinck's “Monna Vana”, Pierre Louis's „The Woman and the Doll”, Shakespeare's „Hamlet”, and others. In his critical and theoretical papers in the period 1918-1920, he recommends Strindberg (together with Knut Hamsun, he calls them world giants) as the first author with whom the Bulgarian stage should start to be transformed (Milev: 1918). What is more – he translates and publishes in “Vezni” journal, book No. 7, Strindberg's drama “ той превежда и издава във „Везни”, кн.№7, драмата на Стриндберг „Intoxication” with a preface, which takes the late works of the modern playwright to the bridgehead of expressionism. In the meantime, Geo Milev is invited to direct “” The Dance of Death” (1919) in the National Theatre. He considers this play a perfect modern drama (expressionism of the spirit, and not just simple impressionism of mood, like Chekhov's dramas, for example) (Milev 1942: 39). He directs it in a modern way, adequate to the new drama.

A problem in the “assimilation” of Strindberg („The Ghost Sonata”, „To Damascus”, and particularly “The Father” and „ Miss Julia”) is caused by the lack of understanding (missing) that deep clandestine, cosmic eroticism, which is the main motif of all of Strindberg’s works. Most often it is accepted as ordinary sensuality, and his characters – children of vice and virtue. The ghost – characters, the ghost symbols foretell the path of conscience. With Strindberg starts what later is dubbed the „I-drama”. According to P. Sondi (Sondi: 1990) the theory of “subjective drama” coincides with the theory of psychological novel, which is his project for the literature of the future. Strindberg creates his own form – the „stage drama” („To Damascus”), which allows the modern playwright to open formally the thematic intentions of subjective drama. It is the subjective dramatist who takes interest mainly in isolating and elevating his central character, who most often incarnates himself. In 1887, he writes the drama “The Father” – a seemingly family saga, which does not include the imminent, but is entirely built around the point of view of the character. The imminent, according to him, is directed to the understanding of the existential loneliness and separateness of his characters, through the focus of the autobiographical aperture. I think that the fully depicted life of the individual is more real and more instructive than that of a whole family. How could we know what is happening in the consciousness of other people ... But the science of man is aided a little by those authors, who, with their meager knowledge of psychology, try to depict the soul life, which is, in fact, hidden. Only one’s own life is known (Sondi 1990: 3).

Already in the theatrical season 1907-1908, the Bulgarian audience meets the emblematic early modernist Gerhardt Hauptmann. His dramas „Lonely People” (directed by P. P. Slaveykov), „The sunken Bell” (translated by Mara Belcheva), „Elga” (translated by N. Liliev) summarise Hauptmann’s diverse and numerous experiments in the field of naturalistic, symbolic and neo-romantic theatre, in overcoming the Nietzschean view on the fate of man. The Nietzschean idea of loneliness and suffering of the chosen creator-prophet in his dramas is transformed in the more general thesis for the original rift of human society between spirit and matter, between the earthly and the heavenly: It is the bell, made of heavy earthly material, but calling the heavens that is the direct symbol of this hopeless fragmentation (Nikolova 2004: 109). Hauptmann is a preferred author after the First World War as well, due to his avant-garde radicalisations in reconciliation and the philosophical acceptance of the tragic logic of existence (ibid. p. 109). His messages are similar to the public attitudes in our country. His “allegation” in the social drama is interesting too („The Reconciliation” (1890 г.), „Before Sunrise”). Although they are known to P.P. Slaveykov, these texts do not make it into the National Theatre. The reason for this is probably the more specific dramatic technique, which strikes out the requirement for absoluteness of the dramatic form. Dramatic faces present thousands of other people, who live in the same conditions. The tension of the work of art between empiricism and creative subjectivity, the open reference to something external, however, is a principle of form not of drama, but of epic literature. That is why, social drama is epic in its essence and is a contradiction in itself (Sondi 1990: 51).

## **CONCLUSION**

It can be summarised that the main reason for the appearance of the modern Bulgarian drama is a result of the interaction of two factors – the change in the spirit of the new generation and the aesthetic influences coming from abroad. It inherits from the European modern drama characteristics which function as artistic constructs, the most important ones being abandoning the traditional forms; breaking the dominant routine of realism; proclaiming individualism in literature and freedom in art; following the trend towards everything new, peculiar, even mystical; the author has a new type of self – esteem, a new understanding of the world and aesthetics; the protagonist is an individualist, speaks an exuberant language, his/her thoughts are directed towards the inner self, does not share any social ideas and does not recognise them as important, s/he is ready to make sacrifices to preserve their spiritual sovereignty, protests against the deep moral degradation of social, spiritual and even literary life, has burnt all bridges that lead back being certain the future belongs to them.

Premonitions, insights and messages interrupted during and immediately after the wars, which modern drama from the beginning of the 20th century introduces into the Bulgarian drama scene, outline the boundary, closing the period of the existence of modernism in our national drama. Since the demarcation line of the concept of “modernity” shrinks and expands, in aesthetic and formal terms, depending on the receivers’ intuitions, it is appropriate to specify that we accept P. Sondi’s view of modern drama which is related to a model of writing drama in the late 19th century created and defined by Ibsen’s, Strindberg’s, Maeterlinck’s, and Hauptmann’s dramas.

What is happening with the drama is proof of the dialogue transitions and pluralism in our literature in the process of restructuring of aesthetic position, motives, images and moods in the 20th century.

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