

REVIEW

By

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Professional field 8.4. Drama and Film Art

For obtaining a Doctoral research degree

In the professional field 8.4. *Drama and Film Art,*

The candidate being Assist. Prof. Desislava Shpatova

Desislava Shpatova has graduated the Bachelor's Degree Program *Theatre*, at New Bulgarian University with a Major in *Acting*, in 2006, as well as the Master's Degree program *Theatrical Art and Society*, at New Bulgarian University with a Major in *Theatre Directing*, in 2016. In 1999, Desislava Spatova founds the nonprofit association for independent theatre *Legal Art Centre*, and in 2002, she specialized Theatre Management as a scholarship student of the *ArtsLink Program, CEC International Partners, New York, USA*. She has extensive professional experience and a considerable number of staged performances. Her performances have been featured in a wide range of international and national theatre fora and festivals, and have been highly appreciated and presented with an array of prestigious awards, such as: The Top Award for an International Performance (for *The Handmaids*) at the International Theatre Festival MASZK, Szeged, Hungary (2003); a nomination for the Directing IKAR award for the performance *Psychosis 4.48* (2006); a nomination for the Directing IKAR award for *The Art of Sweeping under the Carpet* (2009); the ASKEER award for *The Art of Sweeping under the Carpet* (2009) and *Silent Invisible People* (2009); The *Best Performance Award* for *The Art of Sweeping under the Carpet* (2009).

Desislava Shpatova also has considerable pedagogical experience, since 2005, when she starts teaching in several of the BDP *Theater*, at the NBU. Since 2018, she has been holding a tenure within the NBU Faculty of Undergraduate Studies as an assistant professor.

The aspect of the candidate's career that makes a convincing impression is her long-lasting interest in the interaction between the cinematic and the theatrical forms – the performances *Women on the Edge*, based on Pedro Almodóvar's work, (2001),

Coffee and Cigarettes, based on Jim Jarmusch (2006), *The Art of Sweeping under the Carpet*, based on *Scenes from a Marriage* by Bergman (2008), *The Hour of the Wolf*, based on excerpts from Bergman's *From the Life of Marionettes* (2013) and *Changing*, based on texts by Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman, staged at the NBU University (2015). Not surprisingly, the staging of the last three plays connected with the work of Ingmar Bergman, are a part of the study and the author's research.

The dissertation offered for defense, *INGMAR BERGMAN ON BULGARIAN THEATRE STAGE* by Desislava Shpatova amounts to 130 pages, 121 of which are the main part of the text structured as follows: an introduction, a body text of three chapters, conclusions and closing remarks. After the dissertation text, the author has acknowledged the contributions and has included a bibliography section, comprised of 101 sources, of which 69 titles are in Cyrillic script and 32 in Latin script.

The well-formulated title of this dissertation work gives a clear idea of the thematic field where the text is situated and the scope of problems it covers. The works of Ingmar Bergman are related to the essential philosophical, ethical, and existential problems and it doubtlessly exerts a certain influence on the development of both cinema and Bulgarian theatre. The topicality of the dissertation theme is determined by the scarce research coverage of the reflection of Bergman's works in Bulgarian Theater. Desislava Shpatova does study the interaction between the screen and the stage form not only in terms of transferring Bergman's cinema scripts and literary works into theatrical playwrighting. The doctoral candidate focuses on Bergman's oblique impact on contemporary theatrical forms – the adoption and the implication of thematic, visual, musical and composition patterns in Bergman's cinema works. It is exactly that close-up of the research that determines the academic significance of the dissertation work.

The main goal set by the doctoral candidate with this dissertation work is to present and analyze Bergman's works that have influenced the development of the contemporary theatre language and the thematic expansion of Bulgarian theatre by conducting a genuine authored research. The object of the research is limited within the framework of the Bulgarian theatre stage between 1995 and 2019, and is focused on certain performances, staged based on Bergman's Literary work, such as: *Icarus's Descend*, *Autumn Sonata*, *Silencing*, *Pseudo-Morality*, *Sarabanda*, *After the rehearsal*, *Scenes from a Marriage*. The research is also based on the theatre plays *The Art of Sweeping under the Carpet*, *The Wolves' Hour* and *Chang* which was staged by the

author of this dissertation paper.

The specific tasks that the doctoral candidate sets out to achieve as a means of attaining the main research goal are formulated as follows: 1. To analyze Ingmar Bergman's work within the art of theatre as such; 2. To describe Bergman's plays as staged in Bulgaria, including those staged as authored performances; 3. To present her own study of Ingmar Bergman's work realized on the Bulgarian theatrical stage.

The way the research thesis is formulated suggests in-depth, extensive knowledge of the works of Bergman, as well as of their relation to a wide range of fields like theology, psychology, education, and social intervention. The dissertation text demonstrates the candidate's familiarity not only with his work, but also with his ideas, closely related to the development and the improvement of the psychological theatre traditions and the author's approach to staging within the framework of performing arts. What contributes to the candidate's good knowledge of specific issues is the thorough analysis of the themes, essential to Bergman's work, of the specific director's approaches, as well as the use of hands-on experience in the study and the analyses of specific theatre performances and interviews, based on questions, devised by the author herself and her own observations. The methodology used is complex, original, and adequate to the goals that the candidate has set out to achieve and it does unite the theoretical and the practical study in a very effective way

In the first section of the dissertation text, which is divided into three main parts, the author demonstrates excellent skills in carrying out both retrospective and theoretical analysis, through which, using the historical approach, she reveals aspects of the personality and the work of Bergman, essential to the issues in focus. Not surprisingly, the emphasis is on the interaction between cinema and theatre, and on the transfer of meanings and means between these art forms.

In the first part, the author describes the director, depicting his personal life and his artistic achievements. The second part poses two questions of significance for the research thesis of the doctoral candidate: "influences and themes" in the work of Bergman and typical "director's approaches". The author quotes certain works in a very well-grounded and adequate way and reveals the links the main themes and influences in Bergman's work. Strindberg's and Bach's key influence on the director, are very skillfully deduced, as well as the universal themes of death, love, family, and God.

However, it is the next theme that has a major contribution to the author's attempt to register and systematize Bergman's typical director's approaches – an undoubtedly difficult task, requiring a thorough study, analysis, and systematic listing of results. The author has focused on several approaches, quite characteristic of the director, which she names as follows: *The Dialogue between Cinema and Theatre*, *The Impulse of the Unconscious*, *The Actor in a Close-up*, *A Focal Point in Space*, *Light, and music instead of a line*. It is exactly the registering of these approaches of Bergman's that facilitates the tracking of his influence on the contemporary theatrical language, and more specifically the reflection that his work casts on an array of directors in Bulgaria. Considering the functions of the actors, the space, the light and the music as equally important devices of theatre and film, is in line with the contemporary theories about theatre development, that of the Postdramatic Theatre of Hans-Thies Lehmann.

In the third part, the author presents Bergman's theatre plays, films, and literary texts in detail, emphasizing on the director's reformer role in the process of making theatre, as well as his unique, idiosyncratic cinematic language.

The second section of the dissertation paper, consisting of five distinct parts, tracks the dissemination of Bergman's work in Bulgaria, discusses the fact that plays, based on his texts, start being staged after the end of the end of the totalitarian regime, presents the reflections of certain theatre directors from the beginning of the XXI Century and outlines the Desislava Shpatova's personal experience and professional achievements. It definitely is this part of the text that is very informative for the reader, as it reveals the long and troublesome process of introducing Bergman's work to the Bulgarian audience, describing the first attempts with texts of his staged in Bulgaria, like Ivan Dobchev's *The Falling of Icarus* in SFUMATO Theatre Laboratory and Mladen Kiselov's *Autumn Sonata*; It also presents in detail the personal stage experiences of several directors like Elena Panayotova, Chris Sharkov, Ivan Urumov, Valentin Ganev, as well as the radio theatre productions *The City*, *Private Confessions* and *Autumn Sonata*. Enthrillingly written, Desislava Shpatova's text presents an objective account, based on a thorough study, of the practices of different directors using Bergman's works, emphasizing the typical features and the artistic pursuits of each individual attempt, which is, doubtlessly, one of the merits of her research.

Unsurprisingly, the author of dissertation devotes the fourth part of her research to a detailed observation of her own experience with staging the plays *The Art of Sweeping under the Carpet* based on *Scenes from a Marriage*, *Hour of the Wolf*, based

on excerpts from Bergman's *From the Life of Marionettes*, and *Changing*, based on texts by Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman. When presenting these three performances, Desislava Shpatova demonstrates the admirable skill to reconstruct, present and summarize her own experience as a director, which can be pointed out as another one of the merits of this dissertation text. It is not, therefore, a matter of a lucky coincidence that the first play, *The Art of Sweeping under the Carpet*, is conferred by an array of prestigious awards like ASKEER'09 for the best performance, for directing and for best female lead, a special award for popularizing theatre within the community in the town of Pazardzhik, nomination for the IKAR Award, etc. It is with her very first staged play that Desislava Shpatova makes a claim about her genuine interest in registering and transferring Bergman's methods as a director into a specific theatre production – *The entire set of director's devices of the author and Doctoral degree candidate is subjected to the in-depth study of Bergman and the attempt to apply some of his inventions, related to the scenes' rhythm, to the exploitation of details, to the way to lead the narration and to the use of music as a character. All this is united within a single proposition: that what troubles us is a replica of what had troubled previous generations, that the individual cannot outgrow their egocentrism and lives within its confines. Feelings have no age and experience does not render a human wiser, and that is the tragical climax, but it is its inevitability that makes it easier to bear* (p. 83).

In her two subsequent staged performances the author goes on exploring various aspects of Bergman's vision as a director and the main themes underlying his work. The play *Hour of the Wolf* is focused on the theatre space, both as the stage space and as the internal, imagined play space of the characters. Using the new technologies as a means of expression in theatre (3D mapping), Desislava Shpatova provides solutions for key scenes, justifying the play's being characterized as *magical, phantasm theatre*.

In the third play, staged in 2016 at the NBU University Theatre the author thoroughly explores one of the most significant themes in Bergman's work – that of the man and the woman, intertwining the point of view of the man and that of the woman within one and the same theatre composition. The directing approach used is applying a direct quote from Bergman's cinematic work – the constant presence of roaming characters, who do not in fact participate in the specific scenes or the action in general. When developing this particular theatrical form Desislava Shpatova has relied mainly on some of the basic principles induced through the theory of Postdramatic Theatre of Hans-Thies Lehmann – non-hierarchically, simultaneity and multi-directionality of

theatrical elements; distancing from the text through musicalization of speech, using media technological means but not with the purpose of reinforcing the impact of the text or to imply additional meaning, but rather for creating an additional environment which can be related to other levels of the performance, developing parallelly. In her dissertation, the author accurately points out the specific features of the Postdramatic theatrical form, which she develops in the play *Changing*:

The polyphonicity of the vision of this somnambulistic stream of consciousness is achieved through blending bodies, languages (the languages used in the play are Bulgarian, Swedish and the sign language) and media (cinema and theatre) ... Most of the texts in the author's play are projected on a screen, thus alienating the language and depriving the actors of language as a means of communication, to a great extent due to the contribution of the death actress in the play ... The performance was devised as an educational project, but it goes beyond that aim and reaches a complex post dramatic form, developed through the associative principle, blending media, multiplying characters and suggesting the absence of the antagonist by oversaturating the performance with the presence of protagonists and by applying the director's instruction about "non-acting" (p. 89).

In the last section of the dissertation the doctoral candidate convincingly justifies the choice of methodology of her own research by describing in detail the ethical rules and the usefulness of the interview as a research tool. In her work, the author demonstrates excellent skills to analyze and synthesize from a pool of data varying in type, selected based on practical as well as research experience in her own original research. The approach and the methodology chosen by the author undoubtedly contribute to the conclusions drawn being veritable and up to date.

The research conducted by the doctoral candidate, as well as the analysis and the descriptions of the theatre plays staged in Bulgarian theaters to a great extent fulfill the task set in the dissertation paper and it can be stated with certainty that the goal of the dissertation has been successfully achieved. The contributions and the results are accurately presented in the Self-review of the dissertation, which meets all the requirements and very well reflects the contents of the dissertation text. The self-review paper amounts to 53 pages, including acknowledgement of contributions and a list of references. The appendix to the dissertation text encompasses an accurately drawn list

of the self-reference to previous publications written by the doctoral candidate, which, together with her hands-on experience as a director, show a continuing interest in the proposed thematic field. The doctoral candidate's publications have appeared in an array of academic journals focused on art and communications.

Desislava Shpatova's dissertation offered for defense can be emphatically defined as a comprehensive and consistent study of the works of Ingmar Bergman and his impact on Bulgarian theatre; its main contributions can be attributed to its theoretical and its practical and applied aspects alike. Some of the contributions in the theoretical field are the outlined theoretical model of analysis through literary, documentary, scientific and other sources, the systematizing of important facts and events from Ingmar Bergman's life and work, as well as the highly informative nature of the text. The features which can be pointed out as essential merits of the dissertation are the study, conducted from the point of view of a theatre director, and the doctoral candidate's performances based on Bergman's theatrical works. Another unquestionable contribution that must be pointed out is the practical aspect of the study and its suitability for applying it in various academic theatre programs.

The dissertation demonstrates a profound knowledge of the issues studied, purposefulness and independence of the research and the results obtained. I have known Desislava Shpatova ever since she was a student at NBU as we were both part of that "iconic" first batch of alumni of the NBU bachelor program "Theater". Subsequently I have had the chance to follow her first attempts at directing theatre performances staged as a part of the independent theatre projects in Bulgaria, her staging pursuits of theatrical forms on the borderline between theatre and cinema. In the recent years I have taken part in two of her performances where I was greatly impressed by the strict discipline Desislava Shpatova required from all the participants in the process, including herself. Qualities like precision, exactingness, and discipline can be observed in her work as a tutor of students in the acting courses, as well as in the research hereby, provoked and stimulated by her professional experience as a director. I do believe that those qualities of the doctoral candidate contribute to attaining high results in her professional practice and her research work alike.

Being an actor and a theatre tutor I would like to recommend and direct the doctoral student towards a more in-depth research and analysis and presentation of the opportunities for applying Bergman's achievement with view to developing and updating the methods of teaching acting and directing practices and techniques; a

research of this kind would be a huge contribution in the applied theatre and theatre education.

Based on the information presented above as well as on my overall favorable assessment, I can emphatically state that the dissertation offered by Desislava Shpatova, **INGMAR BERGMAN ON THE BULGARIAN STAGE**, meets all the requirements for obtaining a doctoral degree in the professional field *8.4. Drama and Film Art*. As a part of the academic panel, I do vote FOR conferring a doctoral degree to Desislava Shpatova.

Vote: YES!

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