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**SLOVENIA**

## **FALLING BEHIND**

### **A SHORT OUTLINE OF SLOVENIA'S FESTIVALS BEFORE AND AFTER 1991**

In terms of festivals, Slovenia is an interesting phenomenon. In former Yugoslavia it unquestionably held the first place in the field of performing arts over all of the then federal Republics. Despite this fact, however, it failed to create a reputable international festival of performing arts, similar to those in the rest of the country. While the BITEF festival was founded in Belgrade (Serbia), MESS in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), MOT in Skopje (Macedonia), the Eurokaz in Zagreb (Croatia), etc. in Slovenia only smaller and mostly local festivals were created. Of the bigger ones only two survived to this day: Borštnik's Meeting - an annual festival of the best Slovene productions which is going to take place for the 44th time this year, and the Week of Slovenian Drama - a festival of the productions staging the best Slovene plays, which has been around for 39 years. (I am deliberately omitting puppet and children theatre festivals in this paper).

After the break-up of Yugoslavia (1991), the change of the political system presented an abundance of opportunities. Utilising non-governmental or public-private partnership possibilities new festivals such as the Exodos, ExPonto, Mladi levi, Mesto žensk, Gibanica, NagiB, Goli oder, Ana Desetnica, and many others were created. ([www.exodos.si](http://www.exodos.si), [www.exponto.net](http://www.exponto.net), [www.bunker.si/slo/mladi-levi](http://www.bunker.si/slo/mladi-levi), [www.cityofwomen.org](http://www.cityofwomen.org), [www.exodos.si/gibanica](http://www.exodos.si/gibanica), [www.nagib.si](http://www.nagib.si), [www.goli-oder.org](http://www.goli-oder.org), [www.anadesetnica.org](http://www.anadesetnica.org)) in Slovenia. These are small-scale, conceptual and/or thematic festivals which address and appeal to only a small and specific segments of the general public.

The reasons

There are multiple reasons for the "festival boom" after 1991. The most important is the need to reflect, not only on one's own theatrical production, but also on certain problems in the society, such as migration, the social status of women, the acceptance and recognition of young artists abroad, the promotion of individuals and the possibility of introducing local performing achievements into the international festival network. This was a completely natural and logical

reaction to the break-up of the shared Yugoslav performing arts space, which provided local artists with regular participation on the many Yugoslav festivals.

The second reason for the increase in the number of festivals is much more pragmatic. With legalization of private initiative a large number of individuals have founded numerous formal non-governmental cultural organizations. By applying for public financial subsidy in the field of performing arts they have also secured some a means of living. Most of the founders or people closely involved in the foundation of those NGOs have remained their own executive producers to the present day. This phenomenon was very welcome in the years immediately after 1991 for giving young people an opportunity to become professionally involved in the arts. In recent years it has gradually become a burden, curbing any kind of progress, change or important breakthrough in this field, especially in international festivals. Why? The same executive staff which runs programs and organizes most of the above mentioned festivals today have been doing this from their foundations, i. e. for about ten to fifteen years. Throughout the years they have missed the chance to develop the festivals artistically and also professionally. The form of their NGOs is the so-called private institution of public interest. Because they are basically private their executives cannot be changed and even more paradoxically, no matter how successful and ambitious the festivals are - or not, they keep being publicly subsidized. This check-mat position will have to be resolved on the level of cultural policy.

The delineation of some of the festivals

### *National dramatic festivals*

As already mentioned, the **Borštnik's Meeting** festival is an annual show-case of Slovene theatre, and the **Week of Slovenian Drama** festival is the show-case of Slovene playwriting. Both these festivals are closely tied to large public institutions. The former functions within the Slovene National Theatre in Maribor, the latter is run by the Prešeren Theatre in Kranj. Both have an outside selector and are very similar in the aspects of art direction and organization. The way they have been run, organized, strategically focused and promoted has not changed since their beginnings (some minor changes are negligible), thus completely ignoring geopolitical, socio-economic and structural changes that occurred after 1991. Because of their obsolete character they have become rather marginal, local events. It is only their tradition and accumulated respectability that safeguards the favour of the local audiences. However, both festivals have so far shown no substantial interest in expanding to the international level, nor are they striving to address any foreign audiences and professionals. They need to be thoroughly restructured and new experts introduced into the decision making process, which will apparently happen soon. These two festivals are, however, valid and

appealing to the local professional circles because of their competitive nature. Both award the winning artists with prestigious nationally acknowledged prizes, which bring not only fame, but also a higher pay grade to the artists in steady employment and entitle the free lancers to higher fees. Today, this is an anachronism and can be understood as a leftover privilege from the socialist times but no cultural policy so far has dared to touch this issue, let alone abolish this institute.

In terms of the audiences, however, the two festivals differ: Maribor (130.000 inhabitants) is the second largest city in Slovenia and has a long tradition (more than 100 years) of theatrical activities. The Slovene National Theatre in Maribor is the biggest public institution in the country (comprised of the theatre, opera, ballet, symphonic orchestra and the Borštnik's festival). They have their traditionally faithful local audiences that also frequent the festival events. Kranj, on the other hand, is a much smaller town (50.000) with less urban population and not as strong theatrical tradition. In order to encourage the audience to participate at the festival events the present director of the festival, when appointed to the post some eight years ago, decided that all spectators get their tickets for free. The box-office deficit is covered by sponsorship and donations.

#### *International performing arts festivals*

The biggest, most ambitious and most promising Slovenian international performing arts festival created after 1991 is **Exodos**, produced by the non-profit, independent theatre and dance production centre of the same name. Aimed towards the West and the North of Europe its concept revolves around the performing arts and dance practices which also require theoretical reflection to function and exist. In the first few years, when it was run by competent professionals, the festival had a good standing in international circles. Later on, it passed into the hands of some unskilled individuals that turned out to be completely unable to run the festival not only in terms of art direction but also in terms of organisation and production. The decline and slow decay of the Exodos festival has been going on for a few years now. The most drastic changes have started to show after 2006, when the Ministry of Culture declined further financial aid due to unpaid debts. Oscillation in program quality shifts in programming strategies (from theatre festival at the beginning toward more contemporary performing and installation arts in the last editions) and the change of festival's established time (from spring to winter) also caused a substantial decrease of the festival's audience. The number of people attending the festival's performances has been reduced to just a small group of fans. And nothing is being done to increase these numbers. The formal structure of the festival makes it extremely hard to change policy and staff. Unless the government and the municipality find a way to save Slovenia's only internationally recognized festival brand, Exodos is, unfortunately, going to disappear.

**Ex Ponto** international festival **was also** created in the 1990's. It is still being run by its founder Damir Domitrović Kos. It is oriented towards southern and eastern Europe and focuses mostly on dramatic theatre. Even though it is a much more stable festival, with a strong local standing and a slightly weaker international reputation, it is still missing some vital elements. It has no festival centre, no international audience, it does not attract international media, it does not have any audience-performers meetings, round table discussions, lectures, debates etc. In short, it lacks what is needed to create an effective festival network, atmosphere and audience loyalty. It is basically just a series of performances that all touch the same predefined subject matter (this is also a bit limiting) and one or two local or international co-productions that are premiered during the festival. These are risks that often end in a fiasco, which in turn affect the festival's quality and stability. The audience is mostly local - consisting of theatre professionals. Ljubljana has a relatively large general theatre going public, however, no effort is being made to attract it to the Ex Ponto festival. The Exodos and Ex Ponto alike are festivals that were created with much larger ambitions in mind, but unfortunately, due to financial, human resource, space and organizational difficulties these ambitions were not and are still not being fulfilled. The indifference to audience build up that marks both festivals is part of a larger and more complex phenomenon, characteristic not only for the international festivals but also for some other cultural events. Very few public institutions in culture depend on the box-office income in a substantial percentage. The programmers, rather than investing in audience development, rely on the mentality of local theatre goers and fans, who somehow get their tickets and fill the venues. To a certain scale. But I can't remember a festival event that was sold out in advance.

**Mladi levi (Young Lions)** is a festival which was founded by the Bunker production centre. This is the only performing arts NGO with its own premises, an old electricity plant in Ljubljana. Bunker too is being run by its founder Nevenka Koprivšek. Young Lions is a festival of young, not yet established European artists, connected to the international Junge Hunde network. It is over 10 years old and has a stable, mostly younger audience, which is constant, but not growing. The phenomenon of fans and theatre buffs should not go unnoticed, however, there is no sign of a larger international audience or any other similar theatre audiences for that matter.

There is also the well established festival of contemporary arts called **Mesto Žensk (City of Women)** which has been organized by the Association for the Promotion of Women in Culture for the past 15 years. It is not strictly limited to performing arts, but also hosts artists and theoreticians of other profiles and professions. One of the festival's main features is its interdisciplinary nature which connects artists that like to experiment and flirt or even step over the boundaries of individual genres. Every edition of the festival is dedicated to a main theme, touching either the

topics of art and culture, or political, social, cultural, and gender studies. The festival used to have a relatively large audience, today, unfortunately, the numbers are considerably lower.

### *International dance festivals*

In the area of contemporary dance things are changing at a faster pace and the results are slightly better. As already mentioned, the show case Gibanica has been the pioneer in internationalizing of the contemporary dance scene. **NagiB** is a festival of experimental dance that was created in 2005 in Maribor as an answer to the increasing need to expand and promote contemporary and experimental dance. This festival provides the basis for expansion and future development of the current Slovenian dance scene by providing the possibility of organizing educational events, debates and by offering a high quality repertoire of contemporary dance events and performances. This, in turn, strengthens the cooperation of local artists with people from all around the world and encourages not only the exchange of knowledge, but it also improves, reinforces and expands it through a series of theoretical and practical workshops and seminars.

In 2006 Matjaž Farič, a choreographer, started a new festival called **Fronta of Contemporary Dance** in the eastern part of the country, in the town of Murska Sobota. This is one of the rare projects that was started very professionally and with great ambitions in mind. Besides local and national funding it is also supported by the European Commission and European Cultural Foundation. It attracts partners from the neighbouring countries Hungary, Austria, Croatia and also Slovakia. Together they create the festival's repertoire and plan various activities (lectures, workshops, foreign guest visits, etc.) which take place throughout the whole year. During the festival special attention is given to the audience which is brought to Murska Sobota (20.000 inhabitants) from all of the countries mentioned. This project is truly praiseworthy for we have to realize that the majority of the festivals take place in Ljubljana, while smaller towns suffer from the lack of cultural events. This is especially true for the contemporary dance scene, which has little audience other than professionals and a handful of enthusiasts.

### Untouchable leaders

To sum up with the words of Henri Schoenmakers, a festival is an event composed from many individual events. It is a kind of meta-event. Structurally, it is similar to a television or circus programme. A television network is responsible for the selection of shows and the dramaturgy of their succession. And this same dramaturgy which is a decisive factor in the presentation of individual events connects and unites the viewers of one evening's programme. The dramaturgy of a festival connects the audience in the same place at the same time in a very similar fashion. If a

festival is an event of events, then the role of a festival recipient can easily be expanded to festival participant, in short to a person who is able to judge the performance as a piece of art created by a certain artistic group and as an act of choice and programming by the festival's selector or artistic director. The festival as a meta-event with a defined artistic strategy and through its dramaturgy has a stronger influence on its surroundings than a one-time performance event and therefore a stronger and longer lasting impact on a local and international level. With its social connections it strengthens the infrastructure and links established local venues and specific sites.

It seems to me that most Slovenian festival teams keep forgetting many of the above issues since our festivals face numerous problems. The older and well established festivals are financially and organizationally well covered because their connections to larger institutions provide them with venues, technical support and promotion possibilities. Their repertoires, however, suffer greatly - not only from the lack of ambition and flexibility but also from being completely detached from the international scene. Younger festivals usually take the shape of NGOs which means they depend on the project support and cooperation of public institutions. Also their budgets are considerably smaller. The disproportion between the public institution's and the NGO's budgets is so enormous, it is no wonder the situation of the latter group of festivals is miserable. This is, of course, an issue of cultural policy which will, finally, have to free itself of the old socialist patterns and substitute them with other more flexible forms and criteria for funding.

In some cases festivals are led by incompetent staff. Due to the rigid structures it will take a lot of effort to reorganize them and introduce changes. The form of private NGOs applying for public funds has become pressured the public authorities to either fund the existing staff and their programming strategies or refuse the funding and risk the liquidation of the festivals. The authorities are it seems reluctant to be perceived as liquidators. The lack of human resources in festival teams is also a result of the absence of educational programmes on the public university level. In Slovenia it is not possible to study theatre production or organisation, not to mention contemporary dance, choreography, set or costume design. This is definitely a national disgrace and anyone working as a producer is in some ways also an amateur.

## Conclusion

Due to different reasons little or no attention is given to the audience (with a few exceptions). There is an interesting phenomenon concerning the audience: no festival relies seriously on the box-office income. Most of the festival audiences get their tickets for free. In some cases (as in the Week of Slovenian Drama in Kranj) this is a result of strategic planning: sponsoring the tickets attracts theatre goers. In longer term, it means a stable audience and full houses. As long as sponsors and

donors support the festival on the same scale, this policy can, of course, be justified. In most other cases, free tickets mentality is a result of different factors:

Firstly, in a small isolated community, where everyone knows everyone, it has become a rule that theatre professionals, fans and buffs never or very rarely buy theatre tickets. This is true not only for the international festival events but also for premieres and other local theatre productions. For instance, the opening night policy of the local theatre companies, national, local or NGOs, is to give the tickets for free to the so called critical mass. They afterwards spread the voice which increases ticket sales for the upcoming performances. In the dynamics of the prevailing artistic and programming ideology the same mentality has been transposed to the one time events, i.e. festival productions.

And secondly, free tickets render the share of the ticket income negligible and purely of symbolic nature, thus making the subsidy share nearly 100%. This is the result of the existing cultural policy that regardless of the audience development or box-office income enables the festivals to carry on surviving no matter how problematic their strategies and programs are. It is a vicious circle. As the festivals do not depend on the box-office, the festival teams do not strive or invent strategies to attract new audiences. This is one of the reasons why performing arts festival audiences are in many cases fans and regular theatre-goers.

And finally, in my opinion, Slovenia lacks a major international theatre or dance festival whereas numerous production centres and small-scale, theme or focused international festivals (I have mentioned just a few in this paper) have, unfortunately, not succeeded in artistic stability, consolidation of the brand and development of a more diverse audiences. Because of the public funds dispersed among so many incompetent public institutions and NGOs, any kind of a bold move in art direction, promotion and audience build-up alike is rendered impossible. The result are compromises which in turn cause artistic mediocrity and even noticeable regression.

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