

REVIEW

on the dissertation of Vasilena Valerieva Radeva

on the topic: “Theatre Based on a True Story: Document and Fiction in Contemporary Bulgarian Theatre”

for the award of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”

in scientific field 8.4. “Film and Theatre Art”

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Milena Aneva – Department of Television, Theatre and Cinema Art, Faculty of Arts, South-West University “Neofit Rilski”

1. General presentation of the doctoral candidate and the dissertation

I would like to highlight several points which, in my view, prove the usefulness and timeliness of this dissertation. The author examines theatre based on a true story not as a fashion, not as an impressive form, but as a serious artistic and research field in which the document, the human narrative, trauma, the social situation, and scenic imagination enter into complex and often contradictory relations. Already here it is evident that Vasilena Radeva’s interest is not an external academic curiosity, but is dictated by her practice as a director and lecturer. In my opinion, this is one of the most important qualities of the dissertation.

I begin an academic statement in this unconventional way because I am convinced of the need for a doctor with such qualities. In the Bulgarian theatre environment there are not many people who can simultaneously observe processes, participate in them, analyze them, and turn them into a scholarly text. Radeva shows that she knows the matter from within. She does not write about documentary and neo-documentary theatre as a distant system of concepts, but as a living process in which the director, the actor, the document, the spectator, and the social situation stand in a constantly changing relationship.

The dissertation has been discussed and proposed for defence by the Theatre Department of New Bulgarian University. The academic supervisor is Prof. Violeta Decheva, D.Sc. The choice of supervisor itself is indicative of the field in which the work is situated: the field of contemporary theatre studies, political and documentary theatre, and attention to living practices rather than only to historically established forms.

The work comprises 191 pages, of which 139 pages are main text. Structurally, it includes an introduction, an exposition in three chapters, conclusions and a final conclusion, a bibliography, and an appendix. The bibliography is 10 pages long and contains 84 sources: 59 titles in Cyrillic

and 25 titles in Latin script. The appendix contains documented interviews with the artists whose work is the subject of the study. These data are important because they show that the dissertation is built on a sufficient scholarly, empirical, and practical basis, and not on general observations or impressions.

The abstract corresponds to the content of the dissertation. It clearly presents the problem, object, subject, aims, tasks, methodology, structure, contributions, and publications of the author. I find that the abstract correctly brings out the most essential points of the dissertation and gives an accurate idea of its logic, scope, and results.

The doctoral candidate has the necessary scholarly publications, which are thematically related to the dissertation. Among them are texts on fairy-tale motifs in socially engaged theatre, on the search for a scenic language for documentary facts, on the autofictional approach in the collaborative process, and on directing in the pulsation of geopolitical time. This shows that the topic is not isolated for the purposes of the procedure, but is a sustained line in the author's scholarly and creative interests.

2. General characterization of the content of the dissertation

The study "Theatre Based on a True Story: Document and Fiction in Contemporary Bulgarian Theatre" focuses on one of the important questions of the contemporary stage: how reality becomes theatrical reality. This is a question that seems easy only at first glance. In fact, it includes problems of credibility, the ethics of representation, the boundary between testimony and artistic invention, and the artist's responsibility to the fact and to the person who stands behind that fact.

The author defines the research problem as the construction of theatrical reality from factual material: documentary, journalistic, and autobiographical. The subject of the research is the relationship between document and fiction in the contemporary performance based on a true story, as well as the authorial presence of the director and the actor in this type of theatre. Chronologically, the work places twentieth-century European theatre as an important context, while the specific analyzed stage examples are from the first quarter of the twenty-first century in Bulgaria.

The object of the research consists of performances from Bulgarian independent and institutional theatre. Among them are "The Hague," "The Vagina Monologues," "Archaeology of Dreaming,"

“Cinderellas Ltd.,” “Bad Children,” “Nocturne,” “The Room of Pleasure Is Empty,” “Invisible 1,” and “100% Plovdiv.” To this corpus are added three productions from the author’s professional experience: “Nordost. A Tale of Destruction,” “Bluebeard – Marriage without a Fairy Tale,” and “Body Thrown at an Angle to the Horizon.” Radeva’s teaching experience with the introduction of neo-documentary theatre methods into actor training is also examined.

I particularly value the fact that the choice of examples does not claim to be exhaustive. This is a correct and honest research decision. The dissertation does not attempt to create a catalogue of all Bulgarian documentary and neo-documentary practices. It selects a small number of essentially different cases through which one can see how documentary material is translated into scenic language. Precisely this makes the analysis more focused and more useful.

The main thesis of the dissertation is that translating documentary facts into theatrical language requires creative inventiveness, a bold range of imagination, and ethical responsibility toward the sensitivity of the topic and the authenticity of the documentary material. I find this thesis very important. It does not oppose document and fiction, but thinks of them as two regimes that can coexist when placed within a responsible artistic framework.

The methodology of the study combines reference to specialized literature, authorial books, articles, and statements in the media; conducting interviews with artists; analysis of specific performances with a focus on the translation of documentary material into scenic language; and practical work with students in the genre of neo-documentary theatre. This combination of theoretical, empirical, and practical levels is fully adequate to scientific field 8.4 and to the specificity of research in the performing arts.

3. First chapter – “Conceptual Clarifications”

The first chapter has fundamental significance for the entire dissertation. In it, the author introduces the concepts with which she will work and attempts to outline the contextual framework of the research. This is necessary because concepts such as document, fact, fiction, documentary theatre, theatre based on a true story, neo-documentary theatre, verbatim, and autofiction are often used freely and sometimes inaccurately. Radeva makes an effort to clarify not only their meanings but also the way in which they function in theatre.

I find the distinction between fact and document especially important. The author does not accept the document as equivalent to fact, because every document has an origin, context, author, point

of view, and function. This understanding is very important for theatre based on a true story. If the document is perceived as absolute truth, theatre would become an illustration. But if the document is understood as testimony, as material that can be interpreted, then the stage opens up to complex artistic and ethical possibilities.

In this chapter Radeva also considers fiction not as an enemy of the document, but as a necessary part of scenic thinking. Fiction in documentary theatre is not merely invention. It is a way to organize the material, to bring out a conflict, to create an image, and to make possible the encounter between the spectator and the factual content. Here one of the important ideas of the dissertation appears: that the boundaries between document and fiction can be both emphasized and consciously blurred, provided this is done with artistic and ethical measure.

The first chapter also traces the use of documents in European theatre in the twentieth century. In this overview the author discusses important figures and directions: political theatre, epic theatre, documentary theatre, postdramatic forms, and contemporary documentary practices. This historical overview is not an end in itself. It serves to show that theatre based on a true story does not arise in an empty space. It has roots in theatre's desire to speak about its own time, to resist the passive consumption of information, and to turn the stage into a place of thinking.

I believe that the first chapter succeeds in bringing out one of the most important problems of the dissertation: documentary material does not make theatre less artistic. On the contrary, it places higher demands on theatre. It requires the director and the actor not only to create an effective form, but also to be responsible toward what they represent. This is especially important in a contemporary situation in which fake news, media manipulation, and multiple "truths" turn the document into a problematic field.

As a recommendation for this chapter, I would note that some theoretical passages could be even more synthetic. But this does not diminish its value. On the contrary, it shows a serious effort to master complex and multilayered material. For me, the first chapter creates a reliable foundation on which the following analytical parts can develop convincingly.

4. Second chapter – “Bulgarian theatrical practices based on true stories in the first quarter of the twenty-first century”

The second chapter is the most extensive and, in my view, the most essential part of the dissertation. Here the author moves from the conceptual and historical level to concrete Bulgarian

practices. It is precisely in this part that her ability to think about the theatrical process from within, while also analyzing it with the necessary distance, is most clearly visible.

The chapter is organized around several main lines: performances based on dramaturgy in which documents are used; devised performance; autobiographical performance or scenic autofiction; the verbatim method; documentary work in the field; and the political dimensions of theatre based on a true story. This structure makes it possible to trace different mechanisms through which reality enters theatre.

In the analysis of the performances connected with Galin Stoev, Radeva shows how the documentary can appear not only as factual material, but also as the pulsation of time. “The Vagina Monologues,” “Archaeology of Dreaming,” and “The Hague” are examined as different ways in which the political, the personal, and the historical can be theatrically reworked. Particularly valuable is the attention to “The Hague” as a political phantasmagoria based on a true story: an example in which the documentary impulse does not destroy imagination but activates it.

The analysis of “Cinderellas Ltd.” and the work of OSAIK “36 Monkeys” brings out another important aspect: the use of the fairy-tale in socially engaged theatre. In my view, this is one of the interesting moments in the dissertation. Radeva shows that the fairy-tale form is not an escape from reality, but can be a way of mastering it scenically. The fairy-tale functions as a “glue” between different dramaturgical parts, but also as a mechanism for bearing painful social themes.

In the discussion of Theatre “Replica,” the emphasis falls on close contact with the spectator and on the desire for direct social expression. Here the author succeeds in showing that documentary theatre is not only a method for gathering material, but also an ethics of encounter. In this type of performance, the spectator is not a passive consumer, but a participant in a space that insists on being heard.

Devised performance occupies a significant place in the second chapter. Radeva treats the collective process not as a lack of authorship, but as another type of authorship. This is important because contemporary theatre increasingly questions the traditional hierarchy among playwright, director, actor, and spectator. In the devising process, the document is often born from the work itself: from conversations, memories, improvisations, personal stories, bodily reactions, and archives of memory.

Autobiographical performance and scenic autofiction are analyzed as a special zone between personal testimony and artistic construction. Here the author enters a very current problem: how the actor can be a scenic projection of himself or herself and at the same time the theatrical form does not fall apart. This is important because the autobiographical in theatre is not simply confession. It is an organized scenic situation in which the personal becomes material for shared thinking.

The section on Emergency Theatre and the performance “The Room of Pleasure Is Empty” is especially valuable. The author traces the laboratory process that arose under the conditions of the COVID pandemic and shows how frustration, isolation, psychodramatic and philosophical attempts can build authentic dramaturgy. Here the dissertation clearly shows that theatre based on a true story is not necessarily theatre of a ready-made document. Sometimes the document is created during the process.

In the section on the verbatim method and the Documentary Theatre Studio “Vox Populi,” the work reaches one of the purest forms of documentary theatricality: the voice of the real person transferred to the stage. Radeva examines not only the method, but also its dangers: what happens to the voice when it is removed from its original context; how the director selects, edits, and arranges; how the dignity of testimony is preserved.

I believe that the second chapter is contributory precisely because it manages to encompass different forms of theatre based on a true story without unifying them. It shows that in Bulgarian theatre after 2000 the documentary is present not as a single school, but as a network of practices. Some are more political, others more personal, others more laboratory-based, and still others more community-oriented. What they share is the search for a scenic language for reality.

5. Third chapter – “Theatre based on a true story seen through one’s own directing and teaching practice”

The third chapter is the one that most clearly distinguishes Vasilena Radeva’s dissertation from purely theoretical studies. In it the author includes her own directing and teaching practice. This is a difficult move, because there is always a danger that the scholarly text may turn into autobiographical self-description. Here, however, that danger is overcome. Personal experience is transformed into material for analysis.

This chapter examines the productions “Nordost. A Tale of Destruction,” “Bluebeard – Marriage without a Fairy Tale,” and “Body Thrown at an Angle to the Horizon.” They make it possible to trace how the author herself works with document, literary material, social problem, mythological layer, and scenic form. Here the dissertation no longer only analyzes other people’s practices, but tests its own thesis through personal directing experience.

Especially important is the way in which Radeva thinks about the ethical responsibility of the director. When working with a true story, especially with a traumatic topic, one cannot rely only on artistic effect. There must be measure. There must be an attitude toward the real people, the real events, and the real pain. In my opinion, this is one of the strong lines of the third chapter.

In the analysis of her own productions, the author shows that the documentary is not necessarily literal. It can be included as structure, as image, as rhythm, as an ethical problem. In this sense, theatre based on a true story is not reduced to the mechanical transfer of documents to the stage. It is a process of translation: from fact to scenic language, from testimony to image, from reality to theatrical situation.

Equally important is the part devoted to teaching practice. Radeva examines the introduction of neo-documentary techniques into actor training. This has direct practical value. In contemporary theatre education, students need to be prepared not only for classical dramaturgy, but also for work with personal material, interviews, documents, social context, improvisation, and collaborative process.

This part of the dissertation can be especially useful for lecturers and students. It offers a way of thinking about the actor not only as a performer of a role, but also as a collector, bearer, processor, and co-author of material. This corresponds to contemporary stage practices, in which the actor often participates in the creation of the dramaturgy and in the construction of the performance structure.

I find the third chapter particularly valuable because it makes the connection between theory, practice, and pedagogy. It is precisely this connection that gives completeness to the work. The dissertation does not remain only in the field of description, but offers a methodological perspective. This is important for a scientific field in which artistic practice is not an illustration of theory, but an equal research resource.

6. Literature used, methodology, and correspondence of the abstract

The literature used is sufficient in scope and relevant to the topic. As already noted, the bibliography contains 84 sources: 59 in Cyrillic and 25 in Latin script. It includes studies in the fields of theatre theory, literary theory, documentary theatre, postdramatic practices, autofiction, political theatre, as well as publications related to specific stage phenomena. The author works with Bulgarian and foreign authors, which allows the topic to be placed simultaneously in a national and a broader European context.

It is important to note that the literature is not used merely formally. In the first chapter it builds the conceptual apparatus, and in the second and third chapters it supports the analysis of specific stage practices. Of course, the international context could be developed even more broadly, but for the tasks the author sets herself, the bibliographic basis is sufficient and well directed.

The methodology corresponds to the character of the research. It includes theoretical clarification, historical overview, performance analysis, interviews with practitioners, and author-reflexive analysis of the author's own work. This methodological combination is entirely appropriate, because theatre based on a true story cannot be considered only as text, nor only as performance, nor only as a social phenomenon. It exists precisely at the intersection of all these levels.

The abstract corresponds to the dissertation. It reproduces its structure, presents the main problematics, and formulates the aims, tasks, thesis, methods, contributions, and publications. I consider that the abstract gives an accurate and sufficiently clear idea of the content of the dissertation and of its scholarly logic.

7. Scientific contributions and practical significance of the dissertation

I believe that the dissertation contains theoretical and practical contributions. The first contribution lies in the systematization of concepts and in the clarification of the relationships among document, fact, and fiction in theatre based on a true story. The work shows that the documentary in theatre is not simply "truth" placed on stage, but a complex material that must be understood, selected, transformed, and ethically defended.

The second contribution is the analysis of contemporary Bulgarian theatrical practices. This analysis is important because the field has not yet been sufficiently described. Radeva examines artists and formations that have a real role in the development of the Bulgarian independent and

institutional stage. In this way, the dissertation creates a useful map of practices, methods, and aesthetic approaches.

The third contribution is the introduction of interviews with theatre practitioners as essential research material. This gives the work empirical density and preserves testimonies about processes that otherwise often remain outside scholarly description.

The fourth contribution is connected with the author-reflexive analysis of the author's own directing and teaching practice. Here the dissertation acquires particular value because it offers not only observation, but also a working methodological perspective. This makes it useful for directors, actors, lecturers, and students.

The practical significance of the work is obvious. It can be used as a teaching aid in actor training, directing, and theatre studies. It can also be useful for artists who work with documentary material, interviews, personal stories, social themes, and collective processes. I believe that texts of this kind are needed because they connect academic knowledge with the real stage.

8. Critical remarks and recommendations

I find the dissertation valuable and useful for people engaged in theatre, especially in contemporary theatre theory and practice. Still, I would point out several recommendations that do not diminish the work, but rather outline possibilities for its future development.

In places the text could be more concentrated. Sometimes descriptiveness prevails over synthesized analysis. This is understandable, since the author works with a great deal of material, but in a future publication of the work it would be useful for some descriptive passages to be edited and subordinated to a clearer analytical line.

The international context could also be expanded. The dissertation contains a sufficient basis, but future research could place the Bulgarian examples within an even broader comparative framework, especially in relation to leading European and world practices in documentary, verbatim, and autofictional theatre.

These remarks are recommendations. They do not change my positive assessment of the work. On the contrary, they show that the topic has potential for continuation and development.

9. Conclusion

I find the results of the study to be contributory in nature for contemporary Bulgarian theatre. Vasilena Radeva's dissertation is an independent, in-depth, and necessary study that combines theoretical knowledge, practical experience, and a pedagogical perspective.

The author shows that she is excellently familiar with the essence of her research, knows the specifics of documentary and neo-documentary theatre, understands the processes on the contemporary Bulgarian stage, and can analyze them convincingly. Her text has scholarly value, but it also has something else: a living attitude toward theatre. This is important to me.

I believe that the dissertation can be useful for future theatre researchers, for students, for directors, actors, and lecturers. It has the potential to be further developed and published as a teaching aid, because it provides both a theoretical framework and practical guidelines for working with documentary material.

I support the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Vasilena Valerieva Radeva in scientific field 8.4. "Film and Theatre Art."

05.05.2026

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Milena Aneva

Sofia