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# Hristo Boytchev, or The Bulgarian Playwright Who Makes Absurd Meet Hope

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**R**ecords, paradoxes and unexpected turns form the unique blend has become a trademark of Hristo Boytchev's career. He is *the* most staged-abroad Bulgarian playwright and one of the most widely staged contemporary European playwrights. His plays have had first nights in theatres of an astonishingly wide geographical range – from above the polar circle (in the most northern professional theatre – The Polar State Theatre of Nurilsk, Russia) to as far south as South Africa, from Canada and the USA to Australia. In over 50 countries altogether. At the same time, his plays have never been staged in the National Theatre in Sofia. Since 2010, these plays have been studied in US universities as emblematic representatives of modern European drama and as successors to the Beckett and Ionesco line. At the same time, his plays have not yet been included in the curricula of theatre-related educational institutions in Bulgaria.

In 1989, Boytchev was named *Playwright of the Year in his homeland*, and 40 productions of his plays were staged all across the country. And this was only five years after the premiere of his first play (*That Thing*, 1984)! However, the Berlin Wall fell at the end of the same year. The theatre of politics stole the show in Bulgaria, as well as in all of Eastern Europe. What was happening on the streets, in the Parliament, and on TV became far more interesting and important than theatrical performances. The 'real' theatre lost, to a large extent and for quite a while, its audience, its status, and its stable finances. Then, exactly when it was already regaining its ground, about half a decade later, in 1997, Boytchev's *Colonel Bird* was selected as the World Winner of the British Council playwriting contest.

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While this was the beginning of international fame, it also triggered the reverberations of the proverb ‘Nobody is a prophet in his own country.’ Moreover, the breakthrough in Boytchev’s career had nothing to do with politics or any other affiliations. He had never been part of the establishment and had never made any special effort to incorporate himself into it; in some cases, he had even ridiculed the system. It was an attitude that traditionally brings the ‘reward’ of silence and neglect in Bulgaria; in Boytchev’s case, it could well be at the bottom of the startling incongruity between his world success and the subsequent lack of enough local exposure.

By education, Boytchev is a machine engineer. Born in 1950 in a small town in Northern Bulgaria, he worked there between 1976 and 1985 as a technical employee and then as general manager of a factory. He enrolled at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts only after the success of his first play as a Theatre Studies student. However, although he completed the then five-year course, he never wrote his final thesis and consequently never received a diploma. After 1989, he began a career as a TV journalist and participated regularly in one of the most famous satirical shows. He started his television show later and became widely popular for his satirical image of a leader of an imaginary political party. His endeavour culminated with a literal furore when, in 1996, together with a fellow satirist and playwright, they took part in the presidential elections (as a president/VP couple) in a mock-up, yet fully real, campaign. He gathered enough signatures that allowed them to address the electorate on prime-time TV for 30 consecutive days. It contributed to a unique, real-time satirical show, which, remarkably, won approximately 2% of votes in the elections.

The same year Boytchev learned about the BBC contest, which was labelled by the press as the ‘Playwrights Olympics’, and sent his play. In 1997, he was invited to the National Theatre in London to attend the final ceremony, but he did not receive any further information about the possible award. So he went there hoping to be just one of the regional winners. Instead, he heard the title of his play announced as the overall winner among 400 plays from all over the world – it was a decision that the jury had taken only an hour before. The award was presented to him by none other than Harold Pinter. The motivation for the choice read that the play is “joyful, magical, idiosyncratic, and with an inspired comic parable of our times.”

Over the next four years, *The Colonel Bird* was eagerly taken on by theatres in 26 countries. In 1999, the play received another prestigious award: the Italian Premio *Enrico Maria Salerno*. In the same year, its first French production was presented at the Avignon Festival, while its British production at the Gate Theatre in London garnered rave reviews. *The Colonel Bird*, as Michael Billington, the doyen of British theatre criticism, wrote “[...] is an extraordinary play: a politicized, Balkan *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* subverting all our conventional definitions of madness and sanity” (Billington 1999). Ten years later, one of its numerous Russian productions was presented at the prestigious Golden Mask Festival in Moscow. Now, over 20 years later, the play continues its march among the international stages. It has had over 100 productions in over 30 countries.

This triumphant journey was inspired by a small piece of news that Boytchev read in a Bulgarian paper: it commented on the dilapidated condition of a mental asylum located in a former monastery up in the Balkan Mountain, which had to face a shortage of medicines, clothes, food, and medical personnel. This is important since it underpins a major feature of Boutchev’s playwriting style. He may be referred to as a successor of the Absurdist;

however, his plays are deeply rooted in the Bulgarian (Balkan) real-life absurd, both in principle and in the way it has been perceived by the audience and handled by the theatre in Bulgaria, as already described in the Introductory note. In brief, this indicates there are two main points of departure. The first emphasises a reality full of absurdities, where the slightest exaggeration makes them look like they are being conjured up. The second one highlights a very vital attitude towards these absurdities as something that can and has to be overcome and which we will be able to laugh at in the end. The attitude originates from a tradition of constant striving for survival, which is a mark of resilience and buoyancy.

Boychev comes from – and is a *par excellence* representative of – a story-telling line, both in Bulgarian and in Balkan prose and drama, that builds on a special ‘dance’ between facts and fiction, where seemingly surreal yet absolutely true details and situations, or turn-of-events get ‘enriched’, so to speak ‘grafted’, with imaginary elements, and become highly fictional new entities in the end. In that very manner, he took the info from the newspaper as a springboard and made it three-dimensional by populating the monastery-come-asylum with complex and recognizable characters and by developing funny, sad, and deeply human relations between them. He also added some more real-life facts, or at least hints to such events, from the current wars in former Yugoslavia and the then ongoing Bulgarian strive to enter the EU and NATO. For example, humanitarian aid falling by mistake in the monastery yard echoes concrete facts from real war zones. Also, in the different versions of the play, the patients clothed in UN or NATO uniforms they find in the packages paint a jeep with the corresponding signs and set up to join the EU or the UN, ironically, under the command of a former Russian colonel until that moment fully mute. So, the additional non-fictional facts have again been used as a driving force for the plot’s fictional developments and the characters’ transformation.

However, it’s not only reverberations of the absurdist line in Bulgarian drama that could be traced in *The Colonel Bird*. There are also echoes of some other national playwrighting traditions of equal importance. For instance, the comedy soars at times into unexpected lyrical heights. “We shall find that wonderful world. We shall find it even if it does not exist on this earth, because we shall go on searching after death. The universe is everlasting, and no one has been everywhere and proved that the wonderful world does not exist” (Boychev 2000), the Colonel manages to utter before he collapses at the end of the play, upon the arrival of the characters at the Cathedral Square in Strasbourg.

Moreover, under the seeming superficiality, the naivety or even primitivism of some of the characters’ perceptions of life loom unexpected existential and mystical depths. In this respect, Boychev is a direct successor of the Bulgarian modern classic Yordan Radichkov and his tour-de-force plays *January* and *An Attempt for Flying* – something which was visible already in his first plays and continues to be a very strong feature of his oeuvre. Albeit in *The Colonel Bird*, it is a much more subdued line; it is still present. For instance, when, in the wilderness of the mountain, the transformed asylum patients are determined to start their journey, they decide to communicate with the rest of the world via the migratory birds (thus the title of the play) and the doctor writes in his diary: “The birds flew in great flocks over the mountains and at night we caught them in nets while they rested. They were very careful and gentle with the birds to avoid hurting them. They tied hundreds of messages to their legs - messages to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, UNESCO headquarters and anywhere else they could think of. The Actor said the birds flew south

towards Greece, some even further, as far as South Africa, but the colonel explained that the UN has observers everywhere. The messages would get through to their destination eventually” (Botchev 2000). Depending on the point of view and the directors’ rendering, *The Colonel Bird* could be interpreted as a satire, even a grotesque, or as an eccentric piece of theatre-in-life we are so much in need of. Or, most importantly, it could be viewed as a parable of the everlasting people’s quest (a bunch of them or a society, or a nation) to realize the most basic but the most difficult dream – for a simple yet dignified life – and the power of solidarity in the pursuit of this future project. The play could get all these readings since all this is in it. As Billington (1999) wrote: “Satire and compassion mingle easily in Boytchev’s play. Satire on militaristic rigidity and supposed normality, and compassion for a group of hopeless optimists who crave European recognition and who use migratory birds to communicate with the outside world.... But what makes Boytchev’s play complex and humane is that it uses the lunatics’ transfiguration as a vehicle for an attack on social conformity and an endorsement of visionary idealism”.

While the action in *The Colonel Bird* has some concrete space and time coordinates, furthermore, to a certain extent, the power of some of its metaphors is connected with them; Boytchev’s next and equally successful play, *Titanic Orchestra* (2000), has no “ties” to specific geographical or time points. Or maybe it is rather that in it the world is not anymore defined by, or perceived in, such categories. It seems as if the world has already undergone another Big Bang, and a bunch of people happen to have ended up in an unidentified former railway station where trains no longer stop but rush by it, leaving behind only debris (at times, actually, quite useful one, like half-full bottles). It is a world not much unlike our own, set on such a rush-speed mode that so many people feel like real life only passes quickly and they never manage to get fully on its board.

Correspondingly, here, the phantasmagorical streak is much more prevalent. A bear is seen driving trains and also selling tickets – in a recurrent dream of one of the railway station’s inhabitants, who used to be that very bear’s owner and played for money; yet, after waking up, the tickets he dreamt of having ‘bought’ from her happen to be always right in his hand and with the same date at that... Once a train does stop, but only to add more unbelievable elements to the life at the station: a massive box falls off the train onto the railway platform, and a magician in a tuxedo comes out of it, introducing himself as the famous Harry Houdini. He promises to teach the others the “great vanishing act,” paradoxically, they discover fundamental existential truths via his illusions, e.g., that they “disappear” only while alone. According to the play’s final line – when the character waits his turn to disappear: “Nothing to do but sit and wait and see if they’ll return. If someone comes back, I won’t have vanished.” *He waits, opening the lid [of the box] from time to time. “And so I wait”.* Then the lights go off and, when they are on again, all the rest of the characters do turn out to be there. And the magician takes a bow.

I dare say that the final scene of *Titanic Orchestra* is a true masterpiece; it also indicates one of the main reasons for the universal appeal of Boytchev’s plays. The world his figures inhabit, i.e., our world –may well be on the brink of falling apart, with people not only getting more and more alienated from each other but also entering the next, even worse, stage of alienation from themselves – a disintegrated from within. At the same time, though, these characters, in full contrast with all these issues, have an astonishing inner integrity and are capable of full-scale human communication with each other. That is why, although they

are axiomatic losers at first sight, they are winners on a higher moral and existential level. The characters do not let the process of outside disintegration enter their souls and do not give up on their human bonds. Being not lonely and refusing to be alone, they seek to be close and need each other – this is their natural state of being. Consequently, the figures, indeed, cannot disappear.

This applies to all Boytchev's plays<sup>1</sup> and differentiates him fundamentally from the classical Absurdist. The warmth, the compassion, the natural essence of human bonds, the personal inner integrity, and the unrelenting resilience – all these so innate Balkan characteristics imbue the author's dramas with irresistible and incorrigible vitality. Not only is he a par excellence Bulgarian (Balkan) absurdist, but he also managed to take this so idiosyncratic type of absurd to a distinctly higher level. The playwright dared to tackle absurdities of a much larger scale than the local ones, feeling that some of the biggest problems of the globalised world today – like the aforementioned ubiquitous process of disintegration and the resulting chaos – are exactly of an absurd essence and, in total discord with human nature. And, finally, he has been pointing at a way out of them, the only one – the preservation of human integrity and bonds, at a time when these are so much under question and maybe even ridicule. He does so not in a didactic way but by making us feel there is nothing more natural than that.

Creating and developing ingenious situations is something Boytchev is excellent at. However, it is his character that is his main strength. They are like a bunch of people who have been hurled out of our world by the centrifugal motion of our time. Yet, since they have managed to stay intact, right before flying away into the open universe, they reach out to each other, hold hand in hand, and form a circle like parachutists. There, far above the absurd, they create a new world or restore the real universe full of warmth and hope, as it is meant to be so that we realize that it is us who have become the parallel reality.

Boytchev's plays may make audiences laugh, think, and inspire compassion, but what is the most important thing they do in the end is they charge with hope – that it is possible to rise from and above the absurd and create (or restore) a reality where the absurd does not reign supreme, at least on the level of human relations and integrity.

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<sup>1</sup> After a long silence, he went on to dramatize *Zorbas, the Greek*, by Nikos Kazantzakis, and *The Great Gatsby*, by Scott Fitzgerald and wrote the monodrama *Phenomenon*. He has just finished a new play, *Invasion*, which has not been staged or published yet.