

REVIEW/ OPINION

for: the dissertation on acquisition of PhD degree (bulg. doctor), in the professional direction "Theory and History of Culture", professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences, at Institute for Balkan Studies & Center of Thracology (IBCT) of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS), of the regular doctoral student Yanita Kirova, entitled "Non-verbal theatrical forms in South-Eastern Europe (the 1990s – the first two decades of the 21st century)" with scientific supervisor Prof. Dr. Vanya Lozanova-Stancheva

prepared by: prof. D.Sc. Kamelia Nikolova
Institute for Art Studies – BAS based on the Order of the Director of IBCT Prof. Dr. Rummyana Preshlenova for SJ № 189 ПД-16/20.12.2022 and Protocol № 01/11.01.2023 of the first meeting of SJ.

Yanita Kirova's dissertation work „Non-verbal theatrical forms in South-Eastern Europe (the 90s of the XX – the first two decades of the XXI century)“ sets itself the goal of exploring a particularly important problem, relating both to trends in contemporary theater art and to the realm of social practices, medicine and psychology. It is about the intensive development of non-verbal theater in the last three decades and its productive participation in social work with disadvantaged people, with refugees and, above all, in the healing process of children hospitalized in hospitals.

Although the overall philosophy and the variety of different forms and manifestations of non-verbal theater are already the subject of quite a few studies both in Europe and the world, as well as in Bulgaria, its independent examination as a separate specific phenomenon is still rare and faces a number of questions. At the same time, if in a number of foreign texts the problem of the possibilities of some of the non-verbal forms, such as medical clowning, for example, to be part of the healing work is discussed in detail, then in our country it is considered for the first time. That is why I would definitely highlight the very choice of the topic of Yanita Kirova's dissertation and especially its connection with hospital practice as an indisputable contribution of the presented research work.

Another contributing quality of the work is the decision of the doctoral student to examine the chosen topic in a wider geographical and socio-cultural context by tracing the development of

non-verbal theater after the fall of the Berlin Wall, not only in our country, but also throughout Southeastern Europe. A similar presentation and comparative analysis of a theatrical practice in the different countries of our region: Bulgaria, the countries of the former Yugoslavia (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Kosovo) and Albania, which belonged to the so-called Socialist camp, as well as Greece and Cyprus, is done for the first time not only in the field of non-verbal theatrical forms, but also in the field of theater and performing arts in general. Thus, the proposed dissertation discovers and impressively traces a path that is yet to be expanded and walked.

It is also important that the doctoral student conceived and prepared her text as a purposeful attempt through a deep historical-theoretical study to seek scientific answers to the many questions and aesthetic, social and psychological cases provoked by her practice as an active medical clown in a project working with children, hospitalized in medical institutions ("The Funny Hospital of Dr. Cuckoo and Dr. Pippi"), of an actress and director in the field of non-verbal theater. The departure from practice to its scientific interpretation and optimization turns out to be particularly productive in Yanita Kirova's research. Her work not only convincingly fills an important niche in the interdisciplinary studies of theater and its social uses in the modern world, but also has undoubted applied importance.

In order to realize her intention to study and present in detail the current state of non-verbal theater in Bulgaria and its neighboring countries, i.e. in South-Eastern Europe, Yanita Kirova relies on a difficult and demanding approach. On the one hand, it envisages the search, research and systematization of a huge amount of empirical material, and on the other – its scientific interpretation and the construction of a comprehensive idea of the aesthetic characteristics and the ways of presence and participation of the discovered non-verbal theatrical forms in social practices. The chosen strategy of structuring and organizing the research is particularly helpful for the successful implementation of this approach, and here the merit of the scientific supervisor must be noted.

The dissertation has a volume of 363 pages and consists of an introduction, four chapters with numerous subchapters, a conclusion and a bibliography, which includes about 650 sources in Bulgarian, English, Spanish and Greek.

A conceptual place in the work is occupied by Chapter One "Theatre and non-verbal communication", which is also an important starting point for the entire study. In it, the author

undertakes to clarify in detail the concept of “non-verbal theater” and to formulate a clear definition of this theatrical practice. She summarizes that “non-verbal theater is that kind of theater that often replaces verbal language with another kind of language as a means of expression, communication with the audience and telling the story on stage. Nonverbal theater uses human body language or puppet body language, set design, costumes, lighting, technology, movement, posture, space, and other means and codes of communication other than verbal. It suggests the use of bodily and visual stage action as a substitute for the verbal.

It is important the clarification made here that non-verbal theater is called in different ways – plastic theater, theater of movement, physical theater, theater without words, visual theater, etc., but regardless of its name, what makes it non-verbal is the replacement of verbal communication with non-verbal as a stage means of communication between the artist and the audience. A significant achievement here is the identification of two types of non-verbal theater – physical non-verbal theater (pantomime, dance theater, shadow theater, mask theater) and puppet non-verbal theater (black theater, theater of objects). This part of the dissertation should be singled out as his main theoretical contribution.

Particularly valuable both for outlining the current picture of non-verbal theater in the region, and in general for getting to know, in a comparative way, the theatrical landscape in the neighboring countries in the last three decades is the Second Chapter, entitled “Socio-cultural context of non-verbal theater forms in South-East Europe in the 1990s – the first two decades of the 21st century”. Here I would emphasize two definite merits of the text – the research and citation of an impressive number of research texts, authors, reviews and informational materials about the theater during the period and the search and presentation of a huge array of theatrical artifacts, troupes and artists from the countries under consideration. The study would benefit from a more detailed comparative analysis of the data presented, but even now it respects the volume of the studied material and the generalizations and conclusions.

The real center of the dissertation work is the last Chapter Four “Application of non-verbal theatrical forms in the context of therapeutic theatre: Medical clowning”. The entire extensive and multi-directional study of non-verbal theatrical forms and their application in social and especially in medical activities in the individual countries of the Southern European region, carried out by Yanita Kirova so far, aims above all to discover and summarize the useful experience and good practices to add to his own accumulated knowledge in the field of medical

clowning. Clarifying the concept of medical clowning, the essence and functions of the medical clown, as well as their role and importance for the humanization and improvement of the treatment process in hospitalized children and adults in this chapter is another particularly important scientific contribution of the study.

I have no comments on the dissertation work and the auto-abstract, as well as on the other accompanying materials.

I have a question for the PhD student. Based on the research done on contemporary non-verbal theater in Southeast Europe, what other non-verbal theater form, besides medical clowning, do you think is particularly suitable for use as a therapeutic tool in the treatment of hospitalized children in hospitals?

The commented dissertation work is a very serious, in-depth and useful study with indisputable scientific-cognitive importance and practical applicability. I strongly recommend that its author, Yanita Kirova, be awarded the educational and scientific degree “doctor”.

I vote: YES

Sofia, 12.02.2023

prof. DSc Kamelia Nikolova