

REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Antoaneta Hristova Petrova, PhD,
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Professional field 8.4 “Film and Theatre Arts”, for the acquisition of the scientific degree “Doctor”,
in professional field 8.4 “Film and Theatre Arts”,
candidate: Vasilena Valerieva Radeva F 112411
scientific supervisor: Prof. Violeta Decheva, DSc.

Vasilena Radeva’s dissertation, “Theatre Based on a True Story: Document and Fiction in Contemporary Bulgarian Theatre”, supervised by Prof. Violeta Decheva, DSc, has a total length of 191 pages.

The work begins with an Introduction, followed by three main parts, clearly subdivided into chapters and subchapters; Findings and Conclusion; Bibliography and Appendices.

The nearly ninety titles in several languages included in the bibliography are correctly presented and cited in the text of the dissertation. The work is an independent authorial study.

The contributions stated in the abstract are precisely formulated and correspond to the work carried out in the dissertation.

The doctoral candidate has presented four publications that relate to the topic of the dissertation and have been published in licensed scholarly journals.

The candidate meets all formal requirements for admission to the procedure for acquiring the scientific degree “Doctor” in professional field 8.4 “Film and Theatre Arts”.

I am not in a conflict of interest with the candidate.

The main objective of the present dissertation is to examine the creative approaches of artists who develop their own authorial stage language when working with documents and facts; to examine the construction of theatrical reality from factual material (documentary, journalistic, autobiographical); and to examine the presence or absence of conflict between the concepts of fact and fiction as they relate to theatre based on a true story.

As the author states, the main objective of the dissertation is not to analyse the creative result and its public reception, but to examine the creative approaches of artists who develop their own authorial stage language when working with documents and facts.

Chapter One

The first chapter discusses documentary theatre in the twentieth century in detail:

- Theatre based on a true story or documentary theatre
- Epic theatre

- Postdramatic theatre

The dissertation focuses on European theatre in the twentieth century and on the first quarter of the twenty-first century in Bulgaria.

Chapter Two

In the second chapter, the emphasis is on Bulgarian theatre practices based on true stories in the first quarter of the twenty-first century; devising theatre; the autobiographical performance or stage autofiction; and verbatim theatre. The focus is on productions by individual directors and theatre companies:

Galin Stoev

- “The Vagina Monologues” by Eve Ensler at Theatre 199 (2000).
- “Archaeology of Dreaming”, a production based on the story “Dreams” by Ivan Vyrpaev, premiered in 2002 as a production of the Varna Summer International Theatre Festival, later performed on the Apostol Karamitev Stage at the Ivan Vazov National Theatre (2002).
- “The Hague” by Sasha Denisova at the Ivan Vazov National Theatre (2023).

“In order to examine how a director with an evident affinity for dramaturgical fiction and with liberated fantasy in his staging range translates the document and the play based on a true story into stage language.” — Vasilena Radeva

- “36 Monkeys” and the production “Cinderella Ltd.”; a co-production between “36 Monkeys” and TARTproduktion Stuttgart; Sofia, Stuttgart, 2014; authors: Zdrava Kamenova and Gergana Dimitrova; director: Gergana Dimitrova. This is examined as an example of the dramaturgical use of the structure of the fairy tale in a theatre text with a documentary basis and based on a true story, which sharpens the critical discourse and introduces a different, vivid perspective toward the thematic focus of the work. Another essential conclusion is that the embedding of a fairy-tale narrative functions as a kind of dramaturgical backbone of the postdramatic performance.

Theatre “Replika”

Theatre “Replika” and its production “Bad Children”, whose motto is “There can be a response only when there is something to say”, founded by a group of actors who were fellow students: Blagoy Boychev, Ovanes Torosyan, Milko Yovchev, Ivaylo Dragiev, Boryana Peneva, Milena Ermenkova, and Irina Andreeva, with Georg Genoux as the main director.

- “Bad Children” (2017) by the Romanian author Mihaela Michailov; co-authored dramaturgical compilation by Blagoy Boychev and Maria Kassimova-Moisset; a performance based on a true story, as a symbiosis between the imagined and the actual—fact and fiction; the directorial debut of Blagoy

Boychev. Here the emphasis is on the actor as a stage projection of the self, as an example of the autobiographical performance or stage autofiction.

Association “Based on a True Story”

Association “Based on a True Story”, founded by the artists Irina and Ognyan Golevi, and their autobiographical performance “Nocturne – from the Dust to the Radiance” (2012).

“Blurring the boundaries between imagination and the personal moment. Confessions and fiction. The courage to express oneself through one’s intimate world.” — Irina Goleva (p. 77). Goleva successfully collaborates by combining the devising method/principle with autobiographical documentary material.

Emergency Theatre

Emergency Theatre, founded by Yuliana Saiska, and the production “The Room of Pleasure Is Empty” (2025), is a striking example of the collaborative creative approach in the devising performance based on a true story. It is part of a global tendency in theatre today: to give expression to the actor’s personality in the capacity of author.

Documentary Theatre Studio “Vox Populi”

Documentary Theatre Studio “Vox Populi” — verbatim theatre — founded by Neda Sokolovska.

“Reality is in the eye of the perceiver.” — Julia Popovici (p. 98).

Neda Sokolovska combines this performative corporeality with the “living texts” from documentary interviews. Here we also find the characteristic feature of Vox Populi’s theatrical language: the relation of fiction to document, based on interviews taken from real people.

Chapter Three

The third chapter examines theatre based on a true story through the doctoral candidate’s own directorial and teaching practice in her work with Panic Button Theatre Company and the NBU University Theatre, in a study of fact and fiction in the stage language of the productions listed below.

1. Productions in professional theatre

- “Nordost. A Tale of Destruction” — premiered on 04.03.2010 at the Nikolay Binev Youth Theatre; the play “Nordost” by the German author Torsten Buchsteiner.
- “Bluebeard – Marriage without a Fairy Tale”, inspired by Charles Perrault’s fairy tale “Bluebeard” and created using the method of devising theatre; Sfumato Theatre (2012); “On Marriage” by Khalil Gibran and an authorial monologue by the actress Elena Dimitrova.
- “A Body Thrown at an Angle to the Horizon” (2020) in the Backstage hall of Azaryan Theatre.

“As a summary of my professional directorial experience in the search for a stage language for documentary facts, I will say that one of my leading creative provocations is to clearly outline the boundaries between document and fiction, and then to play with their apparent imperativeness and blur them.” — Vasilena Radeva (p. 131).

2. Research into neo-documentary techniques in teaching practice

This section examines the introduction of neo-documentary theatre methods into actor-training practice.

- The production “Birds”, based on the play of the same name by Konstantin Pavlov and interwoven with real memories of the students; NBU University Theatre (2025).

Tasks set by the doctoral candidate

- Clarification of key concepts in the field of the performing arts related to theatre based on a true story in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
- Analysis of staging methods and stage language in the productions.

Evidence of original contribution

Evidence of the presence of the candidate’s own contribution in collecting and analysing empirical data includes:

- The conducted and recorded conversations/interviews with Bulgarian artists whose work with document and fiction is the object of this study.
- The author’s own research into theatre based on a true story on the contemporary Bulgarian stage.
- The sharing of the author’s own directorial and teaching methodology for integrating documentary material into a performance.

The candidate possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge in the relevant speciality and the ability to conduct independent scholarly research. For the formation of the theoretical part of the dissertation, a wide range of sources in the field of theatre theory, publications, and authorial opinions by Bulgarian and foreign researchers in the area of documentary and neo-documentary theatre have been studied and systematised.

Limitations

As the doctoral candidate correctly notes:

- This text offers only a brief historical overview of documentary theatre in Europe in the twentieth century and is limited to mentioning several popular artists and companies creating neo-documentary theatre abroad.

- The dissertation does not examine contemporary theatre genres such as forum theatre, playback theatre, theatrical reenactments of actual events, and other theatre forms that also work with documentary material.
- Many Bulgarian artists and their productions based on true stories are not included in the subject of this study because of its structural and time limitations.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, as the author correctly notes, the “choice of the particular theatre companies and directors” does not claim exhaustiveness, but was made in accordance with the intention to examine in greater depth a small number of essentially different examples of finding a stage language for documentary facts.

Other performative genres of neo-documentary theatre that have their representatives and projects on the Bulgarian cultural scene include playback theatre, sensory theatre, site-specific theatre, promenade performance, as well as other varieties of contemporary theatre approaches that play with the transformation of material from lived reality into a fictional artistic world. All of them relate to the subject of this dissertation, but remain outside the framework of this study, which seeks to offer and justify an authorial perspective in analysing the links between document and fiction in theatre based on a true story from the beginning of the twenty-first century in Bulgaria (p. 117).

Note: If Vasilena Radeva’s dissertation “Theatre Based on a True Story: Document and Fiction in Contemporary Bulgarian Theatre” is published, I recommend adding directors such as Voskresia Viharova with the productions “The Unspoken, Told”, “Your Story, (You) in Me”, and “Pianissimo”; Mariy Rosen — promenade theatre and the production “The Corridor – the Artists from the Burnt Circus”, with dramaturg Maria Kassimova-Moisset and the artists Asya Ivanova and Antoaneta Petrova as representatives of NBU, Department of Theatre, and authorial research on the topic in the productions “Shelter for the Unaccompanied” and “The Corridor – the Artists from the Burnt Circus”.

I recommend, if the author of the dissertation considers it important for her thesis, also adding Ivo Dimchev, who initiated the project Your Home Is My Theatre and performed more than 400 home concerts in people’s homes in Bulgaria during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria.

I recommend emphasising the role in the present study not only of RCAI Toplocentrala, but also of the Centre for Culture and Debate “The Red House Andrey Nikolov”, which, since its opening in 2004, established itself as a home for independent artists in Bulgaria. Its aim was to popularise documentary and socially engaged art, and Neda Sokolovska, Theatre Replika, Vasilena Radeva, and Yuliana Saiska worked there and created most of the productions that are the subject of the present study.

The role of V/HOD — a platform for documentary art by the theatre formation VOX POPULI and the Centre for Culture and Debate “The Red House Andrey Nikolov” — should also be noted. This platform

presented theatre performances, documentary films, performances, installations, and other artistic forms whose content analysed the problems of the present.

In conclusion: Vasilena Radeva's dissertation "Theatre Based on a True Story: Document and Fiction in Contemporary Bulgarian Theatre", supervised by Prof. Violeta Decheva, DSc, meets all legal and internal university requirements under the present procedure.

I vote IN FAVOUR of awarding Vasilena Radeva the scientific and educational degree "Doctor" in scientific field 8.4 "Film and Theatre Arts".

02.06.2026

Sofia

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