

## **DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION OF THEATRE AUDIENCE IN THE BALKANS**

This article is part of my BA thesis which sought to summarize the experiences I gained through collaboration with different festivals and as a producer of festivals and other artistic projects.

These are mostly festivals from my hometown, Novi Sad and other cities in Serbia (INFANT-International Festival of Alternative and New Theatre, Sterijino Pozorje – Festival of National Drama, BITEF – Belgrade International Theatre Festival and FACE – Festival of Alternative Creative Exchange). I have also included some Slovenian festivals (Boršnikovo Srećanje, Exodos, Mladi Levi and Preglej na Glas), since I currently live in Slovenia and collaborate with them, which gives me valuable insight and a possibility to compare them to the previously mentioned festivals in Serbia.

I have chosen those festivals because of their variety, differences in tradition, program orientation, budget, organizational structure and size. This selection is subjective and some of the festivals analyzed here could easily be replaced with others, but I was personally involved in their realization and so I can speak about them from my own experience, not just theoretically. I believe that the situation is similar throughout former Yugoslavia.

It is important to stress that festivals are determined by the context in which they are operating - city, region, state as well as EU cultural policies. However, an official comprehensive EU cultural policy does not exist at this time. One can only speak of actions and programs, such as Culture 2007-2013 and European Cultural Capitals. At international festivals across Europe different cultures meet and interculturalism establishes itself as a European process. At the same time, the EU Culture 2007-2013 programme allocates some funds for inter-festival cooperation, especially for training and co-production.

The situation regarding theater festivals in the Balkans is complex. Both Serbia and Slovenia belonged to the same cultural space until twenty years ago. These two countries share a partial historical background, but today present each other - as “the other”. Slovenians and Serbians lived in the same country, but today Slovenia is part of the EU, while Serbia has barely taken the first step in the accession process. Slovenia and the northern province of Serbia – Vojvodina (with the capital in Novi Sad) have another shared legacy – as they were both in the Austro-Hungarian

Empire before 1918. In spite of all these historical ties, the reality of South-Eastern Europe is a scarcity of contacts and real collaboration, reinforced by political and economic problems. Furthermore, the enlargement of the EU has created new boundaries between states and people.

Even though the process of European Integration provides a general framework for cultural cooperation, the communication and collaboration between and among artists and experts, especially those from Serbia has been aggravated by a complex and restrictive visa regime. Ministries of Culture in the region support primarily the collaboration of EU countries with other EU countries, or of the EU countries with European non-EU countries. However, none of them focus on regional cooperation. This problem has been rectified to some extent by the initiatives that Slovenia undertook during its EU Presidency in 2008. Slovenian Ministry of foreign affairs- sector for culture has also stated that Western Balkan is one of their priority areas, although this has not yet been followed by a specific policy measures.

During and after the brake-up of Yugoslavia new festivals have emerged in the successor states and their respective cultural policies were supportive of their cooperation with Western Europe. In Serbia, during the 1990s, festivals suffered from status uncertainties and financial problems, which lowered their quality. Many festivals had to cut their program to a minimum, especially those on the local level. Festivals have been regaining their deserved place only in the last few years, mainly thanks to small improvements in the standard of living, more possibility for foreign groups to appear etc. However, most of the experts from the field, quoted in this research (Dragan Klaic, Milena Dragicevic- Šešic, Ivan Medenica, Simon Grabovac) agree that there is still a lack of political vision concerning the strategic goals of the festivals followed by a lack of tools for their evaluation.

It is unlikely that festivals will develop their strategies when governments do not have clear cultural policies. At the same time, festivals could and should create their strategic plans for their own sake. They have to be strong enough to prove their credibility and the best way to do so is by using the tools of contemporary cultural management – continuous self-evaluation, strategic planning, audience development, volunteers' programmes, networking, etc.

Milena Dragicevic-Šešic and Sanjin Dragojevic<sup>1</sup> claim that cultural institutions in the Balkans do not have the capacity to face new trends, such as demands for more efficiency and better economic results. Also, these can be demands to address social and, more often, socio-political goals, such as inclusion of different social groups, promotion of interculturalism, development of cultural

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programs in geographic regions that are often excluded (decentralization of culture), etc. However, as this research has shown, none of these festivals have programs dedicated to elderly people or children, or to other specific social groups (women, LGBT population, minorities...). It is also interesting that almost all festivals say they would need more sponsors, while they persistently have little notion of who their audience is or whom they should target in the future.

When speaking of Serbia, another challenge in the emerging market economy is the low sale of tickets, for which we could name several reasons. The first one is the low GDP. Also, people are not accustomed to spending money on culture because of an inherited habit from the communist times, based on the assumption that «culture is for free» (however, this is not completely true since tickets were sold in the communist times, but were subsidized by the state). Thirdly, cultural habits concerning what is termed «high culture» have been abandoned and devalued during the 1990's, as the state expressed far more interest in the production of «kitsch», which was in turn promoted through a media-monopoly at the time, causing a clash of values and taste. Additionally, there are further problems such as piracy, lack of free time (due to the demands of the market economy and a general orientation of society on profit). The first problem is very serious and it can be solved only gradually. Nevertheless, there are many ways to address the other problems. For example, festivals could explore strategies for audience development and collaborate with schools and other educational institutions, (re)creating identity of brands and (re)positioning of the festivals. For example, we can organize theatre in education workshops and thus influence young people's interest and appreciation of theatre. This can create some of the frequent visitors of festivals in the future.

Festivals in Serbia and (even more developed) Slovenia face another problem concerning audience development. The markets in these countries are not yet developed (the situation is better in Slovenia, but since it is a small country, the end-result is similar) and there are only a few large companies that everyone approaches for sponsorships. Thus, when festivals decide on a fundraising strategy they do not begin by thinking of their (target) audience and choose a company with a similar target group. They do the opposite, by first approaching companies who have money, and then search for an audience to match. In the case of international festivals, organizers seek a company that has some interest in the market of either the country of some artistic project or the country where the festival takes place.

From the research that I have conducted, it is clear that many differences exist among the aforementioned festivals – from frequency of these events, organizational structure, status, program, their

importance for the cultural landscape, international element, budget, audience, etc. However, here is a point on which most of them agree. Representatives of the festivals that I have interviewed stated that they do not perceive the issue of attracting an audience as important as, for example, financial problems or other challenges that they face. When they were asked to prioritize some of the main changes they have dealt with in recent years, the question of the audience was again at the bottom of the list of their priorities (after: financial issues, program/concept, venues, and human resources). That could mean that the management of the festivals expects a ready-made audience and takes it for granted. Whatever the explanation at this time, they are not willing to put significant effort into attracting an audience and building it up.

How much do festivals correspond with what audiences expect from them? To what extent are they actually directed toward themselves? Are they limited to one circle of people? Why do we call these people the festival's audience, when they are primarily colleagues (artists), press, critics, etc.? Should not festivals be NEWS by themselves? And, the bigger or more extravagant the news is - the better the chance that a festival will attract someone who is not a regular theatre-goer. In my view, the atmosphere of the event should create a feeling of «once in a lifetime!». It should surprise, do something unexpected, something specific for that time, that place and those people. That sociological component of a festival, which is something created for the community, a gathering place of many different people with diverse tastes, but still with a collective spirit (that they are there, on the festival, together) - that is something crucial but often neglected by festivals, in both in Serbia and Slovenia.

The way a festival will look depends on the taste of the artistic director/selector and his/her ability to anticipate the taste of the audience. He/she should challenge and shape and develop the taste of festival audience, simultaneously bearing in mind the results of research about the audience's preference. Research is also useful to check effects of programming decisions (acceptance, disappointment, rejection etc.).

At this point, I would like to go over some definitions: what is actually meant by the term «audience development»?<sup>2</sup> This is a discipline in management which evolved from marketing, which has its roots in the USA and later on gained acceptance in the UK, during the government of Margaret Thatcher. At that time, cultural institutions were forced to invent new approaches to audience in order to survive. Marketing is considered as the process in management which aims to follow the

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<sup>2</sup> Hargreaves McIntyre, Morris, An Introduction to Strategic Marketing, reader from lecture in Nitra, Slovakia

goals of the organization by fulfilling the market demands. It must go through many phases and the first approach was product oriented (which understands that the audience will be visiting events that are good and have reasonable price, without knowing the public and their preferences). After that the strategy was changed into focus on sale (where the needs of the consumer are being taken into account and integrated in the advertising). The next phase was focused on marketing (the basic task of organization is to identify and communicate with target market better than competition and it is more based on medium of communication (using databases, direct mail, subscriptions, etc.)). At the end, an audience focused approach has been developed. In this approach the emphasis is on understanding and fulfilling the needs of existing and potential audience. Only by doing that, can an organization successfully realize its goals.

The audience should not be merely informed, but attracted. A festival should always invest in a new audience (because social habits are changing), and simultaneously take care of the regular audience. It is important to get to know an audience as much as possible: who they are, where do they come from, with whom they are coming, what is their age, why are they coming, how long are they staying, what do they like best on the festival, what they did not like, how did they find out about the festival, how are they satisfied with parking spots, how do they like festival signalization, have they traveled far to attend the festival, are they just passing by or did they take a hotel room, how much money have they spent on the festival, how do they like the printed material (is it informative enough), how the drink and food is organized, how are side (fringe) activities organized, how do they like our volunteers (were they kind to them?). In short: more is better. But there is a catch! And the one who is doing the research should always be careful with that. We should not bore our audience. And not every question is for everyone. If the one who is doing the research does not plan carefully which questions to ask, to whom and in what manner - one might gather a graveyard of data that will be ignored by both the programming and marketing staff. These answers are some of the crucial data that will help us identify our market, our potential market and the sort of advertisement that is most useful as well as where the money is being spent foolishly. The data is also needed for the next phase: market segmentation, diversification of the audience. A segment is a group of people that share the same needs.

The Art Council of England developed a definition of audience development: “The term Audience Development describes activity which is undertaken specifically to meet the needs of existing and potential audiences and to help arts [and cultural] organizations to develop on-going relationships with audiences. It can include aspects of marketing, commissioning, programming, education, customer care and distribution.” It also focuses on finding audiences outside the mainstream –i.e.

“new audiences” or “audiences from socially excluded groups”. Audience development also reflects the relationship with audiences that develops over time with a focus on the long term. Different types of audience development activity are suitable for different types of organizations, from the large scale concert hall to the small scale arts centre.

As a process, audience development employs a range of marketing tools such as research, publicity, communication and customer relationship management. As an ethos, audience development places the audience at the heart of everything the organization does.”

It is interesting that in the questionnaire that I have conducted for my BA thesis only Borštnikovo srečanje (Maribor, Slovenia) and INFANT festival (Novi Sad, Serbia) anticipated audience development and a target group (university population, although this definition is too rough), while the others’ answers about audience development of the selected festivals were based on the «product oriented logic» of marketing – that the audience will come to see something only because it is artistically valuable and reasonably priced, without considering any special approach to them. Alja Predan, my colleague from Slovenia, argued that Borštnikovo srečanje does not care much about the audience, which could also be true, but I can only speak from what I have found out in my research. However, I know much better the example of INFANT festival and from my experience they have a lack of knowledge, resources and will to put in practice what they have answered. Although most of the festivals have confirmed that they have a strategy for audience development (all except Preglej na glas) or that they are at least thinking about it, this can hardly be the conclusion from their answers. I believe that there is a lack of understanding of the concept of audience development. For example, Sterijino pozorje invoked its tradition in the answer. However, realistically, hardly anyone will come to the festival just because of tradition. A potential visitor expects to be thrilled (if a festival expects to attract a new audience and younger people). Conversely, Ivan Medenica (who was artistic director and selector of Sterijino pozorje back in 2007, when the research has been conducted) stressed a preoccupation with the audience, with a special focus on animating the younger population, but without neglecting a wider generational and cultural profile.. However, this orientation has not been implemented yet.

INFANT had an interesting answer concerning the question of audience development. They have explained their audience development strategy in the following way:» There is a consciousness about forming an audience. In the first place, we need to attract the audience which naturally belongs to this kind of theatre and those are students and youth, and thus we have developed a strategy for getting that audience and introducing them to our program (program Infant-fusion). The

second part of this action is spreading throughout the whole city and animating the entire city population. The third segment of audience development is spreading to the main centers of Vojvodina and attracting an audience from those cities to our festival (there was a trip to Zrenjanin in 2007). The fourth step means further expansion, to Belgrade and some other cities in Serbia. Finally, the last step concerns attracting an audience from abroad. The methods are: questionnaires, research, meeting and informing people, animation with programs similar to Infant-fusion - performances, installations, animations and parties with video projections and other street events.

INFANT was doing one thing that is worth mentioning here when we speak about audience development and that is a series of pre-festival street events called Infant-fusion, which were organized for several years. Those were creative events organized and performed by young people and well attended. It was so unusual for Novi Sad, where people rarely see this kind of street theatre, for example, a girl playing a piano on a moving platform, or people acting as they are climbing the mountain while they were actually crawling on the main pedestrian street, etc. I think that those events really improved the image of INFANT festival as an innovative and proactive festival and again started regaining an audience and even attracting a new one.

In my research, EXODOS festival stated that they are about to start working on an audience development programme (it was in 2007, while now in 2009, when I work for them and see that it is not so in reality, they are not working on that in continuity, although they have some data of who their average audience is), while Mladi levi is successfully developing their volunteer programme for years, which can generate a new audience as well. In creation of the project Lovepangs in 2005 ([http://www.lovepangs.com/lovepangs/archive/03/philosophie\\_en.html](http://www.lovepangs.com/lovepangs/archive/03/philosophie_en.html)) they involved 50 experts and about 50 volunteers, working mostly in the hosting team. Those people were, of course, happy to invite their friends and that is how they did not have to worry if they will have an audience. So, this is a good strategy. It is also a fact that festivals in Slovenia, almost all of them, have adopted market-based thinking, while in Serbia this is still a far-fetched idea. No big festival (neither in Serbia or Slovenia) has seriously approached the audience development issue so far. There is no substantial diversification among the target groups, and they are usually described as local citizens, students, young people, families, tourists, professionals, etc. None of the festivals have used specific instruments to do research about their audience, but they have only used the «visual» method.

If one wants to attract a new audience, it is necessary to see which barriers they face when visiting cultural events. It can be transport, ticket price, lack of time, lack of information and their viability.

It can also be peer pressure, perception of cultural events or the audience and of spaces in which the festival is happening. There is a need to break this prejudice and barrier toward young people if one wants them at such events. In one report of the Arts Marketing Association of London, that deals with a young audience, a good example of how to approach younger audience can be found. Many organizations have applied that method in the framework of their program «New context». These organizations have dislocated some of their events in venues that have usually been visited by young people by bringing dance, music, visual art and multimedia in unusual spaces. If one is developing new markets, it is necessary to reexamine the marketing mix and introduce new elements in order to achieve benefits for the users, as in the previous example, where just one parameter of marketing mix was changed – space in which the performances are happening (other parameters include: product, price, process, people, branding and guarantees).

Can festivals continue to depend ONLY on the ministries of culture and public subsidies or is it time to start with self-evaluation that will lead to changes and the creation of strategic plans? One does not exclude the other, of course, but I am wondering what should happen so that festivals in Serbia in Slovenia begin this process. It remains to be seen. This research has shown that festivals are not corresponding to the needs of local communities sufficiently. A possible solution might be to develop creative approaches that will make festivals more attractive to their audience. Festivals could create partnerships with schools, universities, other cultural institutions and/or non-governmental organizations, in order to (re)create that special feeling of a common event. Research concerning the audience is another necessity if festivals (both in Serbia and Slovenia) want to communicate with potential sponsors, which should not be done occasionally, but systematically through developing special programs.

Finally, a festival organizer should know the following things about his/her audience: Do they think that they got value for money? Are they coming to the next festival?

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