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Amateurs' Theatres in Serbia: Communities

Executive Summary

The research titled “Amateurs’ Theatres in Serbia: Communities” was initiated in 2019 because, since ancient Greece (at least), theatres were not only stages for dramatic artists but also agora in its own right. In this place, citizens can initiate debates on various societal issues.

Acknowledging the variety of contemporary theatre in Serbia, research focused on amateurs’ theatres. Two reasons were crucial for such focus. Foremost, theatre production is represented through the work of over three dozen professional theatres scattered across larger urban areas in Serbia and numerous rather small groups in cities, towns, and villages. Without detailed knowledge about their work, the total picture of theatrical activity would be rudimentary, lacking representations of diversity. The second reason is that by working with amateurs interested in spending their leisure time practicing theatrical creativity, amateurs’ theatres became epicenters of the communities through their work addressing various issues and problems that communities forming Serbian society face.

This second reason enabled the formulation of the hypothesis: Amateurs’ theatres in Serbia have developed into community-based theatres that contribute to both the production and reception of theatrical creativity while encouraging their fellow citizens to act and react on all issues relevant to the community and the society in broader terms.

Examining this hypothesis was based on theories of theatre, theatre anthropology, and management in culture. Methodologically, in the research, qualitative tools were implored: ethnography, individual interviews with representatives of amateurs’ theatres, observation (of the working process and plays), and participation (ahead rehearsals and dialogues following the performances at festivals).

- Throughout 2019 and 2022, interviews were conducted with coordinators of 29 amateur theatres across Serbia. Also, in three theatres, interviewees were amateurs – actors. Interviews were conducted based on a structured questionnaire consisting of questions in three groups - about the theatre, creating a play, and reflections on amateurism in theatre:
 - *About the theatre* – history; current status; employees; membership; venues; technical equipment; costumes; scenography.
 - *Creating plays* – themes; genres; selection of texts; authors’ plays; working process; engagement of members in the production of the space.
 - *Reflections about theatre and amateurism* – amateurs and professional theatres; theatre in general / role of theatre in the society; amateurism.

- Observation and participation consisted of participation at rehearsals, watching plays, and involvement in discussions following the performances at festivals.

The relevance of selected amateurs' theatres on stages in Serbia and the region ensure validity. Results are analyzed in the frame of theatre forms studied by anthropologists and creators in theatre. Also, results were analyzed in line with theories and practices of community-based theatres.

Key findings:

- The majority of examined amateurs' theatres were founded in the 20th century. Just three of them are based in the 2010s.
- Two out of 29 examined theatres hold the status of local cultural institutions, while in equal proportion are theatres within local cultural centers and theatres registered as cultural associations.
- Most examined theatres are sufficiently equipped and employ at least one technician. In three amateur theatres, sound and light engineering is trusted by inexperienced members. The existence of costumes and scenography depots depends on venues in which amateurs' theatre's practice. In 2022 two platforms were under partial reconstruction (roofing). Some coordinators stated that infrastructure was renewed in recent years, while one coordinator emphasized that serious rebuilding should be done, but the municipality lacks financial resources. A couple of coordinators expressed the need for some pieces of sound equipment should be renewed.
- In 27 examined amateurs' theatre's work is organized into the following age groups: youngest group (so-called Acting school, children aged from 6 to 11 years); medium group (children aged from 11 to 14 years); youth group (usually from 14 to 18 years of age, but in few theatres up to 30 years of age); and adults (from 30 years of age). In one theatre youngest and medium groups are planned to be open from 2023, while one theatre developed a concept of joint work of children and adults.
- In all examined theatres, each age group annually premieres at least one (age-appropriate) play.
- Coordinators of all examined amateurs' theatres agree that it is easier to find texts for children's plays (including fairytales, classical and modern literature for children) than for teenagers.
- Coordinators of several examined theatres emphasized that they conceptualize work with youth as a form of engaged theatre in which child explores issues of growing up and problems that youth face in contemporary society. Accordingly, plays reflect youth's opinions about youth issues and in the community.
- Working with children and youth is usually trusted to academically educated actors from the local community. However, some amateurs' theatre work with children and juveniles is charged to coordinators with decades of theatrical experience. In two examined theatres, if the financial situation allows, they contract professional directors to work with younger groups. In contrast, one professional theatre director works with youth (in that theatre from secondary school (14 years of age) up to 30 years of age).
- Although all coordinators reported that generations could be mixed, it is a permanent practice in one theatre, while in others, it depends on the play chosen to premiere that year.

- Most examined theatres working with adults (so-called “evening scene”) are trusted by professional directors. However, some interviewed coordinators reported significant interest in professional directors working with amateurs’ theatres but also noted the tendency among experienced directors towards “franchising,” i.e., repeating models regardless of acting ensembles’ characteristics in different amateurs’ theatres. Hence, many amateur theatres tend to cooperate continuously with directors they have already worked with.
- Due to limited finances and the inability to hire professional directors, directing is trusted by amateurs who have decades-long experience in working on the production of amateurs’ theatres performances. Results of their work – performances at festivals and in other towns – show the high quality of amateurs’ work.
- Most examined amateurs’ theatres annually premier one performance per age group. Still, coordinators of three theatres noted that they annually have six premiers (two co-productions with other theatres are accounted for). Most often, each performance is played at least 20 times.
- The selection of texts on which performances will be based is usually trusted to coordinators (in theatres that do not hire professional directors). In contrast, in theatres that employ experienced directors, the choice is charged to the director but in cooperation with coordinators. In any case, structure and ensemble availability is crucial in text selection.
- The working process corresponds to “classical” work in theatres: text selection, readings, stage rehearsals (including the development of scenography, costumes, sound, and light), and premiers. While improvisations are encouraged in the early stages of production, informants do not favor improvisations in later production phases, especially not during the performances. Any standing out may confuse fellow actors on the scene, giving the audience wrong impressions.
- The difference between youth and adult productions is also noticeable in genres. While youth productions are more oriented towards engagement and problems that youth face in society, adults’ productions are more often oriented towards comedy. In that regard, the majority of informers noted different audiences. While youth productions target youth with the same problems as performers, adult audiences are keener to observe theatre as entertainment. However, informants indicated that comedies might contain “the sting” and encourage the audience to think beyond laughter.
- In all examined theatres, great attention is given to the audience. Reflections about the audience most often imply the need to keep building the audience, to make the audience think of theatre not just as “the place” of entertainment but as a place where the person can weep, laugh, contemplate realities and diversities, and, above all be encouraged to think about actions.
- Informants’ reflections on theatre and its role in society show that the audience is a critical partner in theatrical life because it makes actors and audience think and (re)act.
- The difference between amateur and professional theatres is seen in terms of dedication. Both amateurs and professionals love theatre, but professionals’ socio-economic existence depends on how much they work (not necessarily in terms of the number of people in the audience, so the arts of trade may be implored), while amateurs’ economic existence is not depending on their theatrical engagement, but their spiritual existence does. Also, some informants noted

- that the role of amateurs' theatres is to create the basis (especially in small towns and villages) for the audience, who are likelier to watch professionals' performances in their leisure time.
- Amateurs' theatre performances seen from 2019 until 2022 displayed a high level of production, regardless of hiring a professional director. It is important to note that sound, light, costumes, and scenography production costs are often the same for both professional and amateur theatres. Therefore, in quality terms, both amateur and professional theatres complement in creating quality theatrical offers for Serbian citizens.
 - The importance of theatre for children and youth is perceived from the perspective of self-confidence building, developing speaking skills, and developing creativity.
 - The importance of theatre for adults and society, in general, is perceived from the perspective that theatre is not only a form of entertainment but, above all propeller for critical thinking, acting, and reacting.

Analysis from the global perspective of theatrical forms showed that text-music-dance is the dominant form of media used in performances. Music and dance are most often used to emphasize text. Three theatres tried to make a musical but faced production difficulties, while seven informants noted that they needed help to create a musical. As a strictly textual form, monodrama was performed by actors from three theatres, while one theatre annually organizes an international monodrama festival. Regarding the nature of performers, only one theatre regularly uses masks and dolls, while others use them occasionally as requisites. In all examined theatres, performances are scripted, though some minor modifications may be made following the performance based on shared opinions about the quality of first performances. Watched performances showed that, except for occasional laughter or applause during the performance, the audience does not participate otherwise in the performances. However, all informants appreciate feedback after performances, informally as comments from other community members days after the concert and formal discussions immediately after the festival performance with jury members and the audience.

Research showed high sensitivity of amateurs' theatres regarding problems in society and towards the oppressed. For example, many performances dealt with the problem of peer violence among children and youth, violence against women and migrants, issues of gender equality, and poverty. Therefore, even though texts are frequently chosen by coordinators and hired professional directors, it is possible to say that they do correspond with Boal's notions in his theatre of the oppressed theory.