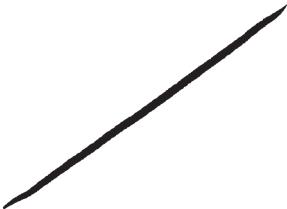


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VARNA SUMMER INTERNATIONAL THEATRE FESTIVAL: THEATRE DIALOGUES

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Abstract: The article examines the history and contemporary development of the main theatre event in Bulgaria – *Varna Summer International Theatre Festival*. The festival was first organised in 1992, as part of the common Eastern European effort to renew and reconnect with Western European and global cultures, following the political shift of 1989. The festival has grown significantly and evolved dynamically over its 33-year history. Launched to present the best of Bulgarian theatre, along with a few foreign productions, starting in 1997 the festival turned into an important international forum that now stands alongside other high-profile European festivals. The festival features four distinct sections: Main Programme – Bulgarian Selection; Main Programme – International Selection; the Showcase; and the Parallel Programme. Maintaining a strong tradition, every edition featured a rich tapestry of foreign and Bulgarian theatre and dance productions, exhibitions, street performances, screenings, concerts and conferences. The forum has also clearly established itself as an open space for discussions, educational workshops and theatre meetings.

Keywords: *Varna Summer International Theatre Festival*, cultural exchange, significant European performances, best Bulgarian theatre productions, theatre showcase, digital portal.

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Introduction

In a complicated place, like our contemporary globalized and digitalized world, facing military conflicts and geopolitical tensions, where a lot of trauma has been heaped up in the interrelations between nations and individuals, international theatre festivals are one of the most productive forums and a good opportunity for a new, calm and refreshing encounter between free individuals, brought together by their shared interest in theatre. Here we can recall how brilliantly this role was fulfilled by the festivals of Edinburgh and Avignon, both established in the late 1940s (Bartie 2013; Nikolova, K. 2007, 99) with similar intentions.

The largest theatrical event in Bulgaria over the past 33 years – the *Varna Summer International Theatre Festival* is a strong confirmation of the statement above. It was launched in 1992 as part of Eastern Europe’s renewal movement and as a platform for engagement with Western European and global cultures. The first theatre forum for this specific purpose emerged in Poland and was aptly named *KONTAKT* (Torun, 1990). It was followed by *Divadelna Nitra* in Slovakia, *Divadlo* in the Czech Republic, the *FITS* festival in Sibiu, Romania, *Eurokaz* in Croatia and *Exodos* in Slovenia. Even though it was established around the same time, the Varna Theatre Festival was quite different in its early days. While all these festivals aimed at establishing themselves as international forums and places for cultural exchange between the East and the West, in the first four years of

its existence, the *Varna Summer* International Theatre Festival was rather trying to examine the valuable traditions and the renewal tendencies in Bulgarian theatre. In that early period, the festival stuck to a formula which emphasized the presentation of a main programme, comprised of the best Bulgarian performances of the season, supplemented by a parallel programme consisting of a few other Bulgarian productions, not included in the main programme, as well as two or three foreign “guest” performances. The fifth edition of *Varna Summer* in 1997 was a turning point in the festival’s development. In that year, the festival essentially changed its approach and turned into an international event. From then on, it naturally became a member of the big family of European festivals and put itself on the continent’s theatre map.

Since 1997, *Varna Summer* International Theatre Festival has been running on a new programme scheme. It is made up of three sections of equal standing: selected Bulgarian performances, selected foreign performances, and a parallel programme, which includes many diverse events. This structure has been followed to date, and has been further developed and enriched.

The 15th anniversary edition in 2007, when *Varna Summer* ITF’s scope broadened, was an important step towards the optimization of the festival’s programme scheme¹. The festival launched a new platform, *World Theatre in Sofia*², to showcase the best of its international programme in the capital, Sofia. Having started in the year of Bulgaria’s accession to the European Union, that initiative naturally integrated Bulgarian theatre into the European and global theatre context and made Bulgarian spectators a part of the global audience.

The festival’s efforts and aspirations to be a stepping stone for Bulgarian stage practice, for an increasingly broader involvement in international theatre processes and the international theatre market, continued the following year – 2008, by the establishment of the *Showcase* section. Its aim is to present interesting and mobile performances from the country’s theatre programme to guests, but mostly to foreign theatre managers, programmers and curators. Over the past years, the broadening and enrichment of the *Varna Summer* International Theatre Festival’s programme scheme has led to an internal restructuring. Today, the festival consists of a Main Programme, which includes a Bulgarian and a foreign selection, while the *Showcase* section includes mobile performances and a Parallel Programme³.

1 See also: Georgieva, A., Editor (15 Years International Theatre Festival *Varna Summer*, Sofia: ITF Varna Summer, 2007)

2 See in more detail: <https://viafest.org/sofia/en/archive/?y=2007>

3 See: <https://viafest.org/varna/en/programme/>

Several main intentions have been clearly outlined in the chosen programme strategy. On the one hand, it aims to make the festival a place where Bulgarian spectators and theatre practitioners are introduced to the art of theatre, mainly from Europe, but also from the USA, China, Japan and Australia. On the other hand, it aims to provide an opportunity to look at Bulgarian theatre in the context of global contemporary theatre practice, and to successfully include it in the international market and exchange of theatre productions. These “local” intentions are supplemented by the desire to get the festival recognized as a centre of active intercultural dialogue.



Varna Summer International Theatre Festival – poster of the 33rd edition: 1-11 June 2025
 Source: <https://viafest.org/en/the-programme-of-the-varna-summer-theatre-festival-2025-is-already-here/>

Main programme – Bulgarian selection

Over the past 33 years, the programme of selected Bulgarian performances has displayed a distinct tendency in its conception. The first editions emphatically attempted to outline the well-established values of Bulgarian theatre, creative developments and new processes based, more or less, on them. Thus, they emphasized the fact that the directors’ thorough and innovative interpretation of drama texts is the greatest accomplishment of Bulgarian theatre and a sign that it remains alive and relevant. All selections in the first three years presented the three main niches in that common direction. They featured performances by leading figures of the prominent director’s theatre, such as Leon Daniel, Krikor

Azaryan, Krasimir Spasov and Nikolay Polyakov. One of the most provoking and spectacular performance of that group was Krasimir Spasov's *Vassa Zheleznova* by Gorky. The group of directors who embraced the mission to seek new dimensions and expand the scope of psychological theatre in the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s, such as Margarita Mladenova, Ivan Dobchev and Stoyan Kambarev was featured most extensively. Margarita Mladenova's *Three Sisters*, *Nirvana*, *Mad Grass*, Ivan Dobchev's *Uncle Vanya*, *Easter Wine* and Stoyan Kambarev's *Black Hole* and *The Mother* became the undisputed highlights of *Varna Summer's* first years. The third niche which was part of the first editions was that of young directors, such as Alexander Morfov, Ivan Panteleev, Galin Stoev, Javor Gardev, who kept on staging classical texts, but increasingly interpreted them through the post-modern notions of game, quotation and irony.

The transformation of the festival into an international event was also accompanied by a considerable change in the way Bulgarian titles were selected. The 1997 and 1998 festival editions tried to showcase, first and foremost, the new manifestations, tendencies and directions in Bulgarian theatre which, since the early 1990s, experienced a process of catching up with the stage genres, forms and ideas it had missed in the previous several decades. It was an act of intensive integration into the latest movements of contemporary European theatre. Nowadays, the programme of selected Bulgarian performances mainly aims to highlight young directors and companies, current quests and innovative discoveries in the field of theatre language. Here, Javor Gardev's *Tanya – Tanya* by Olya Muhina, Galin Stoev's *Ilyria* (after *Twelfth Night* and Shakespeare's sonnets), Lilia Abadjieva's *Hamlet*, Dimitar Nedkov's *Comedy of Errors* have become the undisputed favourites. The other very important aim was the effort to present all kinds of theatre, which had emerged, but used to be marginalized in Bulgarian theatre during the communist era, which was oriented towards ideological realistic theatre, centered around the text. Thus, for the first time since the festival began, a contemporary dance made its way into the official programme. Also, for the first time there was a multimedia performance, with a live-act and physical theatre: Vazkressia Viharova's *Alpenglow* by Peter Turrini. There was also a one-man-show and a post-modern literary performance: Marius Kourkinski's virtuoso solo performance of *The Lady with the Little Dog* after Chekhov, which became the 1997 festival's hit. Alongside those priorities, the 1997 and 1998 selections also presented the new directions or the brilliant achievements of already established directors and experimental theatre companies, such as Alexander Morfov, Ivan Stanev and *Sfumato* Theatre Laboratory. Noteworthy were Stefan Moskov's *The Master and Margarita* by Bulgakov, Alexander Morfov's *The Tempest* and *Apocryph*, directed by Margarita Mladenova and Ivan Dobchev at their TR Sfumato.

After a period during which the festival's focus was to filter the most valuable aspects of tradition, followed by the quest to present mostly new or less widespread theatre genres, ideas and forms from previous years, the 1999 edition somehow summarized what had already been done and also became a starting point for future developments. Under the motto *The Theatre of Tolerance*, the festival's ambition was to showcase the best achievements of Bulgarian theatre as a whole. Thus, the festival's programme brought together stagings of new drama texts, spectacular directorial interpretations of classical plays, experimental psychological theatre, multimedia performances and physical theatre. Amidst this variety, the following productions were of special interest: Marius Kourkinsky's *Man Himself* after Platonov; Lilia Abadjieva's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* after Goethe, Desislava Shpatova's *Dangerous Liaisons* by Choderlos de Laclos and Javor Gardev's *Quartet* after Choderlos de Laclos and Heiner Müller. However, the undisputed favourite of the audience, the critics and the guests was *Three Sisters*, the last performance by the late director Stoyan Kambarev, whose passing was untimely. It was extraordinary both in terms of its execution and as a deep and penetrating personal reading of Chekhov's text. The production's great success at *Varna Festival* opened the doors to many international tours and appearances at other festivals abroad (Iordanov 2013, 35-41).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the festival has adopted a new main strategy: to reflect and advance variety in theatre life and to seek and distinguish the most creative and interesting events in all fields of performing arts. In the first fifteen years, the festival either tried to highlight the latest season's most brilliant productions – which represented the theatre as whole - to the audience and to Bulgarian and foreign critics and selectors, or sought to showcase original achievements and developments in a certain light. In this regard, of special importance was the 2000 Bulgarian programme, which was welcomed, but which also caused certain disagreements. It was based on the idea of examining theatre's experimental nature and performances' openness to other arts. The performances that garnered the best response were *Indje*, directed by Vazkressia Viharova and Zarko Uzunov; Galin Stoev's *The Runaway Plane*; Elena Tsikova's *Noah's Ark*. They demonstrated the diverse and innovative forms such openness could take. The actor (Doycheva 2024: 56) and the text (Nikolova, R. 2017) were other focal points of the festival's selection (editions in 2003, 2005, 2013, 2015, 2024).

Over the past decade, the programme of selected Bulgarian performances has consistently adhered only to the strategy of showing the main tendencies of theatre as a whole. Thus, several dominating directions are highlighted in the programme. The memorable performances of traditional and modern classics (Nikolova, K. 2017: 28-55,) staged by established directors, have made up a

considerable part of the programme, as among the highlights were the profound interpretations of Chekhov by Krikor Azaryan, in his most recent performances of *The Seagull*, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, Krassimir Spasov's *Albena*, Javor Gardev's *Caligula*, Margarita Mladenova's *The Winter's Tale* and *Julie, Jean and Kristin*, Lilia Abadjieva's *Waiting for Godot*, Ivan Dobchev's *Nirvana* and *Antigone* after Anouilh, Marius Kourkinsky's *The Blue Bird*, Stoyan Radev's *A Doll's House*, Plamen Markov's *Richard III*, Katya Petrova's *Peer Gynt*. Another permanent direction has been the postdramatic theatre, represented by Stefan Moskov's *Ulysses Travels*, Maya Novoselska's solo performance *A Small Radio* and the verbatim performance *Bulgaria start here*, directed by Neda Sokolovska. Galin Stoev's *Delhi Dance* by Ivan Viripaev and *The Hague* by Sasha Denisova, as well as Javor Gardev's *Chamcoria*. The performances based on contemporary Bulgarian, European and world dramaturgy have also held a steady place; distinguished among them were Javor Gardev's masterful performance of Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*

Recent festival editions have placed special emphasis on two particularly important trends in the Bulgarian selection: the emergence of new playwriting (Baykov 2017, 79-85) and the rise of the youngest generation of directors. The 2011 selection has a special place in this regard, with its focus on young Bulgarian theatre. The undisputed leaders in the first case are Galin Stoev's two overwhelming postdramatic performances, based on *A Little Play for Children's Room* and *Pleasantlyscary*, both written by Yana Borisova, as well as Margarita Mladenova's original expressive reading of *The Apocalypse Comes at 6 p.m.*, written by Georgi Gospodinov. The most noteworthy mentions in the case of young directors are certainly the following: Gergana Dimitrova's *P.O. Box Unabomber*, Vasilena Radeva's *Carnival.com*, Mladen Alexiev's *Under Control*, Srayko Murdzev's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Chris Sharkov's *A Doll's House* and *The Wild Duck*, as well as Zafir Radjab's *Tribes* by Nina Raine.

Showcase

The Showcase section, established in 2008 to highlight mobile Bulgarian performances which represent the most interesting achievements in recognized aesthetics or innovative approaches, broadens the festival's ability to present and support the distribution of theatre productions nationally and, especially, internationally. Selected performances are required to be easily portable and adaptable to various spaces, reflecting current trends, diversity and impact across different cultural contexts; as a result, the festival programme includes types of theatre, freelance actors and independent theatre companies who have increasingly struggled to secure their place in Bulgaria's theatre scene. Over its

fifteen years of existence, the Showcase section has successfully presented to foreign specialists, curators and selectors both the mobile favourites of contemporary Bulgarian theatre (most of whom also take part in the main selection), such as *Credo* Theatre's production *The Overcoat*, Margarita Mladenova's *The Dance of Death*, Ivan Dobchev's *Lasarus and Jesus*, Vazkressia Viharova's *Bit*, Javor Gardev's *The Pillowman* and *Caligula*, Galin Stoev's *A Little Play for Children's Room* and *Pleasantlyscary*, as well as a rich palette of contemporary dance, physical theatre, environmental theatre and interactive theatre performances. Quite notable among them are Venelin Shurelov's performance-installations *MAN EX MACHINA* and *ZOOM IN*, Nadia Pancheva's *I am My Own Wife*, Boyan Ivanov's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, the dance performances *VOID* by Violeta Vitanova and Stanislav Genadiev, *36 (more 4 less)* by Heteropodi Dance Co., *ecorche* by Miroslav Yordanov and Valeri Milenkov, the *NASK* dance installation by Derida Dance Center and the choreographer Zhivko Zhelyazkov, Iva Sveshtarova and Willy Prager's *Topology*, *Balkan Dance Reality Show* (with Rose Beerman and Sonja Pregrad) and *Made for Happiness*.

The programme's goal of selecting the best and most impactful work from both the mainstream of contemporary Bulgarian theatre and the innovative achievements of alternative theatre, combined with the strong demand for the festival from Varna's audience and theatre community, explains the great spectator interest and the packed theatre halls.

Main programme – International selection

The international programme of *Varna Summer International Theatre Festival* includes more than 300 performances from 39 countries from all over the world. The overall picture of foreign productions from 1997 onward – when the festival became an international event – is diverse and dynamic, yet three clear strategies for selecting the performances can be identified.

In the beginning, as was the case with the Bulgarian productions from that same period, the intention was to present theatre concepts, practices and genres, either unknown or unpopular in Bulgaria during the communist time, which had a strong presence in contemporary theatre. Thus, the international programme was dominated by performances in the field of contemporary dance and physical theatre. The massive import of those alternative genres, quite popular in Europe, Canada and the USA, caused a storm of approval and resistance, until it finally managed, for a couple of years, to shape lasting tastes and habits among Varna audiences, encouraging them to seek out and engage with contemporary dance theatre. Among the many dance, physical and interdisciplinary performances featured in the festival over the past 33 years, several very impressive guest

appearances by leading British companies and individual performers – made possible with the support of the British Council in Sofia - have had a particularly strong impact. Some performances have made their way into the minds of the spectators and theatre community, never to be forgotten for their masterful execution, innovative spirit and technical prowess. Here are a few examples: *And Nothing but the Truth* by the V-Tol Dance Company and choreographer Mark Murphy; Nigel Charnock's *Human Being*; *The Trilogy* by *Random Dance Company*, director and choreographer Wayne McGregor. The Swiss theatre companies, whose selection and participation were supported at the time by the Pro Helvetia Swiss Cultural Programme, have traditionally delivered strong presentations – *Linga* (with *A Train May always Hide Another One* and *Wrap me up I*, choreography by Katarzyna Gdaniec and Marco Cantalupo), *Drift* (with *Relache noir* and *Machine a sons*, choreography by Beatrice Jaccard, Peter Schelling, Massimo Bertinelli, Ivan Wolfe), as well as the troupe of Bulgarian-born dancer Krassen Krastev and Jozsef Trefeli. Well received have also been the butoh performance *Sardine and a Hot Wind* by Hisako Horikawa from Japan, *The Legend about the End of the World* and *Angel's Memories* by *Dah Theatre* from Serbia and the solo-miniatures by Urs Dietrich from Germany.

Since the late 1990s, the *Varna Summer International Theatre Festival* has also aimed at showing a broader programme of foreign performances, while maintaining its approach to showcase good examples of dance, physical and interdisciplinary theatre. Thus, both Bulgarian and guest performances have had the chance to place themselves in the context of the main trends in contemporary theatre.

In this respect, special emphasis has been placed on co-productions between Bulgarian troupes or individual actors and foreign companies, as well as on international performances by promising young Bulgarian directors. The following titles have made a lasting impression: *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter from the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and TV Art, Ljubljana University, Slovenia and *Antigone in Technoland* after Sophocles, by the Macedonian National Theatre, directed by Galin Stoev; *Moon over the Horizon* after Chekhov's plays and short stories by the *New Theatre*, Riga, Latvia, directed by Ivan Pantelev; *The Tempest* by the Adana State Theatre, Turkey, directed by Javor Gardev; *The Story of the Eye*, by *Theatre de la manufacture*, Nancy, France and *Concept for Theatre*, Bulgaria, directed by Ivan Stanev; *Ataraxia*, by *Grand Theatre*, Groningen, The Netherlands and *Sophiensaele*, Berlin, Germany, by choreographer and performer Galina Borisova; *The Black Fleece* by the *Theorem* program and *Sfumato Theatre Laboratory*; *Postcards to the 21st Century* by the *Arabesque Ballet*; *Comedy of Servants* by Festival D'Avignon, *La Filature Theatre* and *La Rose de vent Theatre*, France, the *Bulgarian Army Theatre* and the *La Strada Theatre*, Sofia, Bulgaria, directed by Stefan Moskov.

The selection of fine stagings after classical and modern texts has been another trend in broadening the scope of foreign performances. Andriy Zholdak's impressive and original performance *Hamlet. Dreams*, a production of the *Taras Shevchenko* Theatre, Kharkiv, Ukraine, as well as Eduard Miller's *Miss Julie*, a production of *Mladinsko* Theatre, Ljubljana, Slovenia, Niketi Kontouri's *Medea* after Euripides, a production of the National Theatre – Athens, Greece, *Jeanne D'Arc*, script and direction by Mihai Măniuciu, a production of the National Theatre – Bucharest, Romania, Vera Sturm's *Timon of Athens*, a production of the *Bremer Shakespeare Company*, Germany, have all made lasting impressions on spectators. An important step toward creating a richer international programme is the inclusion of productions based on new dramatic texts, accompanied by relevant educational and theoretical events in the parallel program. Some significant events have been the performance of *Mainstream*, by David Greig of *Suspect Culture*, Glasgow, UK, as well as the renowned Romanian director Radu Afrim's production of the multi-award winning play *Lucia Is Skating*, written by the young Lithuanian author Laura Sintija Černiauskaitė.

The attempt to turn the festival into a platform for dialogue regarding various current trends and explorations in contemporary stage practice has been clearly reflected in its selection of original one-man shows, experimental performances, and presentations of key 20th-century figures and productions which examine the boundaries of contemporary theatrical language. Undoubtedly, one of the most important events in this part of the programme was *Dies Irae* by the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, presented in *Varna Summer 2004*. The one-man show *Voices*, a production of the National Theatre – Gent, Belgium, famous for its participation in many prestigious festivals, directed by Johan Simons, in the striking performance delivered by Jeroen Willems, received great acclaim, as did *Dairy of a Madman*, directed by Viktor Bodó⁴, of the Katona József Theatre, Hungary.

The policy of significantly expanding the programme of foreign performances has naturally led to the goal of establishing the festival as a serious international forum. Over the past two decades - following Bulgaria's accession to the EU on 1.01.2007 – the leading strategy has been to showcase some of the best productions representative of contemporary European theatre developments. This goal was convincingly achieved at the 2006 *Varna Summer*. Its strong international programme not only reaffirmed the festival's position among Europe's leading

4 See more: Nikolova, K. "The 25th Edition of the Varna Summer International Theatre Festival: Gathering a Variety of Theatre Voices", *The Theatre Times*, 22nd Aug 2017. Available at: <https://thetheatretimes.com/25th-edition-varna-summer-international-theatre-festival-gathering-variety-theatre-voices/>. (Accessed at: 28 April 2025)

theatre events, but also introduced Bulgarian audiences and theatre professionals to some of the most emblematic names and productions in recent contemporary theatre. The programme is based on the idea of presenting different kinds of theatre that reflect the main trend of our time: the quest for connection, and the pursuit of understanding and being understood across different cultures and contexts. It presents theatre genres that can transcend geographical and spiritual borders and be embraced by mixed audiences: performances after classical texts, contemporary dance, interdisciplinary forms combining multimedia, environmental theatre and life acts and shows involving direct contact with the spectators. The trend of using classical works as a universal background for understanding human experience has had the strongest impact and has earned widespread acclaim. It is outlined by *Twelfth Night*, directed by the world-famous Romanian director Silviu Purcarete; *rehearsal. Hamlet*, directed by Enrique Diaz, a production of Brazil's *Cia dos Atores*, one of the most provocative companies recently invited to many festivals, and *Seagull*, a production of the *Kretakor Theatre*, Hungary, directed by Arpad Schilling.

Later editions of the festival have continued to further expand this strategy. Their international programme was made up of the most interesting and successful names and performances, which shaped the profile of contemporary European theatre. Particularly noteworthy are: *Hey Girl* by Romeo Castellucci with his incredible theatre of images, a production of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, Italy; Alvis Hermanis's *Sonja*, a quite popular performance and an example of contemporary authenticity, a production of New Theatre, Riga, Latvia; Lithuanian Oskaras Korshunovas's *Romeo and Juliet*, Declan Donnellan's *Andromaque*, a production of C. I. C. T. / Théâtre Des Bouffes Du Nord, Paris, France and *Oedipus Rex*, National Theatre – Craiova, Romania; Galin Stoev's *Life is a Dream*, a production of Théâtre de la Place, Liège, Belgium; Radu Afrim's *The Avalanche*, a production of the National Theatre, Bucharest, Romania; the impressive solo performances *Slylock*, directed by Garrett Armstrong and *Shakespeare's Villains*, directed by Steven Burkoff, UK; *Filoctetes*, directed by Dimiter Gotscheff, who also made his debut as an actor (Volksbühne, Berlin), *Consider the Lobster* by the exceptional actor Samuel Finzi, a production of Deutsches Theater and Volksbühne, Berlin, Jernej Lorenci's *The Iliad*, Slovenia, John Malkovich's *The Infernal Comedy: Confessions Of A Serial Killer* etc.

The festival continued to present some of the legends 20-century theatre, such as Peter Brook with his performance *The Grand Inquisitor*, based on Dostoyevsky, a production of C. I. C. T./ Théâtre Des Bouffes Du Nord, Paris, France, Eugenio Barba's *Salt*, a production of Odin Theatre, Denmark, Pippo Delbono's *Orchids* (Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione/ Compagnia Pippo Delbono – Modena, Italy).

Contemporary dance was also represented by leading names, with great performances. *Rankefod* by the renowned choreographer and performer Kitt Johnson, *Grasping the Floor with the Back of My Head* by Mute Company, Denmark, *The Generosity of Dorcas*, concept, choreography and direction by Jan Fabre, *Correction*, directed by Jiří Havelka, Clarinet Factory – Prague, Marie Chouinard’s *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* from Canada, all earned great success. The following have also made a lasting impression: the masterful documentary theatre of Rabih Mroué from Lebanon, with his *Looking for a Missing Employee* and *Hotel Methuselah*, as well as a wonderful example of the increasingly popular devised theatre by UK’s theatre company *Imitating the Dog*. Some well-selected, diverse installations (Terziev 2017: 95-102:) and performances, such as *Uncanny Valley* of Münchner Kammerspiele and *Rimini Protocol*, Germany, have also resonated with audiences of all ages.

By launching the platform *World Theatre in Sofia* in 2007 and showcasing the figures and performances representative of contemporary theatre, the *Varna Summer* International Theatre Festival has opened its doors to a large part of the Bulgarian audience and theatre community, as it now takes place on stages in two of Bulgaria’s largest cities.

The festival in the digital era

In 2011, another large-scale initiative was added to the international programme. Thanks to the cooperation between the British Council, Cinema City, the *Varna Summer* International Theatre Festival and its platform *World Theatre in Sofia*, as well as the City of Sofia, Bulgaria joined *NT Live*, the global project of the Royal National Theatre in London, launched in 2009 in order to broadcast live, via satellite, performances from the top stages of British theatre, to audiences around the world, at the same time they are shown to London audiences. The first four performances of the Royal National Theatre in London were broadcast live in Sofia and received significant attention. On 5 December 2011, for the first time, Sofia spectators joined a huge audience for the premiere of the new British play *Collaborators* by John Hodge, a powerful political piece about Stalin-era repression against Bulgakov. The Bulgarian audience was then introduced to a new drama text, *Travelling Light* by Nicholas Wright, followed by the bold reading of Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* by Dominic Cooke, in the spirit of urban authenticity, as well as the masterful classic staging of *Mistakes of a Night* by Oliver Goldsmith.

Over the past decade, this method of broad distribution of creative outputs has become increasingly popular with other major theatre companies as well. The *Varna Summer* International Theatre Festival also maintained this special part of its

programme, expanding it with live broadcasts of significant theatre productions from various European theatre companies, with projections of so-called “reruns” of performances, recorded using satellite technology, which in fact simulate the experience of a live digital broadcast of a show by recording the entire event. Other formats of broadcasting theatre productions have also been used, such as screenings on online platforms, with access limited by a scheduled date and time, real-time streaming etc. Some of the productions broadcast in the programme of the last few editions, which received great acclaim from the audience, festival guests and theatre critics are: *Tartuffe, or the Hypocrite*, directed by Ivo van Hove at the Comédie Française, the wonderful one-man show of Andrew Scott *Vanya*, after A.P. Chekhov in the adaptation of Simon Stephens, directed by Sam Yates, NT Live, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, directed by Jernei Lorenci, Slovenia.

In 2021, the *Via Fest* Foundation, which organises the *Varna Summer Theatre Festival*, introduced a special digital section – the *Via Fest Digital Portal*⁵. It is a virtual space for showcasing outstanding productions in contemporary performing arts – theatre, dance, performance etc. The project was launched as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Periodically, it presents a selection of performances by leading artists and companies. In recent years, the festival has featured screenings of notable performances from Slovenia, North Macedonia, and Romania on its website, with free access for 72 hours.

Parallel Programme

The scope of the festival’s parallel programme has increasingly broadened over the years. Today it covers an impressive number of initiatives and activities, which contribute to its image of a place where theatre is celebrated and where fruitful professional meetings are held. First introduced in 1998 as a modest section, with a single event (a discussion on the Bulgarian performances in the programme), over the past fifteen years it has grown into several well-established components, occasionally enriched by new events.

Educational forums and initiatives in the parallel programme are very significant. Numerous creative presentations, workshops, educational seminars and laboratory demonstrations have crowded all empty halls and spaces of the festival at any given time. The conversations with emblematic Bulgarian and foreign directors, actors and theatre scholars, such as Dimiter Gotscheff, Samuel Finzi, Josef Bierbichler, Yosif Sarchadjiev, Patrice Pavis, Jernei Lorenci, Silviu Purcărete, and many others have also been highly impactful.

⁵ See more: <https://viafest.org/dportal/>

The festival's efforts to also function as a marketplace for performances – showcasing emerging and established actors, directors and companies – have played a central role in the parallel programme. A highlight of this section is the annual presentation of directors' projects, alongside excerpts from performances by students graduating from the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, the Theatre Department of the New Bulgarian University, and other theatre schools in Bulgaria and abroad. The parallel programme also includes a wide range of events: special guest performances, host theatre productions, art and scenography exhibitions, student actions and performances, presentations of theatre books and magazines, and film screenings about key figures of contemporary European theatre. Special attention has been given to theatre concerts as well.

The festival has also developed a tradition of featuring street performances as a key part of its parallel programme. These aim to “open up” theatre to the general public and engage passers-by, visitors and tourists in the festival atmosphere. Street performances – typically by troupes from Poland, UK, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Italy – include fire juggling, acrobatics, stilt walking, clowning and light shows. Held in the square outside Varna's Drama Theatre, they draw large crowds and have inspired imitators. Over the festival's ten days, the outdoor areas around its venues are transformed into a vibrant, around-the-clock performance space.

Conclusion

To conclude, over the course of its 33-year history, the *Varna Summer International Theatre Festival* has established itself as the leading international theatre event in Bulgaria. It is held annually in early June in the coastal city of Varna on the Black Sea. The festival is organized by the *Via Fest* Foundation, with support from the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture and the City of Varna.

The festival programme is structured into four main sections: *Main Programme – Bulgarian Selection* showcases the most significant artistic achievements of the Bulgarian performing arts scene. *Main Programme – International Selection* presents a wide range of theatrical forms and leading trends from Europe and beyond. Among the many notable artists featured at the festival are: Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba, Robert Wilson, Declan Donnellan, Romeo Castellucci, Pippo Delbono, Marie Chouinard, Oskaras Korsunovas, Alvis Hermanis, Andriy Zholdak, Forced Entertainment, Dimiter Gotscheff, along with many others. Since 2008 the Varna Summer ITF has also hosted a *Showcase Section*, which highlights innovative and mobile Bulgarian productions in contemporary theatre, dance and performance. These are presented to invited professionals, including curators from international

festivals, venues and organizations. *The Parallel Programme* enhances the festival atmosphere with various events, such as open-air shows, concerts and exhibitions. It also creates a space for dialogue, through discussions, educational workshops and professional meetings.

Today, with its rich and diverse programme of performances, projects and initiatives, the *Varna Summer International Theatre Festival* stands as a well-recognized and sought-after platform for dynamic theatrical exchange on the European stage

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