



**IETM Mapping**

*The independent performing arts scene in Bulgaria*

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# Note from the authors

Providing a short overview of the Bulgarian performing arts scene is a complex and intriguing task. To fully capture the breadth and versatility of this vibrant sector would require a much longer text and more extensive research. This mapping aims to offer a snapshot of the current performing arts landscape, highlighting its challenges and achievements and celebrating its successes. It also seeks to provide insights into the social, economic, and political contexts that continue to shape the ecosystem of the independent performing arts scene in Bulgaria.

To address the immediate need for concise and targeted information for transnational performing arts professionals seeking to connect with the Bulgarian performing arts scene, this publication concentrates on the current state of the arts. While it provides a brief outline of the policies and practices that have shaped the present circumstances, its main aim is to capture the emerging trends of the past decade and identify early indicators of future developments within the sector.

As in other Eastern European countries with a history of centralised socialist cultural policies up to the beginning of the 1990s, the Bulgarian arts sector is marked by a strong division between institutional and independent bodies, each characterised by distinct organisational models, financial resources, scopes of activity, practices, interests, and levels of engagement. The social and economic transition has also fostered a growing sector of commercial performing arts enterprises.

This mapping focuses on the independent sector, leaving the institutional and commercial sectors to other researchers. The term 'independent performing arts sector' refers to freelance artists and performing arts organisations that are neither tied to the state/municipal institutions nor operate as commercial enterprises. These artists and organisations rely on competing for public funding on a project basis to support their artistic endeavours, rather than depending solely on revenue from ticket sales.

The choice to concentrate on this segment of the sector is motivated by the dynamism of the independent scene, its engagement with contemporary aesthetics, its social commitment, and its deep immersion in transnational collaboration.

However, this focus presents a challenge: resources for this segment of cultural practice are scattered and scarce. There is no systematic and comprehensive archive of the independent performing arts scene in Bulgaria, nor is there an official and up-to-date register of performing arts organisations and artists. Additionally, consecutive waves of emigration have led numerous artists to leave the country

and pursue their artistic endeavours abroad. While this publication includes artists who, despite working abroad, maintain strong roots in Bulgaria, it does not cover those who work exclusively from international locations. Our hope is that future research will focus on this vibrant group of migrant and nomadic Bulgarian artists who are making their mark on stages across the world.

To address the need for comprehensive data on the independent sector, this publication includes a list of existing independent performing arts organisations (in the Annex). The list was compiled through a methodology that combined a survey sent to actors within the independent sector as well as research of existing registries, made with the help of young researchers from the Cultural Studies department at Sofia University (St. Kliment Ohridski). The result is a unique list of all performing arts organisations active in the independent sector, across all disciplines and types of structure. While this list may still have shortcomings, it is an invitation for further updates and closer study of the independent sector.

Throughout the text, wherever possible, information, analysis, and data are illustrated with links. Although many of these links lead to sites in Bulgarian, we hope that online machine translation tools can help reduce the communication barrier and provide better access to information.

With these challenges in mind, this publication paints a comprehensive picture of a vibrant and resilient independent performing arts scene, where passionate professionals continue to engage audiences against all odds and develop organisational models and practices that effectively respond to their evolving context. In the current transnational landscape, where the rise of populism, nationalism, and austerity policies threaten established models in the performing arts sector, there is much to learn from the methods and practices the independent scene has been experimenting with, as well as from the skills they have honed through years of precarity and social engagement. We hope this text will inspire you to further explore and connect with this thriving scene.

# A Chronicle of the performing arts scene in Bulgaria

## The institutionalisation of performing arts (1856 - 1944)

The roots of institutionalised performing arts in Bulgaria can be traced back to the mid-19th century. At the end of the five-century-long Ottoman rule, the first community centres, known as *chitalishta*<sup>1</sup> were established to preserve and develop Bulgarian culture, and reconnect it with European culture, significantly contributing to the Bulgarian National Revival. These centres, which hosted various activities, including community amateur theatres, were first created in Shumen, Lom, and Svishtov in 1856.

The independent Bulgarian state was re-established in 1878. As in many countries, the road to independence was marked by a desire to strengthen identities, with theatre playing an important part. Bulgarian independence initiated intensive processes of institution-building and the development of arts and culture. Within ten years of independence, in 1888, the Ivan Vazov National theatre was established, and since 1907 it has had its own building in the centre of Sofia. The first theatres that emerged were driven by their educational and emancipatory roles. They aimed to assert the country's pro-European orientation, in contrast to the dominant Ottoman culture. Through these theatres, Western culture and values were introduced into citizens' everyday lives.

Until 1944<sup>2</sup>, a rapidly developing network of theatres and performing arts venues was emerging across Bulgaria. During this period, various types of theatre companies and venues were established, including public, private,



cooperative, studio, club, and youth theatres. Between 1912 and 1942, 76 theatre companies operated in Bulgaria, regulated by the Theatre Act. An independent sector also emerged during this time, but it was short-lived due to Bulgaria falling under Soviet influence.

## Performing arts in the socialist era (1944 - 1989)

The advent of communist power in 1944 brought about a radical rupture: all existing theatre companies were nationalised, private initiatives were completely terminated and the Soviet management model was introduced, based on centralisation and a uniform structure. The Decree on Theatres<sup>3</sup> was adopted in 1949, remaining in force until 1999, which regulated the status, management, and financing of all theatres in Bulgaria for the next 50 years. This decree introduced a single model of theatre with a permanent troupe and centralised all decisions on repertoire and structure within the Committee for Science, Art, and Culture.

- 1 The community centres *chitalishta* (reading rooms) are the oldest cultural and educational organisations in the country. These multi-functional cultural centres were established to promote the values of education, democracy, gender equality, etc. Today, the network of *chitalishta* comprises approximately 3,500 organisations, many of which have their own stages.
- 2 The two Balkan wars, and the two world wars severely disrupted the activity of Bulgarian theatres. Their consequences deeply impacted the very adequacy of stage art, given the collapse of national ideals and a general moral crisis. The situation was further complicated by the burning of the National Theatre in 1923, which was rebuilt again in 1929. Despite these challenges, the development of theatre continued: a drama school was established at the National Theatre, the practice of tours and guest performances mainly from theatres from Slavic countries (Yugoslavia, Poland, Russia) was maintained. From 1918 to 1941, theatres were established in Pleven (1918), Burgas (1925), Pernik (1919), Blagoevgrad (1920), Haskovo (1921), Yambol (1922), Dobrich (1928) and Vratsa (1938), among others. To the best of their ability, local authorities supported permanent troupes in larger cities, recognising their importance. However, after the wars, subsidies for almost all provincial theatres were terminated, which greatly hampered their activities. In some places municipalities maintained support and in others, civil commissions were created to collect aid for the theatre. Such committees were present in Varna and Plovdiv.
- 3 The Decree on Theatres abolished any diversity in theatre organisations, legalising only the model of the state-subsidised theatre with a permanent troupe (Art. 3). All state theatres came under the direct supervision of the Committee for Science, Art, and Culture (Art. 4). The creation and closure of professional theatres depended on the Committee's decisions, which also approved their repertoire policies and internal structures (Art. 5), effectively imposing censorship on creative endeavours. Theatres were not allowed to have any funding sources other than direct state subsidies, leading to uniformity in terms of funding, structure, and internal organisation. Directors were appointed by the chairman of the Committee (Art. 7), and remuneration of artistic staff was based on educational qualification and work experience rather than the outcomes of their creative work. This system provided high social insurance and protection for artists but offered little motivation for improvement. The decree also allowed for the existence of semi-professional and amateur theatres, which were treated separately from state theatres (Art. 27). These could be formed at People's Councils, other state organisations, and institutes, and were supported and managed only by them. All buildings and property of the theatres became state-owned.



The specific genre of 'socialist realism' was introduced, reflecting and promoting Soviet-style communism. Although this period was characterised by extensive development and the construction of many new theatres<sup>4</sup>, they operated under strict ideological censorship, with a clear focus on the propagandistic and ideological functions of theatres.

The only exceptions to this rule were amateur theatres, and to some extent puppet theatres. Employing non-professional performers, amateur theatres were less subject to strict censorship and could continue carrying out their educational functions.

In the late 1980s, before the fall of communism and the start of the political and economic transition, a crisis began to emerge in Bulgarian theatre. The dominant models of organisation, management and structuring were collapsing and could no longer serve as effective regulatory mechanisms. The lack of vision and leadership accentuated existing problems such as a bloated workforce, hidden unemployment, lack of incentives for artistic development, ageing workers, and inefficient use of resources. These problems were further exacerbated by a severe shortage of financial resources.

As the crisis became evident, steps were taken towards changing the Soviet model of governance. New ideas were dominated by concepts of decentralisation and municipal commitment, diversifying the repertoire model by reformatting theatres as self-governing non-profit organisations, and switching to a contractual system. By 1989, discussions on a new Theatre Act had already begun, although such a document is yet to be enacted.

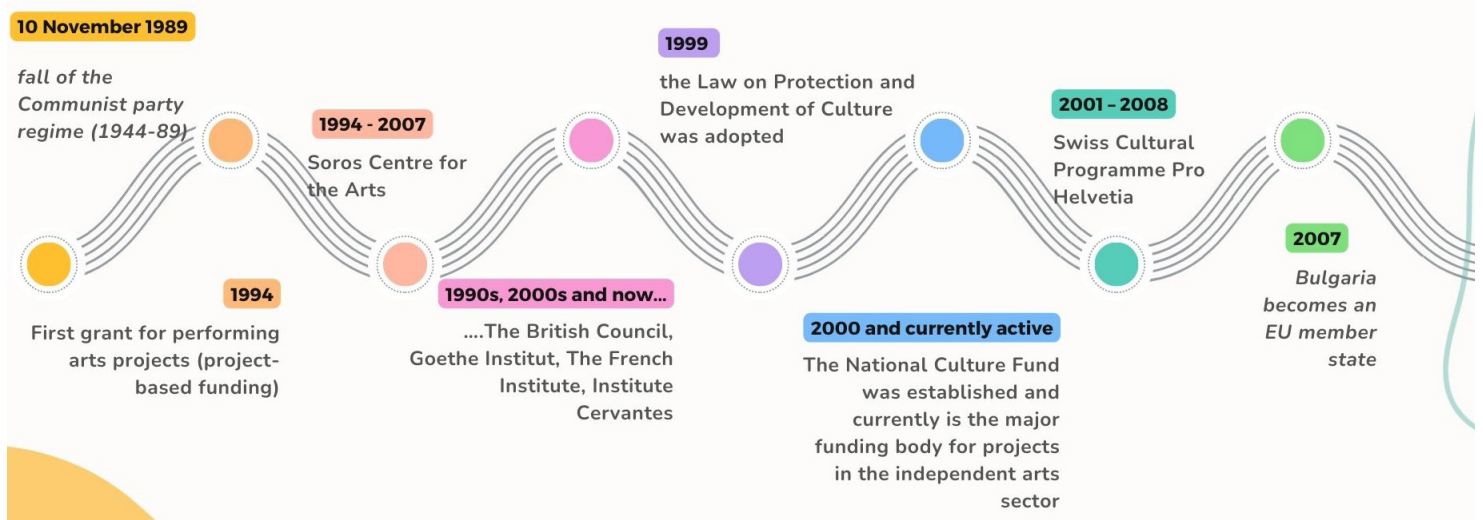
## Performing arts in times of transition (1990 - 2007)

With the fall of communism in 1989 and the severance of ties with the Soviet Union, Bulgaria entered a period of transition. The economic crisis and political instability in the 1990s took precedence over issues regarding the reform of theatre and other segments of the cultural sector. Within seven years (1990 - 1997), there were ten changes of government in Bulgaria<sup>5</sup>. The lack of continuity between governments rendered the implementation of a coherent and effective cultural policy practically impossible.

Regardless of the administrative and financial difficulties, a vibrant and diverse independent sector emerged in Bulgaria in the early 1990s and continued to develop. New and experimental initiatives and models were evolving. The practice of touring performances resumed, and commercial theatre flourished. Many new collectives appeared, successfully paving the way for developing new genres and artistic practices despite receiving little attention from state policy.

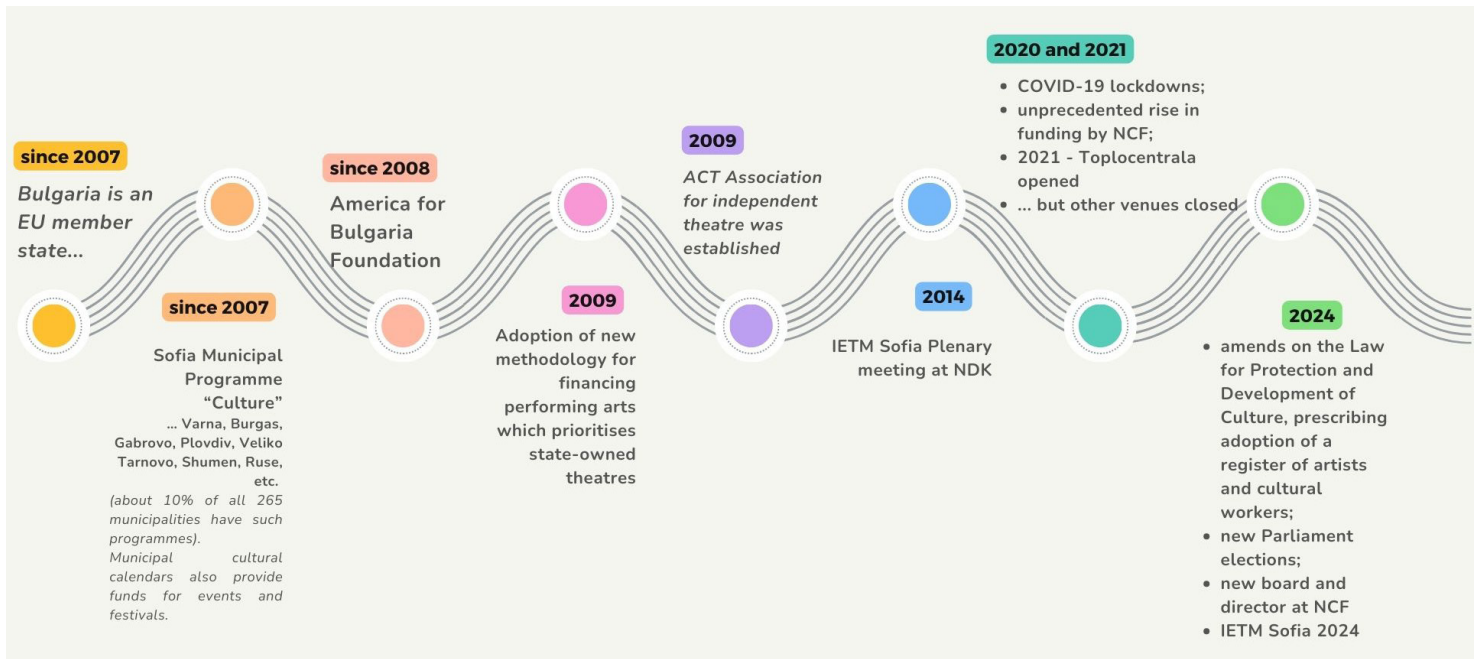
Between 1990 and 2007, numerous international foundations and programmes supported the development of the independent sector. Among them were the Open Society, the Soros Center for the Arts, the Swiss Cultural Programme 'Pro Helvetia', the British Council, and the Goethe Institute. Most of these programmes were oriented towards structuring civil society initiatives within the cultural sector, with a particular emphasis on contemporary artistic practices, social engagement, human rights, rule of law, and inclusion. With their help, the sector managed to construct and strengthen itself as they not only provided the bulk of the funds for the independent organisations' projects but also introduced project management practices and provided opportunities for regional and transnational mobility and collaboration.

## Funding bodies and mechanisms throughout the years



<sup>4</sup> The totalitarian regime developed 28 cities as theatre centres. After 1944, theatres were established in 10 cities, and following the adoption of the Decree on Theatre in 1949, theatres were established in six other cities. By 1989, the theatre system in Bulgaria comprised 54 state theatres. It is worth noting that in addition to these theatre venues, there were theatre companies in the country, including municipal and amateur theatre companies.

<sup>5</sup> A situation similar to the current one.



Undoubtedly, the country's accession to the European Union in 2007 had very positive effects on the intensification of the transnational cultural exchange. New cultural spaces were emerging, clubbing culture and alternative artistic practices were developing, along with alternative cultural spaces such as Red House, Derrida, Mosey, Hambara and Sklada, among others<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, EU accession gave a signal to most of the international programmes that were active in Bulgaria that they could withdraw, based on the assumption that support for civil society development would be ensured by the state itself and the EU. This led many independent organisations to lose their core funding, making the sector more fragile and precarious. The creation of national support programmes which could replace the international funding has taken a long time and many challenges remain.

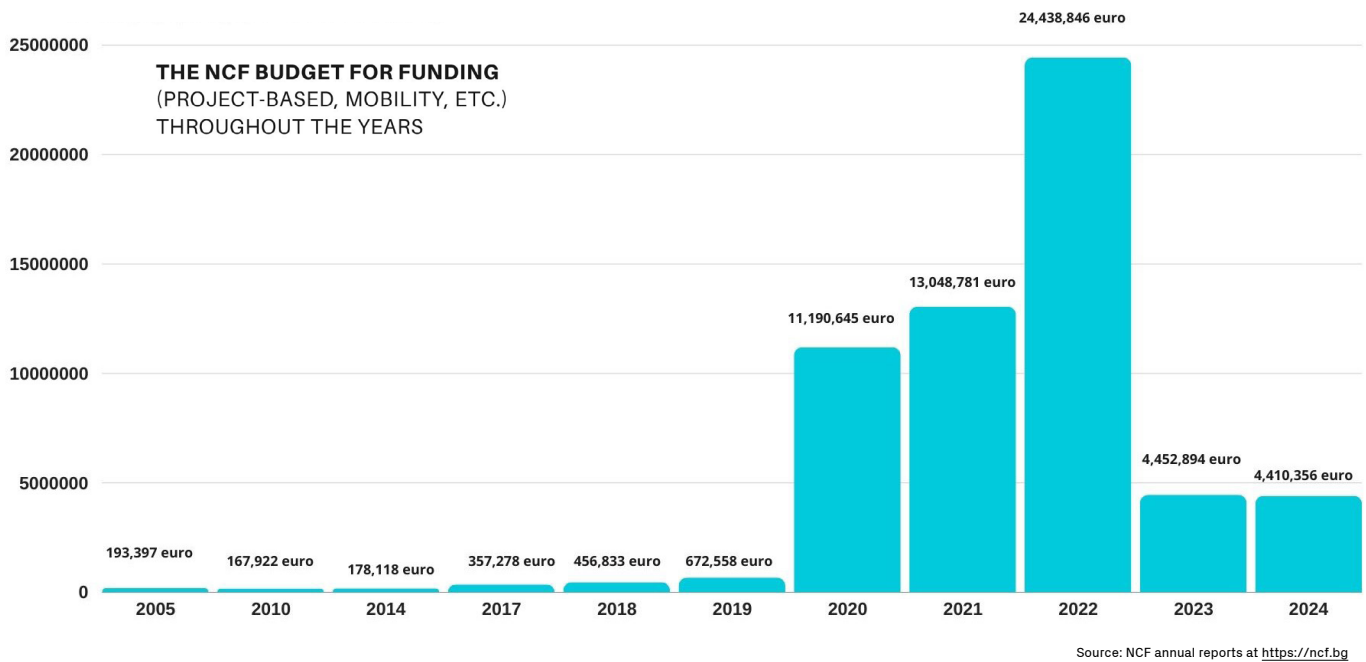
Although the independent scene was the driving force of this new dynamic, institutional reforms were also attempted. Many state theatres undertook radical reforms, renewing their repertoires and artistic compositions, and experimenting with different theatrical aesthetics. Several policy shifts occurred in the 1990s, the most significant being the introduction of the arm's length principle and the creation of the National Centre for Theatre. As theatrical life gradually concentrated in the capital and a few larger cities, this centre aimed to create conditions for decentralisation in the sector, and support stage projects on a competitive basis. Unfortunately, this model did not last, and at the beginning of the new century, there was a return to the centralised management model in the performing arts. This was due to the centripetal forces in power and the desire to maintain centralised control over the established theatre system, a tendency observed both in the Ministry of Culture

itself and in established professional structures such as the Union of Bulgarian Actors.

In 1999 the Law on the Protection and Development of Culture was adopted, defining the main principles of the national cultural policy, including equal treatment of all artists and cultural organisations, regardless of their status or organisational structure. Despite the declared principle, de facto discrimination against the independent sector continued: independent organisations are mainly supported on a project basis and are not entitled to receive structural subsidies. This leaves them in an extremely precarious situation, with most unable to secure long-term planning, employ staff, or provide proper working conditions. In spite of being the driving force of artistic experimentation and cultural development, they are forced into a loop of project overproduction, relying heavily on volunteer work which leads to exhaustion and burnout. A long-term national strategy for cultural development, which would regulate the functioning of the independent sector, has yet to be drawn up.

In 2009, a new methodology was adopted to finance the activities of state theatres, based on the theatres' own income. Following this method, the state provides a certain amount of subsidy for every lev of income of the theatre. This methodology further reinforces the divide between the independent and the institutional sectors. On the one hand, it discourages artistic innovation and risk-taking in state theatres, since subsidies depend on revenues, which in turn depend on ticket sales. Consequently, contemporary experimental arts are not particularly welcome on state stages, and there are no incentives for cooperation between state-owned and independent companies.

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a strong negative impact on these spaces, with some of them being forced to close and others to significantly reduce their activities.



On the other hand, this practice stimulates state-owned theatres to keep their ticket prices low, setting an unfair standard for independent shows which are not able to receive support for the tickets they sell.

In this situation, to survive and secure the necessary funding, independent organisations are forced to apply for various national and European programmes, competing on an equal footing with the state theatres. This creates a sense of unequal treatment, despite the principles declared in the law.

Since 2007, two new funds have played a significant role: the Capital Culture Programme (led by the Sofia Municipality) and the America for Bulgaria Foundation. In addition, the National Culture Fund has become increasingly important for the sector, particularly in relation to initiatives such as the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU (2018) and the European Capital of Culture in Bulgaria (2019), or in respect to recovery measures in connection to the Covid-19 pandemic (2020 - 2023). However, the Fund's resources vary greatly, failing to provide stability and conditions favourable to long-term planning<sup>7</sup>.

In recent years, a positive development was the inclusion of Bulgaria in the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) Initiative in 2019. This participation encouraged candidate municipalities (Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Shumen, Gabrovo, Veliko Tarnovo, Ruse) to build closer relationships with the organisations from the independent sector, and include them in their applications. All candidate municipalities included support for independent projects in their strategies for the development of the cultural sector, as a part of their bid. In most municipalities, these were the first reform programmes in culture since 1990.

Sofia's candidacy spurred the construction of the first centre for contemporary arts in the country – the Regional Centre for Contemporary Art (RCCA) Toplocentrala. The IETM meeting in Sofia in 2014 played a significant role in this process. The presence of numerous diverse representatives of the independent scene from various European countries, highlighted the importance of the sector, both for internal development and international relations. This, coupled with Sofia's bid for European Capital of Culture, became an important factor for the initiation of RCCA Toplocentrala. That year marked the beginning of systematic efforts by the capital municipality to build this new venue for independent culture, leading to its opening in 2021 (despite Sofia not winning the ECoC competition).

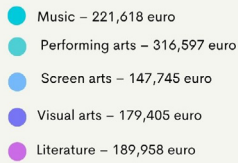
## Current challenges and possible futures

Bulgaria is currently in a political crisis. Over the last three years (from 2021), six consecutive parliamentary elections have been held in the country. This has kept the reform of cultural policy at a standstill, making it very difficult to draft and renew legislation, or implement any long-term vision in the field of culture. The independent sector is particularly affected, as it is already marked by severe instability and vulnerability.

At the moment of writing this publication, the state system of theatres consists of 51 state theatres (37 drama and 14 puppet theatres). Alongside this, there are also 58 municipal stages, although most of them are active in the field of music, and only eleven have a theatre programme.

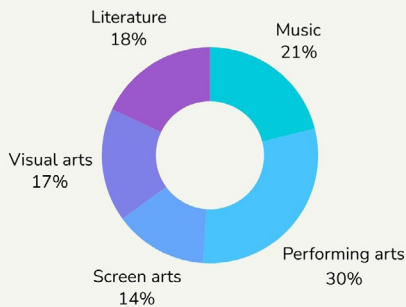
<sup>7</sup> For the period from its establishment in 2001 until 2018, the Fund's budget varied between EUR 150,000 and EUR 400,000 per year. In 2018, its budget reached EUR 750,000. From 2020 to 2023, the Fund's budget saw an unprecedented increase, reaching EUR 24,000,000 in 2022, only to be reduced significantly the year after to just EUR 4.5 million. In 2024, there is still no clarity regarding the Fund's budget, as changes have occurred in its structure and administration. To date (May 2024), the Fund has not yet announced an indicative programme, nor calls for applications.

### Share of performing arts in the indicative programme for 2024 Creation programme



max funding per project - 100 000

Total amount of planned financial resources: 1,055,323 euro

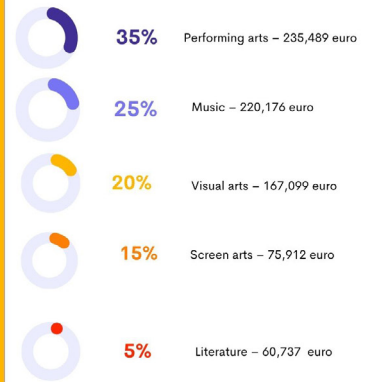


### Programme for distribution

Total amount of planned financial resources  
759,833 euro

Maximum amount per project: 25,550 euro

Distribution of the programme budget by areas



### Mobility programme

Mobility programme  
Total amount of planned financial resources - 464,471 EUR



Maximum amount of financial aid for a specific project:

For projects with individual persons - 3,066 EUR | For projects with two to five participants - 6,132 EUR | For projects with six or more participants - 18,396 EUR

Source: <https://ncf.bg>

Parallel to this infrastructure, but with significantly lower political and funding support, the independent sector evolves, fragile and precarious. It exists in difficult conditions, comparable to those in other Central and Eastern European countries. The independent sector currently includes 200 organisations – of which half are estimated to be active – as well as numerous individual creators and performers. It is mainly concentrated in the capital Sofia and several larger cities in the country (Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Veliko Tarnovo, Ruse, Gabrovo, Stara Zagora, etc.), but separate organisations also function in smaller cities and villages (Bostina, Dolen, Gorna Bela Rechka, etc.). Unfortunately, there are no reliable statistics and data on the sector at national level, one of many challenges that hinder its development.

#### • Access to funding

Funding opportunities, one of the key challenges for the independent sector, are primarily limited to project support on a competitive basis, with no possibility of structural funding. The main donors at national level are the Ministry of Culture, providing grants for production and distribution of performances and the organisation of festivals, and the National Culture Fund (NCF) which proposes programmes for supporting the creation and distribution of artistic production. In addition,

NCF also has programmes for socially engaged arts, debuts, art critics, amateur arts, translations, as well as targeted support for co-financing Creative Europe projects. No regional funds exist in the country, and no cultural policies are implemented at regional level. Several municipalities have specialised programmes to support culture on a competitive basis. These programmes are one of the main sources of support for projects by independent organisations. Municipalities also dispose of an additional financial instrument, the Cultural Calendar, which helps support cultural events in their territory. Unfortunately, a very limited number of municipalities have clearly developed, open and transparent rules or competition procedures within this funding scheme, which results in funds being used to support traditional events in the municipalities, rather than reaching independent artists and organisations.

In addition to public funding, several private donors provide grants for culture and the arts. Among them are the Lachezar Tsotsorkov Foundation, America for Bulgaria Foundation, and the Bulgarian Fund for Women, although their impact on the general performing arts landscape is limited.

Sponsorship in the field of culture is not highly developed, but nevertheless, some companies – mainly mobile operators and banks – periodically provide funds.



Typically, this funding rarely reaches the independent sector and is rather earmarked for larger, popular, and established initiatives.

At the moment, the hopes of the independent sector are focused on Project 42 of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, managed by the NCF. Project 42 envisages reforming the administration of the NCF, stimulating the municipalities in the country to build and develop their own programmes to support culture on a competitive basis, as well as an incentive for the development of international projects and collaborations. Some of the grant schemes under Project 42 are now open for applications.

Beyond the availability of funding, a major challenge for cultural policy is to distinguish between a commercial theatre product and one that needs public investment. Since this is not happening, in many cases purely commercial performances are created with state theatres resources. At the same time, many independent theatre company productions have primarily artistic, educational and social, rather than commercial goals, but nevertheless receive limited public support. This problem is one of the leading ones in the debates about the performing arts. There is no national consensus on the definition of cultural and creative industries.

- **Status of the artists**

Bulgaria is one of the few countries where artists do not have a statutory status. Creators and cultural workers are considered like any other free profession and are subject to the same insurance and taxation requirements. This often puts them in an extremely difficult situation, as the tax and insurance rates are prohibitive relative to the remuneration in the cultural sector. Because of this, a large number of creators and performers (especially in the fields of music and visual arts) work in the grey economy without paying taxes and insurance. This puts them in an extremely vulnerable position, both socially and economically.

A positive step in this sense is the recent amendments to the Law on the Protection and Development of Culture from February 2024, which provides for the creation of a register of artists and other actors in the field of culture. This register will be important in the next steps to develop a statutory tax and insurance framework regarding the status of independent artists. Optimistic predictions are that this could happen within the next two years.

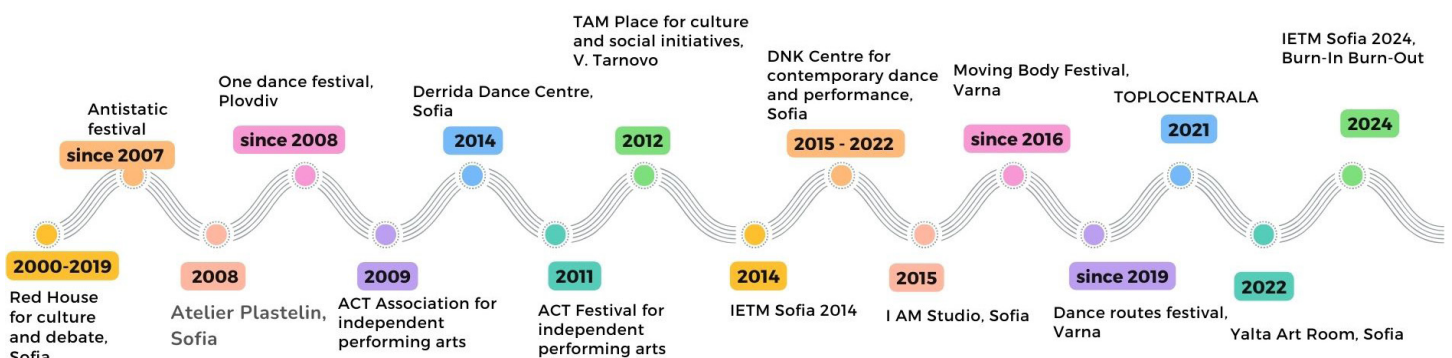
Connected to this, a particular problem in the sector is the limited possibility to secure finance for projects by individual creators and artists. Few programmes are open to applications from individual creators and artists and those that are are mainly limited to those concerning mobility. Establishing an artist status could potentially help recalibrate this practice.

- **Emergence and sustainability of independent cultural spaces**

The lack of office, rehearsal, and presentation spaces is a key issue in the independent sector. Some of the notable independent venues such as The Red House (1999 - 2019), DNK centre for contemporary dance (2015 - 2020), or Theatre Azaryan (2015 - 2020) were forced to close. Very few independent organisations in the country have their own spaces. Among these are Derida Dance Center, Yalta Art Room, I am studio, Atelie Plastelin, HaHaHa Impro Palace, City Mark Art Center etc. in Sofia; TAM, in Veliko Tarnovo; ReBonkers and Festival and Congress Center in Varna; Rorschach stain, Bee-Bop Cafe, A'Part Hall in Plovdiv; Cultural House NHK, Sea Casino, Exposition Center Flora, The Snail Open stage in Bourgas, etc.

These spaces, like all independent organisations, suffer from the lack of a clear distinction between commercial and non-commercial activities. Their existence is precarious because the state has no mechanism to support them.

A special case is the already mentioned RCCA Toplocentrala, and the National Student House, which both provide spaces for independent productions, although this is insufficient for the production of the entire sector.



In addition, some good practices of cooperation have emerged, such as the Nikolay Binev Youth Theatre in Sofia, the state theatres in Shumen, Stara Zagora, Sliven, and others.

Independent venues suffer from a lack of incentives to develop alternative organisational models, such as the public-private partnerships. Their emergence is generally relying on private initiative and the lack of response from public institutions puts their future at risk. Public authorities are often overwhelmed with commitments in state and municipal venues and pay little or no attention to independents. On the other hand, it is important to show and prove the purpose of these venues for the development of culture, so that public authorities can realise their role in this process.

- **Communication with public authorities**

Communication between the independent sector and the public authorities is extremely limited, often reduced to discussing specific conditions for funding programmes. It is occasionally activated around significant topics and initiatives such as the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, the candidacy for the European Capital of Culture or the Covid-19 pandemic, but quickly subsides. At the same time, problems such as the international representation of Bulgarian art, the limited access to culture in some regions of the country, the economic and social significance of the arts, as well as a number of other issues, remain unresolved.

This issue could partly relate to the independent sector's representation within professional organisations. In the performing arts ecosystem, the Union of Bulgarian Actors (UBA) has held a special place since socialist times. It is a creative trade union organisation that represents the interests of its members with respect to their employers and state institutions. The UBA continues to be one of the most influential institutions, with an irrevocable place both in the appointment of directors of state theatres and in the competitions for funding of theatre projects. Unfortunately, independent performing arts organisations are relatively poorly represented in the structure of the union. This is largely due to the lack of a common language and shared understanding of the directions for development in the performing arts. The UBA adheres to interaction mechanisms established within the Soviet model, while the independent sector strives for the development of Western models. One of the challenges facing the independent stage sector in Bulgaria is to succeed in integrating into the UBA in order to be able to more effectively protect its rights before state institutions.

- **Collaboration within the sector**

Internal communication within the sector is also limited and short term. Organisations often lack awareness of one another and do not recognise each other as allies in their communication with public authorities. The sector typically unites only in response to extreme circumstances or external initiatives. Notable examples include the Cultural Programme of the EU Presidency, the European Capital of Culture initiative, as well as the measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2009, due to the unfavourable theatre funding reform that made it unprofitable for institutional theatres to open their venues for independent productions, several independent performing arts organisations and artists came together to form ACT - the Association for Independent Theatre. Since then, ACT has made significant progress, including initiating dialogue in 2014 between the independent sector and the Sofia municipality which led to the establishment of RCCA Toplocentrala, advocating for adoption of a special status for artists, and producing the international ACT festival for independent performing arts for more than a decade. However, the lack of structural support hinders the development of a steady and permanent strategy to represent – and advocate for – the interests of the independent performing arts professionals in state institutions.

- **Sustainability**

Sustainability is a particular challenge for organisations in the sector, as many find it difficult to find a model of operation that can withstand unfriendly policies and a harsh funding climate. Working in the independent sector often entails poor working conditions, low wages, volunteer work, and limited or no social security and health insurance. In these conditions, it is difficult to provide a healthy working environment that would nurture solid and sustainable organisational practices.

Ecological sustainability in the field of the performing arts is still an aspiration and a promise of goodwill, as there is no funding or other incentives for implementing green practices or monitoring any specific green scoring for project applications. In spite of this, organisations from the independent sector are exploring ways to embrace ecological sustainability within their organisational cultures. Imagining ways to address the global ecological crisis from the perspective of a precarious and fragile sector poses a critical challenge for the years ahead.

- **International collaboration**





The independent sector drives international collaboration in Bulgarian performing arts. Despite challenging circumstances, these organisations maintain strong ties with European and global peers, actively engaging in joint projects, international networks and professional forums. They are among the most active participants in international partnerships and networks, including IETM, UNIMA, EURODRAM, ASSITEJ, TEH, Life Long Burning, Aerowaves, etc. Bulgarian independents have also pioneered the emergence of formats of transnational exchange that are still underdeveloped locally. For instance, the RCCA Toplocentrala's resident programme, now in its third year, stands out as a notable success story.

Despite their dynamic involvement in transnational collaboration, national and municipal cultural policies have largely overlooked the independent sector and offered minimal support for transnational exchange. Existing mobility programmes, while present on national and municipal levels, typically allocate limited funds awarded mainly for transportation and occasionally for accommodation. This limits opportunities for international collaborations and makes existing connections difficult to maintain.

Furthermore, Bulgarian participation in the Creative Europe Programme has historically been limited, not least because of the lack of co-financing programmes, essential for enabling fragile organisations to engage internationally.

Nevertheless, some positive trends are emerging. Municipal instruments in Sofia and Varna, along with the establishment of the National Culture Fund co-financing programme in 2020, provide some matching funds. These developments enhance opportunities for Bulgarian organisations to participate more intensively in Creative Europe-funded initiatives.

Stuck between a lack of recognition and the impact of extreme policies, the independent performing arts sector is sustained by the tenacity and resilience of its driven and engaged actors. The policies that have determined its activities during times of transition have not been able to adapt and fully benefit the creativity and expertise of these independent actors. To face its numerous challenges, the sector needs to strengthen communication both internally and with public authorities. Additionally, a stronger cultural policy is needed to diversify and upgrade existing funding, introduce legislation to distinguish between commercial and non-commercial activities, and define an artist status that is adapted to the needs and reality of the sector.

As mentioned in the enlightening essay, Bulgarian Theatre 1989 - 2015, 'Cultural policy faces in full force the main problem, valid since the beginning of the transition: to restructure the system of state theatres in the country and to invent a new type of financing of theatre activity, tied to criteria of high artistic quality and cultural diversity'<sup>8</sup>.

8 Yordanov, Nikolay, Theatre in Bulgaria 1989 - 2015, Sofia 2016.

# Text-driven Performances: The Bulgarian independent Theatre Landscape

The independent theatre scene predominantly focuses on contemporary artistic practices and socially relevant topics. Although companies sometimes stage plays by Beckett, Brecht, or Thomas Bernhard, most often, the plays presented are new pieces by contemporary playwrights or developed specifically for the performance by the director or through various forms of stage writing in collaboration with the artistic team. The themes explored are diverse, sometimes bold, funny or intimate, including the interaction between machines and human beings, space travel, loneliness in the later years of life, social media and fake news, politics, segregation, love, and dreams. The approach is critical, aiming to challenge audiences with non-conformity and innovative dramaturgical approaches.

Independent text-driven performances have been staged since the early 1990s in what was called 'alternative spaces': bars, concert venues, small theatre spaces. The now closed renowned Red House for culture and debate (1999 - 2019) launched the careers of many actors on the independent scene. After the 2009 reform in subsidising the state-supported theatres, it became unprofitable for these institutions to open their stages to the works of independent theatre so this practice has become an exception. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for actors and directors from the institutional sector to stage their own work on the independent scene. Today, independent text-driven performances or drama theatre can be seen in the few venues of the independent performing art scene: RCCA Toplocentrala, I am Studio, Atelier Plastelin, Yalta art room, Derrida Scene in Sofia, Bee-bop cafe in Plovdiv, Studio TAM in Veliko Tarnovo.

Festivals in Sofia and at several bigger cities in Bulgaria are another platform in which independent plays can be presented to Bulgarian audiences (see Chapter 10). Of course, the audience's interest and the artistic quality of the works are the primary reasons to programme them in these numerous festivals. Another major reason lies in the production cycle of independent drama in Bulgaria. As independent artists and companies get their funding predominantly for new productions and touring of new pieces, they have to be highly productive in order to exist. Festivals usually aim to show new pieces to the public and the independent scene is a natural source for fresh, innovative art.



36 Monkeys: 37 Matches at Toplocentrala, 2023 © Teodora Tsanova - Fedya

From the artists' point of view, any opportunity to prolong the life cycle of a performance and to meet with audiences is welcome.

Representatives of the first generation of independent theatre practitioners from the 1990s have increasingly institutionalised their practice since the 2000s. Notable directors such as [Tedi Moskov](#), [Dimiter Gotscheff](#), [Javor Gardev](#), [Galín Stoev](#), and [Alexander Morfov](#) whose work is rooted in text-driven dramaturgy, have staged productions on major European stages, while maintaining connections in Bulgaria, often returning as guest stars at prominent institutional theatres in the capital. Bulgarian-German actor [Samuel Finzi](#) started his career in the 1990s on the independent scene, before moving to major European stages and the cinema. In recent years, he has reconnected with Bulgarian audiences at the National Theatre.

Well-established actress, director, art pedagogue [Snezhina Petrova](#) founded her independent company Legal Art Centre in 1996. Her organisation continues to be active, staging award-winning performances like *Medea*, *Edna Balgarka* ('A Bulgarian Woman') both on institutional stages and in independent venues. Petrova also teaches acting and leads the Theatre Department at New Bulgarian University. This department was established by another notable director, [Vaskressia Viharova](#), who still teaches there and is closely connected with the artistic and socially engaged projects of the [PlatformataNE](#) foundation.



The generations that started their careers in the early 2000s and later are currently the most consistently present on the independent text-driven performing arts scene in Bulgaria. Their active years coincide with significant challenges, such as the global financial crisis of 2008, the withdrawal of international funding as a consequence of Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007 and the arts funding reform that further hampered the independent performing arts sector. These difficult times necessitated a joining of forces for resilience, which is one reason why we see more companies and organisations than individual players in the independent performing arts sector. However, more significantly, shared values, aesthetic pursuits, and common work ethics have also played a crucial role in bringing independent performing artists together.

Independent directors and playwrights often collaborate closely, as seen with [Zdrava Kamenova](#) and [Gergana Dimitrova](#) whose creative partnership has garnered several national and international awards. They carry out their projects through the independent company [36 Monkeys](#) – Contemporary Alternative Art & Culture Organisation, which includes notable figures from the independent scene such as Mladen Alexiev, [Vasilena Radeva](#), Alexander Mitrev, Petko Tanchev and Iliyana Houbenova.

Their projects ([37 Matches](#), [What about bats?](#), [Machines are Bitches](#), [Home for sheep and dreams](#), [Quark time](#) and [P.O. Box Unabomber](#)) have toured internationally and across the country. [ProText](#) is a 36 Monkeys initiative that provides a platform for contemporary dramaturgy. Gergana Dimitrova also serves as the president of the European network for drama in translation, [Eurodram](#).

Another creative duo, director Vasilena Radeva and actor/dancer Nathan Cooper, are the heart of [Panic Button Theatre](#), which is celebrating its 10th anniversary. This company includes independent performing arts professionals like Elena Dimitrova, Victoria Kostova, Emilian Gatsov, Elena Shopova, Juliana Saiska, Bogdana Kotareva, and Nevena Kaludova.

[Metheor](#) is a group of three like-minded artists and intellectuals: Ani Vasseva, Boyan Manchev, and Leonid Yovchev. Their [performing arts programme](#) primarily features their own drama texts.

[Arte Urbana Collectif](#) stages performances that blend theatre and science. Some plays like [George Kaplan](#) or [The Long Way to the Stars](#) are translated, while others, such as [How to Become Einstein in One Hour?](#) are original creations by the company.

[Emergency Theater](#) is an artistic collective that brings together artists working on various projects with different companies and theatres. Elena Dimitrova and Juliana Saiska are the driving force behind these projects, which are staged at RCCA Toplocentrala.



[Force Mineure](#) is a newly established association of experienced independent performing arts professionals including Yavor Kostov, Ralitsa Tonova, Elena Dimitrova, and others. The association is currently staging a play after a Thomas Bernhard [novel](#) at Toplocentrala.

[Spam studios](#), another contemporary performing arts company established in 2018 includes eight of the youngest professionals on the Bulgarian independent scene, such as [Ana Bateva](#) (from North Macedonia), Dessy Dzhurova, and Martina Peneva. Their performances target younger audiences, with topics relevant to Generation Z, while their professional artistic approach also appeals to broader contemporary performing arts audiences in Bulgaria.



In addition to companies and collectives, the independent performing arts scene in Bulgaria features numerous talented individuals whose contributions are significant. Notable directors such as [Mariy Rossen](#), [Veselin Dimov](#), [Stefan Prohorov](#), Mladen Alexiev, along with dramatists and playwrights like [Stefan Ivanov](#), [Alexander Manuiloff](#), [Ivan Dimitrov](#), and [Ivan Landzhev](#), work with various independent performing arts collectives. These collectives typically assemble on a project basis, which is often the only viable method of funding independent arts in Bulgaria.

Despite a clear divide between the independent and institutional theatre scenes, several initiatives have emerged that blur this division and foster collaboration between the two worlds. A notable venue for theatrical experimentation within the state and municipality domain is the [SFUMATO Theatre Laboratory](#), founded in 1989. Here, directors Margarita Mladenova and Ivan Dobchev stage plays after Dostoevsky, by Strindberg, Chekhov, the French existentialists, Beckett, and Brecht. Often, members of the theatre's staff such as Mariy Rosen, Stefan Ivanov, and Ivan Dimitrov, also perform on the independent scene. Unlike the typical practice of state theatres in Bulgaria, SFUMATO does not keep actors on permanent contracts.

In recent years, the [Ivan Vazov National Theatre](#) has opened its stages to independent guest productions. Galina Borissova (see chapter Exploring Bulgaria's contemporary dance landscape) is presenting the multi genre piece [Hypothetically](#) on the small stage, while the big stage will feature the American actor and director [John Malkovich](#) and the Russian director [Timofey Kulyabin](#). The 2023/24 season premiered [The Hague](#), a play by the Ukrainian playwright [Sasha Denisova](#), directed by [Galin Stoev](#).

**More thorough and comprehensive information on Bulgarian text-driven performance can be found in the issues of the [Homo Ludens magazine](#), the essay by Professor Nikolay Yordanov, [Theatre in Bulgaria - 1989-2015](#). [ACT Association for independent theatre](#) can also provide guidance and contacts with artists and organisations from the independent performing arts sector.**

# Exploring Bulgaria's contemporary dance landscape

At first glance, it might seem counterintuitive that the Bulgarian contemporary dance scene has achieved international acclaim without consistent and targeted national policies for support, without adequate rehearsal and performance infrastructure, and without long-standing traditions in contemporary dance education in the country. Yet, Bulgarian dancers and choreographers like Galina Borissova, Christian Bakalov, Ivo Dimchev, Iva Sveshtarova, Willy Prager, Mila Iskrenova, Zhivko Zhelyazkov, Rossen Mihailov and others, as well as international festivals like One Dance and Antistatic, are well recognised worldwide.

As consistent state efforts are lacking in this regard, the internationalisation of Bulgarian contemporary dance is facilitated by grants, international residency programmes, festival invitations, and the absence of a language barrier in this specific art form. The aesthetics, themes, and motives explored by Bulgarian dance artists are also integrated into the global exchange of ideas. Dancers and dance companies from Bulgaria are members of – and circulate within – the activities of prominent dance networks.

Dance festivals bring international names to the local audiences and stage Bulgarian contemporary dance but also host masterclasses and dance workshops (see chapter Spotlight on Festivals: Showcasing diversity in Bulgaria's performing arts).

Although contemporary dance was introduced into local practices during the 1970s and 1980s through the corpus of work of Arabesque, the ballet company in Sofia, and the variety show theatre in Gabrovo that staged modern dance performances, it was the opening up to the world in the 1990s that truly allowed the scene to flourish. In this period, Bulgarian dancers and choreographers started to travel, work, and receive training at major contemporary art centres, mostly in Europe, but also in Canada, the United States, and Australia. Rigorous classical ballet training, which had been a systematic part of secondary school education since socialist times, provides a strong foundation that continues to benefit dancers, with few exceptions, among the younger generations.

The mix between a classical and a contemporary dance mentality, as well as the muscle memory of both practices is the driving force of *Esmeralda and Raimonda (2023)*, a collaborative performance by *Galina Borissova* and Teodora Popova.



Ivo Dimchev METCH © Teodora Simova

These prominent Bulgarian dancers and choreographers started their careers at the beginning of the 1990s, with a classical ballet education, progressed through major international contemporary dance centres, and have been, since the mid-2010s, alternating between their Bulgaria-based projects and international engagements. In an [interview](#) from 2022, Galina Borissova discusses her international career, evolving aesthetics, the foundation of independent space *Etud* that she founded and her choice to eventually base herself in Sofia, after decades of global movement.

From the same generation, quite a few notable contemporary dance artists started their international careers at the beginning of the 1990s and chose to bring their practices – partially or fully – back to Bulgaria.

Rossen Mihailov, who has worked in the United Kingdom, Germany, Latvia, Greece, Switzerland, Hong Kong, and other countries, as a dancer, teacher, choreographer, and producer for over 25 years, now teaches contact improvisation at the New Bulgarian University in Sofia.

World famous performer, singer, and physical theatre artist Ivo Dimchev returned to Bulgaria in the 2010s, dividing his practice between international touring, his own venue (MOZEI) and other independent spaces in the country. In the 2020s, he initiated private concerts and singer-songwriter world tours while also giving masterclasses in Budapest, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and Vienna. Interestingly, he has not offered masterclasses in Sofia, due to the relative conservativeness of the Bulgarian educational system, where adding new classes and masterclasses to the academic curriculum is a complicated procedure.



Christian Bakalov received classical ballet training in Sofia, before joining the Young Ballet of France in 1991 and moving on to work with Ivo Dimchev, Jan Fabre, Miet Warlop, Jérôme Bel, Robert Wilson and Vincent Riebeck / Florentina Holzinger. In 2014 he began exploring immersive art and has since established his company ECIPA in Sofia.

The end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s in Bulgaria were marked by the entrance of a new group of artists and choreographers. Some of them are graduates of the experimental 4xC studio for synthetic artforms in Sofia and the synthetic stage arts degree in Plovdiv university, based on the methodology of Grotowski and introduced by his student, Bulgarian theatre director Nikolay Georgiev (the programme is closed at the moment).

Iva Sveshtarova and Willy Prager started as classmates, and then, in the early 2000s, each went on to specialise in dance, in Portugal and Austria respectively. In 2005 they established their joint company, Brain Store Project, which launched important contemporary dance initiatives, forming a platform for independent contemporary dance in Bulgaria. In their artistic work, Iva and Willy collaborate on joint projects, work independently and partner with other dance artists both locally and internationally. Their works have received numerous festival invitations and awards. In an interview for Homo Ludens, the creative duo shares more about their background, training, artistic pursuits and efforts to develop the dance sector in Bulgaria.

Nomad Dance Academy (NDA) began as an alliance of Balkan independent contemporary dance artists and companies aiming to facilitate networking, residencies, and dance workshops in the region. In 2008, the Brain Store Project company and NDA initiated Antistatic, the first contemporary dance and performance festival in Sofia. Another important initiative they have been involved with is the Creative Europe-funded project Life-long Burning which focuses on the working conditions of dance artists across Europe and initiates creative residencies, collaborations, and artistic exchange. Dance magazine, another joint effort of the Brain Store Project and NDA, has been published annually since 2019, covering specific dance topics.

Stefan A. Shterev, an alumnus of Iva and Willy's, is also a driving force behind Antistatic festival and Nomad Dance Academy. Recently, his company InformBureau, together with the German dance company Ligna and Bulgarian co-producers, won the prestigious Bulgarian prize IKAR 2023 for contemporary dance and performance for NONUMENT 2.0 radioballet<sup>9</sup>.

Dancer and choreographer Jivko Jeljazkov graduated from the Kr. Sarafov National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts (NATFA) in Sofia and specialised in choreography in Contemporary Dance at the Victorian College of Arts in Melbourne, Australia. His works have been staged at numerous international festivals as well as within Bulgaria. In 2005, together with the art manager Atanas Maev, he formed the Derida Dance contemporary dance company. By 2024, Derida Dance Center has become the first (and one of the few) major professional dance centres in Sofia for showcasing contemporary dance and performance.



Jivko Jeljazkov, *Back*, © Ivona Mashova

<sup>9</sup> See here for a subtitled video of the first edition of NONUMENT 2.0 radioballet.





Along with RCCA Toplocentrala, it provides a stage for contemporary dance performances in Sofia. Derida was also the host of Aerowaves Sofia festival, part of the Aerowaves platform – an initiative supporting emerging dance in Europe. The centre offers a residency and training programme Dance Port Derida which paves the way for the next generation in this artform. This one-year training course provides consistent education in contemporary dance techniques.

The latest generation of artists on the Bulgarian dance scene are also world nomads, who, from the very beginning of their careers, split their time between cities without being based in one particular place.

The Steam room collective features Aleksandar Georgiev, Zhana Pencheva and Darío Barreto Damas, three choreographers/dancers actively operating both locally and internationally in cities such as Sofia, Burgas, Skopje, Stockholm and Santa Cruz de Tenerife. Their initiative Imaginative Choreographic Center focuses on research, on imaginative institutionalisation of the dance work offering various programmes and residency opportunities for emerging independent artists.

Stephanie D. Handjiiska is a young Bulgarian dance artist and choreographer based in London. A graduate of the London Contemporary Dance School in 2020, she is in the first decade of her career. She actively promotes Bulgarian artists in the field of contemporary dance and dance film through her organisation Man with a Hat, established in 2016. The organisation's rising dance artists include Yasen Vasilev, a dramaturg, poet and director; Vasiliya Drebova, a verbatim theatre, movement theatre and dance artist; and Kosta Karakashyan, a director, choreographer and dance artist.

AToM Theatre, established in 2011, brings together six Bulgarian dancers, choreographers and dance teachers in their 30s. Besides their artistic pursuit in Bulgaria and across the world, they teach contemporary dance classes in their AToM Dance Studio located on the outskirts of Sofia.

Marion Darova, a dancer and choreographer, collaborates with AToM, alongside her other projects.

Room Temperature Association and HOD movement laboratory are two collaborating organisations aimed at providing professional development, lectures, and seminars for dance professionals and dance audiences.

Varna, a city on the Black Sea, has a strong dance tradition. The ballet ensemble of the city opera and the Varna international ballet festival have provided a classical ballet infrastructure which in turn led to the development of the contemporary dance scene.

Varna Dance Theater, is a contemporary dance organisation run by dancers and choreographers Karina Ilieva and Silvia Hristova. In addition to creating their own artistic work, they also coordinate the Dance Routes festival which aims to bring dancers and choreographers from Varna back to the city to conduct masterclasses and present performances.

The Moving Body platform is an initiative by two young choreographers, Iskra Prodanova and Svetlozara Hristova. Their goal is to engage new audiences with contemporary dance forms through performances, classes, and the Moving Body Festival.

**More detailed and in-depth information on contemporary dance in Bulgaria can be found on the Dance Magazine website.**

# The Art of Open Spaces: street art, site-specific performance, circus, and more in Bulgaria

For decades during the socialist era, artistic activities in public spaces were strictly limited to state-orchestrated events. However, from the 2000s onward, street performers, contemporary circus performers, fire artists, and site-specific artists ventured into the public space.

These artists come from various backgrounds: some are self-taught, while others are graduates of puppet and mime classes at the national performing arts academies or have studied abroad. They work both individually, and in independent companies, running commercial shows as well as independent projects. Their techniques are fluid, combining stilt walking, juggling, aerial dance, clowning, fire theatre and dance with drum circles, site-specific performances and contemporary circus. Along with presenting their work, the performers hold workshops for those willing to master juggling, clowning or other disciplines, suitable for beginners and children. Since there is no targeted support for these artistic practices, artists and companies typically apply for grants from the National Culture Fund and from municipal programmes (in some of the larger cities of Bulgaria) that target new audiences, decentralisation of arts, the city's cultural calendar and socially engaged arts. City streets, city parks, small towns and villages or even the woods are commonly where audiences can experience these artforms in Bulgaria. Many companies and artists travel extensively, often collaborating with international artists.



- **Contemporary circus**

Over decades, several Bulgarian circus families have garnered global acclaim in the field of traditional circus. However, this mapping centres on contemporary circus companies, which unfortunately do not receive dedicated support, as the NCF programme does not differentiate between contemporary and traditional circus. This puts them at a disadvantage compared to traditional circus companies, which enjoy larger audiences and an established infrastructure.

The founding of The New Circus company with a circus venue near the city centre in Sofia was a positive outcome of the Covid-19 relief fund<sup>10</sup>. This venue provided contemporary circus masterclasses, rehearsal space, and a creative hub for artists. Regrettably, with the closing of the funding programme, the New Circus was forced to leave their headquarters. They have relocated some operations to RCCA Toplocentrala, where Luiza Dushkova, the driving force behind New Circus, continues to pursue her projects.

Another contemporary circus company, Skrin Travel Theatre, is based in Dragichevo, a village<sup>11</sup> near Sofia. They organise circus workshops for local children, stage puppet performances, and create site-specific works that travel across the country.

<sup>10</sup> EU-funded grants, distributed by NFC to support independent artists and organisations during the lockdown that deprived them of income. Active: 2020 - 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Moving art practices to rural areas is not as common in Bulgaria as it is in Northern Europe, yet the process of artist-led decentralisation has started.



Contemporary circus companies and artists in Bulgaria have fostered a culture of engaging with social issues and promoting positive change for individuals and communities. They collaborate with marginalised and vulnerable groups, including at-risk youth, refugees, people with disabilities, residents of remote areas, and individuals from low-income backgrounds. The Metamorphoses Association exemplifies this commitment through performances for hospitalised children and a dedicated mime school.

Mini Art Fest has been dedicated to advancing contemporary circus practices for decades and is renowned for their social circus programme. The organisation gathers a constellation of various artists and often collaborates with the clown, Titania Chaos. They have their Mini Circus space where they present performances and hold workshops. They also host a contemporary circus festival in Sofia, now in partnership with RCCA Toplocentrala.



- **Fire performances**

Fire techniques as a street artform became popular<sup>12</sup> in Bulgaria in the early 2000s and are now a common element at outdoor festivals.

FIRE THEATRE Mime Company is among the pioneers of the genre. The company's practice incorporates storytelling, non-verbal theatre, pantomime, fire performance, and giant puppetry. Fire theatre performances mostly take place outdoors. The company proposes workshops for children and adults in marginalised areas and other social projects, in cooperation with social and ecological NGOs.

Shade and Fire theatre 'Fireter' is another company renowned for its stilt walking and fire dance performances and elaborate costumes and props. They also feature UV and LED performances.

Born of fire is a 2021 documentary movie by Sasha Hadjieva on fire art culture in Bulgaria featuring many fire artists and their respective companies.

- **Site-specific and immersive performances**

A considerable part of outdoor arts, site-specific performances comprise diverse, multidisciplinary practices which involve audiences in innovative ways. They have become a common element of festivals in Bulgaria, whether in rural areas/nature reserves, like Beglika fest, Meadows in the Mountains festival, Wake-up festival, Goatmilk festival, Dolen village festivals or in a more urban setting such as 6Fest Street Arts Festival in Plovdiv and Toplo fest at RCCA Toplocentrala in Sofia.

Sensory Theatre Sofia creates performances both for the outdoors and the indoors. They follow a specific work method leading to the creation of two pieces per year through a collective creative process involving the team members. The format relies on audience engagement, where the spectators shape the narrative, its significance, and its message.

Inner Theater Company performs sensory and immersive theatre. The performances and installations intertwine various techniques from performing arts and video art.

Christian Bakalov's ECIPA also develops site-specific and immersive performances.

**For further information you might wish to contact RCCA Toplocentrala or the festival organisers of 6Fest Street Arts Fest and MiniArt Fest.**

<sup>12</sup> Possibly, the practice of nestinarstvo, a fire-walking ritual with ecstatic dance traditional in Southern Bulgaria may have influenced the audience and performers' affinity for fire.

# Engaging Communities: exploring participatory art and socially engaged theatre

On taking a broad perspective of the Bulgarian post-1990 scene, one might mistakenly perceive a shift away from the socially engaged art, often associated with the socialist era. Fortunately, this is not the case, especially in the field of performing arts. Over the years, and particularly in the last decade, many artists and companies have focused on creating works that involve disadvantaged communities or audiences willing to participate in the art process. However, socially engaged or participatory projects are usually specific initiatives rather than the entire body of work of a company or artist.

Text-based theatre, including documentary and verbatim theatre, often highlight the stories of refugees and asylum seekers, socially excluded individuals, substance abusers, prisoners, and isolated elderly individuals. Within the art therapy domain, art projects focus on children at risk. Some municipalities offer funding for such types of performing arts projects.<sup>13</sup> The NCF used to support socially engaged arts but this programme closed in 2023 without explanation. In 2019, the production company Art Office organised Sofia's first and only conference focused on participatory and performing arts at the forefront of social engagement. At the event, artists shared their experiences, discussed the environments influencing their work, and proposed improvements needed in their field.

Companies such as ECIPA, Informbureau, and Sensory Theatre Sofia rely on volunteers or active audience participation to bring about their artistic visions. Outdoor companies like Fire Theatre and Travel Theatre Skrin work with communities to prepare parades or site-specific works.

Elena Panayotova, a theatre director, educator, and producer co-founded the Den Gri Foundation in 1999 to develop projects in support of children at risk. In 2003, she launched the annual Summer Theater Academy for Children at Risk in Shiroka Laka village, which in 2010 evolved into the international programme, 'Artists for Children,' in Kenya and Bulgaria. These projects have engaged over 300 artists and 5,000 children across four continents. In 2016, the Performance Art for Youth Africa (PAYA) project in Kenya



and Tanzania, was chosen from 1,800 submissions as one of eight projects to be supported by UNESCO. Besides her artistic projects, Panayotova also teaches at the theatre department of the New Bulgarian University and authored 'Applied theatre: Theory and Practices from Bulgaria to Africa'.

The Varna-based Association Our World uses theatre and art therapy techniques to work with at-risk and marginalised children, as well as with refugees and individuals with special needs and sensory issues.

The Art Bureau Foundation is a new production house which promotes diversification and decentralisation of the cultural life in the country and improves access to contemporary art. They produce and tour plays for deaf and hearing audiences.

Pavilion 19 is a long-term initiative that trains a new generation of artists to work at the intersection of art and social work. The organisation gathers art therapy and drama therapy specialists and works with children from disadvantaged communities.

Theatre Tsvete focuses on forum theatre, working for and with children to foster positive social inclusion, regardless of their origin and capabilities. They often collaborate with Nataliya Tsekova, a prominent Roma actress.

The SPACES Foundations runs several initiatives for in-theatre education and drama therapy, often working with remote communities and ethnic minorities. Their FreeSpiritArt project brings artists to remote villages to work with Roma children.

**For further information on participatory art companies, see the production companies Art Office and Art Bureau.**

<sup>13</sup> However, this funding is usually insufficient and rarely covers research, long-term projects, or necessary social interventions.

# Documentary Theatre: Addressing complex social issues

Over the past decade, the documentary theatre scene in Bulgaria has significantly flourished, with numerous companies tackling difficult themes such as homelessness, domestic abuse, migration and asylum seeking, substance abuse, segregation, solitude and isolation, and imprisonment. Blending sincerity and humour, their performances win over audiences even when addressing complex topics. Most performances take place in small independent places, which attract compact yet loyal audiences (the notable exceptions being Sfumato Theatre or The National Student House).

Theatre Replica, active since 2011, houses the Interdisciplinary Theatre Laboratory NEDRAMa and Emergency Theatre, the Roma minority social theatre project. The company collaborates with Bulgarian actors and directors and also features international guest directors for some of their works.

The documentary theatre studio Vox Populi led by the artistic director Neda Sokolovska, was established in 2012. Vox Populi constructs the dramaturgy and direction of their projects by combining interviews with real people affected by the topics at hand, research and consultations with sociologists, psychologists, or political scientists. Their goal is to foster processes of sharing and engagement to empower citizens.

Playback theatre Here and Now was founded in 2013 by the actress, director, psychodrama practitioner and trainer, Tzveta Baliyska. Since then, the company has presented more than 100 performances. It offers certified training in playback theatre techniques, runs a youth theatre company, and develops performances for and with the visually impaired. Tzveta Baliyska is also the driving force behind The Festival of Authors Theatre – FAT.

Theater of Responsibility is a Plovdiv based company developing projects in the field of documentary and socially engaged performing arts. They organise a festival of documentary-based theatre, run the programme Scene in the Jazz and have a recent project on forum theatre aimed at schools. Since 2022, they have also been providing a programme for Ukrainian refugees.



VOX POPULI, Golden Fish © Nikolay Staykov



Theatre of Responsibility, 2023 © own archive



Replica Theatre 2022 © Arch

**The websites of the documentary-based theatre companies mentioned above offer detailed perspectives on the individual artists they are working with and the diverse techniques they apply in their work.**



# From Bars to National stages: Dynamic improv and stand-up comedy in Bulgaria

In recent years, improvisational theatre has gained popularity in Bulgaria. Professional actors often participate in improv practices, alongside their other projects. Improv groups perform in small theatre spaces, cafes, open-air festivals and other venues in major cities like Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, and Veliko Tarnovo.

Stand-up comedy is a relatively new form of entertainment on Bulgarian stages, gaining popularity at bars and music halls, although certain entertainers can fill up the largest hall at the National Palace for Culture (NDK) in Sofia. This genre, which prioritises written material over performance, has also provided an offline platform for numerous Bulgarian social media influencers, thus bringing new audiences to a live event.

Hereafter are the two oldest and most well-known improv groups, involving actors from the independent performing arts scene.

HaHaHa Impro is known for their open dialogue with audiences and dynamic improvisations. Founded in 2009, the company performs at RCCA Toplocentrala and tours around Bulgaria and Europe. They also manage HaHaHa Impro Palace, a venue where they conduct classes for improvisational theatre.

Shizi Improv Theatre maintain their own venue in Sofia where they present performances and offer training for non-professionals, adults, and children.



HaHaHa Impro Theatre © pers arch



# Puppetry in Bulgaria: Tradition, innovation, and evolution

Puppet theatre is one of the most dynamically evolving sectors in Bulgaria's performing arts scene. With traditions dating back to the 19th century, puppet theatre was among the first genres to develop, under the influence of Czech, Slovak, and later Soviet artists, activists and educators, at Slavyanska Beseda – a Sofia-based hub for intellectuals.

Bulgaria was one of the first members of UNIMA (Union internationale de la marionnette), a puppetry network founded in 1929 and the oldest international theatre organisation in the world. Additionally, Bulgaria was the third country in the world – after Czechoslovakia and the USSR – to offer professional education in puppetry art, from 1962, at NATFA.

Since puppet theatre in Bulgaria has traditionally been oriented towards children, during socialism it faced less supervision and censorship compared to other arts. This relative freedom allowed for the development of innovative trends, aesthetics and artistic solutions, even during the restrictive socialist period from the 1950s to the 1980s. During this time, puppet theatre achieved notable successes. Prominent figures from this period include: Mara Penkova, founder of the first professional puppet theatre in Sofia in 1946; Arch. Ivan Tsonev, author of some of the most captivating scenographic solutions; Ivan Teofilov, poet and author of innovative puppet shows for adults; Atanas Ilkov and Nikolina Georgieva, founders of the professional puppetry education at NATFA) and Yulia Ognyanova, director, teacher and mentor to many contemporary Bulgarian puppeteers.

These artists established a unique Bulgarian puppetry school, influencing successors who have also made a mark on the European stage.

According to Prof. Slavcho Malenov<sup>14</sup>, there are 46 professional theatre companies in the country that offer puppet theatre. Over the past 60 years, there have been over 800 puppet theatre actors, 75 puppet directors, 27 puppet theatre set designers, and a total of over 1,000 highly educated professionals in puppetry.

In recent years, puppet theatre for adults has gained prominence, with notable contributions from Veselka Kuncheva and Marieta Golomehova, who founded Puppet's Lab in 2014. They develop new forms and innovative



techniques in puppet theatre and have won many prestigious national and international awards.

Among the older – yet still active – puppet companies, Theatre Atelie 313 deserves special mention. As do the Small Puppet Theatre SLON, which specialises in water puppet theatre, and the Credo Theatre, which combines drama and puppet theatre, clowning and commedia dell'arte.

Prominent younger companies include: the Pro-Rodopi Art Centre, which offers theatre and dance performances in rural and isolated areas in the Rhodope mountains; Malle-Malle puppet theatre, which focuses on street puppet theatre, shadow performances, soap bubbles shows, magic and more; the Small Theatre Company, which develops socially engaged performances with a focus on environmental protection; the Senju Puppet Company, which focuses on connections with puppetry practices from Asian countries and Corsair Theatre, which experiments with different forms in puppet theatre and has won several national and international awards.

Individual artists also make significant contributions, such as Manuela Sarkissyan, who specialises in participatory puppet shows and Dimitar Stefanov, known for his innovative and inspiring performances.

Finally, it is worth noting that Bulgaria is one of the few countries that maintains a specialised magazine for puppet theatre, the Kuklart magazine.

<sup>14</sup> Malenov, Slavcho, Sutradhara – the one holding the Strings, in: KuklArt Magazine, Issue 14/2020.

# Emerging Organisations: Independent performing arts production and cultural management

In recent years, alongside the growth and professionalisation of the independent sector, the diversification of their activities, and the advancement of cultural management education, new organisations have emerged. These entities support artistic practices through creative producing and communication efforts, actively seeking to attract a broader and more diverse audience and to provide a solid managerial base to counterbalance the omnipresent precarity of the artists.

Art Office and Art Bureau are seasoned cultural managers and producers who both assist artists in their international residencies and touring and enhance access to culture in the country's remote areas.

Cultural Foundation A25, along with some individual professionals, specialises in public relations and marketing of independent performing arts festivals and initiatives.



Informbureau, Nonument at Buzludza © perssArc



# Spotlight on Festivals: Showcasing diversity in Bulgaria's performing arts

Festivals play a significant role in Bulgaria's performing arts landscape, boasting a rich and diverse tradition dating back to the early 20th century. For many independent organisations, organising festivals serves as a crucial means to secure additional funding, as public institutions often favour financing festival activities over regular organisational activities. Securing foreign productions in their programmes or the participation of foreign artists, remains a challenge for most festivals.

Those that do manage to provide international content play a vital role. They serve as rare opportunities for Bulgarian audiences to experience foreign productions and engage with contemporary European artistic trends, thus occupying a crucial place within the cultural ecosystem.

ACT Festival for Independent Theatre, which has taken place in Sofia since 2009 is dedicated exclusively to the independent scene, featuring drama, along with dance, contemporary circus, and site-specific performances. Other theatrical or multigenre festivals also present works of the independent drama: 180 Degrees International Festival, SoFest Festival, Festival of Author Theatre, Theatre's Night, Small Season, Sfumato Theatre Laboratory, World Theatre in Sofia, Toplo Fest, APOLLONIA Arts Festival in Sozopol, Varna Summer International Festival, Radar Festival in Varna, Stage at a Crossroads International Theatre Festival in Plovdiv, and Varusha-South Festival in Veliko Tarnovo, to name but a few.

Dance festivals have established a tradition of presenting high-profile international productions of contemporary dance, alongside ambitious collaborations with Bulgarian and Balkan artists, to their audiences. The major ones are: One dance - International Dance and Performance Festival in Plovdiv, Antistatic, Aerowaves Bulgaria in Sofia, Moving Body Festival, and Dance Routes in Varna.



TOPLO Fest 2023 © own arch



ACT Festival 2023 © Nikolay Raychev



ACT Festival 2023 Artistic walk at Atelier Plastelin © Pers arch



Mini Art Fest, celebrates contemporary circus practices and takes place in Sofia.

Notable festivals dedicated to street art, giant puppetry, fire performance, and new circus include 6Fest Street Arts Festival in Plovdiv and Toplo fest, produced by RCCA Toplocentrala in their venue and the surrounding park in Sofia.

Gabrovo has established the tradition of the city's Gabrovo Carnival which often features outdoor performing arts professionals: stilt walkers, vertical and aerial dancers, as well as puppeteers.

Some prominent puppetry festivals include the International Puppet Art Festival The Golden Dolphin in Varna, the International Fair for Street and Puppet Theatre Puppet Fair in Sofia, the International puppet and theatre festival for adults Pierrot in Stara Zagora (2000) and the international open-air puppet festival Days of Puppets in Burgas.

Other noteworthy festivals to mention are the International Festival of Performances for Children The Magic Curtain in Targovishte, Two are few, three are too many at the

Plovdiv International Festival, and Adults Forbidden, the international Performing Arts Festival for Children and Youth in Smolyan.

Theatroscope, puppet theatre in a box is a new international festival, presenting puppet miniatures in the style of Caja lambe-lambe theatre from Brazil that is also gaining popularity with Bulgarian audiences.

**For further insights into Bulgarian festivals, the Bulgarian Festival Association provides comprehensive information.**

**Dr. Lyubomir Kutin stands out as one of the leading researchers on Bulgarian festivals. In 2020 he initiated the creation of a digital catalogue of the festivals in Varna, renowned as Bulgaria's festival capital. This ongoing project aims to expand and enrich the understanding of festival events across various disciplines.**



# Nurturing Talent: Education and training

Academic programmes in the performing arts had already been established by the mid-1950s. They continue to actively enrol students, adapting their curricula to contemporary artistic practices. This includes education in new media and technologies and cultural management programmes. Emerging artistic practices such as art therapy and contemporary dance are usually taught at the newly established academic institutions like the New Bulgarian University, and Luben Groys Theatre College, among others.

However, education in the performing arts still suffers from the rigidity of programmes and faculties within Bulgarian academic institutions. There is a notable absence of short-term training and multidisciplinary programmes. Particularly hampering the entrance of new generations in the independent performing arts sector is the lack of structured education in project development, and project funding, portfolio building, freelance and organisational accounting basics, as well as understanding the legal status of independent artists and author's rights.

Professional theatre education in Bulgaria is primarily provided by the National Academy of Theatre and Film Art (NATFA) and the Prof. Asen Diamandiev Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv. In the 1990s, several alternative higher schools were also established: Theatre Department at the New Bulgarian University (NBU), Lyuben Groys Theatre College, Faculty of Arts at the South-West University, and educational initiatives at Sofia University (Alma Alter University Theatre)

Dance education, focusing primarily on classical ballet and folklore, is taught at The National School for Dance Art in Sofia. For decades, being part of the state contemporary dance ensemble Ballet Arabesque and working with choreographers like Mila Iskrenova provided a unique opportunity for classical dancers to study contemporary dance practices in Bulgaria.

Nowadays, contemporary dancers often pursue studies abroad, or participate in programmes such as the MA in Dance and Choreography of the NBU, the BA in Dance Theatre at NATFA, the MA in Contemporary Dance Techniques at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine arts in Plovdiv, and the BA in Contemporary Dance at the Varna Free University. Since 2017, The Derida Dance Centre also offers a yearly educational programme in contemporary dance.



Varna Dance Centre, *Letters*, © Hristo Rushev



Mini Art Fest, © Pers arch

Professionals in contemporary circus, site-specific performances, and outdoor arts receive practical training in informal settings and through masterclasses. NATFA offers a BA in Movement and Mime Practices. NATFA is also renowned for its Puppetry programme.

Scenography and costume design for performing arts are taught at the Faculty of Applied Arts and Design at NAA, at the Prof. Asen Diamandiev Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv, and through Scene Design at NBU.

BA and MA programmes in cultural and arts management are offered at NATFA, Sofia University (St. Kliment Ohridski), NBU, Plovdiv University, and South-West University.



# Critical Voices: The Landscape of cultural criticism and periodicals in Bulgaria

The state of cultural critics and periodicals in Bulgaria faces significant challenges. Art criticism and art theory have been particularly hard hit by cultural crises. While a wide variety of publications thrived in the early years of the transition, in recent times their number and scope have diminished. Nonetheless, several key publications persist under difficult conditions, maintaining high standards of cultural critique.

Homo Ludens magazine, a publication of the guild of theatre critics and playwrights, is the most comprehensive publication specialising in performing arts. It strives to present global and Bulgarian theatre trends, while analysing and reflecting on the key events in current theatrical life.

In the field of dance, Dance Magazine is the only specialised publication. Published annually, it covers ballet, contemporary dance, performance and dance culture. It features personalities, events and ideas spanning classical to contemporary dance on both Bulgarian and international stages.

KukiArt magazine, published by AKT-UNIMA Bulgaria is specialised in the field of puppetry, following the latest trends in puppet theatre around the world and within Bulgaria.

The online platform New Dramaturgies is dedicated to researching, developing, and presenting innovative practices and discourses in the field of contemporary performing arts.

Among larger-format publications covering all the arts, Kultura Magazine, Vapreki, Literaturen vestnik and the now-discontinued Artizanin publish critical material more frequently compared to specialist journals, which typically publish annually.





# Building a Sustainable Future: Prospects for Bulgaria's independent performing arts

The independent performing arts sector in Bulgaria faces numerous challenges, exacerbated by political instability and inadequate support systems. With cultural policy reforms stalled due to ongoing political crises and a lack of structural funding, the independent sector remains fragile and precarious, struggling with lack of infrastructure and minimal financial backing compared to state and municipal theatres. Despite its significant presence comprising hundreds of organisations and individuals, the independent sector operates without reliable data, which further hinders its development.

However, in the face of challenging circumstances, the sector demonstrates remarkable resilience. Since the fall of the communist regime, it has not only grown but also diversified its activities significantly. This expansion has broadened its scope, making it more appealing to new and diverse audiences. Moreover, the sector has shown a proactive approach by developing groundbreaking aesthetics and experimenting with innovative organisational models. Despite the absence of comprehensive state guidelines for environmental sustainability in the arts, the independent sector is taking initiative in this direction. Its resilience and resourcefulness has placed it at the forefront of resource sharing. This includes sharing materials, costumes, props, transportation, touring arrangements, staff, and professional services. Such collaborative efforts underscore the sector's ability to maximise resources effectively while maintaining high standards of artistic achievement. Furthermore, its commitment to international collaboration is evident in its deep connections with colleagues and audiences worldwide. The fact that the Bulgarian independent performing arts sector manages to host big international events and festivals deserves acknowledgement. In a situation where contemporary dance hardly receives any targeted support, three big international dance festivals - One Dance, Antistatic, Aerowaves - boost the local scene' WITH 'two large international dance festivals - One Dance and Antistatic - boost the local scene and audiences, despite insecure funding. In 2024, the ACT Festival for independent theatre, an international event, will celebrate its 14th edition.



The sector's journey is a testament to its adaptability and forward-thinking approach in navigating complex transitions and fostering inclusive growth.

To secure a sustainable future, it is crucial for the sector to strengthen internal communication and establish a more robust dialogue with public authorities. Comprehensive cultural policy reforms are needed to diversify and enhance funding, create clear distinctions between commercial and non-commercial activities, and define an artist status that reflects the sector's unique needs. Enhanced international collaboration and the integration of ecological sustainability practices are equally vital for nurturing a resilient and flourishing independent performing arts landscape in Bulgaria. These steps are crucial for fostering a thriving and resilient independent performing arts scene in Bulgaria.

Bulgaria represents an untapped potential for partnerships and cooperation. International initiatives such as the upcoming TEH meeting in 2025 and networks like IETM are crucial catalysts for the sector's growth and development. Hopefully, the push from the sector for better tailored matching funds will increase Bulgarian participation in Creative Europe projects, in EEA Grants, in Horizon Europe calls as well as in the new mobility initiatives like Culture Moves Europe and Perform Europe.

There is cautious optimism regarding future developments. Despite budget reductions following the Covid-19 pandemic, funding levels in Bulgaria have exceeded those seen before the crisis. Bulgarian authorities are currently tasked with establishing a registry for independent arts professionals and formalising and adopting the status of artists within the country. This deeper understanding of the sector's work processes should lead to improved support, including structural funding for organisations, funding for implementing green practices and technologies, dedicated time for research and artistic exploration, and support for sustainable touring and production.

However, achieving these improvements requires persistent effort and advocacy from the independent sector.

# Annex

You can find a (non-exhaustive) List of performing arts organisations in Bulgaria [HERE](#)



Galina Borissova, *Hypothetically*, 2024 © Stefan Zdraveski



Brain Store Project, *Euforia of the illness* © Teodora Simova

