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## The Plays of Yordan Radichkov and Their Relation to the Theatre of the Absurd

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**Abstract:** The article is an introduction to the playwriting style of Yordan Radichkov (1929–2004), who is considered as one of the most prominent Bulgarian writers from the second half of the 20th century. His works provided him with a special place in national culture since he was a very prolific and versatile artist. Apart from the importance and influence on a national level, his plays have been translated and staged across Europe, America, and Asia. A special emphasis is put on the first plays of Radichkov: *Commotion* (*Sumatokha,* 1967), *January* (*Yanuari*, 1974), and *Lazarus* (*Lazaritsa*, 1979). Theatre of the Absurd has been coined by 'urban' writers. Radichkov proved that the Absurd might crust upon rural characters far from the metropolitan vibe. The main aim of the article is to examine some similarities with the works of Samuel Beckett. Some intellectuals defined Radichkov's style as a "Balkan magic realism". Yet, another important topic of the article is the playwright's allegoric and, thus, subtle parody of the communist regime. The article demonstrates that, without direct access to the theatre of the Absurd, Yordan Radichkov established his unique style by one of the trendiest movements in Western Europe.

**Keywords:** Yordan Radichkov, Absurd drama, Theatre of the Absurd, Samuel Beckett, Bulgarian drama

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# Wioska Absurdski w Bułgarii
## Dramaty Jordana Radiczkowa i ich związek z teatrem absurdu

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł stanowi wprowadzenie do stylu dramatopisarskiego Jordana Radiczkowa (1929–2004), uważanego za jednego z najwybitniejszych pisarzy bułgarskich drugiej połowy XX wieku. Jego twórczość uczyniła go wyjątkowym w kulturze narodowej, ponieważ był płodnym i wszechstronnym artystą. Oprócz znaczenia i wpływu na poziomie krajowym, jego sztuki były tłumaczone i wystawiane w Europie, Ameryce i Azji. Na pierwszy plan wysuwają się pierwsze sztuki Radiczkowa: *Zamieszanie* (*Sumatocha*, 1967), *Styczeń* (*Januari*, 1974) i *Łazarz* (*Łazarica*, 1979). Teatr absurdu został wymyślony przez pisarzy „miejskich". Radiczkow udowodnił, że absurd może przygniatać wiejskich bohaterów z dala od wielkomiejskiego klimatu. Głównym tematem artykułu jest badanie pewnych podobieństw z twórczością Samuela Becketta. Niektórzy intelektualiści określali styl Radiczkowa jako „bałkański realizm magiczny". Innym motywem jest jego alegoryczna, a co za tym idzie, subtelna parodia komunistycznego reżimu. Artykuł pokazuje, że bez bezpośredniego dostępu do teatru absurdu Jordan Radiczkow stworzył swój niepowtarzalny styl, podążając za jednym z najmodniejszych trendów estetycznych w Europie Zachodniej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Jordan Radiczkow, dramat absurdu, teatr absurdu, Samuel Beckett, współczesny dramat bułgarski

Yordan Radichkov (1929–2004) is considered one of the most prominent Bulgarian writers from the second half of the 20th century. His works provided him a special place in Bulgarian culture since he was a very prolific and versatile writer. He wrote numerous short stories and novels for children and adult readers, as well as four novels and eight film scenarios. The stage plays of Radichkov created a new wave in Bulgarian theatre and helped establish the names of several directors and, indeed, the generations of remarkable comedy actors. Apart from their importance and influence on a national level, his plays have been staged in many countries across Europe, North and South America, and Asia. In 2001, he was nominated as the first Bulgarian candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Radichkov graduated from high school in Berkovitsa and then worked as a correspondent and an editor for several newspapers and a magazine (1951–1969). He started publishing short stories in 1959 – *Sartseto Bie za Horata* [*The Heart Beats for the People*]. As the title suggests, his first works followed the aesthetics of the official artistic style – socialist realism. Radichkov gradually developed his approach by combining realistic stories with fantastic elements.

Angusheva and Tihanov claim that "Radichkov soon adopted a new parabolic style. This was initially met with official animosity, and he was accused of escapism, primitivism, dark agnosticism and intellectual emptiness. But he persisted, and it was eventually accepted that the allegedly distorted picture of reality in his books was a sophisticated metaphor

of disillusionment, and a form of restrained dissent that worked against the banality and bureaucratic routine of life under socialism." (Angusheva [&] Tihanov 2004).

Generally, Theatre of the Absurd emerged because of a deep frustration of 'urban' writers, who were living mainly in Paris. It represented the modern people's despair after World War II and showed the world, human deeds and their communication as inexplicable and meaningless, or at least inappropriate. The new playwrighting style was preceded by works of Camus and Sartre in the 1940s, as "in the context of the war and the post-war period, these philosophers painted a disillusioned picture of a world devastated by conflict and ideologies" (Pavis 1998: 2).

On the other hand, Radichkov proved that the Absurd might crust on rural characters that are far away from the metropolitan vibe. He set most of his stories in Cherkazki village. It is pronounced as 'Cherkaski', but the latter is the name of a real place in one of the poorest and less developed regions of Europe even nowadays, i.e. Northwest Bulgaria. In that respect, the region, and the village itself might be easily interpreted as "Nowhere". Radichkov was born and raised in that area as well – in Kalimanitsa village which does not exist anymore. The government decided to build a dam, and the inhabitants were displaced; that process started in the 1970s and ended in 1984. The dam was opened in 1986, but at the end of the day, its waters did not cover the entire village. People were forced to leave their homes and start over their lives without reason. Thus, the writer has been personally touched by the absurdity of the communist planning model.

On focus in this article are the first three stage plays of Radichkov: *Commotion* (*Sumatokha,* 1967), *January* (*Yanuari*, 1974), and *Lazarus* (*Lazaritsa*, 1979). An analysis of these plays from a director's point of view shows some significant similarities with works of Absurdist playwrights, mainly those of Samuel Beckett's. Most of Radichkov's characters do not have surnames – only given names and/or nicknames, just like 'Estragon' and 'Vladimir', i.e., 'nobody'. In the core of Radichkov's plays stands the ridiculously funny repetition of events and actions that creates an image of a meaningless existence, far away from civilized life in towns. On the other hand, the characters often use incomprehensible local dialect words, have their fantasies and (re-)tell stories of mythical creatures of folklore origin. The latter was why some intellectuals defined Radichkov's style as "Balkan magic realism" (Angusheva [&] Tihanov 2004). An important concept of the analysed works is the unique metaphoric criticism of the communist regime. His popularity abroad, especially in Eastern Europe, could be partly explained on the grounds of a grand metaphor of a country forcefully detached from civilized modern development, with people living in ridiculously sad circumstances, who were striving to bring some sense to their dull life.

# *SUMATOKHA* [*Commotion / Confusion / Mayhem / Mix-up / Bustle*][1]

As shown above, the title is very difficult to translate into only one word. In any case, it suggests an activity or an event that is happening off-stage in the intermission between two parts of the play and it is something of superhuman nature as well – people get involved in it, some of them jump into it, the others were "sucked into" it. The word has also different pronunciations, as stated in Radichkov's note at the beginning of the play:

> Excited by the emergence of the commotion in the second part, the characters not only take part in it in their own way, not only differ in their assessments of the commotion, but also pronounce it differently. For example: summatokha, syumatokha, sommatokha, soomaytokha, skhumatokha, sumakhota, skhimitokha, skhyumitokha, soomootokha, someytokha, sammetokha, etc. (Radichkov 2018b: 6).

In an attempt to find an English version, that would be the most appropriate ones: *commotion*, *cumution*, *coomootion*, *coymotion*, *caymution*, etc. It is so clear at the very beginning of the dramatic text it is about an unknown event that is also not easy to name, a great *confusion* indeed.

Radichkov wrote his first play under the pressure of theatre director Metodi Andonov, who was teaching acting at the Theatre Academy in Sofia. It is not very well known, but Andonov was inspired by two students – Milen Penev and Stefan Bobadov – who made a sketch, based on Radichkov's short story *Ferocious Mood*. Then, their teacher invited his close friend, Radichkov, to attend one of the next classes at the Academy, and the writer also loved the sketch. At the end of it, the director turned to Radichkov, saying: "Yordan, do you now see that you must start playwriting?" (the story has been told to me by the prominent Bulgarian actor Stefan Mavrodiev, who was one of the students in the classroom). In fact, the structure of *Sumatokha* follows the model of a series of sketches and stories that have no obvious connection with each other and "keeps its integrity only through the super-metabola of the tale of the fox" (Kirilov 2015: 237).

In the opening scene, we see two characters – 'Gotsa' searching for his lost pig and 'Aralambi' looking for his lost cow. Here comes 'Lillo', carrying a dead Fox. He says that the Fox has eaten all his chickens and it is just pretending to be dead, just like in the story that he tells right away: a peasant was coming back from fishing with a cart full of fish. He saw a dead Fox on the road and put it in the cart, too. When he arrived home, he started shouting for his wife that he had brought new fur for her coat. Then he realized that the Fox ate what it could eat and then threw away the rest of the fish. The conclusion is that one should never trust a Fox (Radichkov 2018b: 8).

[1] Unless otherwise stated in Bibliography, the English translation is the author's.

'Aralambi' confirms that one should not trust a dead Fox and tells his version of the same story that happened to a fur tradesman from another village (Radichkov 2018b: 8–9). Then here comes 'Gligor', who is also asking Lillo what he is going to do with the dead Fox. Lillo answers that the Fox is not dead– just pretending to be dead – and that Foxes love to pretend. As proof that he knows that Gligor is telling his version of the peasant, the fish, and the Fox (Radichkov 2018b: 10). The same story with some minor different details happened to a hunter, who went fishing and is told by 'Ivan the Gaiter', who is a hunter himself (Radichkov 2018b: 11–12). The last member of this colorful company is 'Puffer', who is the only one that traveled abroad. He does not have a name and here are some clues that the nickname comes from a puffer jacket that he is wearing, as he is the only one who owns such a luxurious foreign thing. (In communist-time Bulgaria goods from Western countries were rare, so nicknames based on them were often). Surprisingly, Puffer does not tell the Fox tale, but rather comments on his experience with variety of dog breeds abroad. Then two 'Gypsies'[2] come and try to sell a horse and – surprisingly – do not mention the Fox at all.

Those "gaps" in Part One are deceptive. In the first line of Act Two, Puffer asks Lillo: "But I forgot to ask you: what you will do with this dead fox?". Then the story goes as usual – Lillo says that the Fox is just pretending to be dead, and Puffer tells what happened to a foreigner who went fishing by his own Trabant[3] (Radichkov 2018b: 25–26).

Finally comes the turn of the two Romani people. Gypsy I tells about their friend Ramcho, about Fox that ate all his copper in the cart and his wife was about to beat him. Then Gypsy II steps over and continues the story by implementing a new character – the Priest who tells the women that Ramcho is a virtuous man, but he has met the same devil. It happened when the Priest was collecting the tax all around the parish, but the Fox he found on the road ate all the tax from the cart. (Radichkov 2018b: 26–27)

All the above shows an increasing absurdity about the Fox tale. Starting from a Fox who ate all Lillo's chickens, it turns into a Fox that ate all the fish (from different carts and from a Trabant), then all of the copper, and finally all the tax of the parish. The repetitive story of the Fox resembles so much *Waiting for Godot* that it is hard to omit such a similarity. Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for somebody never to come, while the company of (Bulgarian) peasants in *Commotion* are waiting for the Fox to show its real face as a cheater. There is an important language-based difference from English – a fox in Bulgarian is a 'she', not an 'it'. So, if we considered this issue, the conclusion would be "Never trust a woman!". In a patriarchal society (characters in the play are mainly male), this suggests a new understanding of the story: a male is bringing new fur to his wife, but on the way back home, another female (the Fox) has either eaten or thrown away everything the male has achieved.

As for the commotion itself, it is unclear neither where, nor what exactly happened. We only know that it was the greatest mayhem the characters had ever seen and that everybody lost something important there. The sole winner was Petraki, who was mute in the beginning, but the commotion brought his speech back. Such a great event usually changes the lives of the ones who experienced it. In the case of these characters, it is not so;

[2] By the time the play was written, the term "Romani" still wasn't in use, at least in Bulgaria, so Radichkov could not be suspected of being biased towards this or any other minority.

[3] A trademark of a car, produced in Eastern Germany and popular in Eastern European communist countries.

they continue telling their own stories of what happened to them in the commotion the way they (re-)tell the story of the dead animal. Thus, we cannot be sure of whatever they say, as we already know that their stories are as not-reliable, as a fox. Finally, Lillo realizes that his "dead" animal ran away when he was in the mayhem. Then, for the spectators who have not memorized the story, Gotsa is telling it again, blaming Lillo for having not understood the message, even though the others told him *"a thousand times"* about the slyness of foxes (Radichkov 2018b: 39–40).

That is a clear sign that nothing will change in the lives of these characters who live in a village far away from the city. The very end of the play is a monologue of 'Green Tree' – a character who is trying all the time to bring a green tree (hence, the nickname) from the mountain and plant it in the village but never succeeds. His final solution is that he tied the tree to himself, so that "… it will perish only if I perish. This tree will live in our woods and during the winter, when someone looks out from their threshold through the storm, they will see the tree staying green … staying green … staying green!" (Radichkov 2018b: 45).

The repetition of hope does not bring lots of hopes, such as retelling the fox story does not prevent anybody from being deceived. In other words, *Waiting for Godot* one more day or counting in a perfect mood one more of the *Happy Days* will not bring anybody a better future. Life will continue its dull course and we can only try to spice it up by telling stories. It is extremely funny, but there is a pale light of sadness behind the hilarious plot – just like a green tree behind the storm.

## *YANUARI (January)*

The first play of Radichkov ends with the hope that a green tree will survive a winter storm. His second play happens after a winter storm that buried the village in the snow. The playwright's introduction note is a particularly important guideline to understand the play:

> Events take place during the month of January, the most Bulgarian of months, when the window-panes in the village are paned with frost and under the eaves of every house a pig-skin is stretched to dry, a dead magpie is nailed to each gatepost. Each village well has its own goblin in residence – sometimes two – which makes it difficult to make an exact estimate of their distribution per capita. Wolves beat wedding trails round the village and, though up to their ears in snow, both the village and the people stand on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of what is beyond the trails and to decipher, in fact or in fancy, the events recorded in the white drifts of snow.
>
> The subject matter, folk superstitions, music, and the characters derive from the north-west of Bulgaria (Radichkov 2002: 56).

Many things in this play, when looked at superficially, seem inexplicable or difficult to explain. There are tales of fantastic creatures, a letter from the afterlife, and a woodpecker who drinks brandy, mysteriously disappears, and returns. But there is a huge mystery at its center– what happened to Petar Motorov, who set off to town early in the morning on his sleigh. The village is buried in snow and no one dares or wants to travel. One by one, the usual visitors gather in the village pub. One of them is wondering at the very start why

Petar Motorov decided to go to town and that the wolves would eat him without a trail in the snowdrifts. The innkeeper announces that he tried to stop him and advised to wait for the tractor to make a trail. Petar answered that while waiting for the tractor, he would get to town and come back because his horses are like fiery dragons. On the other hand, a good thing that Motorov did was take his fur coat and rifle (Radichkov 2002: 58–59).

After all of them gather at the pub, they hear the bells of the sleigh and go out to meet Petar Motorov. They find a dead-shot wolf, the fur coat, and the rifle (only one bullet missing), but not their neighbor. The village men bring the dead animal into the pub and start wondering what happened to the guy. Finally, they decide that somebody should take the coat and the Postman, being the young, full of energy and enthusiasm and also Motorov's son-in law, takes over the task (Radichkov 2002: 72–75). This will happen four more times: the horses gone wild, the fur coat, the rifle, and a dead wolf in the sleigh, but the man is missing, so another one should go and see what happened to the previous travelers. 'Angel', the inn-keeper, goes to reveal the mystery, thinking that Petar and the Postman are drinking at an inn on the road, but instead of Angel, the sleigh appears with another wolf in it (Radichkov 2002: 84–88). Then, two characters go together, Lazar and Torlak, so the sleigh brings back two dead wolves (Radichkov 2002: 98–100). Isai prepares some slips of paper for a draw and divides them between Suso, Veliko, and himself, but he is cheating. So Veliko takes the rifle and goes after the others (Radichkov 2002: 100–101). Suso and Isai are getting ready for the next round and Isai prepares another draw Suso outsmarts him and Isai is about to go when Five Musicians enter the pub (Radichkov 2002: 103–105). They are supposed to play during a wedding, but they are late because of the snow. Isai persuades them to join him on the sleigh (Radichkov 2002: 106). The last time the sleigh appears with the Musicians who reveal the mystery. Outside the village, there was a pack of wolves. Isai shot the leader of the pack, so the other beasts retreated a little. Then Isai went down to get the corpse. The horses got wild, smelling a wild beast behind their backs, so they ran back to the village. Isai was running after them but gradually slowed down, and the predators closed a circle around him. That is all the scared-to-death Musicians could see. Suso's conclusion is that "… whatever happened to Petar Motorov happened to the rest of them who went to see what'd happened to Petar Motorov" (Radichkov 2002: 108–110).

The "thriller" is finally resolved, but another question is only partly explained. Suso has a cage with a woodpecker that drinks rakia[4] and has the capability to mysteriously go away and come back to the pub. It turns out that there is a *Tenets* in Suso's house[5]. According to local folklore tales, this is a person who died but did not go to the afterlife; they remained on earth to complete some unfinished work they had to do while being alive. A possible interpretation is that the hobgoblin is the one to get the drinks. The fact is that nobody doubts the existence of the *tenets's*, and yet there is another proof of it. The Postman brought not only newspapers and magazines but also a letter to Torlak from his relative who became a boggart (a "tenets") too. Isai, being obviously the most educated of all, realizes that "Actually this letter is not only for you Torlak, or not only for all the Torlaks of your family. Way I see it, it concerns all of us here, I reckon, maybe not just us lot in the village, but the monk in the monastery, too, and the folk in the next village, Rabisha, and those in

[4] A traditional spirit, produced from fruits, widespread on Balkans and similar to Italian grappa.
[5] A localism from north-west Bulgaria for a hobgoblin.

all the villages here in the north-west, the townsfolk in the nearest town and the other towns and everybody, from all over" (Radichkov 2002: 94). All the lads in the pub read the letter, handing it to one another. The leitmotiv in the message is "I feel no sorrow". Yet, the dead Torlak is so sad about a boy from the village who has drowned in the river and has not flow to the world beyond so far, but is sitting at the end of the wood and all the time making longer and longer stilts. The character wants to go back to see if his family is doing well but he is afraid of drowning in the river again (Radichkov 2002: 95).

This is one of the most important keys to understanding the hidden meaning of this (semi-)fantastic play. Its creator subtitled *January* as *A Winter Poem.* It could be taken as a great metaphor for Bulgaria under the communist regime. This is a nameless pub in the middle of nowhere, and if one goes one step out of it, they cannot come back to see their relatives, even with very long stilts. That is, one cannot easily leave the snowdrifts if they do not follow the guidance of an (ideological) tractor. And if they are someone like Petar Motorov, making their path, the wolves are waiting to eat them. One might kill one of them, but the pack is always stronger than the individual. The fact that the other characters call him by name and surname indicates that Motorov is a respected member of this isolated community. So even the ones that try to save their neighbour face the same doom. People are leaving the village and only predators are coming back from the snowy desolation around. It is such a powerful metaphor that humans turn into beasts. Finally, the Drummer from the music band is dressed in red, and his kettle drum is the same colour. He is half-dead and when he drums, the dead wolves in the pub start flaming in red light. Bearing in mind the main colour of the communist parties, this is a clear reference to the nature of the half-dead.

In conclusion, let us recall the initial note of the writer: "January, the most Bulgarian of months" (Radichkov 2002: 56). How could a month have any national characteristics? Obviously, the author wanted to hint at something. Like the atmosphere of the coldest time of the year, after the feasts of Christmas and the New Year, while the spring is still so distant that the only thing one can do is stay indoors and stick to basic needs of existence – eating, drinking, etc. In hostile surroundings, one should not dare to go out not only from home but also from the homeland. Otherwise, they will either die or become beasts.

## *LAZARITSA (Lazarus)*

The plot is as follows: Lazar thinks his dog has gone mad and goes outside the village to shoot it; he carries a rifle with only one bullet. He climbs up on a wild pear tree and shoots, but instead of the dog, he hits the leash. Now the released animal becomes annoyed at him, and he dwells in the crown of the tree for four seasons, from the spring to the winter. We face again the same model of repeated events that do not change the dramatic situation, but turn it to worse. Lazar cannot shoot again because he does not have more bullets. He cannot get down from the tree because the dog has turned from a best friend into his fierce enemy.

The monodrama presents a lonely person who is communicating only with animals – a dog, a magpie, a turtle (that somebody put in a tin box to chase away the birds by producing

noise), and a blackbird that echoes the melody Lazar whistles. There is no human being to come save this poor lad. If somebody put the turtle into the tree that means they wanted to protect the fruits, but nobody comes to pick them up. The tree has a plate that is a law-protected natural treasure, but nobody comes to see if everything is going well with it. During these four seasons, Lazar gets used to living in the tree and grows older and wiser. In the Autumn (Part 3) he realizes that: "You go to sleep as the last fool and wake up as the first wise man" (Radichkov 2018a: 127).

Paradoxically, there are other people that he sees or hears from the tree but none of them approaches him: these are, among others, some old ladies harvesting the field and a group of cheerfully singing children. He can hear the sound of an axe cutting another tree. Apart from the absurd situation, this play is also full of subtle criticism toward the communist regime. Lazar comes to the idea that a person might happen on a pear tree or in hell and yet they will turn it into a natural habitat (Radichkov 2018a: 129). By the end of the fall, Lazar is catching the straw of last hope that he will not perish (Radichkov 2018a: 135), but at the beginning of the Winter he painfully realizes the inevitable end – "there is no mercy under the sky even when the snow starts slowly and droningly to overwhelm all of us, when the frost strews over our hair, enmity and hatred are still smouldering, as if this will be the last spark to fade out. [ … ] Desolation and deadness surround me, even from the dog not a bone" (Radichkov 2018a: 137). Lazar is lonely and there is no hope. All other living beings are dead, even the tree looks like that without its leaves, and it does not protect him from the frost; "both the winter and the wind are in my heart, hey, I feel how everything is gradually getting cold. If your ears get cold, you will tie a scarf, that's easy, but if the heart starts getting cold, what should I cover the heart with?" Lazar finally realizes that he "[ … ] won the duel with the dog but he lost himself!" (Radichkov 2018a: 139).

*Lazarus* is Radichkov's play with the longest foreword of several pages (Radichkov 2018a: 103–108); he explains there that he started writing the play in 1967 or 1968, around the time he published *Commotion*. The director, Metodi Andonov, and the actor Apostol Karamitev were trying to persuade him to find a way for Lazar to get down from the tree and make peace with the dog, but the playwright did not feel this could happen. Meanwhile, in half a year time (November 1973–April 1974), both Karamitev and Andonov unexpectedly passed away, and Radichkov found himself in a void "as if there aren't or there weren't other people around you" (Radichkov 2018a: 107). The writer concludes the foreword with a tenderly sad and heartening confession:

> He [Lazar] could not forgive me for having put him in the tree. But I had jocosely put him in the tree, to frighten him, to break his pride and conceit, to make him fall on his knees before the dog that served him faithfully, and then to take him down, to stroke the dog's forehead with his hand, and off with a merry hiss the man went, followed by his most faithful friend. Not only would I have liked this, but others would have also liked it, and I am convinced that the public itself would have liked it all to end in this cheerful way. However, as you see for yourselves, fate doesn't like it! (Radichkov 2018a: 108)

The first three plays of Radichkov show some similarities with Beckett's most popular works – *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days*. The most important common element is the use of repetitive actions and events. The Fox stories in *Commotion* and the dead wolves returning with the sleigh in *January* are emphasised as endless repetitions of the same events so that

even the suspense is gradually fading out. In *Lazarus,* the character is trying to talk to a mad dog that is answering him just by barking and snarling; similar to Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days,* who does not really communicate with Willie. In the same way, Winnie is not sure if there was Mr. and Mrs. Shower or Mr. and Mrs. Cooker who passed by her, and there was no communication again (Beckett 1961: 41–43) – just like all different people who pass by Lazar in *Lazarus* and never recognize his presence in the tree. Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006: 101) has an interesting view of Beckett's work that also might be applied to Radichkov's plays: "[…] the trivial occurrences in Beckett's works are anything but trivial, that their radical reduction rather lets the simplest things shine as for the first time […]". We could again recall *Commotion* and *January*, starting with a dull village life activity – searching for a cow and a pig, re-telling the would-be dead Fox story, and gathering in the local pub after a snowstorm. Then, all the characters jump or are consumed by a great unknown event that will probably be the next story to be retold by the survivors in different versions in the future.

Peter Brook (1996: 69–70) stated that Beckett's plays are symbols, and his characters are theatre machines that hold their ground, yet each one has a relation with us we cannot deny. In his "dark plays of light" Beckett does not say 'no' with satisfaction; he forges his merciless 'no' out of a longing for 'yes' and so his despair is the negative from which the contour of its opposite can be drawn. We can find a similar observation in Radichkov's dramatic work: "[He] started a curious and very successful experiment, trying to find the absurd in folklore motives, in traditional heroes and situations, to 'folklorise' some absurdist ideas, to make even some of the absurdist pessimism interchangeable with its opposite" (Sotirova 1995: 49). For many years, Radichkov's plays have been interpreted as hilarious comedies in most of their productions. On the other hand, some productions have emphasized their existential power, especially when dramatizing his short stories and novels. Bulgarian critics and researchers well felt these tendencies; "in Radichkov's works every man is a Universe. But that universe comes to life, it invariably unlocks its wealth, its greatness and its tragedy when challenged by some confusion" (Dachev 1998: 24). Actually, we could perceive Radichkov's characters as simple human beings, trying to survive their everyday lives on the edge of chaos. Just like in Beckett's works, all of them are secluded and isolated from the "outer" world but they always strive to find their way to a meaningful existence by some ridiculous deeds. The individual characteristics of the actants are much less important than their unity of lonely, isolated human beings.

"Many of the critical approaches to the author »discreetly« pass over the comparisons or content themselves with sporadic comparisons of the few meaning-essential occurrences in the texts" (Kirilov 2015: 238). Trying to think over the plays from a director's viewpoint, there is a clear line connecting the three tragicomic plays explored above. At the end of *Commotion,* stands the hope that a green tree will survive the winter storm. In *January*, the snow cover is so dense as if it buried the entire world and there is no way out. At the end of *Lazarus*, the tree is leafless and there is no other life as well as no hope at all.

Certainly, Radichkov was not the only Central Eastern European playwright who found the Absurd as a well-covered tool to criticize the communist regime. Generally, the works of Russian/Soviet absurdist writers (like Daniil Kharms) were not widely known in Bulgaria until the 1990s. Yet, some of the plays of Istvàn Örkeny (Hungary), Václav Havel (Czechoslovakia), and most of all Sławomir Mrożek (Poland, before and after he

emigrated to France) became more and more popular in the 1970's and especially in the 1980's and 1990's. Most probably, they have been a certain inspiration to Radichkov. On the other hand, despite the similarities in the allegoric 'Aesopian' approach to criticism of the communist regime, there is a significant difference between Radichkov and the above-mentioned playwrights. Central European absurdists' characters and stagings are urban (like the Western ones); based on this characteristic, some more appropriate Bulgarian members of this company would be Stanislav Stratiev (above all), Ivan Radoev, and later Hristo Boytchev, Lyudmil Stanev, Kamen Donev, etc. Radichkov's characters and stagings are rural and this is one of his greatest achievements – that he has "translated" the Absurd into countryside Bulgarian landscape, lightly spiced with some fantastic folklore elements.

Martin Esslin (1994: 380) comments favourably on Mrożek's works: "He is in the first rank of those truly heroic intellectuals in his country and its neighbours who, in defying naked violence and oppression, kept the true human spirit alive against all odds and preserved the tradition and pre-eminence of their national culture in the face of a determined and ruthless attempt to eradicate it. That is an achievement for which we all, of whichever nationality, must be grateful". The above might easily be related to Radichkov, too. Without having direct contact, practical experience or even detailed information about the Theatre of the Absurd, Yordan Radichkov has created a Bulgarian rural version of the trendiest urban artistic movement in Western Europe. He was the one who "stood on his tiptoes over the [political] fences" that surrounded his country and "started deciphering the events recorded in the cold drifts" [of ideological taboos] (Radichkov 2002: 56). He was also the one of the Petar-Motorovs who made his own trail through the snow, from the distant village of Cherkazki to the capital cities of Europe.

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