

High Intensity

The best of today's Bulgarian theatre raises the stakes of familiar texts

BY NICOLE ESTVANIK TAYLOR

Hristo Petkov, foreground, and Snejina Petrova in *0000 The Dream of Gogol*, by Sofia's Theatre Laboratory Sfumato.

SIMON VARSANO

A PRIM FELLOW IN DRESS CLOTHES AND WHITE gloves recites to us the beginnings of a story about reclusive Parisian Jonathan Noel, a bank employee so dependent on monotony that he is unhinged by the appearance of a pigeon on his doorstep. But wait—our storyteller is interrupted by the lusty snoring of an audience member. He approaches the offender, a disheveled woman in an evening gown. The sleeper wakes and meanders onto the set, a colorless modern kitchen, where she silently begins to open a bottle of wine. The teller uses his story to try to engage her attention, but she is coolly focused on the jammed cork of the bottle. She dislodges it with a knife, then stoops to siphon spilled wine off the counter with her lipsticked mouth. The man reverts to self-absorption, taking his monologue downstage while his importunate guest begins to prepare a disastrous dinner that culminates in a frantic encounter with a flaming pan—a moment of brilliant physical comedy, tinged tragic by the man's obliviousness. He mutters, growls, and howls the saga of Jonathan Noel for more than an hour, reciting it relentlessly even as he and the woman cavort with party hats and balloons, as they fumble unsuccessfully toward sex on the kitchen counter, as he seizes her by the throat, as she pulls back on her shoes and prepares to leave. And then he finishes his tale. After whispering the closing lines into a bullhorn, he holds it out to his wordless companion. It is a tantalizing moment. She lifts the bullhorn, clears her throat...and says nothing. They rest together on the floor as the lights dim.

The play is *The Pigeon*, and its text is drawn nearly verbatim from the novella of that name by German writer Patrick Süskind. But there is no snoring woman in Süskind's book, no stubborn cork, no balloons, no audience. The scenes I've described from the production at Bulgaria's National Theatre Ivan Vazov in Sofia are wholly the creation of director Desislava Shpatova and actors Snejina Petrova and Vladimir Penev.

I had modest expectations as I settled in to watch this staging of a book I hadn't read, presented without surtitles in a language I do not speak; I'd been warned there would be no literal dramatization of its plot. Improbably, it turned out to be one of the most exciting literary adaptations I've ever seen, illuminating Süskind's concept of a control freak on the edge of chaos, while rendering its details irrelevant. What mattered was the urgency, pathos and selfishness of that monologue, rattling compulsively down a track alongside the disarray of life being lived.

I saw 12 productions during my visit to Sofia this past November, and many of them displayed *The Pigeon's* confidence in taking ownership of an existing text. I was repeatedly impressed by the range and electrifying energy of Bulgarian actors; the flashes of humor amid bleakness; the memorable stage pictures; the sharp knives and open flames.

I TRAVELED TO SOFIA IN NOVEMBER AT THE INVITATION of the Martha W. Coigney U.S./Bulgarian Initiative,



Mihail Bialov, left, and Boyka Velkova in Edward Albee's *The Goat*, directed by Yavor Gardev.

a two-armed project designed to introduce the post-Soviet generation of Bulgarian stage directors to potential American partners and to forge connections between U.S. training programs and Sofia's top-notch National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts (NATFA). The woman after whom the initiative is named is the former head of the International Theatre Institute and an untiring champion of the role of the arts

in international diplomacy. Coigney has teamed up with Philip Arnoult's Center for International Theatre Development to build on relationships seeded some 30 years ago during an ITI conference held in communist Bulgaria. Coigney still recalls the magic of discovering magnificent theatre in a country that had been a cipher even to such internationally savvy theatre folk as the ITI crowd. These days, her mantra is

simple: "The work is not finished in Bulgaria."

Over the past five or so years—with advice from the Bulgarian-born Mladen Kiselov, former director of Carnegie Mellon University's theatre program, and Peter Karapetkov, artistic director of South Carolina's PURE Theatre—she and Arnoult have brought to Bulgaria a series of U.S. theatre artists and administrators, such as Arena Stage's Molly Smith, in the hopes that they will be similarly hooked by the work being done there (or, if all else fails, by the country's cheese-loaded *shopska* salads). The most recent delegation, which I joined this past November, included Derek Goldman, the head of Georgetown University's theatre program, and Gabriel Shanks, executive director of New York's Drama League. As outlined by Kalina Stefanova in *American Theatre's* 2009 international issue, the cutting-edge programming at Sofia's National Theatre, along with an abundance of work at the city's smaller venues, enjoys a thriving audience in its own city, thanks in part to ticket prices that rarely top the equivalent of \$20. Global audiences should take equal notice: There is a body of contemporary Bul-

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garian work so visually strong that language, while a barrier, needn't be a deal-breaker.

Some of the directors we met while in Sofia have already gained U.S. fans. Lilia Abadjieva, a 1998 NATFA graduate, was represented twice at the Lit Moon Festival in Santa Barbara, Calif., after Lit Moon's director John Blondell, a Westmont College professor, saw her work in Poland. "Traditionalists yelp, but I love her!" Blondell declares. He calls the last 20 minutes of her all-male *Romeo and Juliet* "the most affecting ending of this play I have ever witnessed: a torrential downpour in which the doomed lovers slip in and out of each other's grasp to the strains of 'Unchained Melody'—a wonderful metaphor for how Romeo and Juliet are born and die each time the play is performed or read."

As an artist-in-residence at Westmont in fall 2008, Abadjieva worked with students, alumni and theatre department chair Mitchell Thomas to develop a gutsy amalgam of *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*. "She is ferociously demanding, in particular with what she asks actors to do," says Blondell. Her recent work in Sofia, faithful stagings of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, signaled a solemn change in mood. However, she reportedly returned to form in March by directing *The Pigeon's* Petrova in an adventurous *Miss Julie* at the National Theatre, and when we met her in November she said she was preparing to take on a dream project with plenty of room for innovation: *Faust*.

AS IN MUCH OF EUROPE, BULGARIA'S theatre arguably belongs to its directors—certainly not to its playwrights, few of whom came up in discussion while I was visiting. (I did attend a production by one up-and-comer, Yana Borisova, a relatively conventional drama about four friends clinging to nostalgia; its director, Galin Stoev, is helping another of her popular plays at this year's Varna Summer Festival, a major international event held every June since 1997 on the coast of the Black Sea.) For the most part, the current generation of the country's directors draws from the malleable likes of Shakespeare and Gogol—a trend that makes Abadjieva's detour to the notoriously rigid Beckett all the more interesting.

While in Sofia, I also experienced an enduring Bulgarian text from the communist era: playwright Yordan Radichkov's *Lazaritza*, a National Theatre production staged at Salza i Smiah New Drama Theatre by Krikor



Snejina Petrova in *The Pigeon*, directed by Desislava Sapatova.

Azaryan. (Azaryan died the month after my visit, at the age of 75; the renowned director's final production, *The Cherry Orchard*, plays in Varna this June.) *Lazaritza's* ability to cut straight to the contours of human existence and its Calvino-esque blend of whimsy and misery, not to mention its simple set, makes it a great candidate for international touring.

I was surprised to learn, chatting after

Lazaritza's performance with its actors, Valentin Tanev and Malin Krastev, that Radichkov's 30-year-old script has long been known as a solo show. The lanky Krastev played a nearly silent role as a dog, sans furry costume, who has chased his master (Tanev) up a tree and kept him up there philosophizing for four metaphor-friendly seasons. Krastev's secondary purpose was

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to create basic stage effects—spraying rain, whistling bird calls. Tanev’s monologue drew humor from their face-off, and the dog’s eventual absence underscored the grim turn that all good folktales take in the end. Promoting Radichkov’s invisible canine to flesh-and-blood participant was the director’s way of putting his stamp on a beloved national text.

EVEN FACING SUCH EVIDENCE OF THE primacy of Bulgarian directors, I came away convinced the nation’s theatre belongs as much to the actors. Abadjieva remarked that she “falls in love” with her casts from their first meeting on, and relies on their improvisational skills to build many of her productions. I too will remember my first meeting with a number of Bulgarian actors. As Coigny puts it: “In America you’re trained for a job in the theatre; in Bulgaria, you’re trained for a life in the theatre.” The Balkan nation follows a Russian-style system in which most actors are on salary with a particular company, with the option to shoehorn freelance commitments into their schedules. Since most productions run for



SIMON VARSANO

Vladimir Penev and Svetlana Yancheva in Sfumato’s *Dance of Death*.

years in rotating rep, an actor’s calendar is a carefully orchestrated variety of rehearsals and shows. Krastev told us his record was 34 performances of 12 roles in one month!

I saw *The Pigeon*’s remarkable Petrova in three plays during my visit; only one was under Shpatova’s direction, but theirs is a tight director/actor bond. The two started

their own independent company, Legal Art Centre, in the late ’90s by working on adaptations of Dostoevsky and Pushkin in Petrova’s parents’ basement. In the past decade, they have generated several co-productions with established Sofia theatres. They’ve made some U.S connections too, thanks to the organization CEC ArtsLink, which funded

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2001 residencies for Shpatova at Cleveland Public Theatre and for Petrova at GOH Productions in New York; during that year, the Legal Art production of contemporary Bulgarian writer Milena Fuchedjieva's play *Zen Porn* appeared at NYC's La MaMa. Petrova briefly studied Viewpoints and the Suzuki technique while visiting the U.S., but the bulk of her training was at NATFA, where she did oral history research as a student in the first experimental theatre class taught by Ivan Dobchev and Margarita Mladenova, the founders of Theatre Laboratory Sfumato.

Launched right around the time the Berlin Wall came down, Sfumato is con-

sidered in some ways to be Bulgaria's first independent theatre company. (Most theatres are state-funded—even Sfumato, at this point in its history, receives some state assistance—though a new spirit of decentralization in the air at Sofia's ministry of culture may soon allow state theatres more control over their own budgets.) Both Petrova and her thunder-voiced *Pigeon* co-star Penev appeared in stunning Sfumato productions I saw in Sofia: *OOOO The Dream of Gogol* (Petrova) and *Dance of Death* (Penev). The former, adapted by Mladenova and Dobchev from several Gogol tales about love, marriage and obsession, teetered between humor and horror. The latter, though faithful to Strindberg's

script, might as well have been an adaptation too, given Mladenova's stark, ferocious vision of the piece. The couple at the play's center dress in matching military pajamas; their words clatter like machine-gun fire, and the staccato sound of their playing cards slamming on the table echoes like drums on a warpath. One hallmark of Sfumato productions is a bold and integrated use of lighting, with which they created gorgeous chiaroscuro tension in both *Gogol* and *Dance of Death*. In the former, Moscow's fashionable Nevsky Prospekt becomes a ghoulishly lit catwalk; in the latter, harsh spots slice through murky darkness, causing silver cups and bowls to gleam like weapons. ▶

PUPPET ENCOUNTERS OF THE BULGARIAN KIND

TWO ACTORS EMERGE FROM THE AUDIENCE WEARING military trench coats and creepy storm-trooper gas masks. With searchlights strapped to their heads and a rock beat blaring through the house, the moles collect mangled body parts scattered across the stage, piling them carelessly on a medic's gurney as though in a macabre Marx Brothers routine. Finally, with one sweeping gesture, they fumigate the theatre with hand-held fog machines that resemble Uzis. The smoke hangs like a giant ghost as they exit into the wings.

Welcome to Sophocles, Bulgarian style, in which digital video projections intermix with shadow puppets on giant plastic drapes, spray bottles are used to both disinfect and anoint, and eight-foot foam-carved figures salsa-dance their way through Oedipus's nightmares. Produced specifically for the 2009 Pierrot International Festival of Puppetry for Adults, held this past September in Stara Zagora (about 150 miles east of the Bulgarian capital), *Oedipus: The Feast of Blindness* was a collaboration by Bulgarian state puppet theatres from Plovdiv, Burgas and the host city. It was a marquee example of what audiences in this region have come to expect from the puppetry arts: sophisticated craftsmanship; literature-based source material; the offbeat use of everyday objects; and a visible relationship between puppet and puppeteer, often used to add commentary on character and story.



RADA DIMITROVA

Oedipus: The Feast of Blindness, a multi-theatre collaboration at the Pierrot Festival in Stara Zagora.

"Puppetry is a considerable part of our national identity," says festival coordinator Darin Petkov with pride. "It is really well developed, and the government takes great care of our art form." The adult-centric work at the Pierrot Festival, he explains, taps into a respect for the puppetry arts, which has been nurtured in Bulgarians since childhood by state-supported school trips to the theatre.

The 2009 festival hosted 16 full-length productions in all, including presentations from Spain, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Belarus and the U.S., along with six state-funded Bulgarian puppet theatres. Gracefully staged marionette productions of *The Wood Nymph* and *The Little Mermaid* were aimed at family audiences, while others were adapted from adult literature. For example, *The Night Before Christmas*, from Gogol, used Petrushka hand puppets in a wild and sometimes bawdy love story. The Burgas state theatre's production design included a stage made entirely of fabric, stretched across the proscenium, providing the highly energetic puppets great freedom and comic mobility. Dozens of slits in the material allowed for surprise confrontations between characters, including an obnoxious barking dog who repeatedly appeared from nowhere and everywhere.

U.S. artist Larry Hunt's performance at the festival marked his third trip to Bulgaria. Five years ago, an invitation to choreograph *Animal Farm* at the state theatre in Stara Zagora gave him a five-week immersion course in Bulgarian theatre. Since then, Hunt and Petkov have nurtured an ongoing relationship between Hunt's Masque Theatre of Bethlehem, Conn., and the State Puppet Theatre in Stara Zagora. Recent discussions have focused on a proposed collaborative production of Hunt's newest work, *King Fear*. Set in a mythical totalitarian world, Hunt's Lecoq-influenced nonverbal opera already has Israel composer Ady Cohen, Russian costumer Anya Sokolovskaya and U.S. choreographer Adelka Polak on board. Based on his previous experience with the Stara Zagora company, Hunt says it is his first choice as co-producer for the work.

"In this part of the world, especially in the arts, people are very curious," Hunt comments of his Bulgarian colleagues. "Eastern Europeans seem to seek out information to help themselves grow as people and artists. I think the puppeteers do that especially well."

—Ed Wierzbicki

One of the more startling props used in *Dance of Death* is a can of gasoline. At the climax of the marital battle, the husband barricades the bed with furniture and the wife douses it with a liquid whose very real fumes got more than a few patrons nervously noting the emergency exits—especially once she emerged again, brandishing a lit candle. Considering *The Pigeon*'s kitchen fire, and even the twinkling lanterns in *Lazaritza*, one begins to wonder if the secret to exciting theatre is lax fire codes. (Little comfort to learn, when I asked about the image of a phoenix emblazoned on the National Theatre's curtain, that it commemorates a 1923 conflagration that nearly destroyed the place.)

My conclusion is that Bulgarian stagecraft embraces not only a psychological but a real, physical sense of danger—apparent when an actor crouches precariously atop a

wooden pillar in superstar director Alexander Morfov's *Don Juan* at the National Theatre, or during the surprisingly vigorous stage fighting in a *Treasure Island* directed by the National Youth Theatre's Petar Kaukov, who splurged to hire two stuntmen. One of the fastest rising Bulgarian directors, Yavor Gardev, has created such white-knuckle work as a *Caligula* in which an actor douses flaming paper with his hands and thrashes about in a hot tub at the center of the stage. Even in his exacting production of Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*, the prescribed shattering of housewares in the play's second act becomes a muscular undertaking.

THE GOAT'S PREMIERE IN BULGARIA is a particular milestone in U.S./Bulgarian exchange, due to the Pulitzer-winning dramatist's close involvement, which was brokered by Coigney, a personal friend of

Albee's since their mutual participation in Cold War-era cultural diplomacy. Says the playwright, "When Martha told me interesting things were going on in Bulgaria, perhaps the only Eastern European country I hadn't visited, I said: I might as well go there. At the same time I met a very interesting young director, Yavor Gardev, who was in New York trying to finance a film, and I found him very sympathetic."

Albee was present for the beginning and end of the two-month *Goat* rehearsal period. He exercised his privilege to change one cast member, but touched up only a few phrases in what he deemed a solid translation (by Haralampi Anichkin). "I wanted to be sure that everybody understood the author's intention clearly," is how Albee summarizes his input. "I don't like too much new turning up in my plays."

By and large, Sofia's reviewers loved the results: "Precision and passion—a rare and very lucky combination," wrote one. As for Albee, he declares, "I'm delighted with it, so I guess we'll do more!"

While Gardev's production of *The Goat* was appropriately in step with the Tony-winning Broadway premiere, the director found subtle ways to raise the stakes. For one thing, Nikola Toromanov's production design—on a trim, diamond-shaped stage in the National Theatre's downstairs space—gave the characters little room to retreat when the conflict heated up. As in the U.S. premiere, the set evoked the home of a major architect, complete with built-in bookshelves, African art and stylish furniture. Yet it pushed that concept further: Its backlit shelves, on which boldly titled art books alternated with intriguing sculptures and vases, put the inhabitants' cultured tastes on museum-style display.

In the Broadway production, the self-confessed goat-lover's wife (played by Mercedes Ruehl and, later, Sally Field) smashed some plain pottery and a small glass candy bowl, and destroyed a painting on the leg of an overturned chair. In Sofia, shifting her stance from foot to foot like a wrestler, the actress in that role (Boyka Velkova) made the most of a generous disposable-pottery budget. After some of the larger and more interesting objets d'art bit the dust, it was a thrill to wonder whether the fancy African statues might be next. They weren't—but the sofa cushions weren't so lucky, and the painting met its demise not on a table leg but over her husband's head.

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Ironically, one of the challenges facing the new generation of Bulgaria's directors may be graduating beyond the intimacy of such chamber pieces, according to Alexander Morfov. A director who reached canonized status early in his career, Morfov ran the National Theatre for a brief time, and his imaginative work is frequently seen on its main stage as well as, increasingly, in Russia. To illustrate his point, Morfov tells the parable of a huge circus elephant kept in place by only a thin rope attached to a small spike. When the elephant was newborn, Morfov elaborates, the weak tether was enough to prevent escape; now, though fully grown, it has never again thought to test its limits. In other words, if young directors are not entrusted with large canvases now, they're less likely to stretch and fill such spaces later in their careers. In Morfov's case, having sufficient elbow room for pieces such as *Don Juan* has paid off in such indelible stage pictures as a cavernous church in which an array of Michelangelo-like statues stir to life, and a two-story dinner table that becomes a platform for a fatal fencing match.

At first glance, Morfov's panoramic opuses have little in common with one of the most portable productions I saw during my trip—Credo Theatre's *The Overcoat*, based on Gogol. But, like Morfov, its two actor-director-writers, Nina Dimitrova and Vassil "Zuek" Vassilev, are graduates of NATFA's puppetry program (in 1988 and 1992, respectively; Morfov graduated in 1990). Puppetry is an expansive art in Bulgarian culture (see sidebar), and those who study it at the academy receive broad instruction. Says Dimitrova: "We studied not only puppetry, but also commedia dell'arte, clowns and drama, and in our work we combine these skills to diversify our theatre language and to translate literature into an understandable and visually expressive performance. Our education helped us to develop our imagination." In the world of *The Overcoat*, some rags, sticks and pieces of cardboard are nearly as versatile as the two performers' own bodies in representing a ghost caught in a dog trap, or a tailor ripping a patch off a sleeve. The production has a freshness and joy that belies the fact that Credo has performed it for nearly 20 years, in 9 languages, at more than 150 festivals. The duo has created only one other production (*Daddy's Always Right*, commissioned by a Hans Christian Andersen festival in Denmark); touring is their main occupation, and it has brought them several

times to the U.S. since 1997, including to Vermont, California, Maine, Connecticut and upstate New York.

CREDO THEATRE'S FREQUENT FORAYS to the U.S. are not yet the national norm, unfortunately. Gardev's noirish thriller *Zift* played in New York at the 2010 Bulgarian Film Festival, but his theatrical work has yet to appear in the U.S.—and this is a director who made Edward Albee, by the playwright's own admission, see *King Lear* in a different light. Luckily, international collaboration is very much a part of the Bulgarian theatre zeitgeist these days, especially with the country's new status as a member of the European Union. The Coigny Initiative's concern has been to make sure the U.S. is tapping its share of that exchange-friendly energy.

This summer the Drama League's Shanks heads back to Bulgaria with his artistic director, Roger Danforth, to advance plans for a five-year directors' exchange program with Art Office, the Sofia-based cultural promotion organization that assembled our November itinerary. The first step of the Drama League/Art Office project is to bring

delegations of early-career directors to see shows in one another's countries; creative workshops will follow; and down the road, says Shanks, the idea is that culturally attuned U.S. directors will be hired to create new work on Bulgarian stages and vice versa. Georgetown's Goldman is also making plans to return to Bulgaria to hash out the parameters of a partnership between his school and NATFA.

Those who make the journey to Varna this June will encounter a second-annual showcase of local work selected for its international tourability, along with the traditional array of outstanding Bulgarian shows picked out by a guest curator. This year scholar Anna Topaldzhikova has done the honors, under the banner "Theatre as an Intensified Reality." When I mentioned that theme to Albee, his response was bemused, yet approving: "Well, that's what all good theatre should be, no matter what style it's in," he observed. "That means they're doing good plays." ☒

Nicole Estvanik Taylor's trip to Sofia was supported by the Center for International Theatre Development.

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