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## Women in Bulgarian (Post) Socialistic Theatre on and beyond Stage

This paper attempts to draw a rough sketch of several major, intertwined lines of Bulgarian cultural and social history that will have a long-term effect and influence on many processes in the next few decades. As a beginning, it looks into the early phase of the establishment of state socialism in Bulgaria, focusing simultaneously on the processes taking place in the theatre system as part of the larger new political and ideological project of industrialization and modernization and the social role prescribed to it in this intensely changing social landscape. At the same time, the paper follows the parallel introduction of two somewhat contradictory new visions about women's role in society: giving them full election rights and encouraging them to enter the labor force, while simultaneously introducing measures like the "bachelor tax", stimulating men and women to enter marriage, creating a network of policies and notions, and encouraging women to give birth to as many children as possible and to be the main caregivers in the household. That is why the foundation of this research is precisely the paradoxical situation in which women were in the socialist theatre and outside it.

*Key words:* Bulgaria, state-socialism, theatre, arts, culture, family policies

## Жене у бугарском (пост)социјалистичком позоришту на сцени и ван ње

У овом раду представља се неколико крупних, испреплетених линија бугарске културне и друштвене историје, које имају дугорочни ефекат и утицај на многе процесе у деценијама које су уследиле након социјализма. На

почетку се сагледава рана фаза успостављања државног социјализма у Бугарској при чему се истовремено фокусира на процесе који се одвијају у позоришном систему као делу већег новог политичког и идеолошког пројекта индустријализације и модернизације, као и на нову друштвену улогу позоришта прописану у друштвеном пејзажу који се интензивно мења. Рад прати паралелно увођење две донекле супротстављене нове визије о улози жена у друштву: с једне стране им се дају пуна изборна права и подстичу се да постану радна снага, док се с друге стране уводе мере попут „пореза на нежење“, чиме се стимулишу мушкарци и жене да ступе у брак и креирају мрежу политика и појмова; жене се подстичу да рађају што више деце и да буду домаћице. Зато је у фокусу овог истраживања управо парадоксална ситуација у којој су биле жене у социјалистичком позоришту и ван њега.

*Кључне речи:* Бугарска, државни социјализам, позориште, уметност, култура, породична политика.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, with the increase of the necessary historical distance, allowing to make the perspective clearer due to the expanding time gap, the researcher's interest in the period from 1944 to 1989 grew significantly in the Bulgarian academic field. As a result, valuable and thoughtful readings of the era have emerged. On the one hand, they reconstruct the general climate, together with the overall mechanisms of action of certain policies and views in the sphere of gender relations, culture, and the arts. On the other hand, they also focus attention on specific, determining ideas of the period, which are understood simultaneously on the level of their definition but also, practically, on the level of their application in artistic practices and everyday life with its routine<sup>1</sup>.

The accumulation of these studies and the detailed picture they reveal when put together allow for a better, in-depth understanding of how state-socialism functioned in different areas of social life, and that way, it offers a chance to understand its abundant and still influential legacy in today's complex world. Moreover, an important starting point and a necessary prerequisite of the present text will be the understanding that notions of women's various roles are social constructs and that the understanding of their meaning is modified according to cultural context and historical era.

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<sup>1</sup> See resource of the Center for Advanced Study, <https://red.cas.bg/bibliography.php?&setLanguage=1>

Nevertheless, how society thinks about these roles always goes through the framework of something unquestionable, clear, and essential in nature, which is why there is also remarkable stability in the normative requirements for these roles, independent of the political context. In this sense, the notions of women are an illustrative example of the thesis of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who, in his groundbreaking book *"Masculine Domination"* (Bourdieu 2001), claims that when a way of thinking is transmitted, consolidated, and layered over generations, it begins to appear natural to society, which makes it invisible and indistinguishable to those immersed in its context. That is why both men and women imperceptibly comply with it, and getting out of this circle is difficult due to the inscribedness of the participants in its practices.

That being said, important points of observation of the following text will be research questions such as: how on the ground of the totalitarian project of communism, which draws a very clear and categorical trajectory for the development of society, the possible roles of women are defined and how these definition are subsequently assimilated in the subsequent era; what position is prescribed for them in this theological edifice; how and why the role of mother becomes a key topos in this project; who and through what mechanisms establishes these norms, namely who speaks for them and how much of this process happens from the inside out and how much of it is entirely imposed from the outside; in which microelements substitutions are allowed compared to those known from previous understandings and which segments of this imagery remain intact.

Focusing the attention on the time of communism with its ideology and self-mythology, it becomes evident that the image of the mother is among the key legitimating figures, recognizable both in the traditional notion of the motherland as mother from earlier historical periods, and in the emerging vision of Communist party as mother of the people. Moreover, it is also the time of a significant change in the role of women prescribed to them by society, about which researchers still argue whether it has "liberated" them or rather loaded them with a "double burden". Precisely because of this, observing the dynamics in the meanings of these concepts in particularly turbulent historical conditions gives a valuable perspective to the changes that have occurred. What is more, the image of the mother and the characteristics associated with it are a critical intersection between the private and public spheres in any society, if they can and should be separated at all.

It is important to note that "the figure of the mother" is often referred to in the text in singular form, because of several reasons. First and for most,

it is the attempt to reconstruct it as a matrix, as a distillate of the social image of who she is in her desired image, as a norm and model to which all should strive to. Undoubtedly, this understanding rests heavily on the theses of Michel Foucault, developed in many of his works, in which he shows that in the arrangement of social power and hierarchy in societies, one can always trace dominant notions on the fulfillment of a certain social role and others, that are subordinated to it. In this sense, the present text will focus its attention precisely to the “exemplary mother” according to early socialism, the one that the government wants the citizens of the state to desire, to the realization of which women should strive, and men to recognize and structure their role in relationship with her. Also, the singularity comes from the overall ideological climate of the era and the imagery of collectivity that it uses and its own mythologeme of equality and lack of hierarchy in the “new” society with its rhetoric about “woman” that implicitly creates a sense of its monolithicity and only possible path.

## THE NEW ROLE OF CULTURE AND THEATRE

Furthermore, since the time between the two World Wars, during which urban culture developed in the situation of demographic transformation and the beginning of the relocation of a statistically significant number of people from the villages to the cities, theater art in Bulgaria has already stabilized, and the process of its professionalization is clearly set in motion. By the beginning of state-socialism, theater was already recognized as a medium and a tool capable of communicating with many people at the same time, which inevitably led to its use for propaganda purposes, or at least to the careful monitoring of the images and messages spread from the stage. For example, in the main hall of the National Theatre, nearly 800 people can gather at once, which for the time after the Second World War is a significant number, including in a comparative perspective with the potential of the other arts and media that are most widely recognized and used by the authorities.

As Liliyana Deianova describes, in the very beginning of the communist rule in Bulgaria, soon after the process of nationalization of property begun, the cinema was also nationalized, followed by a decree, establishing a state monopoly on the book publishing (Deianova 2004). In 1948, foreign language schools were closed down. These choices clearly show the gradual steps taken by the new government to begin seizing control of society on all levels, including arts.

At that time, television was still a long way off – as it officially begun in the end of the 1950s (Angelova 2021), and nearly two more decades

would pass before its mass entry into the homes of people, but on the other hand, radio was already an influential tool with a considerable reach. It is for this reason that a law about it was also passed during these early years of the establishment of communist power. Also, the printing press has strongly penetrated everyday life and actively contributes to the building of the restructuring “imagined community” of the nation. For that purpose, several new newspapers were imported as models from the Soviet context and became the leading tribune for both – daily news and arts and culture.

Undoubtedly, theatre is also seen as a powerful tool for spreading the desired ideological messages not only because of its potential to provoke the imagination through its artistic means of expression and to embody the sought-after messages in the bodies of the actors, but also because of its ability to address large groups of people at the same time. Somewhat paradoxically, but also logically, as arguments for its involvement and “correct” aesthetic orientation, the motif of the educational function of the theatre was widely used, which is a direct echo of the vision of Romanticism and the key essay of Friedrich Schiller, considering the theatre as a moral institution (Schiller 1784), capable to educate people on what is good and what is bad simultaneously in their capacity of citizens and as individuals.

Starting with this notion, a gradual process of restructuring the entire theatre system begun. Phase by phase it covered many of its layers. The possibility of private initiative in the field of theater – which existed in the period between the two world wars and which had its role in the development of the Bulgarian theatre until this moment – was banned. From an administrative perspective two kind of theatres remained: professional ones and semi-professional ones, both subordinated to the state through different entities. Major process unfolding is the pronounced centralization in the management of culture and theatre, which constructs a vivid centered-model, setting the rules that are later applied according to the created pattern in the periphery. In the theatre of this period, such a role was given to the National Theatre in Sofia.

As the researcher Plamen Doinov observes about the field of literature, the period from 1944 to 1948 was rather a “buffer” or a “phase of a guaranteed alternative” (Doinov 2011) in terms of the entry and imposition of the norms of socialist realism within art and stage practice itself. Researchers such as Joanna Spasova-Dikova (2015) testify that in this period of time, for example, in the National Theater, the repertoire continued to consist largely of performances of classical works. Thus, at this phase, it is rather a matter of “tightening” the systems surrounding

the stage and the artistic content and of “administrative centralization”, which Ivan Elenkov (2008) describes in details, through which the possibility is prepared for the subsequent entry of regulatory mechanisms and prescriptions inside the various artistic elements that constitute the different layers of the theatrical systems, such as: texts to be staged, their interpretation by the directors, the modes of acting; the set design; the critics, who interpret and direct the audience; and last but not least – the audience itself, which begun to be taken in an organized and structured manner, even mandatory to theatre.

During this period, another important component of the functioning of the theatre system was established – the so-called “Stanislavski’s system” became the only method of acting, for which there is a consensus among most of present day theatre scholars that it represents an ideologically adapted version of a far more a comprehensive understanding of the path of connection between the actor and the character, as well as the construction of multi-layered and believable images within the confines of the black box on the stage.

Simultaneously, another major process with a long-term influence is set in motion: the transformation of leading theatre actors into idols beyond the stage. This, combined with the doctrine of psychological theatre, which requires personages on stage to be created through emotionality and credibility, can be interpreted as an attempt to continue the ideologically correct characters from the stage in life, bringing them out in between the set design of the cities and daily life, where, with their mere presence, they can be seen by other people as a manifestation of their characters on stage. It comes as no surprise that one of the first novelties introduced by the new government was to award titles and prizes, honoring those who managed to fulfill the requirements of the new social order. Statistics show that nearly 40% of the recipients of one of the most common titles “in the name of the people” were artists, with 277 (Spasova-Dikova 2015) people being awarded it through the whole state socialism. This numbers clearly show the role given to the artists and people in the field of culture in the system.

In relation to the overall climate and the filters use by that ideologically driven processes in the field of Bulgarian theatre, there are two important paradoxes, pinpointed by many researchers of this era, that are worth mentioning. On the one hand, it is the fact that the idea of the complete achievement of socialist realism is somewhat impossible in its very genesis, since in terms of words and rules it calls for a credible, realistic representation of reality. However, it actually requires a realistic

representation of a reality that is yet to come according to the own theological vision of the new regime, which is said to occur after the total victory of communism and when entering into its maturity. In this way, the very norm of social realism incites to subjectivity, to portraying something imaginary from the point of view of the moment of speaking. But an additional feature, which makes it even more complex is that the creative imagination of artists is called upon to imagine the upcoming “bright future”, but at the same time this imagination is also told how to imagine it, i.e. what is the only possible way it might look.

### (NEW) ROLES OF WOMEN IN THE MODERNIZING SOCIETY

Another major perspective that needs to be considered when trying to understand the process taking place and their long-term impact is that of the massive project for the industrialization of society after the Second World War, for which Bulgaria makes no exception, and that requires women to quickly enter the workforce. Among the reasons for this are the shortage of labor force needed to rebuild the economy after the war, the declared value of gender equality by the state-socialism, as well as the newly established system that does not allow for unemployment, at least not officially. Thus, in that realm, the main emphasis falls on the development of heavy industry.

In this framework, researchers like Rositsa Rangelova observed a drastic increase in the share of women employed in all industries in the beginning of the state-socialism. Traditionally, women predominated in the textile industry with over 70% in the 1950s and nearly 78% in 1961, as well as in the sewing industry, where their share rapidly increased. Over or close to half is the participation of employed women in the food processing, printing and pulp and book industries. The participation of women in the chemical and rubber industries is measured to be 35% in 1961, in machine building and metal industries – 16.3% in 1961. In other branches of heavy industry is remains weaker but is indeed increasing (Rangelova 2011).

The industrialization of the national economy goes along with a necessary process of urbanization, which brings with it several basic trends that have a direct impact on the lives of women and the norms that society at large begins to accept as rightful. On the one hand, the structure and size of the family change, and the large families of the earlier historical phases begin to be replaced by those with two or even one child, which is a vivid transformation directly related to women in general and the role of mothers in particular. It strongly contrasts with pre-modern



understandings in which women who have given birth to a single child are not treated with respect, and this situation seems “unnatural”, while here a woman already receives the approval of society for her fulfilled duty, and the difference is whether she has a child or not.

Another important change is the notable increase in the level of education of women and their access to both secondary and higher education, which is part of the general increase in the level of education of society. In the period from 1938 to 1958, the number of higher education graduates in the country in general increased fivefold, with statistics reporting that in 1956, the share of women graduating from higher education was 32.8% of all graduates (Rangelova 2011). It is interesting to observe how, beyond the apparent economic logic behind this increase, the argument that women are “mothers of the younger generation and daughters are the future mothers of the new generation” is very often used in the party rhetoric promoting the increase of education among women. In that sense, the better education is not so much a value for themselves as individuals, but a matter of improving their skills as mothers, raising future citizens and members of socialist society rightfully.

The unfolding of these arguments used in public debate can also be traced in the development of legislation giving women in Bulgaria the right to vote, which has started before but finds its culmination precisely in the first year of socialism and is an important element of the overall climate and the desired changes in the roles of the women. The first Bulgarian constitution, adopted in 1879 after the liberation of the Ottoman rule, already talks about concepts such as freedom and equal rights, but this still does not mean equality between men and women. In it, Bulgarian citizens refer to those who have served military service, which automatically excludes women. Only in 1937, i.e. 58 years later, married women received the right to vote in municipal elections, and in 1944 they were given full voting rights.

Yet, together with legislative changes, bringing women to a new place in social life and on the labor market, the industrializing economy also needs population growth. An important element in the maze of prohibitions and incentives created around women and their roles in the context is the ban on abortion introduced in 1951, which remained in force until 1956, when abortion became possible again, but for medical reasons. Furthermore, different measure, encouraging women to have at least three or four children were also introduced.

The observations of the researchers, studying one of the most closely followed works of art by the state–literature–offer an insightful view



on how the regime imagined the roles of women and men. Comparing and contrasting the subperiods of the development of socialism, they often note that in its earliest historical stage, until 1956, the leading female images were of strong, including physically healthy, courageous women, who with drive and determination joined the construction of the new society and fearlessly hid in the forest, drove a tractor, and flew an airplane. The practicality of these characters is revealed when, however, they are juxtaposed with the preferred images during the more mature stage of the 1970s, when gender roles are strongly divided, differentiated, and specified, and women are already pacified, as the system does not need them to have a fighting spirit and other “strong” qualities. Instead, now they are presented as happy workers in agriculture and textile factories or as caregivers in kindergartens, schools, and hospitals.

This softening of the exemplary images in the more relaxed phase of socialism also applies to men, from whom the system begins to demand other “masculine” qualities and the harsher features of the partisans, give way to the ideal of the new cultural intellectuals, passionately building a bright future, which is clearly reflected in the role of artists, especially of specific arts, prescribed to them not only in their artistic territory, but also within the boundaries of society.

Thus, the combination of the various official legislative acts and implicit notions, aimed at strengthening and promoting different desired roles of citizens within the overall project of socialism and its various sub-phases – which, moreover, strongly differentiate them on the basis of gender, and this is an important part of the mechanics of the functioning of the whole system – are components in a very complex and diverse picture for both sexes. Within its framework, women are given voting rights, are encouraged to study, work, but at the same time give birth to as many children as possible, which they need to raise “properly” afterwards. All these requirements for them in turn are integrated in the arts and become part of the norm of social realism, setting the themes and artistic approaches with which they can be faithfully expressed.

The totally new model of thinking and restructuring of society actually made its landfall on 7,029,349 destinies – that’s how many were there Bulgarians in 1946, according to the data of the population census carried out that year. Of these, 25% lived in cities and 75% were inhabiting rural areas. The ratio between men and women is almost even – 50.02% versus 48.98%. In the next census, conducted in 1956, there was a change in the number of the population, which increased

by nearly 600 thousand people, but the most serious change registered by the statistics was that the population in the cities increased by more than 10% and it is already 33.57% against 66.43% of the inhabitants of the villages (Rangelova 2011).

## CONCLUSIONS

The above mentioned figures roughly and from bird's eye view show the ground on which the totalitarian project landed and stands and indicate the first steps in its deployment, related to industrialization and the urbanization necessary for it. They represent the broadest framework in which the remaining sub-spheres of society, including gender issues and arts and culture, are placed and developed in gradually. Simultaneously, it also describes the context in which theatre as an art form and as a system functions.

From the Enlightenment onwards, the theatre became increasingly closely linked to cities and urban lifestyles, and in the 20th century, this connection became inextricable. For this reason, in an urbanizing society, the theatre begins to have an increasing opportunity for interaction and impact. This potential was immediately recognized by the new government of the country, and along with other arts with sensible outreach among society, such as literature and cinema, the process of putting it under control began. It starts from the administrative-bureaucratic side related to the management of the theatre system and then dives into the artistic dimension and practice, imposing its filters of control centered around the guiding idea of social realism, first in dramaturgy, and from there on to the director's interpretation and the actor's performance on the stage.

Parallel to all these changes in the Bulgarian theatre, the totalitarian project quite deliberately directs its arsenal of policies to another segment of society – women. On the one hand, they received voting rights for the first time in history, although the one-party electoral system for the next 45 years did not quite allow them to exercise them in practice. Motivated by the labour force needs of modernization and industrialization, combined with the ideological grounds of the whole communist project, promising equality, women are invited, facilitated and encouraged to enter the field of education and hence the labor market. At the same time, however, the industrializing society has a – including economic – need for growth. Therefore, multi-level mechanisms composed of benefits and taxes are also set in motion to encourage birth-rates.

When an attempt is made to look at how these two parallel processes –

of displacement and ideological subjugation of the theatre and of a change in the requirements for women, in the set of roles in which the new order needs them to be placed – there is both an overlap and connectivity, but also confusion, especially in the first half of the period, when the new rules are still rather on paper, but not implemented in practice, and this leads to a certain sense of uncertainty, or to an extreme in the frenzy of their application.

Understanding well how all of those processes, affecting different members of society – and often affecting the same members from different angles – were set in motion and how they developed through the next stages of state socialism is a crucial base for any understanding of contemporaneity. Many of the dilemmas rooted in this project for a total restructuring of society remained either dominant or continued to coexist with new visions that emerged or were imported from the West or elsewhere after 1989. Others were redefined, and pieces of them were reintegrated into new visions. However, in order to be able to trace and understand any of those later processes, knowing and understanding their initial form and dimension remain vital.

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