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Time out of Time in the “Open Theater” of the Bulgarian Village of Patalenitsa

Tucked away in the lush green foothills of the Rhodope mountain is the village of Patalenitsa (fig. 1). With a population of around 1500, it boasts as its most conspicuous architectural structure its school, where about 150 local children aged seven to fourteen receive their elementary education.



Fig. 1. Patalenitsa on the map of Bulgaria.

During the last seventeen years, the school yard has been the site of (more or less) yearly public Shakespeare performances which, by now, have become part and parcel of the identity of the village, have attracted thousands of spectators from across Bulgaria, and beyond and have fostered international theater collaboration (fig. 2). Any history of this extraordinary event, best described as a grassroots Shakespeare festival, should start here, with the effort and vision of a principal who embraced the idea that extra-curricular performance should be made part of “his children’s” education. The other formative strand came from two theater professionals who moved to the village from the nearby city in 1999 and whose selfless work and high professional standards have shaped Patalenitsa Shakespeare. Such meeting of “true minds” is so much more impressive, as it took shape at a time of deep economic crisis, in conditions of social disintegration and the collapse of value systems, characteristic of post-communism.



Fig. 2. The “Konstantin Velichkov” Elementary School in Patalenitsa.

In Bulgaria, the 1990s were marked by the criminal acquisition and stripping of national assets, rampant wild capitalism, unemployment, unravelling of social provision, such as education and healthcare, almost complete dereliction of funding for the arts, and a general loss of moral compass.¹ Basic social structures began to crumble. Towards the end of the 1990s nearly 10% of the Bulgarian population had been pressured into economic emigration,² communities and families came under enormous strain as their working members had to leave loved ones behind in a chaotic and impoverished society. In these circumstances, the mass-media owned by newly-made tycoons, flooded the public space, marketing the latest objects of desire through the onslaught of chalga, whose booming musical numbers glamorized the totalizing ethos of commodified exchange. Writer Vladimir Zarev sums up this situation thus:

*The last 25 years saw the dismantling of the immune systems of statehood, the corruption of the police and judiciary, the abrogation of morality, the demise of social justice. The product of the work of several generations of Bulgarians was stolen, and even worse, made to look completely senseless; what had been built by them was pilfered, or handed over to party flunkies. Morally, the situation was aggravated by branding the intelligent, and most importantly, honest person, a fool, while the thief and self-confessed impostor, became the hero of our time and center of media attention.*³

In this context, the decision of a small group of intellectuals to mitigate the multiple traumas of local children growing up in impoverished and strained families by involving them in a vibrant theater community and by teaching them the highest standards of linguistic and artistic expression through Shakespeare’s plays, amounted to a courageous ethical act.

¹ For a detailed discussion of Bulgarian post-communism, see “‘The readiness is all’, or the Politics of Art in Post-Communist Bulgaria.”

² “Demographics of Bulgaria,” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Bulgaria. By now, immigration has reached nearly 15%.

³ Vladimir Zarev, Interview, “Vladimir Zarev: Ili shte poletim, ili shte se srinem v propastta [We will either fly, or fall into the abyss],” *Trud*, 6 December 2014, <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=4464511>.

Uncannily symbolic from the perspective of current history is that the school in Patalenitsa is named after the writer, translator and one-time minister of education, Konstantin Velichkov (1855-1907), one of the creators of the modern Bulgarian educational system. Following the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule (1878), education became a major nation-building undertaking aiming to integrate the newly emancipated state into European cultural traditions. In 1884, Velichkov and Ivan Vazov prepared the first reader for state schools, entitled *A Collection of Samples of All Literary Kinds*, for which they translated parts of *Macbeth*, thus embedding Shakespeare in the national curriculum.⁴ That a hundred and thirty years later educators would reach out to Shakespeare to inspire intellectual, moral, and personal growth among the children and to sustain the strained web of a local community is a statement of the resilience of Bulgarian cultural traditions in general and education in particular.

The Pioneers

Nikola Kolev has been principal of “Konstantin Velichkov” elementary school since 1983, where he also teaches mathematics.⁵ During each of our visits, the well-maintained 1923 building was buzzing with activity. Stepping in, one experienced the wonder of entering a fairy-tale world: paper angels hung on strings from the ceiling and swayed with the movement of the air. Dolls and artefacts made by the children decorated the entire space; in a corner, a big pocket receives “angry words” which children themselves commit to paper, as a relief from aggression (at the end of the week, the contents are burnt and the ashes spread as compost for the trees in the school yard); in the corridor, a “desk for everyone” has materials to work with when not at study.⁶ As the immaculately dressed Mr. Kolev walks past, children greet politely, or rush over to ask questions. Along the folk-style dolls are murals representing important scenes from Bulgarian history and a long row of photographs tracing

⁴ Ivan Vazov and Konstantin Velichkov, eds., with an introduction by the editors, *Bulgarska hristomatia ili sbornik ot izbrani obrazi po vsichkite rodove suchinenia* (Plovdiv, Svishtov and Thessaloniki: Knizharnitsa na D. V. Manchov, 1884). On this, see Shurbanov and Sokolova, *Painting Shakespeare Red*, 135-36.

⁵ Many of his students have won prizes in the local mathematics and chess competitions, for their age group. See the bulletin published by elementary school “Konstantin Velichkov”, Patalenitsa, *Iskritsi* 42 (2013), 4. In Bulgarian, “iskritsi” means “sparks”. The bulletin is an illustrated school gazette, printed in color, with more than 45 issues since 2002. It features news of all school activities, involvement in projects, student prizes in competitions, and is lavishly illustrated by photographs taken by the students themselves. It also has a page giving space to young literary talent.

⁶ *Iskritsi* 42 (2013), 1-2.

the history of the Patalenitsa Shakespeare performances. Daily school activities, Bulgarian history, and European cultural heritage are interwoven into the ambience.

The school is at the disposal of its pupils after classes, a place where they study, play and are involved in various forms of creativity. For some, it is an all-day surrogate home. Here, in 1997, with a group of teachers, Kolev created Support for Children at Risk, a non-profit organization aimed at “raising the educational, cultural and intellectual levels” of their pupils, opening up their horizons and aspirations.⁷ Since then, through tireless grant writing, the school has managed to engage in a remarkable number of activities.⁸ One of their first projects, “Social Problems and Drama” was the point where school and theater professionals came together and from which grew the seed of Patalenitsa Shakespeare.

In 1999, Hristo Tserovski (1956-2002), a charismatic theater director who had been at the helm of the Plovdiv Drama Theater and was professor of Theater at the University of Plovdiv, moved to the village with his family. His wife, Inna Tserovska, the manager of today’s Shakespeare Theater School Petrovden, remembers how the first village Shakespeare troupe in Bulgaria came into existence:

When we started, our aim was to help children who had never seen theater.⁹ We began work around a social project: to have fun through the reading of plays and performance. Originally, we simply wanted to enthuse the kids and help them with their problems. Through the years, this has evolved into a very serious professional undertaking. Our troupe now has children who are extremely well trained. From their first year at school [aged 6/7] they do theater on Saturdays under the supervision of professional directors and student actors who come to the village. The result of this, in conjunction with Shakespeare’s texts, is what casts the magic spell over our audiences in the summer.¹⁰

Early on in the development of the idea, a crucial decision was taken: students from the Faculty of Drama at the University of Plovdiv were also to be cast in some of the parts. In this way, from the beginning, performance standards were raised above the level of an

⁷ *Iskritsi* unnumbered (2008), 1.

⁸ Long-term supporters of the school have been the Workshop for Civic Activities Foundation (<http://www.wcif-bg.org/index.php>), Tulip Foundation (<http://www.tulipfoundation.net/setLanguage-1/>), Open Society and others.

⁹ Pupils at Bulgarian schools used to be taken to the theater during the school year, an activity which was completely abandoned during the financially strapped and chaotic 1990s, so much so that a whole generation of school kids had never experienced it.

¹⁰ Inna Tserovska, “Idealizmut tryabva da bude nashiya realizam [Idealism should be our realism’],” interviewed by Djadala Maria, *Kafene.bg* 2279, 08 October, 2012, <http://www.kafene.bg/%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%86%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BC%D1%8A%D1%82-%D1%82%D1%80%D1%8F%D0%B1%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%B4%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%88%D0%B8%D1%8F%D1%82-%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B7%D1%8A%D0%BC-11735/article>.

average school play. Throughout the production cycle, the directors treated the Patalenitsa school children and the theater students as equals, thus producing a finely integrated ensemble (fig. 3).¹¹ The pupils recognized the value of the experience, returning to their Saturday acting workshops year after a year, growing during the month-long summer rehearsals for the play side by side with young theater professionals. This is in itself a rare phenomenon: the children study theater and Shakespeare from professionals with diverse backgrounds and experiences, while the professionals themselves have the opportunity for pedagogical and collaborative work, as well as practicing a fully open theater, a concept we will discuss further on.



Fig. 3. Curtain call. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2004.

A Village and Its Theater

A village is a world, inhabited by people of different backgrounds and economic circumstances. While many of the participants come from stable, even affluent homes, many live in broken families on the verge of subsistence. Some are raised by grandparents while their own parents work abroad and suffer the trauma of separation. For some, the Saturday acting workshops provide the only chance to have a meal, spend time in a meaningful way, stay away from abusive families. Working together, out of their regular class time, has forged new friendships across age and class divisions. All have had to learn to focus on the task at hand, speak properly, be considerate, study manners necessary for representing their characters, learn stage combat and even riding (in the inaugural *Romeo and Juliet* production Prince Paris solemnly arrived on a donkey). Generally, the children are given the chance to

¹¹ Todor Dimitrov, in discussion with Kirilka Stavreva, Sofia, Bulgaria, 21 January 2014.

have fun in a supportive, constructive atmosphere. In the course of the first year and in the years since, their mentors have noticed a drop in interpersonal aggression, a surprisingly good discipline during the long rehearsal sessions, a more positive attitude to the world around. The cynicism of “there’s no use doing this” had given way to engagement. A boy from a very difficult family, who was rumored to have stolen money from his classmates, was entrusted with the snack money kitty. And he guarded it, religiously. Some who seemed unable to cope with their school lessons, when coached by the college students, showed a true aptitude for learning and interpreting reams of complex text. There are few behavioral problems and children seem to learn willingly anything from fencing, to English.¹² As their first production in 2000, they unanimously chose *Romeo and Juliet*. As the performance coincided with the summer Feast of St Peter, in a similarly democratic way, they constituted themselves into a “theater school,” named Petrovden (St Peter’s Day).

An inspired decision of Tserovski’s was to extend the performance space by moving the final scene of *Romeo and Juliet* from the school yard to the historic local church, which created a connection between a modern act of cultural resistance and self-identification to the long durée of local history. The St Dimitar church in Patalentsa was built in the 12th century (fig. 4). According to legend, when, in the late 14th century, the Ottoman invasion reached this part of the medieval Bulgarian kingdom, the local people buried it under a hill of earth.¹³ The chance discovery and unearthing of the church occurred in 1840. Declared a cultural monument in 1956, it was again closed to the public for decades of restoration, which, though physically preserving it, “buried” it again to the life of the village. Recently, it has been open to visitors, but services are held only on the day of its patron saint. It is this extraordinary space not a hundred meters up the road from the school, with Byzantine frescoes of stern saints looking down from the walls, that forms the other end of the line of cultural memory, created by the Shakespeare project. In 2013, *To Love, or Not to Love*, a collage of Shakespeare love scenes, showcased the connection between the two sites in a promenade performance part of which took place along the steep street between school and church.

¹² The information about the impact of acting on the behavior of children comes from Inna Tserovska and Nikola Kolev, interview taken by Boika Sokolova, Pazardzhik, Bulgaria, 19 December 2013; “Detska shekspirova teatralna shkola ‘Petrovden’: Nachaloto i sled tova [Children’s Shakespeare Theater School ‘Petrovden’: The Beginning and Later],” <http://patalenica.com/web/begin.html>; and the 2002 award-winning documentary *Shekspir po balkanski [Shakespeare, the Balkan Way]*, directed by Vassil Barakov. The film can be seen on YouTube in two fifteen-minute sections, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rddjw8wMAmI> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfFW7Ibann0>.

¹³ In a more familiar frame of reference, these events coincide with the reign of Richard II in England.



Fig. 4. The medieval church of St Dimitar in Patalenitsa. Photo by Nikola Kolev.

Romeo and Juliet would have remained a one-off event, had not Principal Kolev realized how extremely beneficial the experience of all-year theater training had been for many children. He continued applying for funding from various sources. To this day, none of the professionals or students, who come to work on a weekly basis with the children and then spend a month in the summer rehearsing the production, has ever been paid a fee. The money raised is used only for production expenses and for covering the travel of those who come to work in Patalenitsa. Because of the instability of funding, the production team sometimes camps at the Tserovski's home, or at the school. To cut costs, food is communally prepared (mainly by Mrs Tserovska's mother), while Inna Tserovska and her daughters, now trained designers and actresses, have for years been in charge of the artistic side of preparations. To go into the nitty-gritty of it is to discover enormous personal dedication, generosity, and readiness to take risks. Apart from running the school, Kolev has also served as driver, electrician, sound technician, photographer and general trouble-shooter.¹⁴

Open Theater, Open Community

What nobody expected was that this very first foray into Shakespeare in the open would attract an audience of around 300—in their majority, people who came from other places—theater professionals, colleagues of the students involved in the play, journalists, and numbers have grown over the years. For a school play, this was an extraordinary situation. Chairs were brought from local houses, people sat on the ground, the stars shone, 29 June 2000 was an

¹⁴ Nikola Kolev is also an award-winning amateur photographer who records the beauty of the mountains and the life of the villages around Patalenitsa. His photographs can be seen at

<http://4coolpics.com/ownpage.php?aut=30474&comments&pg=3>.

enormous success. Later, the date of performances was firmly set to the last week of July, which enables audiences to plan their visits in advance. During the winter of 2001, a film crew made a documentary for which the children re-played parts of *Romeo and Juliet* in winter conditions, thus airing to a wide audience the events in Patalenitsa. The high artistic quality of the film was itself a contribution to the making of Patalenitsa Shakespeare into the event it is now.¹⁵ Instead of focusing on the difficult lives of children, it conveyed the excitement, spiritual uplifting and magic of making theater.

The Merchant of Venice (2001) was Hristo Tserovski's second production. For it, the school yard was turned into a Venetian scene of blue canals painted by the children who worked late into the night before the first performance (fig. 5).¹⁶ As the funding body required a partnership with another school from abroad, a school in the village of Bedekovchina in Croatia became a partner. The Croatians arrived in Patalenitsa to take part in the final week of rehearsals, and later in the year the Bulgarian cast travelled to Croatia for another joint performance in Bulgarian and Croatian. This collaboration would be renewed in 2004 with a production of *Hamlet*, directed by Todor Dimitrov. After a ten-day workshop in Croatia at the end of rehearsals, the bilingual performance took place in Patalenitsa and later, in Croatia.



Fig. 5. Production photo from *The Merchant of Venice*, 2001.

Tserovski's last production was *The Taming of the Shrew* (2002). After his death, through the energetic agency of his widow, Inna Tserovska, several professional directors

¹⁵ See note 12. The film was awarded The Golden Chest at The Golden Chest International Festival for TV films in Plovdiv, in 2003.

¹⁶ Support came from Open Society (New York and Sofia) and the Debate Association.

continued his work. In the ensuing years, generations of student and professional actors have helped put on a new play nearly every year: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2004),¹⁷ *Love's Labor's Lost* (2005), *The Comedy of Errors* (2006),¹⁸ *Macbeth* (2008),¹⁹ *Pericles* (2009), *As You Like It* (2010), *Much Ado About Nothing* (2011), *The Winter's Tale* (2012), *The Tempest* (2014),²⁰ *Romeo and Juliet* (2015),²¹ *Twelfth Night* (2016).²² In 2009, Rex Doyle, from the Guildford School of Acting, took over the planning of productions and the summer rehearsals in Patalenitsa, to be joined in 2012 by other colleagues and students from Guildford. In 2013 two of them developed "To Love or Not to Love," a promenade performance composed of Shakespeare's sonnets and play fragments.²³ Other Guildford actors, directors, and musicians continued the collaboration after Doyle's death in 2015, contributing to *Romeo and Juliet* (2015) and *Twelfth Night* (2016). In the summer of 2017, British theater director Russell Bolam will continue the tradition with his version of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Thus, an event which had evolved through sheer local pioneer enthusiasm, personal determination and good will has become internationalized and continues to develop on the same altruistic principles in its second decade. The theatrical side of the undertaking is constantly evolving. Patalenitsa is beginning to emerge as a summer center for cross-cultural actor training. During the last several years, along with work on the play, students from the Guildford School of Acting, Bulgarian theater students, and young actors from Britain, Bulgaria and South Africa have worked together as part of the project *Theater Bridges*.²⁴

Directors and professional actors come to Patalenitsa from different traditions and backgrounds to participate in an "open theater" process. Todor Dimitrov, both director (*Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and actor (Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*), gives a colorful description of what an open theater rehearsal in the school yard feels like:

Dates are negotiated there, young people hang around in their spare time, have a beer, discuss their problems. All this is taking place as rehearsals go on and somehow the two start

¹⁷ Directed by Todor Dimitrov.

¹⁸ The 2005 and 2006 productions were directed by Vyara Nacheva. Nacheva led rehearsals and workshops during 2007, but there was no performance that year.

¹⁹ Directed by Ivailo Simitchiev.

²⁰ The productions of 2009-2012 and 2014 were directed by Rex Doyle.

²¹ Directed by Trevor Rawlins.

²² Directed by Terry Fender.

²³ "To Love or Not to Love" was scripted and directed by Sterre Maier and Jenny Clarke.

²⁴ Vanya Tringova, "Izgrazhdat 'teatralni mostove' mezhdru Anglia i Patalenitsa" ["Theater Bridges' between England and Patalenitsa]," EuroPlovdiv.com, 14 November 2013, <http://europlovdiv.com/izgrazhdat-teatralni-mostove-mezhdru-angliya-i-patalenica>.

*living together in a sort of symbiosis. Until, that is, these young people start paying attention to us, pick up lines, monologues, come to know what actors are about to say next. Big kids, little kids show up on their bikes, mothers with their infants stop by, thus, the show starts living with the daily life of the village well before the opening night. These people will then show up at both our performances.*²⁵

One might conclude that in this way the average Patalenitsa teenager is exposed to more Shakespeare than most children in the world, though the situation should not be idealized. Local people do not yet form the major bulk of the audience. Still, as the troupe's veteran Pavlina-Kalina Tserovska suggests, "if you ask the villagers today, 'Who is Shakespeare?,' they will answer 'My people!'"²⁶

The performances that started as a small social project have many times outstripped their original ambitions, and have come to define Patalenitsa as much as its historical heritage. Every tourist site mentions them along with the ancient churches and monasteries. The array of activities around the summer performances has energized an interest in the history of the village and general creativity. Pupils participate in icon painting classes and ethnographic workshops, an enthusiasm that has led to the opening of a small historical exhibition. Local history was also used to create new shows, thus producing a unique moment of communal theatrical storytelling.²⁷ Lately, the children have organized computer classes for the elderly in the village, whom they teach how to use the internet for video-conferencing with relatives abroad. In the meantime, the school yard has also changed. Since 2002, it has acquired a small open stage and permanent raked seating for about 100 people. On its part, the village has built an indoor auditorium, but the Shakespeare performances always take place outdoors. Thus the theater activities are initiating diverse processes of change. Against the chaotic, anxiety-ridden atmosphere of post-communism these performances create, however temporary, a sense of order and positive expectations. It is the altruistic people who created Patalenitsa Shakespeare who have put the village on the cultural map, revived the interest in local history, made people proud of their village and, most importantly, opened a world of excitement, given a sense of achievement, provided a compass and fostered ambition in generations of young people.

²⁵ Todor Dimitrov in discussion with Kirilka Stavreva, Sofia, Bulgaria, 21 January 2014.

²⁶ Pavlina-Kalina Tserovska in discussion with Kirilka Stavreva, Sofia, Bulgaria, 20 January 2014.

²⁷ *Legendi za Patalenitsa i Batkun* [Legends about Patalenitsa and Batkun] by Inna Tserovska (2005) and *Nashentsi* [Our Folk] (2004), based on texts by Ivan Vazov and Chudomir.

Patalenitsa Shakespeare performances have stricken root in local life and it might be useful to assess them through a theoretical framework used for festivals. To borrow Alessandro Falassi's definition, a festival is "a periodically recurrent social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events . . . all members of a... community [are] united by ethnic, linguistic, religious and historical bonds."²⁸ The yearly presence of an audience of 400-500 people who come here from all over the country is an indicator of the existence of a supra-local community, which also identifies with the historical bonds that the festival stands for; it celebrates Bulgarian identity through a particular version of a larger, now globally open culture, represented by Shakespeare.

Rituals celebrating the creative community and its festival revitalization have evolved through the years. Before coming on stage, the actors form a circle and with the enthusiasm of Alexander Dumas' musketeers shout out: "One for all and all for one." Children who have participated in more than one performance raise their treasured stage swords, earned by hard work. All others join hands (fig. 6). The school bell announces the beginning of theater time, the festive time-out-of-time begins.



Fig. 6. Opening night of *Romeo and Juliet*, 2000.

In this established yet constantly evolving structure, cast, crew, and audience celebrate education and theater as an antithesis of the dominance of a consumerist chalga culture. A new logo further emblemizes the festival's spiritual dimension by bringing

²⁸ Alessandro Falassi, "Festival: Definition and Morphology," *Time out of Time: Essays on the Festival* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 2.

together the images of the historic church, Shakespeare and the name of the Petrovden theater school (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Patalenitsa Shakespeare logo.

In spite of the perpetual tenuousness of funding, the Shakespeare performances in Patalenitsa tell us something very encouraging about how the intellectual energy of individuals can carve out liberating, imaginative, spiritually enriching spaces. As Boika Sokolova was sitting at a rehearsal for the 2013 Christmas play (quite a separate one from the summer Shakespeare), a seven year-old Roma girl who was watching her sister perform, greeted her in English, offering a biscuit with the best manner of a hostess receiving a visitor in her home. She then shared the story of her life in two brief sentences: “We are fostered here,” she said, “our parents left us at a home.” After a short pause, she added, “But you know, I want to become a surgeon.” In Patalenitsa, children are taught to dream, irrespective of who they are.²⁹ The generosity of this vision is beautifully expressed in a statement by Hristo Tserovski, treasured to this day by his daughter: “The theater is for the little and big children of the village. Since we play under the skies, not only the actor, but the spectator is also a star.” Then Pavlina-Kalina Tserovska adds: “At every performance I look up; the sky is not a sky, the stage is not a stage . . . it is a bare place that teaches you about yourself.”³⁰ Inscribed into communal life as well as in the landscape of the village, Patalenitsa Shakespeare performs a function not unlike that of ancient Greek theater.

²⁹ Three of the former pupils are now students at the National Academy for Dramatic Art, others have followed other paths in higher education in Bulgaria and the United Kingdom, and those who leave to search employment elsewhere, tend to come back.

³⁰ See note 26.

If not a joyful celebration of spiritual communal values, that overturns the constraints of the surrounding reality, what *is* a festival?

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