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### **A SLOVAK EXPERIENCE WITH THE CONTEMPORARY DRAMA FESTIVAL**

*Is there anything worse for theatre festival organisers than a half-empty auditorium, empty conference halls, where the majority of seats are occupied by the very participants of symposiums, unattended educational programmes and workshops, that is, an overall lack of interest from the general public? Does the short circuit appear in the very festival headquarters, or the cultural public is so saturated with offers that it does not find enough motivation for attending different kinds of festivals? To be honest, the offer is enormous, while the demand is not yet sufficiently defined nor is it statistically processed in a satisfactory way.*

What would a contemporary theatre festival (of, for instance, new drama, which is nowadays, unfortunately, a form of elitist art)<sup>1</sup> have to look like to be capable of attracting attention? To disassociate itself from the abundant offer of festivals, commercial in nature, which very prudently steal audiences by offering them the so called *family* programmes, a heap of futile entertainment based on a *TV celebrity* concept? The crisis of theatre festivals falls under the category of the crisis of theatre as such. There are few theatres capable of staying in the race with the new media, coping with the current situation of a general loss of spiritual values, and maintaining a quality dramaturgical plan, which does not intend to cater to the taste of commercial society in none of its segments. How can we weed out of such a conglomerate a quality programme, and enter it into festival production? In other words, how can we conceptualise a festival, without copying the non-conceptual dramaturgy of our theatres, to which, by the way, audiences are accustomed to such an extent that they have neither the capability nor the desire to see an offer of higher quality?

A significant difference should be observed in the concept of international festivals, which, as opposed to national theatre festivals, have more freedom in selecting the productions and side programmes.

Here, we will only deal with national theatre festivals, and with seeking an ideal model for them.

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<sup>1</sup> In the theatrical circles throughout the Slovak Republic there is a prevailing opinion that contemporary Slovak drama does not offer material of sufficiently high quality to deal with, that the topics it treats are not interesting enough, that it is obsolete in regard to form and content, so it is mostly treated as a 'necessary evil'. There are but a few theatres to consistently offer Slovak drama on the repertoire, and there are even less of those which seek to affect its development and heighten the level of acceptance among audiences (it is not rare that even the theatre companies have a critical attitude towards performing new theatrical plays).

Festivals are primarily a place where different audience groups come together. A festival regroups experts, art lovers, and casual passers by who attend festivals without any ambition to get deeper into some of their segments. It is only logical that their “social capital” greatly differs - from those who are familiar with the conventions and codes of theatre to casual theatre consumers. The programmatic conception of each festival should surely take into consideration each of these groups and explicitly pose the important question: Which steps are crucial so that all groups – equally important for a festival – find their own reason to revisit the festival next time not only as consumers, but also as participants of some of the programme segments? *Participation building* is much more beneficial for festivals than *audience development*. *Contemporary* audiences expect from festivals more than mere consumption; they expect active participation as well. Festivals built on the basis of the classical principle - as a destination, whose identity is set solely on the principle of being untouchable, are losing their place of importance in the offer of contemporary festivals. Today’s audiences require interaction, side programmes which enable them to grasp the very essence of a festival programme, so to say - a “package arrangement”. It depends on festival organisers to find a way to conceptualise their programmes in such a way so that they do not fall into the trap of becoming popular entertainment and stray away from the basic festival concept.

The most important thing for each festival is its clearly defined concept, based not on a mosaic principle, but the principle of concentric circles, thematically linked, so that they treat the given material from different angles and fit in different ways. Democratisation of festivals does not mean their automatic popularisation. This trend has a baneful effect on the quality of the programme by distracting from the crucial questions of theatre and basic festival topics. The exclusivity of a festival does not necessarily mean that it is sealed off from the general public. Isn’t the education of theatre audiences one of the roles of festivals? The offer of high quality programmes can cause a flood of reactions from the audiences, who will ideally expect matching quality in classical repertoire theatres they visit, and which inform their taste in art. The audiences are not only meant to accept and admire, but to criticise as well. That is a fundamental step towards changing the philosophy of each festival. A stereotypical way of thinking leads to a stagnation in the offer and a loss of interest in festival programmes.

The most frequent marketing objective – the increase in the numbers of festival goers, should be taken as part of the fundamental strategy and as a struggle for quality, not quantity, that is, the accumulation of activities which ultimately distract from what is essential. Many festivals, in their ambition to reach impressive statistics, do not hesitate to include megalomaniac side programmes without any direct links with the festival’s fundamental principles, thus leading to a mere ‘funfairisation’ of the festivals and a loss of their significance. Consumption of theatre art differs

from the consumption of the tourist offer of a town. It is essential to find some common thread which would provide a link between the different elements of a festival. Such programmes ought to be carefully selected and adapted to the thematic needs of the festival (regardless of the fact that psycho-social factors of the audiences – their lifestyles, the usage of free time – deeply affect the festival image), particularly in the case of a national festival with a higher probability that the cultural destinations of the town/city are known. Essentially, it is not so important WHO comes to the festival, but WHY people have a need for this kind of gathering. If we find the answer to this key question, and that is the one of audience motivation, the steps that follow will significantly facilitate the quality of the product/festival. Cultural barriers (primarily of psychological nature: cultural competence of the audiences, relevance and interest, image,...) will be easier to overcome and there is a realistic chance that the specific needs of diverse audiences can be satisfied by festivals. Audience motivation and interest for quality festival productions can only be enabled through a systematic analysis of practical (how well-informed they are, availability,...) and psychological barriers of the audience, instead of patronizing its members. In this way, the complex process of audience development gains new dimensions: an expansion of the type of audience and the preservation of the permanent audience.

### **The Festival of Contemporary Slovak and World Drama Nová dráma / New Drama, Bratislava (case study)**

The Festival of Contemporary Slovak and World Drama Nová dráma / New Drama was founded in 2005, at a time when Slovak festival demand was relatively satisfied by the existing production of 27 festivals. If we take into consideration the fact that the Slovakian theatre network consists of just a bit more than 50 theatres (4 national, 19 regional and 2 municipal) and 26 independent companies, it was clear that a new festival needed a firm ground, strong concept and of course an adequate way of reaching its target groups. The festival theme was not considered in any particularly analytical way by anyone in the Slovak Republic; neither did the state administration – the Ministry of Culture, nor VÚC – Higher Territorial Sections, regions or towns, and/or systems mostly affecting the life of a festival and their further development. Festivals were not regarded as places of cultural presentation or as cross-section points where different activities and fields meet. Fundraising, one of the more important mechanisms in the overall festival structure, was still not understood in the sense of ‘people to people’ but merely as, politely formulated, a nicer way of begging for charity. Out of some 27 festivals which take place in Slovakia every year, each one mainly relies on public budgeting (subsidies from the Ministry of Culture, municipalities and regions, less from European grants). This budget is unstable; we can follow its downward spiral year after year; most festivals

are on the verge of extinction and the question arises about how it is even possible to think about the finesses such as *audience development* without an adequate subsidy.

However difficult it was to start working on the new festival, its starting position was still favourable. The Theatre Institute, the main festival organiser, as a state institution under the patronage of the Slovak Ministry of Culture, thus directly relying on the state budget, was spared from financial problems, which allowed it to prepare a high quality festival project with specific features and programmes. It was crucial to take the following steps:

- an analysis of the already existing festivals in Slovakia (national festivals of contemporary drama were the missing link),
- an analysis of the existing foreign festivals (for a possibility of overlapping times, attendance of foreign guests, critics, selectors...),
- audience profile (with demographic and psycho-social factors),
- finding an adequate co-organiser (since the Theatre Institute has an insufficient numbers of theatre halls and venues at its disposal, as well as technical resources),
- removing the barriers of potential audiences' attendance (of practical and psychological nature),
- preparation of an adequate marketing and advertising strategy (using not only classical methods of promotion, but contemporary social networks as well: Internet, YouTube, Facebook...).

These factors were subsequently used as a basis for creating such programme conception that would be provocative enough and of high enough quality to allow the festival to have a positive image. The initial results were more than encouraging. The festival was met with a positive reception from both the professional and general public and it additionally attracted foreign attention (primarily of international new drama festivals' organisers, who still know little about the Slovak theatre).

The Nová dráma / New Drama Festival is not only about the presentation of the existing plays (the competition segment), but its essence also lies in stimulating efforts in the domain of creative writing (through Drama contests posted by the Theatre Institute each year) and the New Writing project, aimed primarily at children and youths. Creative writing workshops, organised by the Theatre Institute in collaboration with art schools and groups throughout a year, culminate at the festival in the form of stage readings. The image of the festival as a *meeting point* is further affirmed by lectures and workshops given by top experts in new drama and performing arts (H.-T. Lehmann, A. Sirz, A. Jovičević...), together with thematic exhibitions (stage design and new drama, costume design and new drama, photography,...)

Fostering the festival audience undoubtedly includes cooperation with Slovak universities, which take an active part in the selection of topics throughout a year, while students make up a significant part of the audience during the festival (primarily its educational segment).

The positive echo contributed to the extension of the programme, so three years ago the Nová dráma / New Drama Festival introduced a special project called Focus, focusing on one of the important European theatre cultures, bonded to Slovakia by elementary links (Romania – 2007, Russia – 2008, Serbia – 2009, Finland – 2010). A concentrated view upon the foreign theatre through the Focus selection enables comparison with the contemporary Slovak drama and theatre, offers an arena for discussion, and a chance for the audiences to compare, analyse and make conclusions. The section curators come from different countries and they choose theatrical productions of the highest quality from the current and previous seasons (usually there are two plays at Focus – a classical and an alternative one, lectures, stage readings of contemporary dramas, interviews with prominent dramatists, exhibitions and symposiums on intercultural cooperation between the two countries). The embassies of the given states assume the ‘spiritual’ patronage over Focus, which facilitates the flow of information, theatre companies and individuals, while the exclusivity of the venture adds to its importance.

The festival statistics, firstly about its audience figures, significantly facilitate the work on the festival conception, the planning of new projects and work on the already existing ones. A team of associates is engaged with the advancement of the festival’s quality, primarily seeking new ways of presenting contemporary Slovak and world drama to audiences (convincing them that new drama is an important link in contemporary theatre), which is exactly the point of the Nová dráma / New Drama Festival. In the first years of the Nová dráma / New Drama festival the organisers’ ambitions in regard to the audience were mostly satisfied with the existing ‘institutional’ audiences of the theatres where the main festival programme was held. But after the first two festivals, it became obvious that the standard audiences of these theatres did not see the festival as a whole and that they did not have any important impact on the further development of the festival. It was important to take the following steps, which facilitated the development:

- finding a serious partner in a theatre which is thematically focused on introducing new drama, which by itself reflects the modern Slovak society, raises new socio-political and cultural questions appearing after 1989 and 1993 (the Breakup of Czechoslovakia)
- making co-productions with such groups that advocate authorial theatre, lead an active cultural policy and are consciously active in international networks
- directing the PR campaign to a younger group, which follows the Nová dráma / New Drama Festival
- engaging students, young managers and volunteers in the festival operations

- establishing cooperation with theatres throughout Slovakia all year long and the promotion of contemporary Slovak drama (through workshops and the DRÁMA contest)
- directly assisting the birth of new provocative drama (a cycle entitled the Slovak 'Key' Drama – which embraces over twenty Slovak authors of the middle generation and is thematically focused on the period following 1989 in Slovakian society).

These activities resulted in the appearance of a specific New Drama Festival audience, which identifies the festival with its specific atmosphere and which is capable of following new trends in drama (both Slovakian and world drama).

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