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Theatralia. 2018, vol. 21, iss. 2, pp. 141-160

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2018-2-10>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138520>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Socialist Realism in the Bulgarian National Theatre's Stage Design: Processes, Influences, Concepts

Albena Tagareva

Abstract

Set design in Bulgarian theatre history is a field full of questions. There is only one published piece of research which had the aim to cover the processes in to the scenography from the first professional theatre company (at the end of 19th century) until the mid 70's of the 20th century. The biggest problem in this study is the fact that it was written during the Communist regime, so it's hard to be taken as a solid base for contemporary analysis of the theatre situation. Nevertheless, as the only book about the history of set design in Bulgaria, even if it is full of ideological propaganda, it is still used by researchers as a reference.

This article is a part of a bigger research project which has the aim of clarifying the process of development of Bulgarian scenography as well as the personal art styles of the different generations of set designers from a contemporary point of view. The crucial points integrated into the research are the political changes which start with the Communist coup in 1944 and completely transformed not only the socio-political life, but also the artistic one. The National Theatre was a scene of the unfolding of the most important and essential developments of theatre processes. Amongst these, the establishment of Socialist Realism was a milestone that marked the changing of aesthetics. Achieving it onstage both thematically and in each of the elements of a production became the task of and a challenge to the National Theatre. In this paper I will focus on several examples from theatre history to show how the standards of Socialist Realism have transformed set design aesthetics.

Keywords

scenography, Socialist Realism, Bulgarian theatre, theatre history, Communist period, theatrical space

The political coup of 9 September 1944 in Bulgaria unleashed radical changes in the country's public life, and culture and the arts became strategic tools for the imposition of these transformations. In the field of theatre, the entirely funded state National Theatre was the central institution since its very beginnings in 1907 with its own permanent building and company. The National Theatre was the key factor in setting the trends and directions of development in Bulgaria's theatrical life well until the mid-1950s. This holds especially true for the processes in scenography as these necessitated specific stage equipment, materials and resources available to the best-funded theatre institution in Bulgaria. Still, such opportunities came at a price as certain restrictions were imposed. In the interwar years these were aesthetic, and were signified by a clash between conservative and experimental approaches, whereas under Socialism these were first and foremost ideological constraints, which artists couldn't escape.

At the National Theatre, the 'theatrical scene painting' of the period before World War One assumed new dimensions in the Stalinist period. Cultivating a taste for and attitudes towards the stage space was achieved owing, to a large extent, to such innovative stage designers as Ivan Penkov, Asen Popov, Evgeny Vashchenko, etc., who had already achieved the status of artists rather than of executors alone, putting themselves on an equal footing with directors in translating concepts into theatrical productions. Those were the central figures working for the National Theatre between the early 1930s well until the early 1960s. The coup of 1944 changed the course of their aesthetic development. They saw themselves forced to yield and go back to what they had rejected a long time ago – illusory décor – because 'Art was said to be a powerful factor in the struggle on the ideological front for instilling the Socialist idea into our people's mind' (KARSLAVOV 1949: 36). The process of ideological 're-education' included unification, equalisation, and gross simplification.

Until the 1940s, volumetric décors in a Constructivist vein, elevated/tilted walkways, ladders, stairways, suspended multifunctional ramps, platforms, etc., focal sectional lighting, simplified forms and even film screenings were part of the concepts of spatial solutions to the productions of the National Theatre and some of those innovations had established themselves as artistic devices used over and over again by the artists. It's safe to say that in the 1940s, painted scenery in an academic style was viewed as an antiquated concept of stage space.

With the new regime rising to power, the management of the National Theatre was replaced, along with some of the members of the creative team. Logically, the theatre took the course imposed by the authorities. The institution had to assume the obligation to establish the new ideology. Soviet plays and newly composed Bulgarian dramas with storylines based on 'contemporary realities' (as plays of communist content used to be defined) were mandatory for the repertoires. That, however, was far from enough to turn the country's first theatre into an 'agent of the new ideology', which had to be imposed and disseminated from its stage. Socialist Realism was the form that could make it happen. Achieving it onstage both thematically and in each of the elements of a production became the task of and a challenge to the National Theatre, especially after 1948, when this form established itself as the only acceptable method. 1948 proved

to be a divide; for late that year, the new direction of the country's course was in fact announced at the Fifth Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party: '... it has been officially agreed that there is no other way to socialism than the Soviet one and that the new socialist system can only be built on the basis of the dictatorship of the proletariat.' (NIKOLOVA K. 2015: 6) Hence, the radical changes in the economic, social, and ideological directions of development, which with the amended legislation led the country to Sovietisation. The report on the '*Marxist-Leninist education and the struggle on the ideological front*' given by the then Secretary General of the Central Committee of Bulgarian Communist Party, Vulko Chervenkov, at the congress had evolved later in a resolution of a kind on the role of the sciences and arts:

... Such a profound development of literature (fiction and poetry) towards Socialist Realism, where literature has no other interests than the interests of the people, of the state and creating in artistic imagery a true-to-life representation of the struggle of our nation for a transition from capitalism to socialism to help the Party, the Fatherland Front and the government to instil into the people and especially, into the young generation devotion and loyalty to the great cause of socialism (...) (CHERVENKOV 1949: 19)

This requirement was later applied to all arts, getting especially tough with the country's top theatre.

The National Theatre was the one institution which had to serve as an example to all other theatres and was expected to demonstrate the highest artistic achievements in terms of theatrical productions destined to visualise in practice the directives issued by the Communist Party. The standards of staging the 'right' productions were meant mostly for directors as directly responsible for the success/failure of a performance. The renditions of Soviet and newly composed Bulgarian socialist plays (believed to underpin a good production by the standards of that period) were under constant vigilance. That was the reason why heated discussions centred mostly on playwriting. The need to write new plays depicting the 'new man' and their 'right' directorial renditions (any subjective interpretation was out of the question) had been among the key topics ever since the outset of the Stalinisation of the dramatic arts.

Within that decade or so, under consideration here, the changes on the stage of the National Theatre were vital to the company's... well, let's say, development. The initial steps were meant to replace first of all playwriting to then proceed with censoring the visual-spatial solutions and directorial renditions to arrive at the question of realistic acting. Unlike living performers and their art, which is an art of the moment, texts and scenery were the elements that might and were immediately classed as ideologically inappropriate and formalistic. It was these elements that allowed for mechanical replacement (using Soviet experience and practice), while the rest of the components of a production required sustained and systematic steps and, first and foremost, a change of mind of generations of actors.



Fig. 1: *Fuenteovejuna* by L. de Vega, dir. Stefan Surchadjiev, set design by Ivan Penkov (1946), Ivan Vazov National Theatre Archive.

The stagings of Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna* (1946) by Stefan Surchadjiev and Fadeyev's *The Young Guard* (1947) by Boian Danovsky were among the last emanating the air of the previous era. These were an expression of the enthusiasm of some of the members of the company who happened to sympathise with the political changes, hoping against hope that by putting on epic, larger-than-life productions representing the changes undergone by society they would offer an adequate response using the language of art. Their enthusiasm was nipped in the bud. Even these two inherently 'right' in the light of the new standards renditions were criticised for committing 'offences'. Critics were prompt to point the finger at and underscore where 'mistakes' were made regardless of the fact that the creative concepts adhered to the ideological instructions.

The functions of control, banning and allowing at the theatre formed well-orchestrated control structures. In her study, 'A Model of the Functioning of Bulgarian Theatre during 1944–1956' Rumiana Nikolova discusses in depth the building, functioning and interaction between the bodies exerting control over theatrical activities and their hierarchal structure. Her study examines the establishment over time of the bodies administering and governing theatrical activities. I shall not go into details here about the means used by the Committee for Science, Arts and Culture (CSAC) to exert control over the arts, but rather I will only mention some of the key interactions that Rumiana Nikolova has arrived at. First of all, one must consider the CSAC, successor to



Fig. 2: *Fuenteovejuna* by L. de Vega, dir. Stefan Surchadjiev, set design by Ivan Penkov (1946), Ivan Vazov National Theatre Archive.

the Chamber of National Culture. This Committee was responsible for pursuing the Communist Party's agenda in arts and that was the reason why it held all the levers of control.

The governing of theatres was the province of the Department of Arts (...). In its work, the department was assisted by the Union of Actors and Theatre Technicians. The department had the following subdivisions: of theatre, of music, of fine arts and a repertory bureau. (NIKOLOVA R. 2015: 25)

The repertory bureau of the CSAC played a significant role in that it was empowered to deal with all issues relating to the repertoires of the theatres, and playwriting. And last but not least, came the arts councils with the theatres. The arts councils performed operational functions being closer to the theatrical processes and immediately monitored the implementation of or departures from CSAC's provisions. The councils discussed directorial analyses, cast breakdowns, production designers' solutions, etc. The councils performed rather executive and watchdog functions, being a physical expression of the collective method of work, which was an obligatory norm in socialist art and society. The Decree on Theatres (1949) was the fundamental document, governing the activities of art institutions and particularly of the National Theatre, setting out the responsibilities of all those involved in this area, including the art director:

‘an immediate collaborator to the principal director and the directors on the artistic, decorative, costume and lighting design of repertory plays.’ The art director makes the sketches, designs and scale models and when another designer works on the production, ‘the art director sees to not departing from the artistic and ideological standards set by the management of the theatre; makes or approves the covers of theatre brochures, when the latter have been commissioned to another designer.’ (NIKOLOVA R. 2015: 47) Instead, a rather technical position, art directors were assigned managerial functions. Since 1953, art directors had become members of the management boards of theatres and as such were assigned ideological tasks: to watch for departures from the adopted policy of realism both when approving the submitted projects and in the course of their implementation.

The normative aesthetic of Socialist Realism, imposed as the only acceptable method in the arts under Stalin, is an object of study in itself by a number of researchers, mainly historians of literature. Rather than going into details of the processes that shaped the normative aesthetic, I will just use the conclusions summarising the general characteristics of this so-called creative method. In his *Socialist Realism: Theory, Evolution, Decline*, Edward Możejko treats the method through the historical processes of its coming into being and establishment, mainly in the literatures of the USSR and Eastern Bloc countries. The author gives a detailed description of the steps and the distinctive principles of the method, offering the following differentiation between the art styles of the nineteenth-century realism and Socialist Realism: Możejko arrives at the general conclusion that Socialist Realism differed in that it could be deemed to be just a historical occurrence (MOŹEJKO 2009: 28). Given the political circumstances that gave rise to Socialist Realism, it can't be said to be a natural response to some of the coetaneous art movements of the 1920s and the 1930s. The method was underpinned by typical of the ‘traditional realism’ techniques of depicting reality. Dimitër Avramov in his *Annals of a Dramatic Decade*, has also traced this interrelatedness, defining Socialist Realism in Bulgarian fine arts as a return to the style of such masters of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries as Ivan Mrkvička, Yaroslav Veshin, Anton Mitov, etc.

As for theatre and stage design in particular, we could hardly speak of literal translation into or borrowing of practices typical of the late nineteenth century or the pre-war period, as Socialist Realism in stage design drew on many of the modern concepts of space but treated them in the light of the aesthetic of likeness. The idea of inserting the figure of an actor into the three-dimensional stage space has been developed until achieving total literalness, a photographic resemblance to reality. Volumetric constructions were part of the space inasmuch as these had to perform the task of a detailed downstage area, where action takes place. The typical to the late nineteenth-century special solution – painted scenery of interiors and exteriors respectively and their standard arrangement in each production regardless of its genre or storyline – was replaced with an individual solution to each of the productions, especially when it came to those staged at the National Theatre. The resumed practice of using techniques of the past such as painted scenery was witnessed merely

as a device used by set designers to achieve maximal resemblance (mostly in the up-stage and centre stage areas). It was in this component where the normative aesthetic of Socialist Realism in painting produced its effect on stage design. The painting techniques used by the artists onstage to make décors were the nineteenth-century techniques obligatory for the artists.

Mozejko says that the relation between the traditional realism and Socialist Realism was only discernible in the striving for a realistic depiction of reality. Though party henchmen and critics were outdoing each other in comparing and adducing examples of works in the style of traditional realism to emulate, there were insurmountable differences between traditional and Socialist realisms. The nineteenth-century realists created their own models of reality for the benefit of universal humanistic ideals such as virtue, justice, and flair for beauty or happiness without offering a particular platform of amending the existing evil, while Socialist Realists gave their creative individuality up to the ideals of socialism and showed themselves as champions of world socialist revolution. Their artistic perspective was limited by the current requirements of the political struggle and entirely premised on *'historical necessity'* interpreted as a transition from capitalism to socialism (MOŽEJKO 2009). Stylistic restrictions should be added to all this excluding any possibility for the authors to present their own techniques, colouring, compositional solutions and *'unrealistic'* or *'individualistic'* trends representing life from a viewpoint differing from the collective or militantly-idyllic.

Art historian Dimiter Avramov has quite precisely formulated the consequences, which blind subservience to, and the unscrupulous imposition of, Socialist Realism had for the fine arts of that period:

An extremely primitive view of realism reduced to insensate copying of physical simulacra; obscene propaganda of the functions of art and 'universal accessibility' to the language of plasticity; obliteration of personal touch in creative performance; sketchy (academic or pseudo-academic) painting of portraits, historical or genre scenes; anecdotism and illustrativeness of representation not caring about the plastic problematics; exclusion of any metaphoric and symbolic suggestions or expressive deformations' [abbr.] (AVRAMOV 1994: 11)

and these are just some of the characteristics and generalisations that could directly be referred to both fine arts and stage design produced until the Plenary Meeting of the Bulgarian Communist Party in April 1956 and the so-called thaw period.

Afinogenov's *Mashenka* (1946) and Hajikonstantinov's *Daughter-in-law* (1950) by Krustio Mirsky were hailed by critics as productions in the 'true' style of Socialist Realism. While *Mashenka* was staged by the Soviet director Nikolay V. Petrov, the rendition of *Daughter-in-law* was critically acclaimed for being the first ever production staged by a Bulgarian crew to demonstrate 'the best' principles of the method.

For set designer Asen Popov, *Mashenka* was among the earliest productions where the punctiliousness and illustrativeness of the method had to be fully conformed to. One of the few comments on Asen Popov's solution in the periodicals of the age was published in *Stozher* weekly, where the author mentioned that: 'The décor was

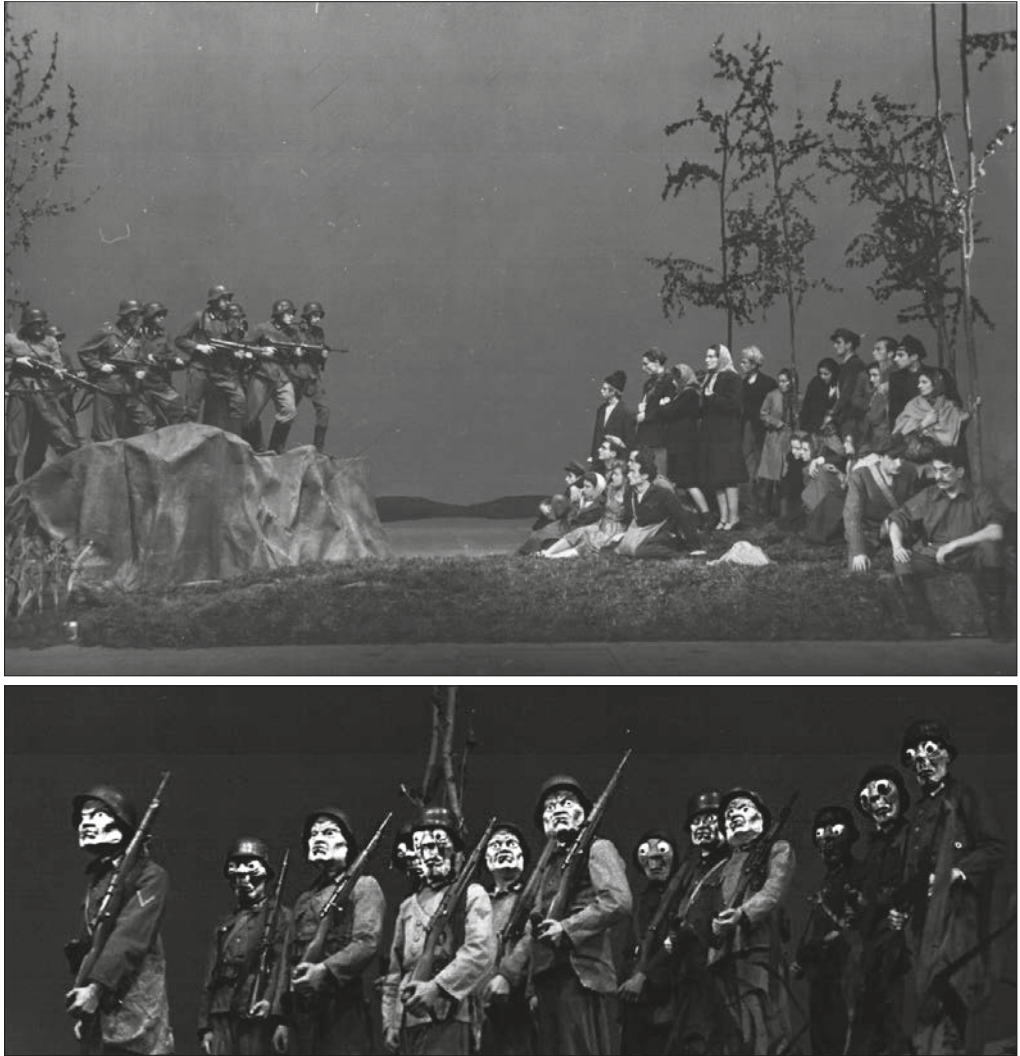


Fig. 3-4: *The Young Guard* by A. Fadeyev, dir. Boian Danovski, set design by Asen Popov (1947), Ivan Vazov National Theatre Archive.

brilliantly translated by Asen Popov, creating a lifelike backdrop against which Afinogonov's *Mashenka* unfolds' (MESECHKOV and NEDYALKO 1946: 4). The setting for the action – Asen Popov's décor – recreates with precision the scenery described in the play. A little later, Vera Dinova-Ruseva observed that Popov's manner had entirely melted into this production. In his review for *Literaturen Front* weekly, Peter Uvaliev commented that Socialist Realism was not a photographic resemblance to reality, but rather 'a stage translation of its advanced nature' (UVALIEV 1946: 2), trying to underscore the need for a space for interpretation of the stage image with regard to both visual and directorial solutions.



Fig. 5: *Leipzig 1933* by Kompaneets and Kronfeld, dir. by B. Babochkin, set design by Georgi Karakashev (1951), Ivan Vazov National Theatre Archive.

The visual solution to the production of *Daughter-in-law* received some mild criticisms that allow understanding the spirit of the times and the expectations for artists' work. Set designer Georgi Karakashev worked in his established elaborative and realistic style. The action has been preset by the author to unfold in a traditional everyday setting: village houses, traditional interiors, props and costumes. Unlike most early 1950s productions though, there was no painted scenery. Karakashev focused on building an architectural centre of the stage space constructing segments of houses of poor and wealthy villagers, a pub, etc., on the revolve. The rest of the scenes of country life were arranged around these main architectural images looking quite authentic. The stage was draped in black curtains so as to highlight the scene. Such a breakaway from traditional details of landscape – no painted yards or fields in the background – was a rare occurrence in the practice of stage design of that period.

Karakashev however moved beyond this simple development of the décor, rather strongly emphasising the objects and the visual representation of the scenes of country life. The *Theatre* journal defined the solution to the production as follows: 'I'd underline that the set designer, Georgi Karakashev has done profound creative work to translate the atmosphere of everyday life of the drama, offering marvellous scenes of country life. The décor is a truly realistic achievement of the artist, which is best witnessed in the second and fourth scenes' (PENEV 1950–1951: 12). The reviewer disagreed with the designer's solutions for the cyclorama lighting.



Fig. 6-7: *Daughter-in-law* by A. Hajikonstantinov, dir. Krustio Mirsky, set design by Georgi Karakashev (1950), Ivan Vazov National Theatre Archive.

Lighting is a key element in scenography. Using it in a realistic vein proved to be a challenge to artists. Even on the face of it, by simply indicating daytime or night-time, artists might lay themselves open to rebukes for unrealism due, for instance, to the shades they had used.

Karakashev's solution to the sky applied to this production is interesting. Instead of a cyclorama depicting clouds, he used spotlights to make a distinction between daytime and night-time. The day/night cycle was expressed through changes in lighting. The skies in a stage designing solution may be said to be an element of crucial importance to the nature of Socialist Realism and has been a matter of debate with almost each of the productions of that period. The solution to the sky is critical to telling the time of the action, the weather and the general mood on the stage. Developing and/or drawing the skies are also indicative of the artistry and the painting skills of a set designer. In such productions as *Fuenteovejuna* (1946) and *The Young Guard* (1947), preceding that dramatic period, the treating of this problem by the designers was also thrashed out by reviewers as a factor in ensuring the realism of a production. The abovementioned review, where the critic voiced his disagreements, is a good case in point: 'I think that the cyclorama in the third scene should be lit by daytime heavenly light rather than in bright blue which renders the picture evening light' (PENEV 1950–1951). Regardless of the levied criticism, the reviewer concluded that the production still had all the makings to be given as an example of a brilliant achievement of Socialist Realism.

Unlike the painting technique of set designer Evgeny Vashchenko, who lavishly used it in his work on *Summerfolk* and *On the Eve*, Karakashev used his outside of his set designs. In *Daughter-in-law*, and *Leipzig 1933*, Georgi Karakashev built the space using three-dimensional forms; in *Leipzig* though, each scene was represented in detail including painted skies on the cyclorama. Here the artist never ventured any departures from the requirements set by the text for the setting.

The three productions by Soviet director Boris Babochkin in Bulgaria of the early 1950s (*Breakup*, 1951; *Leipzig 1933*, 1951 and *Summerfolk*, 1952) were, of course, the ones unconditionally following the path destined by Socialist Realism in theatre and fulfilling the tasks assigned by the Communist Party's programme. The vision of the above productions established the method of Socialist Realism multiplying it both in the productions of the National Theatre and all the theatres across the country in the Stalinist period. The style is generally characterised as a variation of the scenographic practices used by the Moscow Art Theatre complete with a stage version of the so-called sugar-coating. The outcome was pompous neo-academism and even hypernaturalism. The main characteristic of the Stalinist period, according to Edward Mozejko, was the increasing demand to apply the communist perspective (consciousness) and to recognise its exclusive verisimilitude in disclosing the problems and concerns of men in literary works (MOŽEJKO 2009: 210). It's safe to say that this generalisation refers also to theatre. That was the task these productions performed in Bulgarian theatrical practice. The author of an article on the premiere of *Summerfolk* published by *Teatur* journal inferred that '...the three productions are like signal lamps casting light onto the future of Bulgarian theatre...' (TEPLICKI 1951–1952: 31). It is very difficult to

compare these productions with the coetaneous renderings; for, in fact, there was no objective criticism at the time and even later, communicating impressions different from the obligatory admiration, including articles written much later and seeking to criticise the methods of Socialist Realism, but failing to adduce objective arguments for the real value of these productions. Although striving to articulate this period as a time lost to stage design, Vera Dinova-Ruseva highlighted the abovementioned productions as the crowning achievements of the model she sought to present as destructive to art. Here are her opening words: 'The neo-academic realism escalating into Naturalism, has made the individual manners of a number of Bulgarian set designers uniform' (RUSEVA 1975: 271). Then she immediately emphasised Babochkin's contribution to the development of monumental, illustrative set design, which was practiced on the stage of the National Theatre even after 1956. It was impossible to cite the productions by the Soviet emissary as a bad example even years after the official criticism against the Stalinist type of Social Realism. *Breakup*, *Leipzig 1933* and *Summerfolk* were said to be the 'exceptions' of 'neo-academic' realism and an example of how that striving for unachievable realistic images onstage influenced the manners of stage designers practically making them uniform.

Breakup (1951) by Boris Lavrenev was the first production staged by Babochkin in Bulgaria. What he did in fact was to revamp a rendering of the play by Stefan Surchadjiev and Grisha Ostrovski, staged months earlier at the theatre branch. Boris Babochkin's task was to exemplify on the main stage of the theatre what Socialist Realism meant practically and how it ought to be translated theatrically. The figure of the Soviet director was significant to the development of Bulgarian theatre of that period, defining the style of the National Theatre for the next several years.

Asen Popov was the stage designer of both versions, building an imposing décor that was impressive with its verisimilitude. The pictures taken from performances of the production show clearly that Popov has worked according to the obligatory illustration of the scene as set by the author. The Dawn warship appears before the spectators with guns pointed three-thirds at the auditorium. It was on this deck that the crowd scenes took place where the sailors voiced their sympathy for the idea of communism.

A trend became discernible in the early 1950s placing stage designers in a special position requiring that they translate ready-made solutions rather than generate their own. Replicas of Soviet décors were increasingly witnessed on Bulgarian stages. The solutions of the Moscow Art Theatre became an example to follow. Vera Dinova-Ruseva noted this fact with some disappointment, observing that the change in Asen Popov's manner was also a result of the striving for veristic translations of readymade solutions. This process was strongly reminiscent of the pre-war practice of translating productions with ready-made mise-en-scène and sketches of the décors except that the centre to draw on was not Vienna, or Reinhardt's theatres, but rather it was Moscow, where aesthetic could be only in the vein of Socialist Realism.

Leipzig 1933 (premiered in November 1951) marked the culmination of that photographically illustrative style of stage design. Babochkin's task was to stage an epic drama about Georgi Dimitrov. It was not just another production seeking to present



Fig. 8: *Summerfolk* by Gorky, dir. Boris Babochkin, set design by Evgeny Vashchenko (1952), Ivan Vazov National Theatre Archive.

the struggles for the idea of Communism. *Leipzig 1933* had to set an example for all the directors, production designers and actors who were supposed to adopt Socialist Realism from first-hand experience of the Soviet method without ‘giving it a twist’.

The production was assigned a monumentally commemorative task: to represent Georgi Dimitrov as a hero of the idea of Communism. A CSAC document underscored the ‘merits’ of the play and the potential it held.

In this play, the image of Georgi Dimitrov is coherent, realistic, focused. *Leipzig* is a bright realistic picture of the strongly expressed international proletarian solidarity with the rescuing of Comrade Dimitrov from the evil clutches of the Nazi executors. It gives a true rendering of the historic role of the Soviet Union, of the Bolshevik Party, of Soviet working people, who were at the forefront of the struggle to save Comrade Dimitrov’s life. In this way, the picture of the historical setting in which the Leipzig Trial took place is entirely true. (*Minutes of a CSAC sitting* 1951)

Retrospectively, it should be noted that the production was, in its essence, Communist Party propaganda serving the totalitarian political system, a role imposed also on painting, binding the authors to produce historically ‘true’ scenes and portraits



Fig. 9: *Summerfolk* by Gorky, dir. Boris Babochkin, set design by Evgeny Vashchenko (1952), Ivan Vazov National Theatre Archive.

of party heroes, representing them ‘*in the best possible and a positive light*’. It was such scenes and compositions depicted in meticulous details on some of the canvases that stage designers made use of, applying the technique of academic painting.

Georgi Karakashev (who received an award for his solution and was appointed artistic director of the National Theatre on Babochkin’s recommendation) was the stage designer of this production; he had to show a real slice of life, the trials in Berlin and Leipzig, the rallies of the progressive masses against Dimitrov’s detention and his return to the Soviet Union, taking into account the smallest details. The stage of the National Theatre was transformed into a historically ‘true-to-life’ picture. Retrospectively, the archival documents testify to an immensely detailed and colossal work on the spatial solution to the production. Karakashev himself underscored in his notes on the solution to the scenery: ‘the entire theatre rose to the task’ (*Ivan Vazov National Theatre archive*, a.i. 604, p. 1) to help the director show a paragon of Socialist Realism. The management of the theatre even asked CSAC to provide photographs of the courtroom in Leipzig, where Dimitrov was put to trial.

The solution to the scenery of *Leipzig 1933* was very pedantically developed taking into consideration each detail. An illustrative setting was achieved both through using plastic elements and painted volumetric décors and mise-en-scène. Individual scenes were developed so as not to leave the spectators room for building in their minds their own interpretations of the space or the surrounding landscapes in exteriors, but rather

visualised the smallest details as, for example, the street in Berlin meticulously translated even with posters, common to any urban environment.

What has to be highlighted in the artistic solution to this production is its service function. So, the selection of a set designer was non-random either, given that Karakashev never made a clean break with illusionary scenography. Or as Vera Dinova-Ruseva underscored in her monograph on the artist, 'the Constructivism of décors in Bulgarian stage design of the age [i.e. in the interwar years, A.T.] translated only partially into his set designs. He developed more volumetric painted décors, without applying bare stage constructions and material from nature' (RUSEVA 1977: 41). A case in point of this 'more volumetric' approach is his solution to the production of *Daughter-in-law*, which aroused admiration in obeisant critics. The managements of both the theatre and CSAC have arrived, in all likelihood, at the same conclusion as Vera Dinova-Ruseva in her 1970 monograph, to entrust Karakashev with the stage design of the production, rather than Asen Popov, for instance, who, following the criticisms of his solution to *The Young Guard* in the early 1950s, entirely abandoned his passion for the avant-garde based on the new principles and generalised décors.

The productions staged by Soviet director Boris Babochkin are problematic from a contemporary point of view, while the critical reflection on them was absolutely biased. Even those of the publications that claimed to distance from and rethink the artistic devices typical of the time of personality cult fail in fact to articulate any different opinions about the magnitude of these productions. Though the period until the BCP's Plenary Meeting in April 1956 was defined by Vera Dinova-Ruseva as dogmatic, and even stage scenery of the age as 'neo-academic realism evolving into naturalism' (RUSEVA 1975: 271), these definitions remained just mere generalisations. No criticisms have been made of Babochkin's approach to stage design, which he regarded simply as a backdrop for the action. On the contrary, his work was compared to the best traditions of the Moscow Art Theatre. Though Babochkin succeeded in making two of the National Theatre's most emblematic artists lose their individuality, none of the coetaneous critics pointed to the fact that the development of Bulgarian stage design was frustrated by him.

The last (third) of Babochkin's stagings in his almost two-year stint with the National Theatre was Gorky's *Summerfolk* (1952). Vashchenko, very much like Asen Popov in *Breakup*, fully complied with the illustrative aesthetic required by the director. The paintings, which Vashchenko saw himself forced to draw on the stage, put his artistry to the test. 'Daring, realistic is the set design by Evgeny Vashchenko, who, particularly in the Third Act, has achieved a typical Russian landscape' (TEPLICKI 1951–1952: 35). Hence the conclusion that was the artist's ultimate priority: achieving 'the typical landscape' serving as a beautiful background for the action. Vashchenko achieved it by the use of perspective. Downstage he built a hyper-realistic image of grass, for the meadow where the scene of the picnic unfolds, while his 'canvases' were placed upstage, creating a feeling of depth. In the acting area, several elements (trees) were arranged to ensure a seamless transition from the three-dimensional figure of the actor and the objects downstage to the flats.

In Vera Dinova-Ruseva's opinion, Vashchenko was strongly influenced by landscape painting in his scenographic designs. And especially so in this production, where the requirement for recreating the natural features of landscapes was a top priority. He did not leave out any of the smallest elements to satisfy even the most demanding critics with his masterly painting of the skies. That was how the artist met the requirements for realism of that period. He translated the flat canvas into the stage areas, succeeding in creating a verisimilar illusion of depth using classical methods of perspective.

Here is one of the few comments referring to Vashchenko's design: 'The scene of the picnic imprints in memory. Against a backdrop of the magnificently beautiful, serene scenery, the ugly pettiness of that philistine life becomes even more conspicuous...' (TEPLICKI 1951–1952: 31). The aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the ugly were used to depict two conflicting ideologies, the socialist and the capitalist. The beautiful set design by Evgeny Vashchenko in this case was absolutely identified with the 'beauty' of the socialist idea. This interpretation of the décor placed in the plain beautiful-ugly, the academic painting applied by Vashchenko fully complied with the requirements for the beautiful. Beauty in that period was found solely in 'regular' lines, forms and colours, precisely replicating reality. It was not just 'beauty' though and artists were never left free to discover beauty using their discretion. Beauty boiled down to socialist ideals:

...That is, using the method of artist's materialistic view, the method that not only judges rightly the objectively existing reality, but also actively intervenes in it, reshaping it to choose what is the new, the progressive, the revolutionary, fostering the new growth in its development, struggling against everything reactionary and antiquated. (TEPLICKI 1950–1951: 2)

These words of Boris Babochkin in an interview for *Teatur* journal predestined the direction of our national theatre, where 'the socialist adopting of the world under the laws of beauty' (LUTSKANOV 1959: 6) was from then on the primary guiding principle of the theatre's productions. One of the few criticisms, if any, levelled at a discussion of the production held behind closed doors to decide whether or not to allow its premiere, broached the décor:

About the décor. The picture of the river is really marvellous. I wonder if Comrade Vashchenko could rework it, because it features no waterfall, but rather the river seems to go underground. I'm at a loss how the picture ought to be fixed, though in itself it is very beautiful. The same holds true for other trifles, such as, say, the pine tree where the swing hangs. Though it is a massive tree with a thick trunk, it nevertheless sways with the swing. Still, these small things are easily fixed. A thin tree trunk would have made a world of difference. But this one is massive. That's all I have to say (...) (Protocol from artistic council 1952, *Ivan Vazov National Theatre archive*, a.i. 759, p. 3–4)

This is just an example of the desperate situation in which stage designers had to work.



Fig. 10: *Breakup* by Boris Lavrenev, dir. B. Babochkin, set design by Asen Popov (1951), Ivan Vazov National Theatre Archive.

Babochkin's legacy on the stage of the National Theatre multiplied on an unbelievable scale not only when it came to the NT's next productions, but also spread onto the theatres across the country. After his exemplary productions, monumental set design became a showpiece for a 'good staging'. After Babochkin left and until Stalin's death in 1953 and several years after that, productions of new Bulgarian plays such as *Moscow Time* by Angel Wagenstein, *Love* by Orlin Vasilev, *Family* by Ivan F. Popov to name but a few, topped the bill of the National Theatre.

Following Stalin's death in 1953, it was too early to speak of any radical changes in the concepts of stage design; still, the feeling of possible 'breakthroughs' in the strict realistic setting, using the example of *Fuenteovejuna* and *The Young Guard*, appeared, though tentatively, on the stage of the National Theatre ventured by Ivan Penkov in Schiller's *Don Carlos* by Krustio Mirsky (1955). Following the significant BCP's Plenary Meeting in April 1956 the challenge facing stage designers became even tougher: they had to learn how to balance between their own creative quests, which were already demanded from them, meeting at the same time the continuing obligation to comply strictly with the method of Socialist Realism in their work on what was displayed on the stage.

The National Theatre was in practice the place supposed to maintain the conservative realistic line, but in the 'thaw' period (1956–1968) the term 'realistic' assumed a broader sense. An entirely verisimilar décor attained negative responses being associated with the old status quo, which was denounced as a narrow-minded adherence to

certain principles. Still, on the other hand, with the opportunity to introduce individual interpretations and show a distinctive style, stage designers faced new challenges. The directives issued at the significant BCP's Plenary Meeting of April 1956 – fighting the narrow-minded view of Socialist Realism – prompted artists to gain a broader perspective on the method, while critics had to debunk the artistic devices tolerated earlier.

As for the visual aspect of a theatrical production, the illusionary verisimilar building of spatial solutions had to be dismissed as naturalism and automatic replication of the world and, as such, had to be classed as a negative. Despite all the acknowledged damages inflicted on art, the communist authorities could not give up on the method of Socialist Realism, obligatory for all to adhere to. Though the political course had changed, the National Theatre remained a showcase for the official aesthetic policy. In those changed conditions and well until communism was overthrown in 1989, the National Theatre failed to reclaim its authority of the top theatre institution. The aesthetic processes at the National carried further the burden of the dogmatic method.

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1 The romanization is done in accordance with Library of Congress romanization table (<https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsol/romanization/bulgarian.pdf>) omitting some ligatures.

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