

REVIEW

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For a Doctoral degree defense session of: Desislava Shpatova,
Applying with a dissertation themed:
Ingmar Bergman on Bulgarian Stage
Professional Field 8.4. *Drama and Film Art*

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Analysis of the dissertation

The dissertation presented, *Ingmar Bergman on Bulgarian Stage*, by Desislava Shpatova, Assistant Professor at New Bulgarian University, amounts to 130 pages, of which the main part is 115 pages. It comprises an Introduction, a body of three parts, conclusions and a summary. The main contributions of the dissertation being: a bibliography, consisting of 101 publications in Bulgarian, Russian and English (17 of which are electronic).

The research object is Ingmar Bergman's work and its impact on Bulgarian theatre in the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st c., through the staged plays *The Falling of Icarus*, *Autumn Sonata*, *Silencing*, *Pseudo-Moralities*, *Sarabanda*, *After the Rehearsal*, *Scenes from a Marriage*, as well as the doctoral candidate Desislava Shpatova's own performances, such as *The Art of Sweeping under the Carpet* based on *Scenes from a Marriage*, the *Hour of the Wolf*, based on *From the Life of Marionettes* and *Changing*, based on texts by Liv Ullman's and Ingmar Bergman's texts.

A comprehensive and detailed study of Bergman's plays, staged in Bulgaria, the study presented hereby is first of its kind. A particularly important contribution is the personal statement the author of the dissertation expresses, as she has conducted the study from the point of view of an artist inspired by the great Swedish theatre and film director, actor, and writer.

Shpatova very accurately formulates the goal of her research, indicating that her intention has been "...to analyse Bergman's works, staged in Bulgaria, and emphasize their impact on the development of the language of dramaturgy and their contribution to the expansion of the thematic scope of Bulgarian theatre, through a genuine authored study".

The doctoral candidate poses the following tasks to be fulfilled by her study: to analyse

Ingmar Bergman's work within the theatre discourse; to annotate Ingmar Bergman's plays, staged in Bulgaria, including the ones she has staged herself. Another task is to present her own study of Ingmar Bergman's work, staged in Bulgaria.

The main thesis of the doctoral candidate is that

Bergman's works, including his dramaturgical pieces, which cannot be defined within a certain conceptual framework, as psychologism converts into its own antipodes, but can be positioned between surrealism and naturalism, can serve to develop and improve the psychological theatre tradition. Our contemporary world is directly linked to the archaic culture as much as the rigorous psychologism is bound to abstract fantasies, and that is what expands our perception of the psychological approaches to performing arts...

Bergman's ideas transform the reality we live in and offer the audience an alternative.

Exposing her thoughts in the main part of the dissertation text, the doctoral candidate manages to develop and defend this thesis.

Having laid out a theoretical analysis of the literary, documentary and academic sources dealing with the life and works of Ingmar Bergman, the author goes on to explain the methodology of her research: a retrospective analysis within the framework of the historical approach, performed through a review of literature dealing with the issues in focus; an interview, representing the quantitative aspect of the methodology and consisting of questions devised and posed by the doctoral candidate; a comparative analysis of the resulting data registered and presented in the dissertation text; a comprehensive analysis of the findings of the research.

The text is structured in a clear and logical way. The introduction explores the validity and the significance of the issues in focus. The object of the research, as well as the aims, goals and research tasks are clearly stated. The research thesis is precisely formulated. The approaches and the methodology of the study are intelligibly determined. It is stated explicitly that the research work is limited in scope, and it only explores Bergman's plays staged in Bulgaria, which allows the doctoral student to limit the scope of her research but achieve this considerable depth.

In the first section, the author of the dissertation analyses the theatre, cinematic, and literary works of Ingmar Bergman. This section is further divided into three parts. Part one is a 'portrait' of Ingmar Bergman, describing the life and work of the artist.

Part two discusses various studies of Bergman's works. It explores the existing periodization of Bergman's works, which boils down to four chronological periods. It is important, however, to point out that Shpatova's presentation of the phenomenon 'Bergman'

does not rely on the chronological approach, on the contrary, in her text, the works of Bergman are organized in thematic fields in relation to specific titles. Following this logic, this part focuses on two key issues: influences and themes in Bergman's works. On the one hand, the influences covered are *the father figure and God, the mother figure and the woman, Fårö Island and death, and August Strindberg's and Johan Sebastian Bach's influence on his work*. On the other hand, are the approaches used by Bergman as a director, namely: the dialogue between cinema and theatre, the impulse of the unconscious, the actor in close-up (where Shpatova provides a brief review of the actors' achievements of Liv Ullman, Ingrid Thulin, Bibi Andersson, Harriet Andersson, Erland Josephson, Max von Sydow, etc. in Bergman's works) the focal point and the space, the play with light and music replacing lines.

The third sub-part explores Bergman's work, his plays, his films and his literary texts.

The second section contributes immensely as it analyses, in a systematic way, the theatre plays by and about Ingmar Bergman, staged in Bulgaria. This section consists of five major parts, related to Bergman's popularity in Bulgaria: his theatre works (about *The Falling of Icarus* and *Autumn Sonata* – the first plays, staged in Bulgaria, based on Bergman's texts); the performances on Bulgarian stage (e.g. *Silencing, The Pseudo-Morality, Sarabanda, After the rehearsal, Scenes from a Marriage*); the doctoral student's first experiences as a director of three texts by Bergman (*Scenes from a Marriage* as well as her own staged plays like *The Art of Sweeping under the Carpet*, based on *Scenes from a Marriage, Hour of the Wolf*, based on texts by Bergman from *From the Life of the Marionettes* and *Changing*, based on texts by Liv Ullman and Ingmar Bergman). In this part, the doctoral student presents her professional experience as a director. I cannot but note that this self-reflexive part is rather interesting and important for other theatre researchers, as Desislava Shpatova is a prominent Bulgarian director, and is an is studied by professional theatre researchers. I would also like to point out that she is the only director in Bulgaria, who has staged three plays by Bergman.

If I am to list yet another contribution of this dissertation, I would like to point out the analysis of the interviews with Stanka Kalcheva, Elitsa Mateeva and Elena Panayotova, whose work is also related to Bergman's plays and texts.

The conclusion of the dissertation is where the doctoral student points out that with his over fifty feature films, about one hundred articles, forty radio programmes, about fifteen TV programmes, several opera productions and a ballet libretto, not to mention his work as a playwright, screenplay writer and an author of adaptations, Ingmar Bergman has undoubtedly proved to be the most prolific and flexible director. He is a prominent figure in Bulgarian theatre as well, as he is still the one to sustain, develop and build up on the psychological theatre

tradition, the one who brings in existentialist content, typical for the traditional Nordic dramaturgy, into the Bulgarian cultural space. Thus, it was definitely Bergman's merit that, in the 1990's, the thematic scope of the Bulgarian dramaturgy was expanded immensely; he was the one to provide his interpretation of the important issues of interpersonal conflicts and the relations in the family, of the conflicts of the artist and the environment they create, of religion and God, of reality and illusions. Bergman is also the one who has inspired the creation of this new theatre genre – the collaboration between theatre and cinema in a single production.

Description of the Contributions

Some of the contributions of this dissertation were already pointed out. I would like to summarise by saying that not only are they related to the historical, biographical, theoretical, and methodological aspect of the text hereby, but they also have practical and applied character. The doctoral student has defined and described the contributions of her work quite accurately in the last section of the dissertation.

One of the contributions to be mentioned is the developing of a theoretical analysis model, using literary, documentary and academic sources, including a retrospect within the historical approach, through presenting the researcher's review of the issues in focus.

The systematising of key facts and events of the life and work of Ingmar Bergman, together with those of the global theatrical and cinematic stage, presented from the point of view of Bulgarian directors is yet another one of the contributions of the dissertation.

It is also important to note that the dissertation student has deduced certain indicators and components useful for selecting Bergman's works to be used by contemporary theatre researchers and directors, both as the object of research and as material for staging in theatres.

In my opinion, the most important contribution of the dissertation is that it constitutes independent research based clearly defined criteria. It presents a specific viewpoint from the perspective the theatre director and his work with Bergman on the stage. It is worth noting that most studies accentuate on his cinematic work. His theatrical work is generally not sufficiently researched and the interpretations of Bergman's plays, staged in Bulgaria, have only partially been discussed by theatre reviewers. This is the first time that the topic has been examined in such depth.

This study can be useful for students and tutors alike, and for a range of organisations, and individuals, considering development opportunities for theatre directing in Bulgaria, as well as for a wider audience interested in theatre. To that end, I would recommend that this dissertation be published as a monography, after certain points in the text presented have been

elaborated upon.

Author's Merits

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to follow Desislava Shpatova's development, mainly as a director. Her professional qualities as a practitioner, and later on as a pedagogue, have categorically impacted her dissertation in terms of topic choice, postulations, knowledge of the subject under investigation and thorough research into it.

Desislava Shpatova did her BA in Acting in 1995 and her MA in Theatre Directing in 2016, at NBU. From 2005 to 2018 she was a lecturer at the NBU Theatre Department, and in 2016, she became an Assistant Professor, teaching courses such as *Theatrical Performance*, *Actor and Audience*, and *Acting Techniques*. She is a founder and board member of the Legal Art Centre non-profit association for independent theatre. In 2001, she specialized in theatre management under the *ArtsLink* Programme in New York, USA.

Among her numerous staged performances, (amounting to almost forty, a fair share of which at the NBU University Theatre), the doctoral candidate has directed the following: *Animal Farm*, based on George Orwell's eponymous novel, at Theatre 199; Euripedes' *Medea*, at the European Capital of Culture, Azaryan Theatre; *The Last Quartet* by Yaron Ziberman, Theatre Laboratory Sfumato, *Hour of the Wolf* by Ingmar Bergman, Youth Theatre Nikolay Binev, *Idiot 2012* based on works by F. Dostoevsky, NT Ivan Vazov, *The Suicide* by Nikolay Erdman, SMT Konstantin Velichkov, Pazardzik, *The Construction of Unleashed Imagination*, based on Eugene Ionesco's works; ST Sava Ognyanov, Rousse, *Silent Invisible People* by Yana Borisova, Youth Theatre Nikolay Binev; *The Pigeon* by Patrick Süskind, NT Ivan Vazov; *The Garden*, based on *Three Sisters*, by A.P. Checkov, TL Sfumato; *The Art of Sweeping Under the Carpet*, by Ingmar Bergman, SMT Konstantin Velichkov, Pazardzik; *Psychosis 4:48* by Sara Cane, International Theatre Festival Varna Summer and TL Sfumato; *DJ* by Georgi Gospodinov, SST Aleko Konstantinov; *Zen Porn* by Milena Fuchedzhieva, SST Aleko Konstantinov; Theatre *La Mama*, New York; *Handmaids*, by Jean Genet, SST Aleko Konstantinov; *Women on the Edge*, by Pedro Almodovar, Theatre 199, *Idiot*, Youth Theatre Nikolay Binev; *Dangerous Liaisons* by Choderlos de Laclos, SST Aleko Konstantinov, etc.

Her performances, after selection, have toured internationally to festivals in Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania, Macedonia, Italy, Hungary, France, and USA. Her performances have been awarded with theatre prizes: the ASKEER Award 2009, two nominations for the Icarus Award, several awards at international festivals abroad.

Recommendations and notes

The text is well structured. It is interesting and engaging to read and has a high cognitive and practical value, but needs some refinement of citations (e.g. unification of citation style), removal of some inaccuracies in style, such as punctuation, spelling, other minor problems, as well as of repetitions. I recommend, with a view to the preparation of a monograph, the inclusion of illustrative material. It is also possible to prepare an appendix with Bergman's plays staged in Bulgaria.

Conclusion

The proposed dissertation meets the requirements of Art. 3. The required minimum of publications has been submitted. In view of the already highlighted qualities of Desislava Shpatova as an educator, theatre practitioner and researcher in the field of theatre art, as well as the contributions made in the submitted dissertation, I give her a positive evaluation and propose that she be awarded a Doctoral degree

Date:

12. 07. 2021

Signature:

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