

## On comedy, values and “bears” in Bulgaria

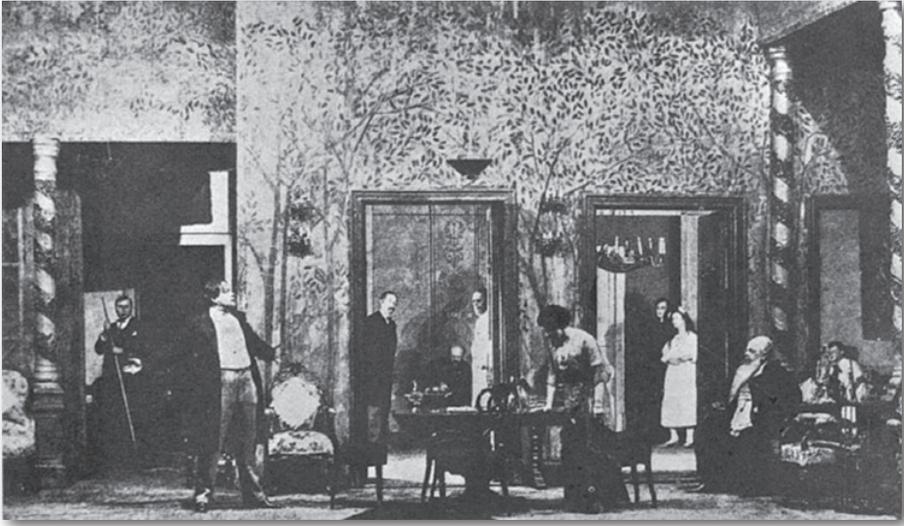
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**Abstract.** The text is part of a larger study of different aspects of the development of the comic theatre art in Bulgaria viewed in European context. The focus is put on the mass culture influence on the genre of comedy in contemporary theatre when comedians go out under the spotlights, not only in theatres but also in shows, in movies, on television, in front of their audiences, before the eyes of loudly applauding and laughing spectators. In the devilish struggle for the soul of the spectator at any price that is immanently embedded in the very nature of the actor, many of the comedians, no matter how talented, are misled by the loudly applauding laughing audiences that do not emit, but absorb. The actors sink into the black hole of uncritically consuming masses that desire them and expect their portion of fun, eagerly absorbing every word, smile, gesture. The artists forget their mission of spiritual leaders, who have to scourge the vices of society. On focus are the contemporary problems with the comedians who often begin overplaying. The latter ruins the so-called “bears”, which in most cases are wonderful and talented actors. The paper discusses the public attitudes and aesthetic values and tastes of our time. The many TV shows like “The Comedians” or a series of similar ones, unfortunately worldwide create audiences that are looking for cheap entertainments, audiences who paradoxically turn into “silent majorities”, as Baudrillard called them.

**Keywords:** cultural values, aesthetical tastes, “silent majorities”, comedians, theatre “bears”

This text is inspired by the title of an International conference in Bucharest, Romania, in 2017, organized by the International Association of Theatre Critics, where I had to make a presentation.

The title of the conference was ‘I Laugh, Therefore I Think. The Power of Comedy in the Twenty-First Century’. I found this expression rather challenging, as well as its inversion: ‘I think, therefore I laugh’. It is close to the cause-effect ideas of Stanislavski’s method of physical actions and Meyerhold’s biomechanics for actor’s training, that pertains to the developed by William James theory of emotion at the end of the 19th century, in which he paradoxically affirms that we do not run from a bear, because we are afraid, but we are afraid because we run from a bear (James 1884, 190).



**Fig. 1.** “The Cherry Orchard” by A. P. Chekhov, director K. S. Stanislavski, Moscow Art Theatre, 1904

Which is first? The mental operation or the bodily manifestations? I am not going to get deeper in this discussions from the very early years of the development of psychological science as far as the contemporary cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience have discovered that these processes are much more complicated (Niedenthal, Krauth-Gruber, Ric 2006).

Here important is that the phrase ‘I laugh, therefore I think’ in its core pertains to the theatre phenomenon. It is indicative that this is the name of a 90-minute one-man show of the Canadian comic actor and TV star Steve Patterson, from 2015 (Patterson 2015). The other sentence is a title of John Paulos’s book “I Think, Therefore I Laugh: The Flip Side of Philosophy” from 1985 (Paulos 1985) and outlines more philosophical aspects of these cognitive-emotion processes. The latter is a kind of paraphrase of the attributed to René Descartes sentence Cogito Argument from the 17th century - “Cogito, ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) (Descartes 1637). Thinking means doubting, or putting things in reconsideration. I also associate this phrase with the words of the famous Bulgarian satire writer Radoy Ralin: “The world lasts, because it laughs!” (Ralin 1972). I believe that I am and I can survive, because I think, and have the ability to laugh. I am sure that our existence, our living is impossible without laughing, without having sense of humour.

In this respect without trying to give definitions of “comic”, I will give one classical example from theatre history. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, writing his “The Cherry Orchard” (1904), labelled it as a “comedy” and “in places almost a farce”. Stanislavski did not agree. He wanted to stage the play as tragedy (Stanislavski 1984, 265-266). How it comes? Stanislavski was famous for being true to the author, especially to Chekhov (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 2.** “The Cherry Orchard” by A. P. Chekhov,  
director P. Brook, Bouffes du Nord Theatre, Paris, 1981

In 1981 Peter Brook made a performance of “The Cherry Orchard”. I had the chance to watch it 10 years later in Saint Petersburg, where I had my post-graduate studies. There Brook discussed the idea of comedy as perspective in an ingeniously simple way. He argued that if you are nostalgic for the past, this is drama, even tragedy, if you look into the future, and do not regret for the past, this is comedy (Eder 1981; Rich 1988). So to treat something as comic or as tragic depends on the point of view. The important thing here comes out to be that in the comedy there is a perspective of the optimist, which versus the one of the pessimist (Fig. 2).

There is enormous literature on the role of laughter and the power of comedy, about the fears from laughter, which could be therapeutic and liberating force, a weapon for social change. I will just mention the names of two great thinkers: Bergson (Bergson 1900) and Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1996). Bakhtin’s higher doctoral thesis “Rabelais and His World” (1940) was not just accidentally rejected. He was blamed for his almost anarchistic ideas about the carnivalesque and grotesque and the power of laughter.

In this context I would like to quote one phrase: “Any community that gets its laughs by pretending to be idiots will eventually be flooded by actual idiots, who mistakenly believe that they’re in good company”. This sentence also is attributed to Descartes (Burns 2001, 84). It puts an accent on something very important. The simple message is to be careful on what do we laugh, as far as idiocy reproduces idiocy.

I will make a short comment on idiocy. The word “idiot” is derived from the Greek *ιδιώτης*, *idiōtēs* (“person lacking professional skill”, “a private citizen”, “individual”), from *ἴδιος*, *idios* (“private”, “one’s own”) (Liddell-Scott-

Jones 1819). An idiot was someone who was characterized by self-centredness and concerned with private - as opposed to public affairs. Idiocy was the natural state of ignorance into which all were born and citizenship was cultivated through education (Parker 2005, 344). Over time, the term "idiot" shifted away from its original connotation of non-socialized and came to refer to individuals who are foolish.

The discussion about the possible spawning of foolishness by laughing without thinking could continue with the famous Shakespearean theme about the fool and the wise man, as it is said in Act 5, Scene 1 of "As You Like It": "the fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool" (Shakespeare 1559, 2373-2374). So the formula is to fool wisely.

Talking about fools and comedy I will quote Patris Pavis's comprehensive definition in his "Dictionary of Theatre": "Comedy is traditionally defined by three criteria that oppose it to its elder sister, tragedy. It has characters of humble origins and happy endings, and is intended to make the spectators laugh" (Pavis 1998, 63). Thus to have a comedy on a first place common people have to be shown on the stage. In this way certain collaborative mode of expression (States 1985, 170-180) is preconditioned. The latter might cause simple identification of the masses with the played characters, who are just like them and who radiate optimism and make them laugh.

And here comes the problem about the comic and the funny in the 21st century, which pertains to the values of the local and the global, the high and the low, the elite and the mass, the minorities and the majorities, the closed and the opened, the mass-media and the tiny border between popular art and kitsch.

In my paper I question the mass culture influence on the genre of comedy in contemporary theatre when our "idiots", our fools, our comedians go out under the spotlights, not only in theatres but also in shows, in movies, on television, in front of their audiences, before the eyes of loudly applauding them and laughing spectators. They become a necessary part of the community. In the devilish struggle for the soul of the spectator at any price, that is immanently embedded in the very nature of the actor, many of the comedians, no matter how talented, are misled by the loudly applauding laughing audiences that do not emit, but absorb. The actors sink into the black hole of uncritically consuming masses that desires them and expects their portion of fun, eagerly absorbing every word, smile, gesture. The artists forget their mission of spiritual leaders, who have to scourge the vices of society.

I would like to discuss these topical problems about the degrading processes in the conditions of free market economy, about the devolution and commercialization of the art of comedians, which in most cases are wonderful and talented actors. I want to focus on the public attitudes and aesthetic tastes of our time. The many popular TV shows like "The Comedians" in Bulgaria or a series of similar ones, unfortunately worldwide, create audiences that are looking for cheap entertainments who paradoxically turn into "silent majorities", as Baudrillard called them (Baudrillard 1983, 6).

Recently these actors in Bulgaria are named "bears". These are not William James's bears from which we run. Just the opposite these are "bears", who have to attract the silent majorities.



**Fig. 3.** The last bear Stanka provided to the Park for Dancing Bears in Belitza in 2004

Not long ago the President of the Union of the Bulgarian artist in an interview, while talking about a reform in theatre in Bulgaria, that intends to create open stages, when the troupes might apply for projects before the Ministry of Culture under state procurement, said: “And then the “bears” will come and will show another culture of the city, not only made by local artists. That’s the idea that’s going on” (Cholakova 2016).

Who are the “bears”?

There is a long lasting gypsy tradition in Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova specially. Under some sounds and music accompaniment the bear dances on two legs as a person to amuse the people in the streets and this is a way for the owner to earn some money. In the past the bears were part of the family. This has been forbidden already for years (Stoilov 2013) (Fig. 3).

In Romania and Moldova this is a Christmas or Eastern roma/gypsy tradition for celebrity and to expel the evil spirits (Marushiakova, Popov 1995). This does not exclude to collect some money. After the prohibition the so-called “ursari” started not to show real bears but to be dancing bears themselves, wearing real bear furs. Thus they keep the tradition alive (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** Urșii din Comănești – Bear dance, Moldova, 2015

Our president meant that the “bears” are the famous actors, who became popular from mainly comic TV shows or series. They have to be used and involved in theatre projects by the producers and theatre managers to attract audiences. Nowadays this scheme really works, fills and fools the theatres. The great problem is that the audiences, accustomed to watch kitschy TV shows start to like them, to look for them, to applaud them.

Here comes the question whether theatre is for mass tasteless entertainment or for making you think as well, for being the avant-garde of the cultural development of the society.

In Bulgaria we have two special words with pejorative connotation to indicate such popular forms of mass entertainment. These are *haltura* and *chalga*.

*Haltura* comes from the Russian verb *халтурить* (*halturit'*) (Tolkovoj slovar' Ushakova 1935-1940) - doing a low level and not professional show for money - may be from Greek *χαλκός* - copper coin.

*Chalga* comes from the Turkish word with Arabic root *çalgi* - to play music (Georgiev 2012, 54). This is a new decadent musical style that appeared in Bulgaria in the 1980s, where pop-folk music, usually from the Balkans, are adapted to the mass taste and performed by seductive, lecherous and scarcely dressed beauties, more rarely by talented gypsy or sexy male singers - as it is said: “Less talent - more flesh”.

Unfortunately recently “chalga” from more restricted musical style is growing in popular acting style. The theatre stages are flooded with “chalga” performances, played all over the country, where famous TV comic showmen and women entertain audiences with productions of unbearably low aesthetic quality.

Just the titles are already indicative for what could be expected from these in most of the cases *halturas*: “Bed for Three”, “Four in Bed”, “Could you Dismount my Wife”, “My Wife’s Husband”, “My Wife’s Name is Boris”, “The Henpecked”, “Marriage Madness”, “Pyjama pour six”, “Infidelities in Excess”, “A Jackson in Excess”, “Oh, What a Family”, “Love for Four”, “Love in the Madhouse”, “Crazy Night à la française”, “Couple, Foursome, Sex”, “Sex for a First Time”, “Sexy Laundry”, “Rare Dunces”, “Cranks”, “Freaks”, “Schmucks”, “Dinner for Schmucks”, “Kill the Idiots”, etc. (Programme 2017) (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** Popular comic star from TV shows Militsa Gladnishka in “Marriage Madness” by Al. Kozhuharov, after the play “Pyjama pour six” by Marc Camoletti, director Al. Kozhuharov, “Salza i Smyah”, 2017

Fortunately there are some performances with more measured and tiny sense of humour, paradoxically played by the same talented actors, who in other cases are doing complete *haltura*.

One emblematic example is the famous from TV shows comic actress Maria Sapundzhieva. In her repertoire there are almost 30 comic roles, which she



**Fig. 6.** Maria Sapundzhieva in “One Tango with Marquez”, director Boyko Bogdanov, 2015

plays around the country. Among these are “Santa Claus is Garbage”, “Evening Act”, “The Capital vs. We Won’t Pay”, “Enchanting Night”, “The Bulgarian Model”, “Casting for Men”, “Features of the Russian Love”, “Sunny Boys”, “Ticks”, “A Tango with Marquez”, “The Crazy Family”, “A Smoke from Unextinguished Cigarette”, “Sea Salt”, “Live from Another World”, “My Wife’s Husband” and others. Sometimes she is brilliant, but sometimes she starts to flirt with the audience and to overplay (Fig. 6, 7).

I am not against the mass or commercial productions. I am not against the “bears”, but they must not be unbearable! They have to oppose the silent majorities.

I believe that we, the theatre critics and theatre makers, have to help the silent majorities not to glut junk food for feeding their souls and minds. Laughter has to be above and not below the waist.



**Fig. 7.** Maria Sapundzhieva in “My Wife’s Husband” by Miro Gavran, director Marius Kurkinski, Drama Theatre - Plovdiv, 2017

Recently there was a worldwide protest against banning of Shakespeare, Chekhov and Brecht. Why to ban Shakespeare, Chekhov and Brecht? Because they make us reconsider, think and laugh. The latter is unacceptable in authoritarian regimes.

I also think that the cultural elites have to fight against “chalga” performances and expansion of idiocy via commercial comic TV shows into the temple of theatre. Let us laugh thinking the thought!

According to Eugenio Barba to “think the thought implies waste, sudden transitions, abrupt turns, unexpected connections between previously unrelated levels and contexts, routes which intersect and vanish. It is as if different voices, different thoughts, each with its own logic, were simultaneously present and began to collaborate in unplanned way, combining precision and fortuitousness, enjoyment of the game for its own sake, and tension towards a result” (Barba 1991, 59). The accumulated power of such processes of thinking and rethinking by the means of comedy is enormous. Let us name it clown’s power! Cogito ergo rideo!

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