

# Theatre Control Policy or Why After Goran Stefanovski and Dejan Dukovski, No One Is Known Outside the Borders of the Macedonian Theatre? (2010–2021)

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## Introduction

To capture the dramatic situation in/of the contemporary drama theatre in Macedonia, I will try to draw certain characteristics of the state of the theatre by referring to several political and social conditions with us, that erode the spirit and matter of everyday life:

- hyper-corruption, local imperialism in every pore of society, political party terrorism, consistently poor policy of artificial status quo in transition, a deeply corrupted legal system and captive state, education in a bitter crisis, tortured and abused culture, rotten health, violent stoning with regular changes to the constitutional name, crime-local feudal capitalism combined with laziness, brutal opportunism, and overnight constructed professional identities; constant and accelerated economic brain drain, radical nepotism, *elephant valley* in every institutional sector; treating the public budget and public institutions as if they were the private property of several government figures in managerial positions;
- corrupted and irrelevant mainstream media working for the interests of the political party opposition and position – through a low level of editorial ethics and extremely poor quality media programme; we are a country burdened by daily financial and institutional scandals and social damages for which no one takes the responsibility – nor are they punished for the damage they inflict;
- the local Don Quixote – the Macedonian Center ITI/PRODUKCIJA, through which we promote domestic contemporary plays as literary works; Macedonian playwrights who are not part of the establishment; dramatists, who are deliberately not staged in theatres, with the exception of the incidental (sudden) goodwill of a particular theatrical institution – which usually does not know how to carry out successful local and international promotional strategies afterwards.

## The Topics about Which Local Playwrights Are Writing

We are a country where cultural and natural heritage are hypocritically glorified, while 80% of our cultural heritage is neglected, and nature, with its ecosystem of soil, flora, fauna and minerals, is brutally exploited and smuggled on the grey market.

In my country, every public-institutional pore of society is totally controlled by the political party in power. The party employs you, controls your existential destiny, traces your future and controls your happiness by taking an illegal percentage of your earnings and profits. The party owns you to retaliate with an uncritical – amputated vote in the election – in fact, these are the topics and conditions that are written about in the contemporary dramatic texts in our country; or it is not written, and it is kept silent. These are the topics that are talked about at home and on social networks but even now, more courageously and openly, before the local elections, which follows in October 2021. At the same time, these are the conditions that paralyse contemporary theatre in our country.

Let me share an introductory dramatic-theatrical mapping: We are a country with fifteen national theatres and one opera and ballet. We do not have city theatres and private theatres with their own workspace and independent programmes. We have several independent troupes tracing the independent drama scene on their muscles and are without their own space and budget. They work on the premises of *MKC* Skopje, *SKC Jadro*, *SKC Dunja* and the Center for Contemporary Culture – *Kino Kultura* – which was closed at the beginning of 2021.

Due to the distrust of local municipalities due to corruption and disastrous local ethnicised policy of divisions and rural fundamentalism (not agricultural), due to the fragile cultural policy which, if necessary and ad hoc, tightens the criteria for applying for projects in order to give up and not apply – or if they (the Ministry of Culture) supports you with a project – then the money will not be paid, or they will pay you off with a radical delay when the debts to your co-workers and the executor are already hanging on your door.

It does not matter who is in power. The pernicious crime policy of the mafia and terrorists in the ranks of parliamentarians pursue their own agenda of violating all conceivable and unimaginable ethical rules and legal laws.

It does not matter who is in power, but when he/she is in power, leading politicians choose several artists who, for justified and unjustified reasons, as well as personal and professional achievements/interests, favour and distinguish them as a kind of cultural elite, at the level of justifiably unjustified genius and exceptionalism. This is how the local syndrome arises – the syndrome of nothing before me and after me, a

flood. Either some get everything and others little or nothing, or the privileged are simply irreplaceable. And let us not overcome such cultural non-politics.

Artists and cultural workers do not trust the implementation of decentralisation of culture by reforming most national theatres into city theatres due to the above conditions or the fear that any theatre may be closed overnight if it is not in the personal-profit interest of the “local sheriff” – the mayor.

It becomes clear that the spectacular, sensational drama is happening on the political scene and not in official theatres and independent stages/scenes. Hence the employment in the theatres is carried out through party merits or for those close to the theatre clans who manage to establish an opportunistic relationship with the government and the oppositions just to maintain themselves in the theatre.

The negative selection, culmination and reign of the mediocre, local antagonism and silence as well as tolerating inaccuracies, for fear of being fired and fear of losing the basic pleasant life comfort of self-deception and posing quasi-success on social media.

So we live in an existential theatre of constant absurdity and meaninglessness and hopelessness in which drug dealers and sociopaths reign, passive second and third echelons in the party; protected by police full of petty criminals, thieves and perpetrators of domestic violence who abuse their position of responsibility and power. Crime-Grotesque and Drug-Caricatures, media copycat status, have become criteria for quasi-value and pseudo-success in our society of acting and self-deception. A society stuck in eternal infantilism without a sense of self-initiative, self-responsibility and self-awareness. A condition that distorts our perception of having the consistency and capacity to notice both the positive and authentic motifs in the culture and art of home theatre that fortunately happens.

Theatres and theatre festivals belong to several clans that own the rights to production, good budget, guest appearances and awards at domestic festivals such as – service for service, interest for interest – money. No one moves from their strange comfort zone in the direction of artistic progress once they are employed in a national institution.

## **The Specific State of the Vicious Circle, for All Possible Excuses**

Due to the institutional political party policy in theatres and academies, which mostly seeks refuge in world classical and modern classical dramatic texts and authors in order not to provoke the contemporary local establishment or seeks refuge in theatrical adaptations of well-known film scripts and film hits without developing solid and fresh directorial concepts and interpretations.

We have no continuity of visibility of new generations of playwrights, their ups and downs, themes and stylistic approaches, dramatic reflections, structural experiments, and methodology of character building. Their capacity for staging, for national, regional or international recognition. In theatres, someone constantly sends dramatic texts that no one or rarely anyone reads. Talented children/young people, if they do not have a clan backing them – no one supports them until they begin to chart their own path of visibility thanks to the visibility opportunities offered by the internet and social networks or they are reoriented in another professional direction.

If authors are not internationally visible like the late Goran Stefanovski and Dejan Dukovski, partly like Jordan Plevnesh and Venko Andonovski, it does not mean they do not exist.

Today in our theatre community, too much is written about the plays of Goran Stefanovski and Dejan Dukovski, as well as the classical Macedonian drama period before the year 2010. But we forget about solving and systematising the problem of visibility and establishing contemporary playwrights through the introduction of new creative subjects at the drama academies, cooperation with various visiting professors – foreign colleagues and domestic colleagues with excellent international achievements. Regular public drama readings and critical-analytical-theoretical discussions about new names – topics and directions, innovations and novelties in a local dramatic context compared to international trends then and now. We lack much more than courage and obedience. We lack the sensibility of directors to set the contemporary domestic authors in joint collaboration with them. We lack the development and support of promotional programmes for the international relevance of contemporary drama in our country through professional magazines, bilateral, trilateral collaborations and collaborative educational and production-oriented co-productions.

## Macedonian Contemporary Drama

Here, I will list authors from mixed generations with different publishing and staging intensities like – Jugoslav Petrovski, Trajce Kacarov, Katerina Momeva, Blagica Sekulovska, Gorjan Milosevski, Srdjan Janacievic, Saso Dimovski, Ivana Nelkovska, Igor Pop Trajkov, Mia Efremova, Mia Nikoloska, Lidija Mitoska Gjorgjievaska, Mia Nikolovska, Mia Efremova, Mitko Bojadziski, Viktorija Rangelova Petrovska. There are also those, who in 2020/2021 published their first or second plays, such as Ana Stojanoska, Goce Ristovski, Maja Stevanovikj, Gabriela Stojanoska-Stanojevaska and many others who joined the trend of ad hoc writing and publishing dramatic texts, especially in the years of COVID-19 when theatrical production on stage died out.

In general, the contemporary Macedonian theatre is classical and conservative, with the exception of guest directors invited to work in our theatres, like Igor Vuk Torbica, Marjan Necak, Andraz Urban, Andriy Zoldak, Alexander Morfov, and domestic directors such as Dejan Projkovski, Ivan Popovski, Aleksandar Popovski, Vladimir Milcin, Ljupco Georgievski, Martin Kocovski and others trying to flirt with postdramatic theatre. Macedonian theatres, viewed from a distance – act as one and the same identical theatre with copy-paste programme logic and a copycat repertoire mentality. Nobody makes a work of art from a theatre programme. The managers are eternal deputy managers stuck in self-censorship, and every three to six months, they are replaced with a new temporary deputy director/manager.

## The Selection of the Most Interesting Playwrights

The following contemporary domestic playwrights are the most interesting for me. Yugoslav Petrovski, who, in the spirit of Antonin Artaud, Eugenio Barba and Richard Schechner, writes about rituals, archaic theatre, exploring the capacities of the barbaric anthropological ethos in the theatre, exploring the dark side of fairy tales, folklore, myths, connecting the demon(s) of the present times with the demons of the primordial, ancient, pre-civilisation times. His female characters are always sacrificed to the Sun. In the 1990s, the Orthodox Church in Macedonia anathematised Yugoslav Petrovski for writing and staging the play *Gospel of Judas* in the National Theatre Anton Panov – Strumitca in 1993.

In the spirit of the poet Svetlana Hristova-Jocic and the archaic opus of the visual artist Aneta Svetieva (who creates ethnological sculptures – chimaeras with the body of a female swimmer and a crocodile), Blagica Sekulovska writes plays for the teenage woman, the pregnant woman, mother(s), the divorcee, the widow, the prostitute, the yoga teacher, betrayed women, cheated women and abandoned women in the context of this patriarchal society in which the woman is still polarised into a saint or a whore.

Mitko Bojadziski is an extraordinary and intelligent humorist. He creates contemporary political and social comedies inspired by local political banality. He makes the audience laugh in a lucid and witty way, at the expense of its local stereotypes and existential sadomasochism, borrowing from the matrices of Stale Popov but building a modern cynical à la Strumitca's *Itar Pejo* and *Nasreddin Hodja*. Tired of corruption and lies, Macedonians love comedies and catharsis through popular humour and laughter.

Eva Kamcevska turns the local reality into a grotesque caricature. She ironises the pressure on a woman or her biological clock, called the deadline for the possibility of having a child, making the surreal turning into a biological clock – as a surreal lover. The irony of getting married and being married, she ironises by turning the

godmother into a mythical cow – the twin of the Minotaur from Crete. Eva's play *A Wedding to Remember* was selected for the programme of the 2021 edition of the International Theatre Festival Analogio in Athens, Greece.

Mia Efremova is a productive and talented author. Dramatically, she is self-taught and manifests strong poetics of a woman shaman – a woman as meta medium which draws amazing contexts from TV, film, theatre, internet and social networks and from the everyday life of her peers into her plays. She writes about filmed and unreal youth, conflicts with men, all men without a penny who live off the account of a woman with a bank card. (Her plays: *Rosebud*, *Demigods*, *Big Deal*, etc.). Mia Efremova was noticed by Simon James Collier from the British audio drama platform [www.evcoll.com](http://www.evcoll.com).

Mia Nikoloska creates the drama of smell, odour and stench. She places her stories in current and futuristic contexts in which the characters determine their relations according to the smell of their body – she builds characters who are disgusted by love, touch, tenderness and intimacy – stuck in the de-humanism of progress and the dead-end of life. Her play *Hunger Artist* (an adaptation of the short story of the same name by Franz Kafka) was selected for the 2021 edition of the Contemporary Performing Drama Festival in Incheon, South Korea.

One of the most successful regional authors translated into several foreign languages and staged on three stages at the Dramski Theatre in Skopje, SNT Drama Ljubljana and the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade is Rumena Bužarovska and her short stories entitled *My Man*. The Balkan region writes and promotes Rumena very zealously, while I shall focus on her writing style and structure to see what made her a hit not only in the world of literature but also in film and theatre. She writes directly, briefly, clearly, visually, with strict focus, precisely, accurately-explicitly, from the perspective of several female characters/prototypes in a specifically subordinate position in marriage, at work and in society. The stories are ready-made narrative material for great female characters and a good movie or play, with a striking beginning and ending – and an unpretentious narrative in which every woman in the world can be found.

Rumena Bužarovska has the solid support of the literary promotion networks and channels, which are very strong and fused in the Balkans and in the former Yugoslav territories. It makes her independent of the success of theatrical tactics and strategies of success.

Mia Nikoloska, Mia Efremova, Vasil Mihail, Sasho Blazeski, Eva Kamcevska, Katerina Momeva, Yugoslav Petrovski and other talented relevant authors with a great sense of drama. Gradually they are gaining visibility thanks to their talent, great knowledge of the English language, and our promotional approach and connections with Europe and the world – like international festivals, networks for playwrights, audio drama

platforms, theatre researchers from abroad interested in the state of contemporary Macedonian drama and theatre. It is very important that you do not take away their copyrights. And it is very important that the agreements are not disgustingly exclusive and exploitative – the destruction of authorship. The rest is a matter of their individual luck, perseverance and personal and professional dramatic development, at all costs of the original vocation inside them.

To summarise, most domestic authors refer to local topics, with the exception of the younger generation writers, who are open to all narrative influences available via the internet. Domestic playwrights often turn to writing prose and poetry to articulate their drive and writing angles. They are synthesised in literary circles and movements because the theatre ignores them. The structure of the dramatic texts they create is very open and looks like dialogue lists, more precisely, like a movie script, for practical reasons to make it easier to get into the film community: contemporary film in Macedonia, unlike the crisis in theatre, is experiencing a slight renaissance.

In Macedonia or FYROM or North Macedonia, the most interesting people are outside the local media, political and theatre mainstream – the local mainstream saturates with boring “stars” of the negative selection – and the rising female dramatic voices in contemporary drama in Macedonia. They break up and conquer the readers, but only we know that. The local mainstream media and pseudo establishment practically ignore them!

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