

Teil 2 der Serie: panorama international

A Brief Outline of the Bulgarian Independent Performing Arts Scene

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At first, we need to define the term our narrative will employ: it is one initially used for naming the art forms conceived outside the state structures – "independent".





Foto links: IETM meeting, ACT independent theatre festival, the National Palace of Culture © ACT association archive
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As the notion of independence elaborated, exceeding institutional arguments and adding new political and aesthetical facets, the term "free scene" was adopted from the corresponding German discourse of that time. However, this concept still encompasses a much larger philosophical complex. It is not only an institution-free, self-organising mode of making art, but it also implies a different ideological and aesthetical approach. It resides in the ideas of experiment, risk, contemporaneity, mobility, interdisciplinarity, collaboration, political and civic expression, process-oriented vs. product-aimed work, etc.

The first Bulgarian formations which could be identified as "free scene" projects were the informal groups, the independent creative communitas – unstructured and non-hierarchical convergences of like-minded people, which emerged in a natural and spontaneous way, based on free inter-connections

between individuals, led by one and the same initiation path (as the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner understands the notion). These unstructured groups, based on the principle of free association, were born outside the centre (the capital city) but still engulfed in the strong ideological grip of communism at the beginning of the 80s. They were brought together and driven by the taste for experimenting with innovative forms of theatre and dance, to break free from the rigidity of the socialist art subordinate to ideological and aesthetic norms. They were short-lived phenomena due to their loose nature of collectivism and intrinsic instability.

The contemporary free scene – in terms of a tangible environment of active agents from various art disciplines – emerged just after the democratic changes, when the political situation allowed for private and non-governmental entities (NGOs) to enter the

scene. The possibility to somehow institutionalise the creative impulse, to set up legal bodies and organisations, made the scene a coherent perceptible body intensively present in the social, political and cultural environment. The independent working mode of artist groups and individual artists became only possible when public institutions devised instruments that allowed for producing art outside the state structures. In the 90s, some international institutions like Soros Centre for the Arts, Pro Helvetia, and later local institutions like Ministry of Culture and Sofia Municipality launched programs in support of independently produced art. So, the free scene eventually started to transform into a strong consolidated body only at the beginning of the new millennium. During the first decade of the 21st century artistic communities began to form legal structures like NGOs for the purpose of fund raising and sustainability.

Artistic Formations

Following the period of individual artists in the 90s, legally structured formations – more stable than the *communitas* some 20 years earlier – institutionalised different ideas, aesthetics, means of expression and artistic positions on contemporaneity. Their operational mode has been the project-based principle: applying at various funding bodies locally and internationally. A crucial factor in regard to the independent artists'/organisations' development is their involvement in an international context, which enables the free scene to align with the contemporary zeitgeist. A broad spectrum of networking and international collaborations is the only valid way of functioning in the contemporary environment, and the free scene is the herald and the motor of this mode. Contemporary intuitions – aesthetics, ideas, concepts and tools – are derived from the milieu of the free art scene rather than from the institutional art, which is much more embedded in the local and the national.

In the field of contemporary dance and performance, some of the most active organisations are Brain Store Project, founded in 2005 by Iva Sveshtarova and Willy Prager, who mainly work in the field of conceptual physical performance. Their approach to performance is mostly theoretical and framed conceptually due to their specific education in experimental theatre, avant-garde aesthetics and contemporary practices in Bulgaria and Germany.

In 2008, the choreographer Zhivko Zhelyazkov and the manager Atanas Maev launched Derida Dance Company. This is the first and only artistic structure to be in charge of a venue so far. Derida Dance Centre is an entirely private initiative. The centre produces only productions by Derida Company. However, it does also provide programs for developing and maintaining dancers' qualifications as well as residencies for artists. One of their main objectives is to cultivate their own dancers by providing training in various modern and contemporary techniques.

Garage collective is another unique voice in the contemporary dance scene with its mixture of Bulgarian, Macedonian and Swedish artists.

Some of the most interesting individual artists, who have experienced classical ballet training before mastering contemporary dance techniques, are Galina Borissova, Violeta Vitanova, Stanislav Genadiev. Anna Dankova, working in the cross-genre of theatre and movement-based performance, is also among the important names of the scene with her sensitive and nuanced research into the relationship of the human and the apparatus. The performer and choreographer Ivo Dimchev is a story of its own: Bulgarian by origin, international by career, Ivo Dimchev is probably the most well-known Bulgarian artist worldwide with his signature style ranging from performance to pop music (his latest course of artistry). Ivo opened his own space called Mozei in Sofia, conceptualised as an extension of his own artistic expressions – concerts, exhibitions, performances, etc.



In the domain of theatre and performance some of the most active players are Metheor, an association for theatre, philosophy and literature initiated by theatre director Ani Vaseva, philosopher Boyan Manchev and actor Leonid Yovchev; 36 monkeys, run by theatre director Gergana Dimitrova; Based on Actual Events association, led by Irina Goleva and Ognyan Golev; The Pressure Cooker association of Ida Daniel; Studio for documentary theatre Vox Populi, directed by Neda Sokolovska. In the realm of theoretical reflection, it is the New Dramaturgies platform of two theatre and dance theoreticians, Angelina Georgieva and Mira Todorova, who have launched a website for theory and criticism called dramaturgynew.net, reflecting on projects and processes within the free scene and in terms of the local as well as international contemporary performing arts.

A significant initiative for the consolidation of the independent scene was the establishment of the ACT Association in 2009, which was conceived

as an alliance of non-governmental organisations and artists active in the field of contemporary performing arts. The main objectives of the association are to unify, coordinate and research the independent performing arts scene; to pursue advocacy campaigns in order to improve the conditions for professional work in the sector; to facilitate the internalisation of the independent scene in a European and broader cultural context.

Festivals

Many festivals organised by people working in the free scene started to appear at the end of the first decade of the new millennium. In 2008, two festivals for contemporary dance and performance simultaneously launched their first editions: Antistatic and Sofia Dance Week (later called One Dance Week, when it moved to the city of Plovdiv). The former, an initiative by the Brain Store Project, focuses more on experimental work and has a strong emphasis on discursive and training modules, while the latter is targeting larger audiences with bigger names and more spectacular performances. In 2016, a small-scale festival for contemporary dance and performance, led by the private initiative of Etud gallery, emerged: "Etud and Friends" – an initiative by former dancer Ani Collier, who is now a photographer living in New York, in collaboration with the choreographer Galina Borissova.

The ACT association initiated the ACT independent theatre festival, which started in 2011 with the aim to be an annual forum for independent artists and organisations in the field of performing arts. It subsequently grew to become an international festival and, in

2014, it also managed to organise the first IETM meeting in Sofia, which was a great boost for the whole scene and set off a series of events that led to the creation of the first interdisciplinary centre for contemporary arts – as a response to the long-standing deficit in spaces and incubators for creating and presenting independent work. An extensive advocacy campaign, supported by international experts, took place in front of the Sofia Municipality and the Ministry of Culture. As a result, several managerial and artistic concepts were developed, a suitable site was identified and the "Toplocentrala" project was launched, accompanied by an international call for architectural concepts. The project, still at its beginning, is one of the biggest of this scale and ambition in Bulgaria, though. Another major project by the association, again in partnership with Sofia Municipality, was to conduct an extensive research into the potentiality and needs of the independent scenes – the visual arts, theatre, dance, music and literature – and to develop a proposal for a 7-year strategy for its development in Sofia. All these initiatives made the public institutions finally aware of the presence and significance of the free scene in the general artistic and socio-cultural ecosystem.

Spaces

The first original space for independent arts, culture and social practices was the Red House Centre for Culture and Debate, inaugurated in 2004. The mission of the centre is to develop the independent arts scene, to inspire civic participation and critical thinking and to support social inclusion through art and psychodrama. One of the contemporary stars of the performing arts scene

Foto links: Toplocentrala

Foto rechts: iFeel2 Marco Berrettini
(part of the international platform
Migrating Body, DNK space for
contemporary dance and performance)
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worldwide, Ivo Dimchev, started his career there while he was still only being considered a charismatic weirdo. For many years, The Red House Centre was the only space to host and co-produce independent projects. In 2015, within the structure of the National Palace of Culture in Sofia, a former club was converted into an art space: the DNK space for contemporary dance and performance. DNK is the first space with a special curatorial concept focusing on contemporary dance and performance. It co-produces independent projects, providing them with rehearsal space and regular presentation opportunities throughout each season. DNK collaborates with many festivals (Antistatic, Etud and Friends, ACT festival) and runs the international program Migrating Body (supported by various local and international funds), featuring

performances, workshops, residencies and discursive formats. The latest space is Derida Stage, inaugurated in April 2019, a private project by Derida Dance Centre, which is planned to be a multidisciplinary space for artistic projects in the performing and visual arts.

Education

One of the essential prerequisites for the development of the arts – and the free scene in particular – is the contemporary educational infrastructure and the diverse training opportunities it can present young people with. But one of the biggest setbacks in the above-mentioned development is the lack of adequate educational institutions and programs, which is more or less the case in Bulgaria. The general problem is the strong tendency toward traditional practices and the emphasis

on the epic arts like classical theatre and dance, which do not empower people to be innovative, to be authors (and not merely performers/executors/subjects of somebody else's will), to work in a manner of self-organisation and to collaborate with peers in horizontal, non-hierarchical structures. Opportunities for contemporary forms of training are only provided by the organisations, the institutions and the spaces which are already the main operators of the independent art scene. The unfortunate outcome of this situation is that there are only few young people entering the free scene, and the most active generation – artists in their 30s and 40s – are getting tired of struggling with the realities regarding funding, budgets, available spaces, social conditions, etc.

Challenges

The Bulgarian free scene faces the same challenges as project-based art everywhere – lack of funding, lack of space for extensive rehearsal periods, limited creative processes and an extremely short life span of the performance/product. As a consequence, one of the free scene's constitutive characteristics is the apparent social and aesthetic precarity of the sector. But therein also lies a certain reaffirmation of freedom – of constantly having to reinvent and justify one's course of action and identity, of constantly claiming one's right to choose and being responsible for every choice you make. The Bulgarian free scene does not only play an important role in the general Bulgarian art landscape but it also stimulates urban dynamics through its self-organising modes of art production, which create not only artefacts but challenge conventional modes of thinking and participating in the broader context of the polis.

PURE Christian Bakalov (DNK space for contemporary dance and performance) © Orlin Ognyanov

