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Absurd(ism), Balkan Style

An Introductory Note

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2023.032>

When, in the 1980s and 1990s, the plays by Stanislav Stratiev – one of the most prominent Bulgarian playwrights – were finally translated into a host of languages and staged in many countries, critics tried to explain the popularity by comparing him with playwrights who had to do with different faces of the absurd or with borderlands, like the phantasmagoria and the grotesque.

Here is, for instance, what Edward J. Czerwinski of *Slavic and East European Arts* magazine said about *The Roman Bath* – Stratiev’s first play, which was an instant and immense success: “[It] was Stratiev’s first excursion into the world of Gogol and Mrozek. Like both satirists, Stratiev began with a premise:

What if a relic of antiquity – a Roman Bath – was discovered in the home of a contemporary Bulgarian? What would be the consequences?’ Of course, the results would have to be laced with humor, not with the ferocious edge of a Swift or the laid-back political stance of Mrozek, but with a deft social-political bite [...]. Some writers have theatricalized the banality of life (Chekhov, Miller, and Chayevsky); some have glorified it (Gorky); and some, like Stratiev, have tried to break the saran-wrap that covers a host of decomposing social pillars (Czerwinski 1987: 7–9).

Another comparative perspective on Stratiev’s output was offered later by Nicole Vigouroux-Frey in *Theatre Research International*:

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He relishes paradoxical situations, debunks redeeming features in the most intricate or absurd structure and, vice versa, pinpoints the absurdity lurking beneath the most trivial situation... In Stratiev's early plays, the protagonist is often a young man trapped in a Beckettian, absurd situation. What seems at first plain and straightforward develops into a grotesque nightmare. The hero's innocent, fragile, lyrical authenticity crumbles into ridicule. Social laughter proves a lethal weapon as the naive protagonist must conform, loses his individual original perception, and eventually finds relief in becoming a non-person, a mere object (Vigouroux-Frey 2000: 135).

Rather than resorting to further references and comparisons, the other critics sought out the explanation of Stratiev's impact as a playwright in his freely crisscrossing of different genres and of the borderlines within the very territory of comedy and the comic.

"What distinguishes Stratiev from his colleagues playwrights", wrote Irina Kanusheva in *Contemporary Bulgarian Theatre*, "is that he is not afraid to exploit "thoroughly" the absurd, the grotesque, the hyperbole, the techniques of the feuilleton and the joke, and fun in all its varieties, in order to attract spectators" (Kanusheva 1998: 2).

All these observations are indeed insightful analyses, delving deeply into the essence of Stratiev's works. Yet, there is something more in it that is, to me, the very key to his invariable ability to reach out to the audience and achieve a full-scale rapport with it. It again is related to the absurd, but rather with a special "brand" of it: the absurd "made in Bulgaria". Or rather: "made in the Balkans", since this Balkan style of the absurd is, to a considerable extent, the key to the steady appeal of playwrights from other countries of the region too.

The absurd has been our – the people in the Balkans – lifelong companion in relation to the theatre of reality. The real world brimming with such absurdities that it often seems surreal aside and, in fact needs only a slight exaggeration at times to be easily transformed into a piece of fiction. Therefore, we have developed a correspondingly special, Balkan perception of I – that differs significantly from the one outside of the region.

At first sight, this attitude towards the absurd is very paradoxical. It is as if we were afraid of everything else but not of the absurd itself. Maybe because of the fact that the absurd has been so invariably present in our everyday life, it has become a 'natural' ingredient of reality, a sort of a given – something which we consider as merely the n'th thing that, indeed, may seem impossible but is still a fact. Yet, it is also something that we know we have to outwit and, thus, overcome in order to be able to continue with our lives. And when we do so, we have peculiar pride in having yet again managed to prove that we can beat the absurd (i.e. the impossible) even though it is, by default, unbeatable due to its illogical nature. Viewed from this perspective, the constant struggle with the unending everyday life's absurdities could be perceived as an equally unending process of proving our own ingenuity.

In other words – no matter against how many odds, the absurd, in the end, is surmountable – at least to a large extent. So, despite all the energy that defeating it would require, finally, we manage to overcome, thus – figuratively – above it. Therefore, we can then ignore it and mock it. The disassociation from the absurd and the sabotage of laughter seem to be the best ways for the absurd to be ultimately disempowered, and, again, it may provide us with an opportunity to boost our self-confidence.

There is something very vital in this attitude towards the absurd – that is, in a specific Balkan way. A type of vitality that is so well encapsulated in the verse "In the death-car we are still alive!" from Goran Bregovic's song in the film *Arizona Dream* (1993), directed

by Emir Kusturica (both of them being from the Balkans). A type of vitality – even more paradoxically – manages to exceed the ‘borders’ of human life itself and is, thus, a *par excellence* example of something that is indeed larger-than-life. Consider this old saying of the population traditionally inhabiting the region around Sofia, Bulgarian’s capital, used when somebody is crossed with his life: “Ah, you, life! You will see when I finish you!”. In the Balkans, the absurd tends to be perceived beyond its appearance as a coup-de-sac; rather, it is seen as only a seemingly almighty player that has to be beaten in a game with only a seemingly foretold end. Or, to put it more practically, the absurd is no more than an everyday challenge that we know we have to find a way out of if we are to go on.

And not by chance, our point of departure towards the absurd differs a lot from the one that has its roots in the Theatre of the Absurd, for instance. The oeuvre of the famed Theatre Absurdists was a child of WWII, when the destruction and the wounds, in literal and figurative terms, in most parts of Europe were so deep, devastating, and unfathomably inhuman, that the faith in Goodness as a driving force and thus the availability of Meaning was shaken. Unlike it, our attitude to the absurd is more of an ‘offspring’ of the everyday fight for survival – and the usually required for its strong character, adaptability, and resilience – rather than of the pain of disillusion, bordering on despondency. Thus, it is an expression of a special buoyancy and ebullience.

The plays that have as their springboard this idiosyncratic Balkan perception of the absurd, I believe, could be considered as belonging to a special brand that might as well be called *Balkan Absurdist Drama*. This issue of “Litteraria Copernicana” is an attempt to present a glimpse at it through texts on a few playwrights: the aforementioned Stanislav Stratiev, Yordan Radichkov, and Hristo Boytchev (all from Bulgaria; the latter one being staged in over 50 countries), and the Croatian Miro Gavran, who has not only been staged around the world as well but also is in the unique position of being the only European playwright with a traveling Festival devoted solely to his plays. The inclusion in the issue of the play *Superman Killed by a Handful of Unknown People* by the Serbian playwright Katarina Todorović (in the Polish-language version) further enhances the focus on the Balkan Absurdist Drama.

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