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The Late Antroposcene Findings: **Rethink/Recycling the Theatre Props.** **Bulgarian Participation in PQ 2023**

Albena Tagareva¹

Bulgarian Pavilion *The Late Antroposcene Findings*. Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space. Trade Fair Palace of the National Gallery. 8–18 June 2023. Prague.

Bulgaria is one of the nations that has taken part in every single edition of the Prague Quadrennial since its establishment in 1967. What is more, thanks to the consistency which the country has achieved in its participation throughout the years, the forum has turned out to be one of the main factors in the development of Bulgarian scenography, especially during the time of communism. In the People's Republic of Bulgaria (until 1989), as a state part of the Eastern bloc with a totalitarian regime, there was censorship and a number of political and economic restrictions to the natural development of the arts, and in particular the theatre. Despite the censorship, travel restrictions, and controlled access to information in the totalitarian times, stage designers and directors, thanks to the opportunities provided by the Quadrennial, were able to exchange ideas and experience, and actors were given the chance to watch live performances as well as get to know the style and working methods of artists such as Ralph Koltai, Karl von Appen, Yannis Kokkos, and many others.

During the communist era Bulgaria's participation was strictly organised by the Scenography Department of the creative organisations, the Union of Artists and Union of Actors under the watchful eye of party secretaries and functionaries. In this context they would never break the conservative understanding for performance of works of art, or as Arnold Aronson (1993: 62) calls it: 'the museum or jewel-box approach in which the object is beautifully displayed as one might present a painting or sculpture'. The Bulgarian exhibitions within the Quadrennial, as well as nationally, up until the mid-1980s were big expositions with a retrospective nature, which rarely included photographs of plays, objects, or any type of interaction with the audience.

The political and economic crisis in the USSR, which began in the early 1980s, led to change in the policy of the Bulgarian Communist Party. After the mid-1980s for the intellectuals it became completely clear that the downfall of the regime was inevitable, which gave the artists additional courage to start taking advantage of the even more relaxed and practically absent censoring mechanisms. One of the first direct results of the changed socio-political

1 Albena Tagareva was a member of the team responsible for the Bulgarian pavilion, called *The Late Antroposcene Findings*, at PQ 2023.

situation was when the youngest scenographers at the time (having debuted in the late 1970s) began actively participating in national scenography exhibitions as well as the Prague Quadrennial, where they got inspiration for their work in the Bulgarian theatre life. The greatest demonstration of this abandonment of limitations was the exhibition *The Artist and The Theatre*, which opened in Sofia in 1986. The concept and initiative behind its realisation was down to the very young stage designers Elena Ivanova, Silva Buchvarova, Stefan Popov, and 30 more artists. They all completely abandoned the ‘Museum approach’ of displaying artwork, according to Aronson’s definition, and presented it in the theatre, allowing viewers to ‘come on stage’, walk among the theatrical objects and decors, and redefine the supposedly utilitarian objects. This exhibition was the first of its kind in the country and achieved an unseen success for its time.² It was a reaction to the traditional and tedious display of models and sketches of decors in general exhibitions and their international versions. In the local papers the exhibition was described as a phenomenon, and one of the authors, stage designer Silva Buchvarova (quoted in KLEMENTIEV and GROZDANOV 1986: 4), pointed out that the idea for it was inspired by presentations at the Prague Quadrennial on forms and creative approaches to the interpretation of theatrical space. Apart from the innovative for the country approach towards the form of the exhibition, within the exposition the stage designers initiated recitals, concerts, clown acts, as well as happening acts with

the audience, inspired by the practice of Jozef Szajna and Tadeusz Kantor. In October of the same year the exhibition was presented in Czechoslovakia and later in other countries. The event was a gesture through which the young artists demonstrated their categorical detachment from everything prior to them.

The energy that *The Artist and the Theatre* exhibition generated was continued in the following year (1987) with the exhibition with which Bulgaria took part in the sixth edition of the Quadrennial. It was in this edition that for the first time a Bulgarian exposition had a motto, namely ‘*Imagination of the artist is searching for its realisation*’.³ The unification of the presentation of individual scenographers under a common theme was a continuation of the revolutionary achievement of the young scenographers in the previous year. The concept was credited to Evgeniya Radeva (exhibition commissioner) and Elena Ivanova, together with the designers of the space Maria Gancheva and Dimitar Ganchev. The exposition was formed within a two-storey structure ‘covered’ with an attractive element – a huge raincoat from the scenographic solution of Chayka Petrusheva for the production of Dario Fo (1985) on the stage of the theatre ‘Salza I Smyah’ [Tears and Laughter] (DINOVA-RUSEVA 1987: 3). The artists presented in the exhibition were 13 of the youngest stage designers,⁴ who strove to

2 Over 1,500 visitors per day according to Elena Ivanova, curator of the exhibitions (Ivanova quoted in KLEMENTIEV and GROZDANOV 1986: 2).

3 See PQ digital archive.

4 The presented stage designers were young, between 26 and 36 years old: Maria Dimanova, Silva Buchvarova, Vasil Rokomanov, Stefan Popov, Virginia Dobрева, Elena Ivanova, Miglena Kasakova, Maya Petrova, Rumen Dobrev, Chayka Petrusheva, Marina Raichinova, Nevena Kavaldzhieva.

demonstrate their broad view of the theatrical art and were not burdened by the party directives for the unified approach in art (socialist realism). This generally different approach, courage, and creativity of the Bulgarian scenographers did not go unnoticed by the jury of the Quadrennial, which awarded the exhibition with a special certificate for Distinct Development (DINOVA-RUSEVA 1987: 37). The development consisted of the regained possibility of the scenographers for free expression through their own art.

After the fall of the communist regime in the country, the Bulgarian scenographers, via the Union of Bulgarian Artists and Scenography Department, continued to participate in the Prague Quadrennial. The political chaos and economic instability in the years after 1989, affected the scenographic expositions, meaning that for each consecutive edition of the Quadrennial the commissionaires, selected for the exhibition, needed to secure the funding for its realisation, which previously used to be guaranteed. In contrast to the communist state, where participating in international forums was mainly an ideological tool, in the new millennium the Bulgarian government, respectively the Ministry of Culture, lacked a long-term policy to ensure at least basic budgets for such nationally representative forums. This ever so important professional exchange continued through the 15th edition of the Prague Quadrennial.

In 2023 we can safely say that the search for personal contact between people, between artists and the audience, was dominant as a conceptual approach in the national exhibitions within the Prague Quadrennial. To a great extent this was provoked by the theme chosen by the cu-

rators of PQ 2023, namely RARE. Their choice was influenced by the need that arose during the severe restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic for new opportunities to create and experience art, but also by the strong need for real, immediate, and conscious contact between people, which we all previously took for granted. The direct meetings between people during those two years of isolation became rare, even unique. According to the organisers, it is on this human, personal, simple, vulnerable, intimate level that art is born. The desire for personal communication and individual meetings between artists and the audience was present in almost all of the awarded expositions, as well as in many others, among which was the Bulgarian pavilion.

The inclusion of the audience, its activation, provoking, encouragement to enter boldly the various expositions, installations, and performances, to touch and become a participant in them, is that moment which actually makes scenography alive, defining and giving meaning to forms and objects. It is the performativity embedded in most of the national pavilions and the search for means of immersion, inclusion of the spectators in the physical environment built by the artists, and their place as the main character – as an actor on stage, – is that interaction which gives theatricality to the material and compositions. The implementation of theatrically performative movements and gestures lies in the centre of a great part of the expositions at the Quadrennial even at the beginning of the 1980s (cf. SVOBODA 2015). Today the displays and exhibits that they consist of have long been perceived not only as static works of art but are transformed into such through

the presence of the viewers/artists, who interact with them, who activate and enliven them.

In this direction of searching for this rare and unique human contact, which only happens here and now, the Bulgarian pavilion, called *The Late Antroposcene Findings*, was decided. Its commissioner is the theatre designer Petya Boyukova, who has chosen an interesting take on the work of the theatre artist. The focus of the pavilion falls on the theatrical costumes and props, or the small theatrical objects which the stage designers create for the plays and which are actively used by the actors in the *mise-en-scènes*. In the exposition there were theatrical objects and costumes of thirty scenographers, working mainly in the independent sector. On its own, as a construction of the external look, the pavilion resembles some warehouse in which unusual objects are arranged. Yet, they come to life thanks to the active participation of the viewers, an approach used in the exhibition *The Artist and the Theatre*, which remained an iconic one of Bulgarian scenography.

Petya Boyukova and the theatre director Mariy Rosen have created an unpretentious performance that at the same time is charged with delicate humour and self-irony, which aims to raise the question of the destiny of the theatre decor when the play comes off stage. A basis for its script, which was created by the poet Ivanka Mogilska, are interviews conducted with each of the authors of the objects in advance. In each of his performances, the actor Alexander Mitrev presents three of them. What is interesting here is that after each so-called parade, objects from the exposition are auctioned off, and the audience is challenged to give them a new

meaning by setting their price. By the act of purchasing or by showing that a certain object is of value to someone, it becomes a separate work of art and is no longer part of the 'big' image of the play, it starts a life of its own. In the live performance, apart from Alexander Mitrev, participants are the director Mariy Rosen, stage designer Nevena Georgieva, digital artists Albena Baeva and Momchil Aleksiev, as well as the writer Ivanka Mogilska. All of them have supporting roles, presenting and playing with the different objects.

This, at first glance, almost naive performance, raises important questions related to its production, which is not always visible to the audience. Precisely what happens to the entire material part of a play: the decor, props, objects, and costumes after the end of their stage life. Do these objects have any meaning and value to anyone else, except while the performance takes place? Some of them make their way through to theatre museums, wherever such exist. Through those historians often attribute value to them by adding them to various exhibitions and thus they represent part of the materialistic world of the theatre performance – the physical trace it has left. What they reveal is the development and tendencies of a certain historical period, as well as the aesthetical processes which have affected the scenographers, for instance. What about all the rest of the material evidence of the theatre play, which does not make it to the museum to be preserved? Some perhaps are re-used in other productions, others – diligently recycled or are just left in the basements and attics of set designers until one day they are thrown away like domestic waste. And they could be turned into works of art in



Fig. 1: A scene of *Late Antroposcene Findings* performance. PQ 2023. Personal archive of the author (Albena Tagareva).



Fig. 2: A scene of *Late Antroposcene Findings* performance. PQ 2023. Personal archive of the author (Albena Tagareva).



Fig. 3: Bulgarian Pavilion at PQ 2023. PQ Archive. Photo: Jakub Červenka.

someone's home or recycled into a beautiful piece of furniture or something else. What happens to them, when practically there is no theatre museum at a national level? There are only two theatre museums in Bulgaria – one of them is the museum of puppets at the National Puppet Theatre in Varna, and the other was opened in 2022 – a theatre museum at the Plovdiv Drama Theatre. Both institutions, however, encompass only the local theatrical facts. The lack of a network of theatre museums in the country provokes the question about the future of theatre artefacts, posed by the Bulgarian pavilion, which echoes particularly strongly here.

Re-considering the theatrical matter through removing it from the stage/theatre context and putting it in a new environment, takes it off the theatrical stage and into the field of design, the fine arts, which no longer need the acting or directing in order to exist, but still need their

audience to give them value, to appreciate and demand them. One such path and process could not only be turned into theatre, as it is in the performance, but it could also be useful for its authors. However, such practices do not yet exist in Bulgaria – theatre spectators cannot acquire an item from their favourite play or a piece of the costume of an actor they admire, for instance. *The Late Antroposcene Findings* is just an example of the performative approach towards trivial-looking questions about the constant lack of warehouse spaces, as well as the incapacity of the theatrical practice to deal with the waste it produces. Keeping theatre decor and costumes in stock turns out to be a problem of Bulgarian scenography, mainly for the independent companies which face a range of other challenges. The most significant of them are the permanent insecurity with regard to budgets, insufficient performance space, and also

the options for keeping and storing the decor. All these circumstances inevitably lead to compromises on the visual side of the plays. The stage designer, before making a decision on how the space should look, needs to solve the problem with the logistics of the decor and costumes, which are eventually stored in the houses of the actors, directors, and artists. The opportunity for the spectators to take an active part in the transformation of these processes is probably a step which could add to the stability of the theatrical practice.

The Late Antroposcene Findings sparked a serious discussion on these issues among the audience of the Quadrennial, which is to be transferred to Sofia. On each of the days of the forum, tens of visitors passed through the Bulgarian pavilion, bidding for jars of theatrical magic, golden boxes for important thoughts, and a lot more. The professional audience shared their experience and practice about how these challenges are dealt with in the countries they come from and the theatre companies they are involved in.

The Bulgarian pavilion should be proud of a worthy presentation, adequate to the current trends. In the short time that the participation was organised, the team, gathered by Petya Boyukova, devoted creativity and effort to make all this possible, proof of which are the over 3,500 people who passed through the Bulgarian exposition during the 10 days of the forum.

The fifteenth Bulgarian pavilion at the Prague Quadrennial also draws an interesting parallel with that emblematic participation in 1987, when despite the heavy burden

from the socialist realism and censorship, a young generation of scenographers demonstrated a contemporary mindset and scale of the creative act. In 2023 the commissioner of the exposition and the team that realised the exhibition clearly state the need to rethink, as a society, our attitude to the surrounding material, consumerist world. What is more, they clearly formulate the need in the country for a system to assess, preserve, and recycle the material world of the performance.

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