

## REVIEW

**On a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree 'PhD'  
in the professional field 3.1 'Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies'**

**Doctoral Programme 'Cultural Studies'**

**Department of History and Theory of Culture, Faculty of Philosophy**

**Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'**

Topic: *Exploring the Potential of Sofia University for Creating a Centre for  
Scientific Theatre*

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Gergana Dimitrova holds a Master's degree in Cultural Studies from Sofia University (2000). She holds a Master's Degree in Theatre Directing from the Ernst Busch State Theatre Academy in Berlin (2005) and a Master's Degree in Theatre Directing from the National Theatre Academy 'Krastyo Sarafov' (2007). From 01 February 2019 to 01 February 2022 she was a full-time PhD student at the Department of History and Theory of Culture, Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University, in the thematic field of 'Cultural Relations between Sciences and Arts. Scientific Theatre as an Intersection of Science, Art and Education'.

Gergana Dimitrova 'came back' to the Department as a PhD student after almost 20 years of creative experience as a director, producer, author and translator of dramaturgical texts. The dissertation project builds on this wealth of experience and offers a reflection on one particular aspect of it – scientific/science theatre. This is why Gergana Dimitrova's presence and work as a PhD student were unusual, intriguing and enriching. Her dissertation project was a challenge in itself, which proved to be greatly complicated by the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is with great satisfaction that I hasten to note that PhD student Dimitrova rose to all the challenges admirably, and the proof of this is enclosed between the covers of her dissertation.

The dissertation submitted for defence consists of an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion with a total length of 214 pages. In addition, there are 13 appendices. The bibliography includes 101 titles in Bulgarian, English and German, including web pages, audio and video sources, which are correctly cited in the text of the dissertation. The author's abstract fully reflects the main points of the content, the scholarly contributions and the publications stemming from the dissertation project.

The topic of the dissertation has been defined by the practical experience of the author within several projects that she has carried out in recent years. As she herself notes in the Introduction, the advantage of her positioning as researcher is that within the framework of the dissertation project, artistic productions have been created that have become the object of analysis and reflection. In this way, the creative conception can be compared with the results as they have been appreciated by both professionals and audiences. I am very pleased to note the productivity of this approach in the dissertation at hand.

The construction of the object of study also deserves attention. Dimitrova takes a completely new and original perspective, unexplored so far, which mobilizes her previous experiences and expertise on the topic, places her research in a different context and leads to non-trivial results. Different methods have been used for the research, which are very well combined in the dissertation, so that they complement and support each other: institutional analysis; autoethnography; a research experiment of sorts, which has been analyzed; audience surveys; interviews; a public discussion. The video archives of the events constitute a solid empirical basis for the analysis and conclusions in this dissertation.

The structure adopted for the dissertation is consistent with the aims, objectives and steps towards their realisation. The Introduction defines the context and the subject of the research, namely to explore 'the potential of scientific theatre as an artistic practice with high added value' (p. 7), and its tasks, namely to investigate the possibilities of establishing a 'Centre for Scientific Theatre at Sofia University that would serve as a point of intersection of science, art and education' (p. 15). This

combination of research and practical-applied tasks determines the originality of the approach in the dissertation project. Dimitrova correctly elucidates her working concept of scientific/science theatre, which is not simply the promotion of scientific knowledge, but 'uses the inherent dramatic potential of science, the fact that its discoveries and scientific and technological revolutions give rise to tensions, risks, human problems, human passions' in order to present science as 'a positive but complex and conflicting value' (p. 10).

Chapter One clarifies the basic concept – scientific theatre (or science theatre) – in terms of the two sectors it links: theatre and science. On the one hand, science theatre is a means of transferring scientific knowledge in an accessible and engaging way; on the other, it carries the mission of theatre as an art to raise existential and moral questions and to provoke reflection. Science theatre has been conceptualised broadly, encompassing multiple genres: from lecture-performance, through installation, theatrical discussion, dance, to classical science-themed drama. Central to all of them is the kind of storytelling, which presents verified scientific information in an accessible way, has an emotional impact on audiences, and raises ethical questions related to the development of science and technology (p. 26). The practical-applied aspect of this chapter consists of developing a methodology containing the sequential steps of implementing different genres of science theatre based on reflecting on the author's own and others' experiences.

Chapter Two is exploratory in nature. It systematises the descriptions of seven organisations in Germany, Austria, Italy and Ireland that incorporate some form of science theatre into their activities. This part of the work is valuable for its systematic nature and its wealth of information, making it a good introduction to and mapping of the research field. It follows a consistent scheme of description of the organizations that allows for comparisons and well-argued conclusions. One of the most important indicators for comparison is the sustainability of the initiatives examined. Another important aspect is partnerships, with special attention to those involving universities and/or research institutes. In addition, the author is interested in the structure, funding and repertoire of the organisations examined, as well as their thematic range and their target audiences. This chapter is instrumental not

only due to its informativeness (together with Appendices 1-3), but above all with the models of interaction and partnership that the author constructs on the basis of her comparative analysis.

Chapter Three offers detailed accounts of the initiatives on the Bulgarian scene that link science and art. Here, Dimitrova draws on her own artistic experience, which lies at the heart of the idea for the PhD thesis project. Several projects are described in detail, with a focus on the interactive installation 'In the Little Big World of Bats', made jointly by the author and the biologist Antonia Hubancheva as part of the dissertation research. The analysis is closely related to the specific empirical material. In addition, of particular interest is the online discussion organized by Dimitrova within the dissertation project. It involves representatives of the natural sciences (physics, biology) and the humanities (cultural studies) discussing the potential and limitations of possible synergies between science and art. The argument in this chapter logically leads to the author's statement that the development of scientific theatre in Bulgaria is not catching up, but is going parallel to its development in other European countries. This positive finding is, however, accompanied by the cautiously formulated observation of 'a certain conservatism of the environment' (p. 117), expressed in the lack of participation of Bulgarian public institutions in the implemented projects, including the international ones. Unlike Bulgaria, in other European countries it is the partnership with public institutions that ensures the sustainability of such initiatives. This significant difference in context will be highlighted and commented further in Chapter Five with regard to Sofia University.

Chapter Four (including Appendices 5-7) is particularly valuable in that it reverses the perspective to explore the impact of the events outlined in the previous chapter, on their audiences. To the best of my knowledge, such studies are very rare, and this one is the first of its kind in this country. I would like to specifically point out the original methodologies that give access to the long-term, medium-term and short-term impacts of science theatre productions. Although the surveyed samples (especially of the long-term study) are limited in scope, the results still give some insight into the correlation between the conception and the objectives of the events

on the one hand, and their reception, on the other. No less importantly, the methodologies allow for similar studies to be conducted in the future. The long-term impact of the author's two theatre installations was established through focus groups conducted several years after the events. Both the immediate impressions and the more lasting effects such as changes in attitudes, broadening of horizons, etc. have been very carefully and thoroughly summarized. Although conducted using different methods, namely observations and surveys, the other two studies adhere to the same research questions. The careful analysis of the limitations of the methodologies and the sampling is another merit of the studies. Here, I would like to particularly note the practical contribution of the observations on students and in particular the findings about the conditions that influence their interest; these findings are significant also beyond the context of scientific theatre.

Chapter Five is devoted to the so-called feasibility study – exploring the possibility of establishing a permanent centre for scientific theatre at Sofia University. Here, Dimitrova relies on expert interviews with stakeholders in key positions: the Rectors (current and former) and a Vice-Rector of the University, the heads of the University Theatre and of the Cultural Centre of Sofia University. The interviews have been thoroughly transcribed and appended to the PhD thesis (Appendices 10-13). The respondents' views on the opportunities and challenges of establishing such a centre are summarised in a kind of SWOT-analysis (although the author does not use this term) with reference to the European experience, systematised in Chapter Two. In this respect, the work offers yet another valuable practical contribution, despite the discouraging conclusion that Sofia University currently lacks the potential to establish a centre for science theatre: not only in terms of financial resources and infrastructure, but also because of the lack of 'strategic thinking and visionary policy' (p. 207). While agreeing in principle with this conclusion, I would like to raise the question of the interdependence between the characteristics of the chosen model and the possibilities for its implementation: the Science Gallery (Dublin), which is rightly pointed out as the most suitable model for Sofia University (p. 192), is also among the most ambitious and resource-intensive of the cases considered. Could the author evaluate the possibility of launching a smaller-scale model, whose successful

implementation could eventually become a first step towards the implementation of a more ambitious, Science Gallery-type model?

To conclude: Gergana Dimitrova's doctoral dissertation is a groundbreaking work that not only outlines a research field, but also opens up a fertile ground for synergies between education, science and the arts, for inter-institutional and inter-sectoral partnerships and, last but not least – for involving young people in science and attracting them to the University. Dimitrova has made significant contributions in several respects: developing the concept of scientific/science theatre and a methodology for creating science-theatre productions; testing and conceptualising different genres (forms) of science theatre; analysing and evaluating existing initiatives in Europe and Bulgaria; researching the reception and the impact of science theatre productions on the audience's attitudes and hence its added value; developing a model for a science theatre centre and exploring the potential of Sofia University to establish such a centre. These contributions are accurately reflected in the author's abstract.

The proposed dissertation, the author's abstract and the publications stemming from the PhD research fully comply with the criteria for the award of the educational and scientific degree 'Doctor' (PhD). On this basis, I unhesitatingly propose that Gergana Dimitrova be awarded the degree of Doctor in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies.

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