

REVIEW

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Институт за балканистика с Център по тракология	
"Проф. А. Фол"	
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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 PhD 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.Sc. Vanya Lozanova-Stancheva

prepared by: Prof. Dr. Joanna Minkova Spassova-Dikova,
Institute for Art Studies – BAS, based on the Order of the Director of IBCT
Prof. PhD Rumyana Preshlenova for SJ №189 ПД-16/20.12.2022
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Analysis of the dissertation

The dissertation is 363 pages long. It has a clear and precise structure. The exposition consists of an introduction, four chapters with several subchapters and a conclusion, a bibliography that is considerable in volume and is in different languages.

The focus is on non-verbal theatre in its various forms from the last 30 years, placed in a broad temporal and global context.

According to Y. Kirova, the research objects of the dissertation work are the following widespread and known manifestations of them on the European stage: physical theatre, pantomime, dance theatre, shadow theatre, mask theatre, puppet theatre, including black theatre and object theatre. Only those events, performances, troupes, companies and theatres which, due to their importance, are in the view of the media and various scientific studies, and which were or are

actively functioning on the stage of the non-verbal theatre, are included in the study.

Medical clowning as a therapeutic theatre and as an aspect of practical application of non-verbal theatrical forms in a paratheatrical context is also an object of the proposed research.

The territorial scope of the study includes the countries of Bulgaria, the former Yugoslavia (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, the Republic of North Macedonia, Croatia, Montenegro, Kosovo), and Albania, which belonged to the so-called socialist camp until the end of the 1990s of the 20th century, on the one hand, and Greece and Cyprus, on the other.

Primary sources are field studies, which include both visits to festivals and individual performances of non-verbal theatre in Bulgaria, as well as an examination of online editions of festivals and theatre products of non-verbal theatre from the world and South-Eastern Europe. A specific focus of the field studies is on the application of non-verbal theatre forms, also realized in a space different from the conventional theatre stage – children's wards and wards for adults in medical institutions in the country. The personal experience of the PhD student is a unique and primary source regarding this little-researched issue.

To the primary sources of information can be added individual journalistic and theatrical articles and interviews in the press, texts on websites, guest appearances on the air, video materials on the youtube channel, memories, available brochures and catalogues of individual editions of festivals over the years, available programs in the archives of theatres and festival platforms, personal professional experience and awareness of the author's personal professional interest, meetings and interviews with colleagues, personal archive.

The research aims to study the development and spread of non-verbal theatrical forms in the countries of South-Eastern Europe in the period from the 1990s of the 20th century to the beginning of the 2020s of the 21st century; to form a representative picture of non-verbal theatre in the region; to describe its

current state and present trends in the field, referring to specific examples from the professional practice of selected theatres and theatre formations working in the field of non-verbal theatre, as well as a sample of theatre festivals offering non-verbal performances in their programs. The issues under consideration are voluminous in themselves and pose multidirectional problem situations, which could not be realized in just one effort like the present text, which is why it does not claim to be comprehensive.

The introduction indicates the actuality of the topic, the goals, the tasks, the subject, the object, the methodology, the scope of the research.

The first chapter *Theatre and non-verbal communication* examines the concepts and definitions of non-verbal communication, non-verbal communication in the theatre, where theatre is recognized as a communication medium. The focus is on contemporary non-verbal theatre forms in the countries of South-Eastern Europe in the context of contemporary audience perception of theatre and art, which is why the retrospective look at their genesis in this part focuses on the reformist and avant-garde trends in European theatre that have begun to take shape already during the first stage of modernism (1910-1930), as well as in the process of generating postmodernism from the 1960s of the 20th century and after. Modernism and postmodernism shaped theatrical forms in their contemporary appearance and, more specifically, established the beginning of the purposeful formation of the stage language of the body.

The basic forms of non-verbal theatre, physical non-verbal theatre, puppet non-verbal theatre are also defined. As non-verbal theatre, the PhD student defines this type of theatre that replaces verbal language with another type of language as a means of expression, communication with the audience and telling the story on stage. Non-verbal theatre uses human body language or puppet body language, sets and costumes, lighting, technology, movement, posture, position, vision, space and other non-verbal means and codes of communication. It predetermines the use of corporeal and visual stage performance, replacing the

verbal one. Kirova indicates the synonymous forms of non-verbal theatre: plastic theatre, theatre of vision, theatre without words, theatre without speech, body theatre, etc.

The second chapter, *Socio-cultural context of non-verbal theatrical forms in South-Eastern Europe, the 1990s of the 20th century – the first two decades of the 21st century*, outlines the historical framework introducing the relevant specific socio-economic processes in the countries of South-Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and that had an impact on culture in general and more specifically on the theatre scene.

For the purposes of the analysis, the geographical scope of the study is presented in three separate groups – Bulgaria, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the post-Yugoslav countries, Albania, on the one hand, and Greece and Cyprus, on the other. The approach is based on the fact that the countries of South-Eastern Europe differ significantly from each other in social, economic and cultural aspects, regardless of the fact that Bulgaria, the countries of the former Yugoslavia and Albania basically belonged to the socialist camp until the end of the 1980s. After the fall of the socialist regimes, the different countries took their own paths, although to some extent they showed some parallel trends in political, social and cultural terms. On the other hand, Greece and Cyprus, as part of South-Eastern Europe, show fundamental differences compared to the post-socialist countries of the region, remaining outside the system of Soviet socialist culture and ideology. However, they do not avoid drastic military-political and social catastrophes, which have a profound impact on the spiritual, *resp.* on theatrical life.

In the third chapter *Festivals of non-verbal theatre forms and formations in Southeast Europe: the 1990s of the 20th century - the first two decades of the 21st century* the most significant forums in the field of non-verbal theatre during the specified period in Southeast Europe are examined. In addition to the gradual entry of new European and world theatre trends and intensive attempts

to develop new theatrical forms, including various forms of physical and non-verbal theatre, after the 1990s, theatre life opened up to new intensive partnerships, visiting international troupes, which led to greater opportunities for creative exchange between artists from all over the world and opening the audience to the new horizons of contemporary European and world theatre. Along with the already established ones, new theatre festivals and forums at a high international level are emerging on the territory of South-Eastern Europe, in the programs of which a large part of the performances are precisely non-verbal, especially those foreign to the visiting countries, which require finding a way to overcome the language barrier.

Along with them, festivals specializing in non-verbal theatre are also appearing. Despite the great differences in the profiles of the studied festivals, the results of the analysis of the festival repertoires clearly show that non-verbal theatre forms occupy an essential part of the festival programs of some of the largest and established international festivals in the territory of South-Eastern Europe and have an important role and place in the stage of the region as a part of the world trends in contemporary theatre.

The fourth chapter, *Applying Non-Verbal Theatre Forms in the Context of Therapeutic Theatre: Medical Clowning*, is especially contributing. This part is dedicated to a more specific application of the theatre, namely the theatre as a therapeutic tool in hospitals or the so-called medical clowning. Several examples of medical clowning in refugee camps, nursing homes, disaster areas, etc. are also cited.

In the conclusion, initial hypotheses are discussed that non-verbal theatrical forms occupy a significant place in the contemporary theatre scene of South-Eastern Europe, on a par with dramatic theatre and contemporary performing arts and performances. However, they entered the theatre scene of the post-socialist countries somewhat late compared to the global and European trends of modernism and postmodernism.

Even in countries like Greece and Cyprus remaining on the other side of the “Iron Curtain”, there is some delay in some respects, due to complex socio-economic problems and a series of political crises that ruin but also stimulate the spiritual efforts of theatre makers. However, in the 1960s, modernist models in the cultural dynamics of Greece were already sustainably functioning. After the 1990s of the 20th century, modern intercultural theatrical forms, easily accessible both to the local audience and for intercultural theatrical participation and exchange, and presenting to the audience alternative themes and messages to the commercial and conventional theatre, gradually began to be established.

However, non-verbal theatre forms in some of the countries of South-East Europe towards the end of the second decade of the 21st century still remain a small phenomenon against the background of world and European development in this area and are mainly supported by private and independent theatre companies, small companies or solo artists.

Yanita Kirova has done her research with great conscientiousness and thoroughness. She apparently knows the objects of her research and demonstrates her ability to reconsider theoretically the empirical material. The text is interesting and fascinating to read and has high cognitive and practical value. It should be noted that the bibliography is extensive. The citations are correct and cover the research of a number of contemporary world and Bulgarian scientists.

Description of the Contributions

The main contributions of the work are: in the research, the basic concepts of non-verbal communication are formulated and definitions of the individual forms of non-verbal theatre are proposed according to the specifics of the used means of expression, methods and tools, necessary for making sense of the described processes and phenomena; the main political, economic and social conditions and factors of the environment, which create an integral context of

the development of non-verbal theatre in the period immediately before the onset of changes in the 1990s of the 20th century, are outlined and analyzed; information on the state and development of non-verbal theatrical forms in the countries of South-Eastern Europe has been systematized and analyzed; the trends in this area have been traced, as well as the changes that have occurred in the receptive attitudes for their offer in the context of the political, economic and social changes that have occurred since the 1990s; a representative sample of theatres, theatre companies and individual prominent artists working primarily in the field of non-verbal theatre and offering non-verbal performances in their repertoires after the 1990s is proposed; some formations and companies working in the field of contemporary performative arts have been studied from the point of view of the use of non-verbal theatrical forms in their work, despite the fact that the so-called performances are not theatre in the full sense and cannot always be related to it; an analysis of the state of Bulgarian pantomime before and after the 1990s was made, with problems and trends in the development, distribution and significance of silent art on the Bulgarian stage as an independent form of non-verbal theatre presented; significant international festivals have been registered and interpreted in the context of international cultural cooperation and partnership in the field of non-verbal theatre; applied aspects of non-verbal theatre forms in an environment other than the conventional theatre stage, in the context of therapeutic theatre in hospital wards (medical clowning), were investigated; the importance and prospects of non-verbal theatre as part of the general processes in the development of theatrical art in the countries of South-Eastern Europe are brought to the fore.

Personal qualities of the author

Yanita Kirova graduated from 164 *Miguel de Cervantes* Spanish Language School (1999–2004). In 2008, she became a bachelor in tourism at the *St. Kliment Ohridski* Sofia University. In 2011, she graduated with a master's

degree in the *St. Kliment Ohridski* Sofia University. She is also a Bachelor in Acting for Theatre of Movement – Pantomime, *Krastyo Sarafov* NATFIZ since 2016.

From 2007 to 2008 she specialized in the field of cultural exchange under the “Socrates” – Erasmus program at the *Frederick Institute of Technology* in Nicosia (Cyprus). She joined a mime-internship “Bodies-Poets” led by mime Gerasim Dishliev in 2013 and a master class in acting with Alexis Floyd – *Carnegie Mellon University*, Pittsburgh, PA, USA, School of Drama in 2014. She conducted a student internship in real working environment under the project “Student Practices” at the OP “Development of Human Resources” “Center for Semiotic and Cultural Studies”, with mentor Margarita Bozhilova in 2014. She accomplished Module 1 of the one-year education and training program *Dance PORT Derida Derida Dance Center*, with teachers Zhivko Zhelyazkov, Maria Gezenchova and Emilia Zankina 2015–2016. She underwent training for one year – from 2015 to 2016 in medical clowning “Clinic of Laughter and Psychotherapy”, UMBALSM “Pirogov”.

Kirova also performed managerial activities as an art manager, art director and pantomime teacher in the children’s pantomime school “School of Happiness” in 2014, as well as manager, medical clown, director and actress of “Art-Metamorphosis” Ltd. in 2018. She also practiced as an actress for physical theatre at *Derrida Dance* between 2016 and 2018.

Her activity as a medical clown is impressive: she worked at the “National Cardiology Hospital” MBAL, 2016; SBAL for Children's Diseases “Prof. Dr. Ivan Mitev”, 2017; UMBALSM “Pirogov”, 2018; Acibadem City Clinic, Tokuda Hospital, 2018. This work of hers includes visiting hospitalized children in the children’s wards of the hospital in relation to administering therapy, calming and reducing stress and anxiety levels through the means of theatre and clowning as part of the patients' treatment; visits to each room and application of

an individual approach to the patients, including a visit to the intensive care unit, resuscitation unit and manipulation unit.

Kirova also conducted theatre therapy at the Center for Mental Health “Prof. N. Shipkovensky”, 2017 – 2020.

All of her specializations, and especially her useful work in the field of therapeutic theatre, inevitably contribute to the undisputed relevance and significance of her dissertation, which is based on both thorough and conscientious scholarly research, as well as on her fieldwork and personal experience as practitioner.

Recommendations and notes

I would recommend this work to be published as a monograph in the future, specifying its structure in the direction of the balance of the parts, perhaps even restructuring, shortening and expanding some of them. The bibliography and citations should also undergo some editing. Illustrations could be added, which would enrich the cognitive value of the work. Applications of selected materials from Kirova’s field studies may also be included.

Conclusion:

The proposed dissertation meets the requirements of Art. 6, paragraph 3 of Law of academic development of the scientific staff of the Republic of Bulgaria. The publications, which are 6 in number, out of print 2020–2022, exceed the required minimum.

In view of all the mentioned merits of the work and the clarifications made, I give a positive assessment and propose that Yanita Kirova be awarded the Educational and scientific degree “Doctor”.

February 5, 2023

Prof. PhD Joanna Spassova-Dikova