

Dürrenmatt in Bulgaria – A love of the theatre (A Portrait of Dürrenmatt from 1963 – 2004)

A Bulgarian project on the role of Dürrenmatt in Bulgarian Theatre

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The 60s: Illusions of Freedom

During the 60s, Bulgarian theatre exhibits an illusion of freedom, during which a period of extremely risky artistic experiments takes place.

A dialogue is established with Dürrenmatt one year after the Berlin wall is built: the Bulgarian director Léon Daniel stages *The Visit (of the Old Lady)* in 1963, and if his choice falls on this particular work it is not fortuitous. His adaptation forces one to pose a question that must have seemed Cornelian to the predominantly Communist society of the period: who is stronger, the intellectual Ill or the proletarian from Güllen? At this point in time, asking a question in what could be considered a self-critical manner is highly dangerous.

The first presentation, one of the best adaptations of the 60s, took place on March 16, 1963, in Sofia at the Bulgarian Army Theatre.

The same year (1963) the Bulgarian public is offered a proletarian version of the play put on at the Sofia Workers Theatre and staged by Lena Tschentschewa. In opposition to Léon Daniel's intellectual interpretation of the play, here, the mayor of Güllen is a local welder. Contemporary critics could not avoid speaking of the artistic value of the Daniel

production, nor did they forget to praise the performance of the actor who was a local welder.

Frank V was put on stage almost at the same time as The Visit; the first presentation, directed by Grischa Ostrowski, took place on February 18, 1963, at the National Satire Theatre in Sofia. Its staging concept was extremely modern, so much so that it should serve as an example for contemporary productions!

Paradox of paradoxes, the play The Physicists seduced both artists and the powers that be: its production furnished the alibi necessary to allow a rather large freedom of speech on the one hand, and on the other, those in power discovered a healthy dose of criticism of the "capitalistic society" and concluded that "the socialist scientist is the most aware of his responsibility" toward society.

Between 1965 and 1966, a wave of adaptations of The Physicists followed at Haskowo, Sofia, Burgas and Sliwen. The psychiatric clinic of Mathilde von Zahnd corresponded to the Sofia political leaders' notion of the symbol of the moribund capitalist society, Möbius being a victim of this society. For the actors and the public, however, the play was founded on a different allegory: that of military "barracks socialism" that permitted no liberty, even for a genius.

The 70s: Games and Allegories

Spectators and actors alike were fascinated by Romulus the Grand, produced at the Sofia Theatre (staging by Wassil Lukanow) during the theatrical season of 1973-74. The production made fun of the local political leaders. In this Bulgarian adaptation, Izhak Finzi interprets Romulus as the king's fool in a political regime that rules over no one: a wonderful allegory of the socialist regime on the decline.

Dürrenmatt's play had become an aesthetic battle field for testing limits and experimenting, and the author an accomplice in theatrical games tweaking the noses of the political power in place at the time.

On November 16, 1974, the premier of *The Breakdown* took place in the Theatre of the Bulgarian Army. It was produced by Assen Angelow, and it was to be the last time a play by Dürrenmatt was put on during the 70s. The extraordinary interpretation by the actors was magnificent. Dürrenmatt's highly allegorical character portrayal allows the public to understand the underlying meaning.

The 80s: Was a change of system possible?

The 80s is a period of 10 years during which Dürrenmatt was noticeably absent from Bulgarian theatre. Was this hiatus caused by a lack of interest or some invisible form of censure?

It wasn't until 1988 that one of his plays was finally staged at the Popular Youth Theatre under the direction of Nikolai Poljakow. The production of *King Jack* represents all that is sad, grotesque and desperate in a power structure's mechanisms: a metaphor which only proceeds by a little the downfall of the Communist regime.

One question, typical of the period of "perestroika" hung in the air: Is society capable of evolving?

The 90s – 2000s: Dürrenmatt and the power of the market

This period on the Bulgarian stage is one of great effervescence for the works of Dürrenmatt, since it is a period where the search for a new dialogue with the general public appears as part of “the program.”

1990	<u><i>The Visit</i></u>	Plamen Markow	National Satire Theatre
1992	<u><i>Romulus The Grand</i></u>	Zdrawko Mitkow	National Satire Theatre
1996	<u><i>Late Autumn Evening</i></u>	Zdrawko Mitkow	Theatre 199
2002	The <u><i>Bastard</i></u> (adapted from <i>King Jack</i>)	Javor Gardev	Schauspielhaus at Varna
2003	<u><i>The Meteor</i></u>	Nikolaj Lambrew	Bulgarian Army Theatre
2004	<u><i>The Visit</i></u>	Leon Daniel	National Theatre “Iwan Wasow”

The productions of *The Bastard* and *The Visit* were particularly remarkable and their final result was to free Dürrenmatt from the iron hand of political ideology and the grips of censure.

Dürrenmatt in the deforming mirror of Communism & Post-Communism

The Visit

In 1963, seven years after its premier in Zurich, the most beautiful play by Dürrenmatt is produced on Bulgarian stages by Léon Daniel, the Bulgarian stage manager, who gives this play the perspective of a communist-deforming mirror, a paradox of manipulating power – a revolutionary interpretation for the period.

By the masterly effect of the use of images and stage characters, as well as a sermon that all is finally but a game, Léon Daniel managed to take the censure machine for a ride. His slogan “Life is serious, art is amusing,” accompanied this stage adaptation. A play ought to push the spectator to reflect on life, and if, on top of this, the public enjoys the play, then the director has succeeded. The Visit has become the archetype of aesthetic freedom, inspiring generations of artists.

In January 1990, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, The Visit was once again performed at the National Satire Theatre at Sofia. In between times, art became serious and life amusing.

In 2004 The Visit reappeared on stage with a new adaptation, this time on the representative stage of the National Theatre “Ivan Vazov.” The production was proof that Léon Daniel was living a beautiful love affair with this play.

The Visit, Sofia, premier April 30, 2004

Léon Daniel, staging; video production, Vladimir Liuzkanov.
Scenario, Léa Cohen – Augsburg

This is the fourth Bulgarian production of the well-known play by Dürrenmatt. The first took place in 1963 and was the work of Léon Daniel (Army Theatre).

Forty years later, the same stage manager returns to the same play; this time, as he puts it, he wants to show how totally corrupt society is at the beginning of the third millennium.

This production of *The Visit* takes place on the stage of the Bulgarian National Theatre "Ivan Vazov" and is included in the official 100-year anniversary celebration program of this institution.

The Bastard, according to Dürrenmatt, Shakespeare and Medieval chronicles will take place during the 2003 – 2004 season at Varna, and will be staged by Yavor Gardev.

In the "Dimyat" wine cellars in Varna, the young stage manager Yavor Gardev is presenting a somber and dramatic version of the subject dealt with in *King Jack*. The staging makes use of a mixture of choreography of gestures, mime and costumes and masques recalling those of the period.

