

“Poor Bip is crying silently”: The tears of the Bulgarian mim

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Abstract. The article discusses some of the main problems of Bulgarian pantomime against the background of its short historical development in Bulgaria - problems such as the need for an institution of silent art, socio-cultural situation in Bulgaria, reflected in this art, as well as lack of traditions and sufficiently prepared for this purpose professionals in modern pantomime to establish a representative and influential movement to promote it. The work of the Bulgarian mimes until the end of the 20th century left a deep trace in the development of theatrical art. After the political changes in the late 1980s and in the context of the complicated transition in Bulgarian society, the state of the Bulgarian pantomime began to change. Pantomime has become less present in theatrical life in Bulgaria as a standalone art. It has been modified and transferred to other more contemporary theatrical forms and has often been marginalized due to the introduction of new theatrical trends since the beginning of the 21st century.

Keywords: pantomime, the silent art, Bulgarian theatrical stage, Bulgarian pantomime, the period of Transition

*Бедният Биб.
Няма дом,
думи си няма даже.
Плаче бедният Биб
мълчешком.
Нищо не може
да каже.*

Poor Bip.
He has no home,
he even has no words.
Poor Bip is crying
silently.
He can say nothing.
(Hanchev 1961, 104)

This is how, in his poem dedicated to the great French mime artist Marcel Marceau, Veselin Hanchev describes the white-faced clown with a striped shirt and a worn-out beret, a true embodiment of the fragile human being. When Marceau created his Bip the Clown and started telling Bip's numerous comic and tragic stories, he relied only on the language of his body and the audience's capacity to play with its imagination, which precisely comprises the magic of the miracle, called *pantomime*.

The present article considers some of the main problems of Bulgarian pantomime against the background of its short historical development as an independent art form - a period that has begun a little over half a century ago. An art whose nonverbal codes of communication can speak more than a thousand words, because it is the magic created by the movement of the human body, by gestures and mimics, that sets in motion the imagination of the audience and makes it an active participant in the miracle happening on the stage.

The discussed questions could be systematized and differentiated in two main periods. The first one covers the years from the appearance of pantomime on the Bulgarian theatrical stage as an independent art form during the 1960s to the political changes of the last decade of the 20th century, and the second one - the years after the changes at the end of the 20th century to the beginning of the 2020s.

The information sources that can be analysed and used in the reconstruction of a clearer and more comprehensive picture of the discussed problems are individual journalistic articles, interviews in the press and on websites, appearances on TV and radio, video material on the YouTube channel, memoirs, personal directorial and acting experience in nonverbal performances, meetings and discussions with colleagues, personal professionally motivated research. Most of these are subjective, hard to access as they were removed from the web space at some point or wanting from a factological point of view. Two little-known and rarely used sources are the documentary films about the *Dvizhenie* [Movement] Theatre, that shed light on the development and the problems of the pantomime theatre in Bulgaria.

There are a number of definitions of the silent art, but I would prefer those of them (Żywiczyński, Wacewicz, Sibierska 2018, 307) which maximally expand the boundaries of the pantomime as a communicative kind that is nonverbal, mimetic; unconventional and motivated; multimodal (above all visually); improvisational; uses the entire body; is communicatively and semantically complex; open and universal. In this sense, pantomime is a “bodily mimetic communication” (Zlatev 2008, 137-151; Zlatev 2014, 3-29).

Pantomime appeared in Bulgaria as an independent art form a little over half a century ago when in the 1960s Prof. Vasil Indzhev accidentally saw Marcel Marceau’s films at a closed film screening in the then “Actor’s House”. “I went in with impudence and left in a state of shock”, he said and vowed to make everything possible to introduce pantomime to the Bulgarian stage. He managed to borrow the film reels from the French embassy for a week and started to study intensively the language of modern pantomime¹ (Indzhev 1977, 91; see Indzhev 1987; Indzhev 1998).

The skepticism towards the silent art did not discourage Indzhev and he accepted the invitation to direct the gesture-mimic theatre group at the Bulgarian Union of the Deaf. It turned out that pantomime had been part of the cultural life of people with impaired hearing well before the period.

¹ Report on Vasil Indzhev on the programme *It is said*, Edita Group production company, the year of the broadcast is not specified in the video, personal digital archive, the source has been removed from the webpage.

Thus, the idea appeared for the then *Krastyo Sarafov* Higher Institute for Theatre Art to enroll a group of boys and girls with impaired hearing who were to be taught in a specialized programme in acting for pantomime theatre. A competition was held, eight candidates were selected who after their successful graduation became the first deaf mimes with a higher education training (Indzhev 1998, 8).

What in those years was of extreme importance was the exchange of experience precisely with the leading international pantomime artists. In 1969 the First International Pantomime Festival was held in Prague, where V. Indzhev met Marcel Marceau, Samy Molcho, Ladislav Fialka, Jacques Lecoq, Henryk Tomaszewski, Miklosh Kölö and other prominent figures of the silent art. Two years later he specialized in “pantomime” with Jacques Lecoq in Paris. He put on a number of pantomime performances in Bulgaria such as *Familiar Stories* (director V. Indzhev), *The Girl is Leaving* (director V. Indzhev), *The Devil's Tail* (director V. Indzhev) and many others that were played in various theatres around the country and whose cast consisted mainly of actors who had graduated the classes of the specialty “Acting for dramatic theater” as well as actors of the *Pantomime Studio* at the *Salza i Smyah* [*Tear and Laughter*] Theatre. At that time, there were no specialized classes in pantomime in any of the Bulgarian institutions of higher education. Vasil Indzhev worked as a director till 1982 when the first separate class in pantomime was enrolled at *Krastyo Sarafov* National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts (Natsionalna akademiya za teatralno i filmovo izkustvo “Krastyo Sarafov”, or NATFIZ) with Milcho Milchev, Alexander Iliev and Alexandra Hong as lecturers. Until that moment pantomime was included as an additional discipline in the curriculum of the students in acting and directing for drama and puppet theatre (Indzhev 1998, 81-105). Since this day on, between 10 and 15 professional mimes graduate the Academy every two years. But where could they find their vocation and professional realization?

Compared to other European countries, Bulgarian theatre was introduced to pantomime, to its specific characteristics and problems relatively late. That, to a certain extent, explains the lack of traditions and understanding it faced in the first years of its appearance.

The development of Bulgarian pantomime in the 1970s and 1980s was a peculiar cultural phenomenon. The first instances of successful pantomime performances on the professional stage started to appear during that period. The socio-cultural circumstances at the time and the progressive liberalization of the spiritual sphere and of the scenic arts in the country allowed for the introduction of that new art form. *Yordan Yovkov* Drama Theatre in Tolbukhin (now Dobrich) performed the pantomime show *Familiar Stories* (director V. Indzhev); Theatre 199 in Sofia - *Grotesques* (études); Velyo Goranov played in *A Mime Speaks* at *Georgi Kirkov* Drama Theatre in Pleven. The following year *Four of Masks* (director A. Angelov) was performed at *Konstantin Kisimov* Drama and Music Theatre in Veliko Tarnovo. In 1976, *The Boy's Dream* (director V. Indzhev) was put on at the State Puppet Theatre - Shumen. The listed performances had their weaknesses and merits but were a good start for Bulgarian pantomime (Indzhev 1977, 101; see Gadzhev 1975).

The rapid expansion of the pantomime network in the country led to the organization of festivals and contests, theatre pantomime workshops, national and international visits, performance invitations to renowned foreign mimes and groups. Certainly, the pantomime improvement and development did not proceed unproblematically. Among the questions that started to be discussed were the lack of qualified directors and pedagogues, the lack of literature on pantomime and of professional research of its theory and practice, the lack of adequately trained artists - mime actors, the turnover in the groups and of their artistic directors, the lack of necessary equipment, of training and rehearsal facilities, etc. (Indzhev 1998, 29-31). During the period, the pantomime shows were performed on the stages of the country's drama and puppet theatres. Pantomime was also one of the components of the developing circus and variety art in Bulgaria.

A new phase in the professional pantomime art in Bulgaria started in 1979, when Vasil Indzhev, Velyo Goranov and Milcho Milchev created the first Bulgarian pantomime formation - the *Pantomime Studio* at *Salza i Smyah* Theatre - with the assistance of Stoycho Mazgalov, the then chief manager and artistic director of the theatre, who had invited Velyo Goranov to work there for a certain period. In a while, V. Goranov presented the director with a detailed plan for the creation of the *Pantomime Studio* and received a positive answer.²

Velyo Goranov is one of the most remarkable mimes not only on the Bulgarian but on the international stage too, the man who a few years later created the first home of pantomime in Bulgaria. It is a curious fact that in those first years of pantomime in Bulgaria, it was a part of the cultural life not only of Western Europe but of the Balkans as well. In 1973, a year before the premiere of *A Mime Speaks* (Fig. 1) at the Pleven Theatre, Velyo Goranov read in an article published in the *Vecherni Novini* (Evening News) newspaper that Monodrama and Pantomime Festival was being held in Belgrade. The Festival's Committee liked the etudes he proposed, and he was allowed to perform them in Belgrade. There Velyo Goranov was announced as a "student of Marcel Marceau". Which, however, was not true. Velyo Goranov graduated Drama theatre acting at the then *Krastyo Sarafov* Higher Institute for Theatre Art in prof. Boyan Danovski's class (Goranov 2018). He began his career as a drama actor but became the first Bulgarian mime. At the Pantomima and Mimodrama Festival in London in 1980 he was declared mime number one in the world (Goranov 2018).

In 1987, Velyo Goranov found a new home for the silent art creating the first pantomime theatre in Bulgaria - the *Dvizhenie* Theatre. The actor himself and the people who supported the cause tell about the process of its creation and functioning in more detail in their personal memories. The memories, the stories and the personal experiences were documented in two films dedicated to

² Interview with Velyo Goranov, hosted in Efir 2 studio, the year of the broadcast is not specified in the video, personal digital archive, the source has been removed from the web-space.



Fig. 1. Velyo Goranov, *A Mime Speaks* (Sokolova 2012)

the *Dvizhenie Theatre - Movement and Trust*, 1989, written and directed by Marin Dimitrov and *Dvizhenie Theatre*, 1988, directed by Ivan Hlebarov. Those contain curious facts and interesting details of the whole complicated road to the building of the institution.

Velyo Goranov shares that their initial goal was to create a state theatre, which was impossible without the “blessing” of the Council of Ministers. The existing *Pantomime Studio* started to impede the operation of the *Salza i Smyah Theatre*, where it was housed at the time. The theatre was finding it difficult to meet the increasing needs and ambitions of the developing pantomime troupe (Teatar Dvizhenie 2012).

One of the important steps in the history of the creation of the new theatre was the mime recruitment contest. The selection was hard for the committee. Many actors were sifted so that a stable core could be formed that could secure the progress of the newly created *Dvizhenie Theatre*. Apart from the physical qualities and the acting talent, the attitude of the candidates to the silent art proved to be of utmost importance too. Nicolay Sotirov, Vasko Pavlov, Maya Andonova, Zdravko Spasov, etc., were among of the best and most memorable theatre actors. A great part of them had been actors at the

Pantomime Studio. The manager was Gertruda Lukanova, and the principal director - Velyo Goranov.

Hard was the road to the creation of the new theatre. The conditions were extremely adverse. The rehearsals of the first show *Švejk* were held on temporary premises such as the sports hall of the 51st School and the hall of the *Sredets* Community Centre. The constant relocation of the actors started to become exhausting for them. There was a lack of basic aesthetic theatrical conditions of the rehearsal and staging processes. There were many problems with the ateliers, the equipment, the costumes. To a certain extent, the theatre turned out to be a burden for the Municipality, which did not show a real interest in the development of Bulgarian pantomime. The Union of Bulgarian Actors wanted to include pantomime into the “Variety art” rather than the “Theatre” division, which the troupe found incomprehensible and somewhat offensive. V. Goranov and G. Lukanova continued to work hard. They, however, spent most of their energy on administrative instead of artistic tasks. Under those conditions, the premiere of *Švejk*, directed by Velyo Goranov took place on 1 December 1988 (Teatar Dvizhenie 2012). For years, the mime had tried to realize his dream of creating the *Dvizhenie Theatre*. He had been searching for the proper form of that theatre for a long time.

All those difficulties gave rise to the idea to build a chapiteau as a separate theatre building, though not a stationary one, to organize the transportation and everything else that a theatre needed. In 1988, the chapiteau was erected at the site now occupied by the Hilton Sofia Hotel. The economic structure of the theatre proved to be far-sighted. It was privately funded but had the status of a state theatre. Its model was different from that of other theatres. The bureaucratic machine had been reduced to a minimum. The team believed that the future of the theatre had been secured (Dvizhenie i upovanie 2013).

That future, however, turned out to be short-lived. Sources differ in their accounts of the year of and the reasons for the closing down of the *Dvizhenie Theatre*. According to some that year was 1994 (Mariyanska 2017), according to others - 1997 (Kotseva 2001), while others think it was 1999, when the building of the Hilton Sofia Hotel began (Sokolova 2012). According to Alexander Iliev’s personal memories, the process of closing the theatre down started in 1993, and at the end of January 1994 it was officially shut down and sold off.³ It was the transitional period mainly that killed the theatre, but it is unclear whether the reasons were political or financial. At that time, many attempts at establishing private theatrical formations unsurprisingly failed, sunk by the complex processes of the transitional period. Thus, the years-long attempt to create and maintain a separate home for Bulgarian pantomime was trampled and dumped. In order to avoid becoming “homeless”, many of the best Bulgarian mimes made the hard choice of leaving Bulgaria and searching for their realization abroad.

Despite the unhappy fate of the *Dvizhenie Theatre*, several pantomime troupes were formed in 1990s that contributed a lot to the progress of Bulgarian

³ Author’s conversation with Prof. Alexander Iliev, PhD.

pantomime. They had no home of their own, but a number of theatres provided them with one. Such were the Studio pantomime theatre at the *Sredets* House of Culture - Sofia; *Mime Studio Alba* - Sofia; the *Pantomime* Formation at the National Student House; the Representative Pantomime Theatre at the Trade Union House of Culture "Emanuil Manolov" - Gabrovo; the *Pantomime Studio* - Russe; the *Pantdance* Theatre - Sofia; *Balagan* Mime Theatre - Sofia; *Sivina* theatrical troupe - Plovdiv; *Zhar* [Embers] Theatre - Sofia, etc. Of all the ones mentioned, only *Zhar* Theatre functions at present. It is a private professional formation, founded in 1993 by the director-mimographs (experts in pantomime and nonverbal theatre) Elena Pap and Plamen Pap, both MA graduates in pantomime at the *Krastyo Sarafov* National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts. The formation is of an open character, i.e., the theatre has no permanent troupe, rather an artistic team of the actors needed is formed for every new project. *Zhar* Theatre works in the fields of pantomime, nonverbal theatrical communication, slapstick (clowing), mask theatre, dance, folklore theatrical forms, street theatre, plastic improvisation. It also stages fire shows, which is the reason most of its repertoire is performed outdoors (Indzhev 1998, 172-200).

One of the most significant figures in the development and survival of Bulgarian pantomime is precisely the director of the then *Mime Studio Alba* - Prof. Alexander Iliev, PhD. The studio existed from 1985 till 1992, with a professional status since 1988. The theatre used the stage at the *Slavyanska Beseda* Community Centre. In 1999 Prof. Iliev created *Theatre Dreams Studio*, a professional nonverbal theatre that exists to this day. Again, it has no stage of its own and uses the facilities of various theatres, institutions, and community centres in Bulgaria and abroad as well as streets and squares. Prof. Al. Iliev is one of the few currently practicing mimes, pantomime directors and scriptwriters, who also stages a number of pantomime shows, has performed a pantomime show on Mount Everest (*Mime 19*), and was included in the Guinness World Records in 1992 - for his 24-hour uninterrupted pantomime performance with no breaks and plot repetition (Balgarski aktyor-mim 2005; Aktyorat Alexander Iliev 2005; Mimat Alexander Iliev 2005; Teatar 199 predstavya 2011); broke his record in 1994 (25-hour performance) and again in 2005 (25.5-hour performance) (Teatar 199 predstavya 2011). He has been given numerous pantomime awards: The Great award for pantomime marathon - Münster 2006; the Grand Prize for his pantomime performance at the Festival of Pantomime in Verona (Italy) 1992; the Grand Prize at the Festival of University Theatres - Padua (Italy) 1989 (Teatar 199 predstavya 2011). Since 1984 he has been teaching pantomime, and since 1992 he has been a class supervisor in pantomime at *Krastyo Sarafov* National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts.⁴ Apart from the professional stage, Prof. Alexander Iliev has devoted considerable efforts to the pantomime work on the stage of the Training Theatre, where he has put on a number of graduate shows with his students, one of which was the pantomime performance *Orient Express* (2018) (*Orient Express* 2018).

In the 1990s Bulgarian pantomime saw the appearance of another actor who would become one of the most famous mimes in the world - Guerassim

⁴ Information collected from author's personal conversations with Prof. Alexander Iliev.



Fig. 2. Guerassim Dishliev, *Monologue with a Suitcase* (Detev, Atanasova 2017)

Dishliev. In many of interviews and personal conversations the actor has stated that it has not been him that has chosen pantomime but rather pantomime has chosen him. That happened at the *Slavyanska Beseda* Community Centre, where in 1989 he watched a pantomime performance for the first time. He left his home in Svilengrad, spent some time with *Mime Studio Alba*, then studied at the then *Krastyo Sarafov* Higher Institute for Theatre Art and finally packed his suitcase and went to “drink from the source” in Paris, at Marcel Marceau’s school. When he graduated, Marceau invited him to become his assistant. Since then, Guerassim Dishliev seems to have always been on the road, between Svilengrad and Paris, between Paris and Svilengrad. His two authored shows *Monologue with a Suitcase* (Fig. 2) and *Not in His Place* have been performed on many stages around the world. He was even on tours in Africa and South America. In 2014, Guerassim Dishliev toured Europe on a bicycle, on the road from Paris to Svilengrad, making stops at 34 settlements where he performed *Monologue with a Suitcase*. Thus, he fulfilled his dream of a travelling show. In 2019, he became the first Bulgarian to have been cast at the Cirque du Soleil (Tsenova 2018).⁵

After that brief and schematic presentation of the mimes who left the deepest and most indelible marks in the history of Bulgarian pantomime and of their

⁵ Information personally collected from meetings and conversations with Guerassim Dishliev.

work in the field of the silent art, we can turn to the 21st century to trace the fate of the Bulgarian mime during the last 20 years.

The enrollment of students in pantomime at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts continues in full swing. The specialty has become “exotic” for the candidates, who have been attracted by its international character and by the opportunities abroad it could provide them with after graduation.

In 2008, following V. Indzhev’s experience, another group of students with impaired hearing graduated in Assoc. Prof. Alexandra Hong’s class. Part of them has found post-graduate artistic realization, which happened thanks to the only Bulgarian professional theatre of people with impaired hearing - the *Mime-Art Theatre* at the “Silence” Association. On 25 September 2019, *Silent Movies’ Smiles*, a pantomime show on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the creation of the *Mime-Art Theatre* was performed on the stage of the NATFIZ Training Drama Theatre. The show was written and directed by Prof. Alexander Iliev. The mimes with impaired hearing proved that gestures, mimics, and the movement of the body in space are sufficient to create the magic of the theatre. The productions realized by the theatre have been over 14 and have been mostly pantomime ones. Nowadays, the troupe gets tour invitations by various theatres around the country and when it is not on tour, its performances and rehearsals take place in the *Mime-Art Theatre* hall at the “Silence” Association in Sofia, which has been specially renovated and equipped for that purpose (Teatar Mim-Art 2019).⁶

Assoc. Prof. Alexandra Hong is one of the current lecturers at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts in the Department of “Pantomime”. She graduated in “Acting” at the Russian State University of Cinematography - Moscow (Russia). After graduation, she worked as an actress at the *Dvizhenie Theatre* and was one of the first lecturers in pantomime at the Theatre Academy. Her theatrical experiments from the beginning of the 21st century were mainly in the sphere of the mimodrama on the stage of the NATFIZ Training Drama Theatre and included *A School for Happiness* (class of 2010), *Carmen’s Smile* (class of 2012), *A Requiem of Time* (class of 2016), etc.

Another lecturer to have invested efforts primarily in the field of pantomime at the Training Theatre is Asst. Prof. Margarita Bozhilova, PhD, who graduated in “Acting for drama theatre” at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts but has been a guest lecturer in the major “Theatre of Movement - Pantomime” since 2009. In 2019, she put on the graduation performance *Bulgarian Mystery* with graduates from Assoc. Prof. Alexandra Hong’s class that was shown on the stage of the NATFIZ Training Drama Theatre (Balgarska misteriya 2020).

⁶ Information collected from personal conversations with Darinka Borisova - a gesture mime interpreter and co-founder of the social enterprise Deaf Kids Power, Ashod Derandonyan - a representative of the hearing-impaired community, founder of the “Listen” Foundation, and Nuri Yasharov - an actor with impaired hearing from the *Mime-Art Theatre*, graduated in pantomime in the class of 2008, the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts.

Unfortunately, Velyo Goranov ceased to perform for a long period of time. In 2011/2012, he returned with one final attempt by bringing back to life *A Mime Speaks* on the stage of the *Salza i Smyah* Theatre (Fig. 1). The performance was shown during the theatre season but then disappeared from the playbills of Bulgarian Theatre. In an interview on the BNT 1 show “The day begins with culture”, on the occasion of the return of the performance on the stage, Velyo Goranov shared yet again his concerns about the future of the Bulgarian mime. After the steep road he had had to travel in his career, he expressed his conviction that pantomime had its place on the Bulgarian theatre stage rather than only in the street.⁷

Alexander Iliev’s pantomime one-man show *Pierrot* at Theatre 199 in Sofia (Fig. 3) premiered in 2011 and was described as a “virtuoso pantomime performance”. The synthesis between the Italian *commedia dell’arte* and the French farce and city square tradition gave birth to a new genre. The popularity of that truly unique genre jumped over the footlights of the Théâtre des Funambules (The Theatre of the Tightrope-Walkers) of the great mime Jean-Gaspard-Baptiste Deburau and managed to conquer the world. Alexander Iliev presented it in its best version on the Bulgarian stage (Pancheva, 2011). *Pierrot*, however, did not stay for long on the stage of the theatre not due to lack of artistic virtues but due to lack of advertising for the show on the part of the theatre. Thus, from a certain point the theatre hall remained empty and the show became unprofitable. It is one of the few classical pantomime performances that can be seen nowadays. But it is not on the regular theatre playbill. Alexander Iliev performs the show on various stages in Bulgaria and abroad during visits, festivals, tours, etc.⁸

Some of the more recent cursory attempts of professional Bulgarian mimes to find a stage and a home for their shows should also be mentioned. In 2018, Tsvetan Naydenov and Svetoslav Athanassov, both graduates of the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts in Prof. Alexander Iliev’s class, presented on *Salza i Smyah* open stage the premiere of their nonverbal performance which they called “action animation pantomime” - *Shashavtsi*:⁹ *The Treasure* (Shashavtsi: Sakrovishteto 2018). The show was previously performed a few times at the “Stage-club” of the Bulgarian Army Theatre, and five more times at *Salza i Smyah* Theatre. Due to lack of audience and empty theatre halls the show was cancelled. And so more professional mimes decided to specialize in a different area since they have no opportunities for realization with their art in Bulgaria.¹⁰ Bulgarian theatre critics did not comment these attempts; there were actually no critical reviews of any kind, as no theatre critics or theatre experts attended any of the shows.

⁷ Interview with Velyo Goranov, “The day begins with culture”, BNT 1, 2011, personal digital archive, the source has been removed from the webspace.

⁸ Information collected from author’s conversations with Prof. Alexander Iliev.

⁹ i.e. Crazy people.

¹⁰ Information collected from author’s conversations with Tsvetan Naydenov.



Fig. 3. *Pierrot*, author's performance of Alexander Iliev (Teatar 199 predstavya 2011)

In 2017 and 2018, Iva Lapatova and Yanita Kirova (the author of the present article), graduates of the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts, Assoc. Prof. Alexandra Hong's class, staged four pantomime shows: *Oblivion*, *The White Bip*, *The Funny Clinic of Dr. Coooco and Dr. Pippi* (Fig. 4), and *Clown's Advices and Recipes for Healthy Children*, the latter two of which were children's ones. The fate of the classic pantomime show *The White Bip* was paradigmatic. Finding a venue to be performed at was hard. Eventually, *Salza i Smyah* Theatre opened its doors again for the art of pantomime. But after a season of an almost empty auditorium the show was removed from the theatre programme. The fate of the other shows was similar, with the exception of the *Clown's Advices and Recipes for Healthy Children*, which is still performed in the children's wards at Sofia hospitals, kindergartens, and schools. It should be noted that *Salza i*



Fig. 4. *The Funny Clinic of Dr. Cocoo and Dr. Pippi*, author's performance of Yanita Kirova and Iva Lapatova (Photo: Beatris Bocheva)

Smyah Theatre is a stage that hosts outside productions but has no responsibility for advertising those and attracting audience. Thus, the visiting independent actors and formations need to take care of providing audience for their shows themselves.¹¹

In 2018, another independent show appeared - the one-man show *Circle of Life* (Kragovrat na zivota 2019) of Philip Donchev, an independent actor, who graduated the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts in Alexander Iliev's class of 2018. Philip said that the show had been performed twice in Serbia, once in North Macedonia, and once in Bulgaria and that he had not yet started to look for a venue for his production in the country but was about to (*Circle of Life* 2018).

At the end of 2019, the director Alexander Kalinov performed his show *Severe Case*, physical comedy theatre on the *Shipka Art Stage*. Alexander Kalinov is also a graduate of the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts, Prof. Alexander Iliev's class. In a personal conversation Alexander Kalinov

¹¹ Personal professional experience.

shared that finding a stage had been a challenge again since either the programmes had already been filled up and there had been no available dates for months ahead, or that the rent prices had been unaffordable for the team. Finally, he found a venue and at present the show is on and can be seen by the public.¹²

In conclusion, the present text clearly shows that up to the end of 1980s, i.e., before the beginning of the so-called “transition period”, Bulgarian pantomime was flourishing and developing rapidly regardless of the hurdles along its road. Pantomime shows were relatively often included in the programmes of Bulgarian theatres over the country. There was audience who could successfully decode the nonverbal messages of the shows. The auditoriums were full. Festivals and competitions were organized. A new higher education specialty in acting came into being. Many graduates in acting for dramatic theatre specialized in pantomime.

A number of pantomime formations were created as well as the only professional pantomime theatre in Bulgaria - the *Dvizhenie Theatre*. Despite the fact that it existed for less than a decade, it had a significant contribution to the development of Bulgarian pantomime. An important role for laying the foundations of the professional pantomime in Bulgaria was played by individual artists such as Vasil Indzhev, Velyo Goranov, and Alexander Iliev. The work of Bulgarian mimes until the end of the 20th century left a deep mark on the development of theatre art not only on the Bulgarian but also on the international stage.

After the political changes of the end of the 1980s and in the context of the complex transition of Bulgarian society, the state of Bulgarian pantomime underwent a number of transformations. There have been fewer emblematic shows and personalities, and pantomime’s presence in Bulgarian theatrical life has become ever rarer. The attempts at establishing pantomime theatres and formations such as the *Pantomime Studio*, *Dvizhenie Theatre* and *Mime Studio Alba*, and many others failed, casts have been getting reduced as is the pay of mimes, and the audience has started to move away from theatrical life mostly because of decreasing incomes. The requirement for mandatory allocation of directors and actors after graduation has been dropped. The trend of free-lance occupation and of actors leaving state theatres has been growing. The changes in theatre management and the attempt to transition the arts to market economy without reforms in the theatre system have brought about the collapse not only of pantomime but also of theatre as a whole. There is a constant search for sponsors, and the state has not taken the necessary course of action.

During the first decade of the 21st century pantomime took some small steps in the history of its development. The first professional theatre for actors with impaired hearing was established. Some formations such as *Zhar Theatre* and *Theatre Dreams* continued to develop successfully, despite the lack of facilities, the necessity of using outside stages, and the lack of funding.

¹² Information collected from an interview with Alexander Kalinov.

While in the last century visiting European mimes such as Marcel Marceau, Henryk Tomaszewski, Miklosh Kölö, and other prominent ones were regularly invited to Bulgarian festivals and competitions, in the beginning of the 21st century Bulgarian audience has much rarer opportunities to see such mimes, since fewer and fewer Bulgarian festivals select and invite purely pantomime shows. Instances of creative foreign visits can nevertheless be found. Among the guests of the third issue of the Black Box International Theatre and Dance Festival in 2009 were: Laurent Decolle, France, with the pantomime show *The Words of Silence* and the workshop *La Technique Marcel Marceau et La Technique Etienne Decroux*; Tarick Markovich, Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the pantomime one-man show *The Line*, etc. (Chernata kutiya 2009). In October 2019, the European Festival of Travelling Theatre in Slivnitsa invited the Czech mime Michal Hecht with his show *Old Masters' Pantomime* for the official opening of the festival (Evropeyskiyat festival 2019). In 2015, during *World Theatre in Sofia*, Jakop Ahlbom performed his show *Stichting pels*, which transfers the magic of silent films to the theatre stage (Viafest 2015). Most invitations have been sent mainly to the so-called troupes of experimental theatre, dance shows, and performances, in which pantomime may have been a component but which cannot be classified as independent pantomime art.

Another important instrument for the development of pantomime art in Bulgaria is finding effective forms and mechanisms for a closer contact with the audience, which are, for example, children's pantomime troupes and pantomime shows for children, children's workshops. In this way, Bulgarian audience will be stimulated to be interested in and to love pantomime since childhood so that the children who have been won over by the magic of that art can remain admirers of it as adults too. Unfortunately, the attempts in that direction have not been many. A specialty in "Pantomime" is taught at the National High School of Stage and Film Design in Plovdiv (NGSEI 2020; Chernata kutiya 2018). In 2010, Denitsa Gerginikova - who had graduated in Pantomime at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts, a course in modern dance techniques and choreography at the School for New Dance Development (SNDO), Amsterdam (Nederland) and a M.A. programme in Modern dance techniques at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts, Plovdiv - started to conduct classes in pantomime for children. She taught the classes at the *Pantarei Studio* at Plovdiv Institute of Culture until 2017 (Pantarei 2019). In 2015, Yanita Kirova and Iva Lapatova founded the children's school of pantomime "School for Happiness" at *Aleko Konstantinov 1897 Community Centre*, Sofia.

Contemporary theatre of the beginning of the 21st century shows a powerful trend towards syncretism of various forms of performance that include multimedia, installations, and audio recordings. To a certain extent, these pose a threat of marginalizing the actor's performance. Pantomime could bring back the lost spectacularity and the obliterated magic of the art of theatre and could revive the live actor's presence and the live plastic performance.

Bulgarian pantomime theatre has attained high European and international level. "We must not abandon it", Velyo Goranov pleads (Teatar Dvizhenie 2012). Words that echo and melt in time, and years later we have come to realize that if we had managed to preserve what we had had, we would not need a miracle and magic now, in order to rebuild it. And the Bulgarian mime would not be homeless, holding out his hat begging for alms...

...с черна тъга,
който мълчи така, че
още го чувам
и досега
как оглушително плаче.

...with a black sorrow,
who keeps silent in such a way that
I can still hear him
deafeningly cry.

(Hanchev 1961, 104)

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