

REVIEW

By Prof. Nikolay Goranov Yordanov, D.Sc.

Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Science, Professional Field 8.4. Theatre and Film Art, on the academic work (artistic production) submitted for the contest for receiving the Academic Position Associate Professor, in the professional field 8.4. *Theatre and Film Arts*, candidate: Ch. Asst. Prof. Antonia Hristova Petrova, PhD

The review hereby focuses on the materials provided by the candidate, namely the extended abstract, accompanying the artistic portfolio of her works, presented as evidence for her achievements to be measured against the minimal requirements in the national legislation and the requirements posed by New Bulgarian University for attaining the academic position of Associate Professor, based on the research and tutoring work of the candidate, as well as on her overall professional artistic portfolio and her artistic performances after having been awarded the academic degree *Doctor*.

Having carefully reviewed the materials presented, my first impression was that Antoaneta Petrova, PhD has an extraordinarily intensive creative activity and it is combined with educational and social applicability of her knowledge and skills, as well as with a keen researcher's reflection on them, aimed at their theoretical and methodological summarization.

After attaining her Bachelor's and a Master's at NBU, and after having graduated the specialization course in *Social Pedagogy and Culture Studies* at Sofia University *St. Kliment Ohridski*, Antoaneta Petrova successfully defended her Doctoral thesis for attaining the academic degree *Doctor*, as a full-time doctoral student at NBU; her doctoral thesis was entitled *The Non-literary Theatre – Performance Practices, Specific Features and Development: the itinerary to waking up, arousing and stripping the psychophysical nature of the actor, determined on the basis of the experience of various systems from the 20th century, and the paths available to the actor for attaining spiritual and bodily wholeness*. Based on this doctoral thesis, two years later, Antoaneta Petrova published the book *Egyptian Tale of the Heart*, publisher: NBU, 2014. Her book, as well as her consecutive professional contributions show her permanent and thorough interest in the problem of the actor's

contrivance and development in the widest range possible: from the theatre based on text to the theatre, based on ritual, from the performance to the performative practices in a non-theatrical environment. Her reflectiveness is accompanied by a rich and diverse artistic activity, encompassing a multitude of leading and supporting acts in the field of stage arts, which have been publicly acclaimed and praised through reviews in the specialised media. Another impressive aspect of the work of Antoaneta Petrova is her role as a participant and a leading figure in a variety of educational programmes, as a tutor of graduating students and as the initiator of educational modules, as well as her participation in national and international educational projects and workshops for subsequent development of theatrical skills. It is of major importance that her creative and educational activities are very consistently intertwined. What the candidate demonstrates is persistence in the effort to turn her professional experience in the field of stage arts into methodological approaches to be applied beyond the field of stage arts, in teaching at high school level of general education. There are also specific results and goals achieved.

The overall conclusion for the materials presented is that they undoubtedly meet and even exceed the minimal national requirements and the requirements of New Bulgarian University for taking up the academic position of Associate Professor.

The extended abstract presented together with the artistic portfolio of Antoaneta Petrova, *Improvisation and Games in an Actor's Training and Practice* is in essence a theoretical summary of the candidates opinions about the new models of relationships between the actors/performers and the audience in the 21st century, about the respective diverse methods of tuition of the students in NBU Theatre Department, about specific educational programmes and initiatives, about the specificities and the possible applications of the so called Playback Theatre. The last focal point of the theoretical work that was mentioned is actually the point of commencement of the presented material. This theatrical practice is brand new for the Bulgarian cultural environment, and it encompasses diverse approaches: that of the so called Applied Theatre in a non-theatrical environment, that of the Forum Theatre, that of the Documentary Theatre and that of the Participatory Performance. What stands out in the foreground is the social function of theatre, on the common ground where the theatre and the public domain overlap and mix, and where the possibility arises for the theatre to perform its social and mediation functions in relation to its potential viewers/participants. It is exactly through the option of Playback Theatre, that the actor's improvisation techniques are reconsidered, while the actor themselves is already an interdisciplinary artist and a social

mediator. It is exactly that perspective which yields the Game Model, and that model might be applied in the general high school education.

Following the differentiations in the theatre forms in the 21st century, with view to their being socialised and turned towards the potential viewers/participants is done with a thorough knowledge of the views, the approaches and the methodologies in the actor's work that have been left as a legacy from the 20th century. In this respect, the extended abstract to the her artistic work portfolio demonstrates that the author has been persistent and that her review of the historical and theoretical aspects of the actor's work have been built up on since the defence of her Doctoral Degree thesis, considering Antoaneta Petrova's subsequent creative and teaching activities. The basic concepts in this review have been deducted from the works of Richard Schechner on the relations between ritual and theatre and from those by Berth O. Seits – the one that proposed the abstract types of an actor's play (a model of self-expression, a presentation model and a model for collaborating with the audience.) It is where these varying conceptual systems overlap that the Playback Performance occurs, and in it, "the ritual is the base, the spine of the performance upon which the improvisation is constructed" (p. 18 of the extended abstract). The improvisation, being considered in its function of the actor's main tool in the Playback Theatre is the main goal of both the author's training and their practice, and also for determining the actor's behaviour when they are to provoke and encourage the viewers to become accomplices in the course of the performance. Therefore it is important to distinguish between improvising on a given dramaturgical material and the improvisation in the Playback Theatre, the essence of which is the interaction between the actors as performers and social mediators and the awakened and cunningly directed activeness of the participating viewers.

A. Petrova has managed to present the algorithm of the Playback Performance, initiating from established models in the international theatre practice and has been refracted through her own professional experience. The candidate has summarised a thorough specific approach for training both actors and non-actors using the improvisation techniques of the Playback Theatre. Her experience from the Playback cast with the NBU University Theatre, as well as her participation in various Playback Performances have enabled her to suggest the Game Method as a teaching method in the high school degree education. This is a particularly important focus of both her theoretical and practical endeavours. I, personally, am deeply convinced that our high school degree educational system is in dare need of game approaches and models, capable of rendering knowledge taught a lot more attractive to acquire and a lot

more adequate to the current attitudes of the youngsters. With view to the above I do appreciate the candidate's professional activities as having significant educational and social added value.

It is also important to point out the practical experience and the creative accomplishments that Antoaneta Petrova has had when she participated as both a creator and an actor in mono performances: Gogol's *A Diary of a Madman*, directed by Valentin Ganev for the Varna Theatre (1995), and for the Satirical Theatre (2005), and *On the Edge*, by B. Jones, directed by Andrey Belchev (the Red House, Sofia, 2004). It is exactly in the mono performance that the ability of the actor to improvise on stage is demonstrated. Using this professional experience as a stepping stone, A. Petrova continues her development in a new direction, driven by her interest in the Playback Theatre, and she has been following this path in the recent years of her professional development. Therefore it is her contribution as a host, together with Malen Malenov and Sibila Serafim in the NBU University Theatre's Playback Theatre Group (from 2007 to 2017), as a part of the PHONOPTIKFORM platform (a long-term project developed by Prof. Vaskresia Viharova and Arch. Zarko Uzunov, as well as in the projects *The Untold Told* (2019) and *The Story of You, the You in Me* (2020), and as a project manager for *Studying through Games*, realised in a number of educational institutions in Sofia (an ongoing project since 2016). All these initiatives have been presented in the public domain, have been acknowledged and have had considerable results in the field of Playback Theatre, the Forum Theatre and the Documentary Theatre. These activities, together with A. Petrova's participation in a variety of theatre performances and with developing specific courses for the NBU students, aimed at training students for the Educational Theatre, the Improvisational Theatre and the Game Theatre, demonstrate the candidate's potential to be a prominent artist, a creative tutor in the abovementioned disciplines, an initiator and a participant in projects with added educational and social value, as well as an analyst, focusing on the thespian processes and on the methodological tools and approaches in the work of an actor.

A possible recommendation on my part would be that, in the extended abstract, the terms "modern" and "modernist", "modern" and "contemporary" be used with more nuancing and their meanings be distinguished. I suppose that this might be considered when editing the text further.

I have known Antoaneta Petrova as an actress since the beginning of her professional development and I can claim that she is an original artist with a memorably organic stage

presence. I particularly appreciate her reflectiveness on the nature of the actor's art and her tendency to theorise, historicise and contextualise the work of the actor. I have witnessed that she participates actively in projects that aim at expanding the perception of theatre as a social and educational instrument both in an individual's personal development and the life of society as a whole. I would like to emphasize on her inquisitive interest in a variety of theatrical forms and approaches, which is a quality that allows her to avoid remaining confined within the rigid perception of the boundaries of theatre, and to continuously change perspectives to it and to the functions of the actor/performer, trying to construct a holistic perception for the multitude of manifestations and facades of this basic figure on stage, both in retrospect to the theatre history in the 20th century and the contemporary tendencies in stage arts in the new 21st century.

What has been ascertained so far allows me to conclude that there is enough proof for Antoaneta Petrova's contribution to her professional and educational endeavours, to her work as a tutor and researcher, and to her active role in popularising the academic aspects of theatre, and that she has all the qualities required to be awarded the academic position of Associate Professor in professional field 8.4 *Theatre and Film Arts*.

11.11.2022

Prof. Nikolay Yordanov, DSc