

THEATRE EXPRESSIONISM IN BULGARIA: GEO MILEV

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Abstract: Geo Milev (1895-1925) is not only a brilliant expressionist poet and publicist from the first quarter of the last century, but also one of the founders of theatre avant-garde in Bulgaria. In 1918 in his study *Theatre Art* he declares an overall radical project for renewal and transformation of the Bulgarian theatre through its “re-birth” as expressionistic. Throughout the several following years the author persistently pursues the accomplishment of this project, till his early death in 1925. The reformatory ideas declared by him in his program study could be defined as an original manifestation of the *Geist*-trend in theatre expressionism, influenced by the conditions of the local stage practice.

The article analyzes the list of playwrights and plays, through which Geo Milev intends to implement his expressionistic theatre project and discusses his debut staging of the Strindberg’s *Dance of Death* as a first step to its realization.

Key words: Theatre, theatre avant-garde, theatre expressionism, Geo Milev, Bulgarian theatre avant-garde, Bulgarian theatre expressionism, Strindberg, first Bulgarian director, drama of rhythm, expressionist performance.

The year 2015 is the 120th anniversary of the birth of Geo Milev (1895-1925) – not only a brilliant Bulgarian poet and publicist from the first quarter of the last century, but also one of the founders of theatre avant-garde in this country. In the years right after the First World War the Bulgarian cultural space is filled with heated disputes and heterogeneous programs for modernizing the national stage art. The first categorical and well-grounded statement belongs to Geo Milev, who in 1918 in his study *Theatre Art* [**Milev, 1918**]¹ declares an overall radical project for renewal and transformation of the Bulgarian theatre through its “re-birth”² as expressionistic.

Geo Milev’s interest towards theatre starts in his student’s years in Sofia (1911-1912) and turns into an enduring passion during his studies in Leipzig

¹ [**Milev, Geo. 1918.**] Театрално изкуство. [Teatralno izkustvo]. Stara Zagora: Vezni.

² *Re-birth* (*Wiedergeburt* in German) – is a key notion in the philosophy of expressionism.

(1912-1915). The goal of the ambitious philosophy student is “a professor’s chair in university” but together with his involvement in the expressionist movement, it is replaced by the persistent desire for theatre career as a director. Seen through the prism of the activist position of expressionism this strange inconsistency turns out to be a regular move. The key belief of the expressionist project that the world reconstruction could only be accomplished through the (self)enlightenment of the separate personality, which has to reveal to the mankind the truth discovered by himself, leads the theatre in the front lines of expressionistic action due to its quality as a tribune, as a space for dialogue and influence on the community. On the other side, as far as theatre is a means of communication, language in which the discovered new content by the separate personality should reach to the multitude of people and in order to express adequately this new content, the language should also be rediscovered and recreated. According to this logic Geo Milev’s decision to become a stage director is a radical, iconoclastic act. An act which supposes the destruction of his contemporary Bulgarian theatre as an old language and the formulation of a new one to take its place.

The program step of Geo Milev in search of new stage language is his study *Theatre Art*. It is simultaneously a manifesto and a conspectus of his expressionistic project. Throughout the several following years the author persistently pursues the accomplishment of this project, till his early death in 1925. The study is written as a concrete program for practical work, whose intention is to introduce “the new theatre” that would bring to an end the romantic postures and the naturalistic resemblance of the Bulgarian stage of that time and would replace them with the art of rhythm, of primary simplicity and clarity of expression, called by Geo Milev “absolute realistic”. The reformatory ideas declared by him in this theoretical work could be defined as an original manifestation of the Geist-trend in theatre expressionism, influenced by the conditions of the local stage practice.

The well-considered scheme of Geo Milev for transformation of the theatre act has clear, even ascetic consistence and comprises five basic positions. They are: 1) transformation of the theatre “like art”; 2) new formulation of the relationship theatre-audience; 3) “transformation” of the actor as an artist by “the hand of the director”, 4) creation of the performance by the director according to his inner rhythm, born by the play and 5) birth of theatre from the text of the dramatic poet, in case it is “a work of art” (that in Geo Milev’s understanding means “drama of the rhythm”). These five conditions could be accomplished by the stage realization of four precisely defined dramas – *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, *Ghosts* by Ibsen and *Pelleas and Melisande* by Maeterlinck.

It is obvious that this list is thought over and is not made by chance. There are emblematic texts in it that mark the stages of movement of the European spirit and theatre. In the terms of expressionism they could be defined as essential, “primary” zones of European culture engraving pulsations of eternal energies and questions of human existence. It means that they are recognized and chosen by Geo Milev as “dramas of rhythm” appropriate for expressionistic interpretation. It strikes at once that the expressionistic drama in the program

repertoire list is missing. This fact is traditionally interpreted as a proof for the belated early modern nature of Geo Milev's project, born by the undeveloped theatre situation in Bulgaria. However, its objective consideration in the light of the actual self-placement of the author within the expressionist movement offers another interpretation. The year, when the study appears is a time of starting consolidation of both main expressionist styles – *Schrei* and *Geist* and the formulating of the ideology of the late *emblematic* (or *Ih*) style. Characteristic of this late expressionist style is the enlargement of the circle of staged expressionist plays by complementing it and at the end by replacing it with universal works from the world dramaturgy. Thus the offered repertoire list is, first of all, a manifestation of the common moods in the theatre expressionism in the first years after the war. Undoubtedly, an important role in its formation plays, as well, the fact that Bulgarian theatre and Bulgarian public are not acquainted with the newly created expressionist drama and do not have their experience in it. It could be said that this period in the development of the European radical avant-garde theatre turns out to be, in a peculiar way, appropriate for the Bulgarian theatre situation.

Although the choice of the mentioned four texts reflects the subjective staging intentions of an avant-garde director, it contains also a more general concept for the necessary translated dramas in the repertoire of the Bulgarian theatre. According to this concept, it should comprise only high dramaturgy – classical and modern. The classical is presented by the Greek tragedy and the emblematic Shakespearean tragedy, and the modern – by the early modern naturalistic and symbolist drama.

Almost all titles, offered in the study, repeat already affirmed repertoire trends in the Bulgarian theatre in the period from the beginning of XX century to the interwar time. These are the years when in the country for the first time the Shakespearean “Hamlet” (1914) has been staged and the early modern drama has been introduced (Ibsen, the naturalists, Maeterlinck). The new thing in Geo Milev's repertoire project is the declared intention for interpretation of the plays in the spirit of a radical avant-garde style as the expressionism. The real innovation here is that this interpretation can only be accomplished by a director. Otherwise, striving to renovate the contemporary Bulgarian theatre through one of the radical modern movements of that time, Geo Milev introduces in Bulgaria the view for the own director's reading of significant texts. This is also his main contribution to the following development of the stage practice between the wars.

Right after printing his manifesto text Geo Milev begins consistent efforts for its realization. He is trying to accomplish the practical application of his project in the concrete conditions of the theatre life in Bulgaria with plays not included in its program repertoire. The few translated texts staged by him after the appearance of his study could easily be defined as natural enlargement and as giving the necessary concreteness of this repertoire in local conditions. In the year 1920 he stages Strindberg's *Dance of Death* in the National theatre that remains also his sole spectacle on this stage, in 1923 – *Masses Man* by Ernst Toller in theatre “Renaissance” and in the period from October 1923 to January 1924 – *Elektra* by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. The last performance is completed

but due to disagreement of part of the actors with his extremely radical aesthetics and upon a decision of the Artistic council of the National theatre, it is not allowed to official premiere. In short, as far as there is a lack of both acting skills and receptive dispositions in the main part of the audience in Bulgaria in that period in the field of the expressionistic stage language, Geo Milev undertakes their step-by-step building through dramaturgical texts, standing on the borderline between early modern drama and expressionism. It is not a chance that he stages the emblematic expressionist text of Ernst Toller as an experiment in theatre “Renaissance”. In this sense *Dance of Death* of the “father” of the expressionists Strindberg is a program title in the first preparatory action of his project that remains anyway unfinished.

It is well known from the memoir and research literature about Geo Milev that besides the categorical desire to become director and his study *Theatre Art* in March 1919 after medical treatment in Germany (during it he becomes close with the circle around *Der Sturm*) he returns in Bulgaria with many dramaturgical texts, as well, and according to him, the renewal of the Bulgarian stage should start with them. However, it is a less known fact that the main place among these texts is occupied by Strindberg’s dramas and especially the works of the writer from his last period announced by Geo Milev himself as a beginning of “the perfect modern drama” [Milev, 1942]³: *Dance of Death*, *The Ghost Sonata*, *Dream Mystery (Dream Play)*, *To Damascus*. Even more – in his theoretical and critical articles from this period Geo Milev often points out Strindberg as the first author with whom the reformation of the Bulgarian stage should start. For the realization of this program recommendation he makes also quite a concrete first step – starts preparing a collection *Selected Dramas* by Strindberg for publishing. He manages to translate and publish in the family publishing house *Vežni* two plays – *Intoxication* (with an introduction, presenting his understanding of the late Strindberg as a direct predecessor and forefather of the expressionist drama) and *Dance of Death*. From a letter [Literaturen arhiv, 1964]⁴ to his father Milyo Kasabov it becomes obvious that Geo Milev makes the translation of the second play during (and probably for the needs of) his work on its staging in the National theatre. This means that he is invited to direct a text by Strindberg already foreseen and included in the repertoire created by the management of the theatre. The deduced conclusion is confirmed by the fact that the spectacle is realized after the prepared in advance translation by Ivan Maleev. Undoubtedly although, the active introduction by Geo Milev of Strindberg’s dramaturgy (that had not been staged till then on a professional scene in Bulgaria) in its capacity of one of the tools for reconstruction of theatre in the cultural debate of that period plays a decisive role both for the inclusion of the play *Dance of Death* in the National theatre repertoire and for the invitation to him to realize it.

³ Milev, Geo. 1942. Художествена диагноза на българския театър (статия четвърта) [Hudojestvena diagnoza na bulgarskia teatar (statija chetvurta)]. In: Milev, Geo. 1942. Театрално изкуство. Смигуу, самуу и крумуку [Teatralno izkustvo. Studii, stati-ikritiki]. 21-24. Sofia: Nov Svyat.

⁴ *Literaturen arhiv*. 1964. Том 2: Гео Милев. [Literaturen arhiv. Том 2: Geo Milev]. Sofia: BAN, p. 352

“The thought for transfiguration of the actor” is the main thing with which “Geo Milev came out on debut” – announces categorically Nikolay Raynov in his article for the premiere of *Dance of Death* on the pages of the avant-garde magazine *Veznc* [Raynov, 1919]⁵ published by the director himself. The tracing, as well, of several other key moments in it – the conclusion that “for becoming a theatre piece the play should pass through the hands of the director, today the director is stronger than the playwright”; that the role of the actor should be built by the director and this requires quite “precise work” – “as if the tune should be given by atuning fork, the pauses should be measured with a clock, the simple modulations should be notated, the steps should be measured with the necessary rhythm” and that the National theatre should turn towards “the new drama, that requires new directing”, because it wouldn’t be able “to bring in the new that has already imposed itself in music, and in painting, and in poetry, if it drags on the worn out roads” [Raynov, 1919]⁶– unequivocally points out that in his debut performance Geo Milev has been striving to apply in practice the theoretical concepts of his program study.

The impressions of Nikolay Raynov presented in the aforementioned large citation offer rich, multidirectional and provocative material for analysis. Here, we are going to mark only their unifying leading idea. It consists in Geo Milev’s belief (demonstrated unambiguously in the spectacle as it becomes obvious in the review) that occupying the position of a director of the National theatre is not simply a desired personal realization, but a messiah’s duty. This duty consists in accomplishment of the radical reforming of the existing till that moment conventional model of actor’s performance and as a result of the receptive attitudes of the audience. The achievement of the new kind of actor’s performance would be the factor for overcoming “the crisis” of the National theatre and it is based on building of one or other *rhythm* of the role and of the performance through especially found by the director “measurements” of the intonations, pauses, gestures and the elements of space. Otherwise, the intention of Geo Milev as a director to make the National theatre’ troupe to formulate and speak to its audience in a sensuous theatre language produced and perceived, first and foremost, by the human body and not by his mind, is an unequivocal avant-garde gesture. A gesture in which “the old” National theatre should be killed and resurrected (if we use the key notions of the expressionists) as adequate to its time i.e. as an avant-garde theatre.

The concrete strategies and techniques, used by Geo Milev in his attempt to create the spectacle *Dance of Death* as a performance realized by the rhythm, direct to the Geist-expressionist theatre style especially *Santa Susanna* type by Lothar Schreyer in the *School of arts* of the circle *Der Sturm*[Nikolova, 2000,

⁵ Raynov, Nikolay.1919. „Мъртвешки танц“ на наша сцена. [“Murtveshki tantz” na nasha scena] *Vezni*, 1919, № 6

⁶ Raynov, Nikolay.1919. „Мъртвешки танц“ на наша сцена. [“Murtveshki tantz” na nasha scena; *Vezni*, 1919, № 6

Kuhnst, 1997].⁷ They could be reconstructed comparatively distinctly through the detailed positive and negative reviews for the production and from the preserved director's plan and the working printed copy of the Geo Milev's play. Most generally seen these strategies and techniques concern the three main zones of the spectacle – the *mise-en-scene* and the plastic presence of the actors, the sound score of speech and the scenery. Staves with notes are drawn against the characters' cues in the empty fields of the director's copy and all the reviews, without exception, talk about the unusual precisely "measured" musically-spoken way of pronunciation of the words by the performers and about their strange ("wooden") postures. It is not difficult to recognize the director's effort to create a radically new kind of performance transforming the actor into a "sound-speaker" and "bearer of his mask (of meaning)" [**Kuhnst, 1997**]⁸, characteristic of the *Geist-expressionist* trends in the German theatre of the same period.

The specific moment here is that Geo Milev tries to realize his unconditionally avant-garde intention through the expressionistic interpretation of an early modern text, as actually is *Dance of Death*. Although this Strindberg's drama is written in 1900 and belongs to his late works (after his stay in the psychiatric clinic from 1894 to 1897) it speaks out his usual theme for libido-motivated human behaviour and the logic of existence in his ideographic and compositional model of his early manifesto dramas such as *The Father* and *Miss Julie*. This is to say that the play is built by means of strong *overstraining* of the key discoveries of the naturalists, complemented by some of the ideas and visions of the symbolist theatre (the isolated home in a world-desert, the leitmotif replicas, the existential loneliness of the characters). In other words – *Dance of Death* is a border text as far as it unifies the naturalism and symbolism in a subsequent exaggerated mode, a presentiment of the expressionist (and therefore avant-garde) meanings and forms in drama and performance.

The contradiction between the radicalism of Geo Milev's intention as a director and the transitional, step-by-step reforming, let's define it like that, nature of the chosen dramaturgical material, discovers a definite avant-garde gesture, committed in the only possible way for the Bulgarian conditions then (i.e. the lack of naturally and well developed in the previous decades early modern theatre manifestations and habits), simultaneously compensating and re-birthing. This strategy for the additional building of the Bulgarian theatre as early modern in parallel with the purposeful attempts for its inclusion in the up-to-date avant-garde quests of the European stage remain the most substantial reverberation of his reformatory project during the following two decades till the end of the interwar period.

⁷ See also: **Nikolova, Kamelia 2000**. *Експресионистичният театър и езикът на мялото* [Expresionistichniyat theater i ezikut na tyaloto]. Sofia: University Publishing House "St Kliment Ohridski"; **Kuhnst, D.E. 1997**. *German Expressionist Theatre. The actor and the Stage*. Cambridge University Press

⁸ **Kuhnst, D.E. 1997**. *German Expressionist Theatre. The actor and the Stage*. Cambridge University Press, p. 139-154.

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