

REVIEW



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 the 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. Albena Georgieva**, IEFSEM – BAS,
based on the Order of the Director of IBCT Prof. PhD Romyana Preshlenova for SJ № 189 ПД-16/22.12.2022 and Protocol № 01/11.01.2023 of the first meeting of SJ.

Yanita Kirova is an actress, director, medical clown and manager of "Art-Metamorphosis" Ltd. – a non-governmental organization with a socially beneficial purpose. She has worked as a medical clown, an actress in non-verbal theater, a teacher and a translator. She graduates from the 164 'Miguel de Cervantes' Spanish Language High School (2004), later studies cultural tourism at the Sofia University 'St. Kl. Ohridski' (2011), acting for the Movement Theater – Pantomime, in NATFA 'Krastyo Sarafov' (2016) and specializes in various programs in the field of non-verbal theater. She prepares her dissertation "Non-verbal Theater Forms in Southeastern Europe (1990s – the first two decades of the 21st century)" as a full-time doctoral student at the Institute of Balkan Studies with Center for Thracology at the BAS in the period 2019–2022. In the process of her studies, she participates in 5 scientific forums and 18 projects, realizing 6 scientific publications. She is awarded a total of 8 honors and awards.

The discussed work of Yanita Kirova is dedicated to a current and significant topic. Although with some delay, the non-verbal theater definitely declares its presence in Bulgaria and in South-Eastern Europe, which requires its interpretation not only from the theater criticism, but also from a scientific and

theoretical point of view. The fact that the PhD student is a practicing actress herself is a challenge that requires her to look from 'outside' and 'objectively' at her pursuits, but on the other hand gives her an 'inside' perspective and knowledge that broadens and gives depth to the constructed picture about the phenomenon being studied. She has successfully met this challenge.

The text consists of 364 pages divided into an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. The *Introduction* clarifies the leading problem by formulating the main concepts used and identifying the object of the study, outlining its chronological and territorial boundaries. The author's field observations and the review of online editions of festivals and theater productions are indicated as primary sources, and the historiographical works on which the analyses and summaries are based are pointed out as secondary sources. The topicality of the theme is emphasized and the purpose of the work is formulated: "to form a representative picture of the non-verbal theater" (p. 28) in the period and region chosen by the author. The tasks resulting from this goal are specified. The research methods are indicated, which combine the cultural-historical and theatrical approaches and include a comparative analysis of the material used.

The *First chapter "Theatre and non-verbal communication"* thoroughly clarifies the essence of non-verbal communication and the specifics of its application in the theater, presenting basic concepts of various authors. The history of ideas for establishing the stage language of the body in the European theater is traced. First, an attempt is made to delineate the boundaries of the concept of a theater itself, in order to avoid confusion with similar forms such as circus, ballet or dance art, variety shows, etc., then the role of non-verbal elements in the theater is highlighted (architecture, decor, lighting, etc.) in order to characterize at last the movements, gestures and facial expressions, used not as accompaniments, but as substitutes for theatrical speech. The theoretical literature that rationalizes the phenomenon of non-verbal theater and its development is reviewed.

The forms of non-verbal theater are outlined in detail: generally a physical and a puppet one. Physical (movement) non-verbal theater is based on the movements and postures of the human body and includes phenomena such as pantomime, dance theater, shadow theater and mask theater. Puppet non-verbal theater, in turn, is based on the operation of puppets, just as the theater of objects implies the metaphorical 'animation' of various material objects. The author has presented the points of view of various authors and their concepts on the types of theater of the movement, as well as their reasons for considering them as separate phenomena with their own specificity. She convincingly shows that is well versed both in theoretical and critical literature and in the analyzed theatrical forms themselves. Finally, she attempts to define the concept itself: "Non-verbal theater is that kind of theater that replaces verbal language with another kind of language as a means of expression, communication with the audience and telling the story on stage" (p. 99).

The *Second chapter, "Socio-cultural context of non-verbal theatrical forms in South-Eastern Europe (the 1990s – the first two decades of the 21st century)"* attempts to present a comprehensive picture of the studied phenomena in a vast region. For this purpose, the author relies, in addition to personally observed and tracked online appearances and formations, also on theoretical and critical publications in English, which examine and analyze the processes that interest her. The socio-political situation that led to serious changes in the development of cultural life in the countries of the former socialist bloc after 1989 is presented. Attention is paid to the influence on theatrical performances of the political regimes in Greece and Cyprus. The 'crisis of the Transition' in which the theater in Bulgaria fell after the collapse of the 'Iron Curtain' and the attempts to adapt it to the emerging conditions of a market economy are traced. The nascence of independent non-verbal formations even before the political changes is indicated, among which pantomime occupies an important place. It is obvious that the author is intimately familiar with the private theater troupes that subsequently arose and their performances in the pursuit of their more

sustainable existence. Those of them which specialize in the field of non-verbal theater are highlighted.

Further in this chapter, the forms of non-verbal theater that are characteristic or emerging in the countries of the former Yugoslavia are presented, and as a point of departure is outlined the situation before its disintegration as well as during the wars that broke out in the region. The author does not fail to emphasize the social and ideological role that the theater plays in the complex and tense military environment. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro are included in the review. Attention is paid to the situation in Albania, and a comparison is made with the theatrical reality in Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, which are outside the so-called 'socialist camp'. The reasons for the observed cultural and contextual differences are sought. The author shows a good awareness and knowledge of the studied phenomena, which she has obviously followed with a deep professional interest. The information provided is rich and full of details about formations, directors, actors and performances.

The *Third chapter* is dedicated to "*Festivals of non-verbal theatrical forms and formations in South-Eastern Europe in the 1990s – the first two decades of the 21st century*". After the concept of a 'festival' is specified, it consistently outlines the festivals organized in the last thirty years in South-Eastern Europe, including non-verbal theater forms and formations or specially dedicated to them. Most of those festivals arise in the 21st century and are of key importance for the development of alternative forms of theatre. Shown are the possibilities for full-fledged communication and exchange in the field of the artistic expressions, which are not hindered by the language barrier between representatives of different peoples and which contribute to the understanding and acceptance of the 'foreign' and the 'different'. The role of these festivals in the development of non-verbal theater in different countries is outlined. The hybrid (verbal and non-verbal) festivals are presented first: BITEF in Belgrade; "Doll Fair" in Sofia; "World Theater in Sofia"; "Varna Summer"; "The Black Box" in Plovdiv; The International Festival of Puppet Theater and Pantomime –

Kilkis, Greece; “Thesspuppet” in Thessaloniki and Veria; The International Festival of Modern Theatre, Dance and Mime in Volos, Greece. Then the performances of the specialized festivals for non-verbal theater are tracked: PANFIZ in Skopje; Dance and Non-Verbal Theater Festival in Svetvincenat, Croatia; “One Dance Week” in Sofia.

The *Fourth chapter* is dedicated to a current and non-standard topic: “*Application of non-verbal theatrical forms in the context of Therapeutic Theatre: Medical clowning*”. I will say right away that I am impressed by the social commitment of the author and by her personal participation in ‘medical clowning’. The purpose of this type of theater is to have a therapeutic effect on both patients and medical staff, as well as on the actors themselves, who in difficult conditions test their possibilities for reincarnation and creating a parallel reality. This is clearly a completely new field of artistic presence, which is difficult to break through, but which should be supported by society for its civic engagement and humanity. The author is among the pioneers who seek to establish medical clowning as a practice, but she is also among the first to offer a scientific perspective on the phenomenon. As the goal of medical clowning, she points out “reducing stress, calming, eliminating pain by creating an imaginary world for the patient and ennobling the overall atmosphere in the hospital” (p. 289). And further on: “The task of the medical clown is not to entertain, but to assist the process of treatment and recovery” (p. 290). The author points to several examples of the application of this type of theater in refugee camps, homes for the elderly, disaster areas, etc. She outlines the specificity of medical clowning, which integrates the roles of director and actor, relies on an individual approach to every patient and on the improvisational capabilities of the actor.

In the *Conclusion*, Yanita Kirova summarizes the main conclusions and observations made in the dissertation. She once again emphasizes the role of non-verbal theater in the so-called contemporary performing (performative) arts and its significant place on the theater scene in South-Eastern Europe, proven by

the numerous international festivals organized, which have become a platform for cultural exchange and the promotion of non-verbal art.

In her dissertation, Yanita Kirova shows good training looking at the terms used and clarifying them. The information submitted is comprehensive and consistently presented. The considered phenomenon 'non-verbal theater' is examined from different sides and a comprehensive and wholesome picture is created for it. The information about its development in different countries of our region, as well as the festivals held, can serve as a starting point for future studies, as well as a reference for all those dealing with this issue. This makes me think that publishing the dissertation would be useful and necessary. The language used is clear and readable. A future revision would avoid some mistakes and repetitions.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that the text presented by Yanita Kirova "Non-verbal theatrical forms in South-Eastern Europe (the 1990s – the first two decades of the 21st century)" meets the requirements for a dissertation and gives grounds its author to be conferred the educational and scientific degree 'doctor'.

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Prof. D.Sc. Albena Georgieva