

REVIEW

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Department, 8.4, Major: *Theatre Studies and Theatre Arts*

For acquiring the academic degree "Doctor" in professional field 8.4 *Theatre and Film Arts*,
Candidate: Yavor Gardev Stefanov.

The topic of the dissertation is: ***Power, Sovereignty and Directing. Experiments on the Performative Power, the Interpretative Freedom, and the Creative Autonomy***

Academic advisor: Prof. Hristo Todorov, PhD

The dissertation is a rare example of research on a problem in the field of theatre, which is approached with the tools of other humanities (philosophy, sociology, political history, jurisprudence). The author sets horizons for thinking applicable to theatre and more specifically to directing, which, although commented on in various specialized reflections, find their unique dimension here. As he has repeatedly noted, directing as a professional activity and a separate profession has been established rather recently in the centuries-old history of European theatre art. Although relatively young, contemporary directing is an absolute foundation in theatrical practices. In modern terms, it is namely directing that turns out to be the element of the theatrical process that is commensurate with the authority of the drama (text) as a carrier of meaning and ideology in the performance and manages to take precedence in authorship by activating diversity in the interpretive potentials of the essence of dramatic performance. Consensus in thinking about directing as a factor of renewal in the theatre does exist. There are also new directions in the practices, results and fields of communication related to directing, which unfold both in the course of the theatrical process (the creation of the performance) and in the course of the reception (audience participation). These extensively sketched and well-known facts about the phenomenon of "directing" and the agent, "director", are the principal basis from which Y. Gardev starts. The academic significance of the dissertation lies in the understanding of "directing" and "director" in the perspective of a major function of the profession – the power that is realized through the domination of this figure in modern theatre. Everyone in theatre recognises and knows this, and as the author of the dissertation accurately comments, the

recognition, acceptance, and subordination of the resource to power at the disposal of the director is one of the most dynamic ingredients in the relationship configurations. The dissertation offers a look at this relationship (directing – theatrical process) through the instruments of philosophy.

The author precisely defines his tasks and goals in academic terms. The subject of the study is: the power relations in which the director operates in modern, postmodern, and modern theatre. Although the author is an active director, he excludes personal experience from the field of research in order to remain as objective as possible to his academic interests and to explore the state of the problem through the possibilities of academic accumulations. Gardev repeatedly elaborates on his goals, stressing that he does not aim to offer an exhaustive theory of the power-directing-theatre relationship, but actually, he manages to largely disprove his own statements. The dissertation achieves a broad theoretical framework in relation to its subject and as a result builds an impressive, multilayered, and precise panorama of the possibility of thinking power through the activity of theatre directing.

The structure of the dissertation realizes and confirms the high research capacity of the author in the study. The two composite concepts with which he works are subject to reviewing. These pages highlight Gardev's sensitivity to clarifying the nuances in the concepts so that they express, to the maximum degree, the exact content of the phenomenon. Consistently through the levels of linguistic analysis and semantic aura, he introduced "performativity" as a working term "most adequately expressing the wide-ranging English-language philosophical category of performance" (p. 20 of the dissertation) and justifies the need for this by emphasizing the lack of meaning contained in the uses of performance, accepted in Bulgarian, related to a specific artistic genre. Continuing in this line of reviewing, which highlights the shortage of concepts in relation to references, the terms "performing arts" and "stage arts" are also discussed. In both cases, the layers of meaning that come to the fore are emphasized, which highlights an aspect of subordination through the execution/fulfilment of an external idea/form ("performing arts") and the apparently partial reference to ideas of theatricality through the traditional venue - the stage ("stage arts"). Mostly through philosophical reflection, basic ideas about power and the performing arts are presented, and the various positions are commented on with refinement and updating, according to the author's critical understanding. In the field of competence, awareness and independent reading of academic literature, the dissertation is not just rich and convincing but is also representative of the systematic criticism inherent for the author. The aspect that has a particular importance is the interdisciplinary approach he

follows, using - with confidence and ease - theoretical concepts from the field of philosophy - in the first place, but also of social sciences, theatrical studies, linguistics, cultural and political history, anthropology, jurisprudence. The result of this research attitude is an academic paper, located both in the field of theatrical reflection and philosophical knowledge. The impressive bibliographical foundation, which Gardev knows well, is not only relevant to the research task, but is applied with deep insight by the candidate, as the dissertation extracts the essence of theoretical models created in various academic fields and reveals the dimensions of their essential relationship to the fields of power and directing. In the path chosen, the author does not follow an absolute chronological sequence, but consciously decides to knit nets of touches, which in turn leads the text of the dissertation to points of surprise. This is also essentially the research model stated and followed systematically and accurately. In order to ensure stability of gaze and to overcome the risk of arbitrariness in meetings at a meaningful level, he chooses "to build temporarily strengthened points of balance" and thus "collect usable parts of the methodological apparatus of different, complementary, mutually corrective, but also in many aspects mutually denying thought paradigms. Moreover, I have tried to synthesize explanatory material applicable to the topic both from the internal methodological conflicts within these paradigms and from the sharp turns of their own frameworks." (p. 13) It should be noted that this approach is successful and convincing. Due to this, the power-direction relationship turns out to be conceived from multiple positions in order to build the final observation achieved.

The author also emphasizes his own position in the power-directing relationship and the experiences derived, but it is not personal empirical facts that are subject to study, neither are the empirics of diversity in historical or national culture terms. The text confirms that as a background there is a detailed knowledge of both the origin and dynamics of directing, as well as the aesthetics, methodologies, and personal style of significant figures worldwide. In fact, Gardev extracts the core of this historical experience in order to consolidate the typology of power, like a marshal's staff that every director carries with him.

It turns out that just as the art of theatre is infinite, it is power that is not a single concept. Directing can extend its power claims to different segments of theatrical reality. Gardev points out that his observations will be limited to the dimensions of power-directing-actor. This focus is justified by the fact that the figure of the actor in the theatrical phenomenon is absolute. The actor is the unique "tool" through which the director declares himself, and since here a relationship between living, real, independent, free, and creative subjects occur, the realization of power is an operation of special nature and complexity. A director-actor (most often - actors)

connection is a social one, and it is realized in a specific context (more precisely, different contextual horizons). This is the reason Gardev studied concepts of power from the perspective and with the approaches employed by sociology, political science, and social psychology. In this part, the dissertation balances between an analytical, critical, and synthetic entry into the problems of understanding power, authority, and legitimacy. Filtering the categories of power applicable to the theatrical field (Weber, Guzman, Parsons) gives reason to define the typology of the director as “Weber's charismatic, traditional and legally rational type, as well as (...) Guzman's content-rational type” (p. 52 of the dissertation). The director is defined as an extremely complex figure who jumps from role to role, but they also reside in volatile manifestations of legitimacy. Part of the specificity of the profession is in the permanent renegotiation, achievement and change of these "histrionic" persons according to the unpredictable needs of the process and the communication. Variations of power are surrounded by a detailed accumulation of diverse definitions, drawn from philosophical, political and communication frameworks. In the field of theatre, these diverse tactics and positions of power are defined along the lines of creative interaction of all three persons of power, thanks to which decisions may or may not be made, or manipulation guaranteeing a certain way of thinking may be used. At this point, the author perceptively points out that ideological manipulation is required for the director, who must invent power tactics to win the willingness of the actor to express, experience and prove the artistic validity of the ideological truth of his character.

Another possible dimension of the use of power by the director is borrowed from Foucault and it directs to the microphysics of power, and, in this case, the director is the driving force of the interactions between people by realizing power in a capillary mode of application.

In fact, the only tool the director works with is language. Through his personal ability to use linguistic tactics, he communicates and creates; and for this basic reason, language is attributed a certain meaning in his attitude to the problems of power. The second mandatory condition is the immediate personal presence in the process of creating the theatrical performance.

A working hypothesis is placed at the beginning of the main part which is also compacted as a conclusion in the course of developing the dissertation. This is the analogy with the figure of the sovereign, historically realized in the monarchical institute and conceived as a productive attitude to the high degree of domination, independence and control, exercised by the director. In these reflections, the peculiar parallels with the elaboration of mental constructs that would express as closely as possible the phenomena of absolute power in a social environment are very productive. The historical examples with which the author works connect the realization

of such power with the invention of the concept of a "fictitious persona" (*persona ficta*) in the field of jurisprudence. What is highlighted through these analogies to the director's status and their relations with the actors/the troupe, is the tendency of power to erode, as well as the character of "dual sovereignty" (individually independent and socially woven; unique and one of all but having power over them). The conclusions that the status of the director in terms of power as sovereignty is dynamic and the change of content repeats the movement of the status of the sovereign in political history (from centralization and consolidation to dispersion and distribution of sovereignty) are particularly interesting. This point made by the author also touches on the specific problem of the mythologization of the figure of the director and the resources of power that it gives, as well as the scale of subversion that each of the members of the troupe could exercise in challenging mandate, authority, and expertise. Specifically, directorial sovereignty is also indicated as tied to the inalienability from the personality and physical body of the figure of the director. The continuation of this thematic line leads to a reflection on the individual sovereignty of the participants in the theatrical act. This is a sensitive point that, according to the author, requires a convincing negotiation within the director-actors relationship, since inviolability of personal space, body and permissibility of intervention within the boundaries of the theatrical act occur on the physical body of the actor, who bears this by being a character with whom the physical injury occurs. Obviously, the duality of such a being presupposes originality every time the director exercises any of the facets of their power. In these pages, the author does not touch on the problems of the various theatrical aesthetic modes and theoretical platforms, but indirectly focuses on the fact that they also contain positions on this issue. By the way, this is an interesting line for expanding and further development of the research – exploring the dimensions of power in the typology of theatrical systems and directorial manifestos as aesthetic platforms.

Original observations are also made in the reporting of the director's self-privilege. It turns out that certain practices and cultural policies can institutionally regulate this type of power (examples of the structures of the National/Regional Drama Centre in France, headed by prominent directorial figures). In these cases, institutional and expert empowerment are codified, but this is done in the field of a socially prescribed personal freedom of the sovereign origins.

The point of understanding sovereignty as a power figure and the correlations with directing lead the researcher to original observations related to the first person historically accepted in the history of theatre as a professional director – the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen Georg II: "Georg

II through his idea of cultural despotism, born of his voluntary mandate invalidation in the field of political power, paves the way for many directors who choose the path of centralized hierarchical aesthetic power and total control over their performances. Thanks to the example of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, the director chooses the path of the theatrical sovereign and demiurge." (p. 162 of the dissertation)

Another very productive core of the study gives Gardev's observations a powerful charge. This is the linking of power issues with the performative twist and theories of language, reading and interpretation, also with the "metaphysics of presence ".

The study concludes by highlighting three types of deferred directorial power (presence), which are described as temporal, sedimentary, and ostensible. These configurations highlight the exercising power without participation in the act of realizing the theatrical event, in which the will to creating the director is imprinted in the various imagery decisions and actor presences.

What was outlined above are some of the important contributions of the dissertation. First of all, it is an original, innovative reflection on directing and the director through philosophical reasoning. The concept of power is revealed as a resource owned and used by the director, which is much more than a personal quality. Gardev manages to deploy the connectivity of this resource with different conditions for its emergence, realization, stabilization, or loss. Fields of social relations, spiritual attitudes, cultural capacities, and aesthetic specificities are indicated, which can shed light on the director demiurge, mythical figure or impostor, whom the theatre needs, but who is located in the niche of this need, either filling it with meaning or barring it as a void.

Gardev's overall research attitude contributed to the search for dynamic provocations from various scientific fields, making sense of the problems of power and their critical connection with the manifestation of power in theatre.

There is no work in Bulgarian theatrical studies that offers such a rich interdisciplinary view of the phenomenon of directing. The dissertation can also be called "The Director and the Philosophy of Power." The conclusions reached by this philosophy of Gardev establish directing as the exercise of power, sovereignty, personally conquered and expertly restrained, dispersedly expressed and deterred, always expressed through the performativity of language and unconditionally embodied and voiced in the living existence of the individual director.

Yavor Gardev is undoubtedly the author of original academic research, categorically interdisciplinary in nature, which demonstrates the high degrees of complexity in which theatre and directing can be reflected upon.

All necessary conditions related to the academic presentation of the dissertation are fulfilled (volume 295 pages, rich bibliography in several languages, abstract and publications).

I have known Yavor Gardev personally and closely since his student years at NATFA. I have witnessed his successful realization as a director. I have repeatedly participated in professional events in Bulgaria and abroad in which he was part of creative or academic events. I have had the opportunity to comment as a critic on many of his theatrical productions. All this gives me grounds to categorically state that the dissertation is a manifestation of a bright theatrical talent, recognized nationally and internationally.

The dissertation he presents complements the profile of his personality as an authoritative and beloved theatre professional. With his research paper, "Power, Sovereignty and Directing. Experiments on the Performative Power, the Interpretative Freedom, and the Creative Autonomy" he proves that he is also a researcher and an academically competent scientist. I confidently propose that the academic degree "Doctor" be awarded to Yavor Gardev Stefanov.

I vote with conviction "Yes".

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