

Musical in Bulgaria: A Mission Possible



A Conversation with Petar Kaukov, the Bulgarian director of *Avenue Q*, at The Central Puppet Theatre, Sofia

The musical has never been a popular stage form in Bulgaria and the few shows of the genre that have been produced over the years have little in common with the American or British samples. Most of them are part of the repertoire of the operetta theatre, the performers are opera professionals, and the result is frequently described with phrases like a “bad experience” or the more magnanimous “at least they tried”. Fake and pompous, instead of provoking the audiences to sing or dance along with them, they tend to drive them away. Or at least it used to be predominantly so until this season, when *Avenue Q* was staged in Bulgaria.

Given the Bulgarian long-standing tradition of puppet theatre for adults, naturally, *Avenue Q* found a home at the Central Puppet Theatre in Sofia. Another prerequisite for its staging there was the fact that the same theatre hosted two workshops dedicated to the American musical, organized by The Drama League of New York and the Art Office Foundation (Bulgaria). The first one took place at the end of 2015 and it was then that the participants, along with their mentors from the US, headed by Shelley Butler, started to learn the basic techniques of the genre. News of the event quickly spread by word-of-mouth, and the result of the workshop was presented twice. A year later a second workshop took place. Ms. Butler came back, this time in partnership with choreographer Clare Cook, and, under their guidance,

the participants continued mastering the skills required for the genre, especially the indelible combination of singing and acting. So, step by step, the team of young and talented actors became more and more “fluent” in the language of the American musical.

One of the main driving forces of the project was Petar Kaukov, a Bulgarian director who never stops searching. He is a translator of contemporary drama and, at the same, particularly interested in Shakespeare, especially in his comedies, which are the subject of his doctoral dissertation. He also teaches at The National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts, stages plays, and travels the world. Last but not least, he has to his credit considerable experience as a successful manager of two leading national theatre institutions.

To bring *Avenue Q* to Bulgaria, Kaukov joined forces with the American director West Hyler. The two of them turned the small puppet theatre stage into a colorful parade where everyone can speak their mind without fear of the consequences. The show was the talk of the town long before the premiere and afterwards the feedback was overwhelming. There were some markedly negative responses, but predominantly the show was considered an event; the majority of the critics were glowingly positive and raved about the excellent work of the team. Most importantly, the show provoked debates.

We spoke with Petar Kaukov as *Avenue Q* was already gathering steam.



Avenue Q, directed by West Hyler and Petar Kaukov for The Central Puppet Theatre, Sofia, Bulgaria.
Photo: Guergana Damianova.

Traykova: *This is not the first attempt in Bulgaria to do a musical, but it is you and the Central Puppet Theatre who gave us the first real opportunity to enjoy a well-made production. In this sense, Avenue Q is almost like a dream come true, and is a direct result of the two workshops of which you were a part. What was your basic idea when you started this project?*

Kaukov: It was a tradition of the musical in Bulgaria to be performed as operetta, i.e. with classical staging of the voice. But the musicals performed around the world, and I've seen quite a few of them, are not done in this manner. The purpose of the workshops was to acquire knowledge on how the Americans create musicals, hoping that this could lead potentially to a complete production. I was sure that Bulgarian actors could rise to the occasion, but it was important for me to find out what the American colleagues think, whether they like it or not, and if they see a prospect for a full-scale production.

Traykova: *Do you believe Bulgarian actors needed the workshops?*

Kaukov: Yes, we all needed them. Acquiring new knowledge and skills is the foundation of progress. I didn't want to do a musical by myself. My goal was to enable the acquisition of education—that is very important. This is practical knowledge, not mere theory.

Traykova: *Was it not these workshops, though, that inspired you to stage a musical?*

Kaukov: The desire was already there, but I did not want to start doing a show only by my own criteria, I knew musicals only passively, through watching shows and reading books. I thought that we should learn from people with experience in the genre. It all started with a conversation between me, Kalina Wagenstein of Art Office, and Gabriel Stelian-Shanks of The Drama League of New York. I met and befriended Gabriel in 2009. We spoke at length and came to the conclusion that we must do something for the development of the musical in Bulgaria and that we can definitely learn about it from our colleagues in the United States. This will probably sound offensive to many back home, but solving a problem begins with the recognition of its existence. We had to admit we don't have much of a tradition in this, so we decided to find a way to bring on people with Broadway experience to tell us and show us how to make a musical. Not just to showcase it but to take us through the process accurately, i.e. to gain knowledge and skills through the very practice. In the course of that conversation we realized we didn't have the right type of musical actors in Bulgaria. Yes, the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts "Kr. Sarafov" used to offer a major in acting for musical theatre, but this was for a short time. We concluded that closest to the American actor in a musical are the Bulgarian puppet actors, as they are taught to do several things at once—not quite the same, but closest to the desired outcome. Hence the idea to implement the workshop at Central Puppet Theatre in Sofia whose head, Kyriakos Argyropoulos, eagerly embraced the initiative.

Traykova: *In the first workshop you had excerpts from three popular musicals—A Little Night Music, Little Shop of Horrors and Avenue Q. What attracted you to Avenue Q?*

Kaukov: Actually Gabriel sent me eight or nine titles and I had to make a choice based only on plot synopses and maybe few video clips on Youtube. What drew me to *Avenue Q* was that it is made for young people, and there are muppets as well. It reminded me a little of the musical *Rent*, the *Friends* sitcom—young people facing life after graduation—and I thought it might be interesting for Bulgarian

audiences too. Then Gabriel sent me two songs and I saw the titles: "The Internet is for Porn" and "If You Were Gay." I thought, "Great!"

Traykova: *Do you think the topics raised in Avenue Q today are still interesting for Bulgarians, fourteen years after it was first staged on Broadway?*

Kaukov: I think the topics are valid. Let's say the gay community in Bulgaria still has problems. Here they are not positively perceived. It is a fact that, every time, the LGBT pride parade needs to be guarded by police because some pseudo-nationalist organizations are always expressing at least verbal aggression. And not just for the gay community—in this country ethnic minorities too are not perceived as really equal to the majority. That's a sad fact. So these issues are still sensitive in our society more than they are in New York, where the lines between different ethnicities and races are blurred. While at home these subjects still need to be resolved. There is still lack of understanding of these issues. Misunderstanding breeds fear and fear creates hatred.

Traykova: *Do you think Avenue Q scandalizes Bulgarian viewers?*

Kaukov: No! *Avenue Q* can only scandalize the loud xenophobic minority. It is loud and therefore perhaps gives the impression that it is not a minority, but it is.

Traykova: *You work along with U.S. director West Hyler. The collaboration between professionals from two different countries is quite interesting. How did your collaboration go and did you have moments of disagreement?*

Kaukov: Our collaboration is actually a symbol of the Bulgarian-American exchange program, which was initiated eight years ago by the Art Office Foundation and The Drama League of New York. West has extensive international experience. He has worked in many countries, most of them English-speaking, but also in Singapore and China, in partnership with a Chinese director. West Hyler has loads of projects in the US and around the world so his time was very limited, therefore we had to find common ground very quickly. We didn't have differences, as we talked a lot via Skype before we started rehearsals. We managed many conceptual things long before West's arrival. There was no way for everything to just resolve itself on the go, of course, but we were in agreement about the main issues. Actually I do not remember having any disagreements. When we looked at our notes at the end of rehearsals, in most cases, he had written down things that I had also meant to say and vice versa. And since I started this project with the idea that I want a Broadway director to come and do it the American way, from the very beginning I decided to stay a step behind him. In most cases, when we had different ideas I stepped back because I trusted him as completely as he trusted me with the Bulgarian text. West is a great professional and an experienced director, and very discerning about the behavior of actors—when they were true and when they were not, though even when he learned some Bulgarian words and phrases, the verbal layer of the show could not be as familiar for him as it was to me. This half of the directing responsibilities was mainly my duty, which is quite logical, for I am the Bulgarian. In general, working with West was extremely fruitful and I think this is quite evident in the show.

Traykova: *Where does the libretto and the music end and the personal message of Petar Kaukov and West Hyler begin?*

Kaukov: I cannot say that our message is different from the one of the authors. It is more like our intention is to share the story with more people. This is a performance about the acceptance of all differences; it's about tolerance, including our own understanding of life. Sometimes we think everything is in place, but it turns out that life has outsmarted us and served us surprises, some pleasant, some not. Ultimately, it's all part of the rich diversity of life.

Traykova: *I think it's because you have gathered so many different artists in the show that it is so colorful and alive!*

Kaukov: West and I thought so too. For a musical to become alive there are a lot of people who are working invisibly behind the scenes. Of course, credit for this must go to the actors, that's how things work in the theatre. But aside from me and West, there were others: Roberta the musical director, Rossen Mihailov for choreography, the set and puppet designers, Ivaylo Nikolov and Dimitar Dimitrov, and many more, such as Angel Nikolov, who is not only a rehearsal accompanist on stage, but plays the keyboard during every performance. These are two and a half hours where he not only plays live, face down in the score, but he follows the action throughout the play. In most cases there is an orchestra in the pit, but he is visible throughout the show. This is also one more reason for the success of this show.



Avenue Q, directed by West Hyler and Petar Kaukov for The Central Puppet Theatre, Sofia, Bulgaria.
Photo: Guergana Damianova.

Traykova: *In the cast, apart from the puppet and dramatic actors, there is a singer and a director who performs as an actor. How did you manage to assemble such a team?*

Kaukov: These are actually participants in the workshops, which were in fact a kind of audition.

Traykova: *What was the difficult part for the actors in your opinion?*

Kaukov: The short time for rehearsals, the deadlines and busy schedule. Otherwise they are great actors. See, a month and a half for preparing a play is not a long time for Bulgaria, and for a musical that has so many components it is terribly short. The actors in our team are eight great professionals who managed in a very short time to create a well-bonded dream team. I told them on the tenth or the fifteenth day when we ran through Part One: "Guys, you probably still do not realize it, but you've become a complex organism with 16 arms and 16 legs". This is what is most impressive in the show and I think that the audience subconsciously feels how complicated all this is and how they help each other throughout the play. One actor leads the puppet that is voiced by another, while a third closes the door behind a fourth one. It is all so complex that even I do not know some details—for example, who is helping whom to change at some point.

Traykova: *You have already performed the musical quite a few times. When the play ends does the audience look for you, do the viewers seek a dialogue?*

Kaukov: Yes. Usually these are colleagues, but also people I do not know. There are active viewers who also express their approval. The audience is very mixed in terms of age groups. I wondered whether some of the older viewers would be scandalized by the slang. It turned out that was not an issue and they got the message. There are moments when the audience reacts like they are at a football game. Like when the song "The Internet is for Porn" ends. But why is that? It's because we drew the audience in and made it part of the song, because I think there's hardly an adult person out there who has never watched porn.

Traykova: *Avenue Q is candid about the problems of life. It calls a spade a spade. Do you think that the show is educational in any meaningful way?*

Kaukov: Yes, although it is not didactic. Surely *Avenue Q* is entertaining, but it encourages the audience to think as well. That was our main goal while we worked and the result is in place. After performances all sorts of people come to us saying, "The show sure is fun, but it imparts serious and important messages". It makes me very happy that we have accomplished all that.

Gergana Traykova is one of the few young critics in Bulgaria with a special interest in the symbiosis of drama and puppet theatre. She has been actively contributing to *KuklArt*, a prestigious national magazine devoted to puppet theatre, has worked on the daily bulletins of several theatre festivals, and last year was chosen to write the diary-journal of the laboratory work of the acclaimed puppet theatre director Vesselka Kuncheva on her production of *The Queen of Spades* by Pushkin. A graduate of the National High school of Stage and Film Design (an Alma Mater also of her interviewee Petar Kaukov), with a major in Light Design, Traykova has worked for a couple of years as a light-designer at the puppet theatre *Hand* in Plovdiv. Currently she studies Theatre Studies and Management at the National Academy of Theatre and

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