



**Independent theatre for children and youth in Macedonia:
Self – sustainability as a main protagonist for its endurance**

Collective Veternica

1 Short history of Macedonian independent theatre

In Macedonian theatre practices the “traditional theatre” is dominant (this nomenclature refers to the method of work and finances, not to the provided repertoire), but nevertheless, the alternative theatre troupes that were established and active during the 60s¹ and the 70s² were eager to experiment with postmodern theatre in relation with the techniques, audience and space. In this paper we would correlate to independent ³ as an entity which is not initiated by state authorities and being a critique or an alternative to mainstream theater. Although this period was actually the period when the modern theater was established in Macedonia, these theater troupes were already postmodern in their way of existence.

1.1 “Progress” from 1990-2000

Unfortunately, during the late 80s and the beginning of the 90s⁴, these practices diminished and did not succeed to provide patterns of behavior for further existence of the independent theatre, especially in the possibilities to maintain a space which would in some way secure partial conditions for continuous work outside the traditional theatre.

¹ 1959 First Macedonian professional alternative theatre ESTRADA 59, 1964 Alternative theatre NON – THEATREKAKTUS.

² In the Monastery St. Nikita Goltarot a unique theatre troupe was formed which later would create the alternative theatre ZELENATA GUSKA.

1978 Theatre workshop FF was launched in frames of the aesthetic laboratory as part of the Faculty of Philosophy.

³. At this point we would like to underline that in the further text we clarify the definition of “independent theatre” as a subject which is not depended on the state budget in terms of salary, program activities, methodology and repertoire although this does not suggest that collaboration with the state institutions of culture and art is not possible, but nevertheless is depended on our ideas, projects and visions.

⁴ First private theatre MALA STANICA (it will be the stage for few extravagant theatre plays and performances during a period of 2 years).

Hereby, in the late 90s, the question of independent scene was raised among the cultural workers but generally in terms of theorization, networking in the region and lobbying. Different initiatives and legal negotiations with the local municipalities for providing a legal space for work in the culture lasted for more than 10 years, and finally, three years ago “Kino Kultura”⁵ was established. But, this building is privately owned and had been empty and not used for the past 10 years. Part of the building is rented by Theatre Navigator Cvetko and Lokomotiva with support of Municipality Centre and with the goal to reform the space in contemporary art and culture space.

Being independent in some way consequential the post-socialist transition and that such independence is very often a call for what is a regular state subsidizing as in the case of Kino Kultura and some other initiatives happening in the negotiation process at the moment. With this situation we have a complex meaning of “independency” when most of the budget is being provided by the state authorities. So that is why the statement that at the moment the independent entities are in a certain form of transition in post-socialist countries.

1.2 New waves in the independent scene from 2000-today

This gap of 20 years (1990-2018) is marked with the existence of the Open Stage Theatre CEKORI (which is amateur, alternative theatre, and now with the prefix Open Stage) working in the House of Culture of the Municipality of Avtokomanda. Later in 1997, the Theatre 007 was established as part of the cultural space of the “Universal Hall” defining itself as an independent production and establishing the festival “Faces without masks”. But again we are speaking about legal spaces that are supported by the budget of the local municipalities.

Another two distinguished examples during the period 2008-2011 are the Art Institute and the Independent theatre TEATRA which managed to sustain their own spaces for 2 years, but again with a high monthly rent - since the spaces were owned by the state. Later, the Autonomous Cultural Center 104 managed to pay rent again for only 2 years, for 2 rooms in a city building.

Therefore, the history of independent scene in Macedonia is not marked with remarkable attempts (except the one for squatting of the space of Mala Stanica, which today is a National

⁵KINO KULTURA as project space for contemporary performing arts and culture was co-founded in December 2015 by “Theatre Navigator Cvetko” and “Lokomotiva”- Centre for New Initiatives in Arts and Culture. In the past, the building where this project/space KINO KULTURA is accommodated used to be a cinema named KULTURA, important cultural space, part of the urban living of the city Skopje.

Gallery) for squatting or occupying a space for working in the field of arts and culture, although the number of abandoned spaces should not be neglected.

2 Establishment of Collective Veternica

2.1 Squatting – mission impossible in Macedonia

The circumstances that underlined the situation may be noticed in the law provisions that are strictly in favor of the state, and any kind of illegal trespassing is a criminal act with strict penalties, and on the other side the lethargy of the arts and culture scene which wasn't part of the establishment – the comfort zone of melancholy or project support. The initiation of Collective Veternica was marked with this kind of attempt for negotiating/after even occupying a building in the municipality of Karpos that used to be a local community space and nowadays it is abandoned building with two ownerships – the land is in the ownership of the municipality and the building in ownership of the Socialist Party. After unsuccessful negotiation process with both sides and one event titled URBANA RABOTNA AKCIJA, on the after meeting only three of us showed up. It was then when we realized that there is no will or possibility for occupation – even if we manage, we will be not able to take care for such a big space. But since we were active in the scene since 2006, the conclusion was clear - we need a permanent space in order to continue, otherwise we are lost in the perpetual folklore of organization and no production losing our energy in cleaning spaces that are common and public but do not belong to the people i.e. most of them in the period of privatization were subjects of “criminal” law procedures.

2.2 Why, how, when, where, with whom?

Thus, one year later, we established Collective Veternica in a private space for which we share the rent with Familija Tangovi (Tango Collective). The main vision was inducted by the fact that we are not able to inspire the adults to experiment, learn and use their creative energy to create new ideas, so we decided to work with children since otherwise they will grow up in already exhausted world and on the other had they are the only ones who have the will as well as time (although their time is planned in advance as well) to create new world of stories. The Collective was founded by five women in Skopje, all of them/us coming from different walks of life (playwright, actor, cultural worker, social worker and illustrator and political studies expert) but united by the spirit of independent creation, solidarity, storytelling and body language, as pillars for creating a common collective which would further explore its own

purpose and possibilities. Guided by the mission for personal development through creative exploration and theatre techniques among a group of equals we strive to manage a cultural space that will be common, tax and rent free since art is from the people and belongs to the people. We believe that the horizontal approach in the division of labor is possible via common cooperation, respect, shared responsibilities and sharing of knowledge, energy and ideas. Within the notion of perpetual reexamination of our personal and shared values we believe that art is the only tool to reflect and change ourselves and the environment we live in. Nothing is eternal, everything is theatre.

2.3 Development in numbers

Starting from scratch is never easy and we were absolutely aware of this when we made the first open call for “dance theatre workshops for children”. Primarily we hesitated over the name of the workshops: “theatre” or “drama”, “physical theatre” or “experimental theatre”, “alternative” or some other alternative... We had a clear picture about the content of the workshops, the esthetics that we will appreciate, the games and the exercises that we will conduct, the methods and the techniques that we will apply, but it was difficult and delicate to formulate the right definition that describes and characterizes all the aspects involved in the process of creating a non-verbal theatre performance with children that will equally satisfy the interest of the adult audience as that of the infants. Finally, we decided to go for the term “dance theatre” risking that it would require additional explanations and a lot of skepticism since it is something that can rarely be experienced on the scenes in our theatres. And we were right – we began with six children, five of which we already knew (previous work with children and friends’ or relatives’ children). We had to justify a lot of questions to all the other interested parents about this “new, eccentric and unfamiliar term”, which they decided that will eventually not pay off in their children’s lives (read: bank accounts). Learning languages is always on the top of the lists, sports are good for the health, playing instruments is not so popular yet still appreciated, but theatre which doesn’t even involve speaking so children can “express” themselves is a waste of time and money, totally boring and not productive for their future professions, and definitely not for boys.

After five years of continuous work with children aged six to thirteen in the field of dance theatre, we now have three groups of a total of 27 children, and about other 20 children who used to be part of the groups but quit coming for various reasons. Only (5) five out of these 27 are boys. If we had a chance to go back and choose one more time – it would again be “dance

theatre". Though in this sense the possible connections of verbal expressions and gender may be discussed, the influence of being five women involved as mentors and the sensibility of loose discipline (the first associating when we speak about play as method of learning) has important influence. Though it is hard, and the numbers rise really slowly, we are truly more devoted to the quality than the quantity. The reason for that is quite simple – we do all the work and we do care for every child as an individual, so not much time or money is left for marketing. Even when we devoted more time and/or money for promotion, it turns up that the word of mouth advertising is the only one that functions for this particular extra curriculum activity.

A rough estimation of the number of children who have been part of other activities or workshops which don't require regular attendance is about 700 children (puppets and masks workshops, juggling workshops, DIY workshops, arts & crafts workshops, shadow theatre workshops, kite workshops, recycling workshops and alike).

3. Collective Veternica as a post-post- modern theatre

3.1 Collaboration within the collective

The collective itself as a group of people gathered by a common goal / issue/ interest/ problem, cannot prosper if collaboration is excluded in any of the processes that arise during its existence. Collaboration implicates sharing with the others but also being able to state a different opinion, openly speaking about problems but respecting privacy, suggesting improvements in others' behavior but accepting critics, absorbing ideas before eliminating them, being ready to step up rather than to give up, understand that you are your own "boss" and you are equally responsible towards self and the group as all the others, and finally identify yourself throughout the work you do and belong by overcoming all the obstacles that may come your way.

3.2 Collective work

The first principle and at the same time the foundation for a successful production is the collective work. This is a practice that combines two approaches: dividing some of the assignments amongst the members of the team and working together on tasks that are more demanding and time consuming. At some points of the process it is important to stimulate the members to undertake duties that are not their cup of tea – as a method for varied development and joint growth with the group, but also as training for coping with difficult situations.

3.3 Methods of self-organization

Furthermore, the methods of self-organization are in a close relation with the collective work, meaning that they depend on each other and are always in fusion. Precise organization in time, space and resources based on detailed analyzes is truly a work half done. Being accurate at some points is absolutely impossible, and that is why having a few back up plans is highly recommendable: always have doubts and predict any risks in order to act quickly when a problem appears. So, the key to a good (self) organization is the pre-organization process which incorporates the desired results and the real possibilities for their achievement. At the point it is crucial to be emphasized that the leadership in the group is always present in one form another, subjected in the persons who are leading the current project. There are projects in which we are partially or completely active but the goal/destination is marked as a common compromise, the responsibility is shared responsibility while the leadership is flexible and planned in advance. The distribution of power is equal and dependent on the level of involvement. The rent in the space is covered by the month participation fee, and the mentorship in the classes is part of mutual week agreement.

3.4 Horizontal structure

Moreover, what lies in the core of the internal collaboration is the horizontal structure that gives each member freedom in terms of not being supervised or assessed by others - but also demands oneself to be self-aware and conscious about the decisions they make in that loyal environment. This also draws higher responsibility and therefore greater productivity due to the fact that everybody is directly or indirectly involved in all the processes and the product depends on everybody's effort and the shared responsibility. With the continuity we become better in understanding each other's interests and capacities.

3.5 Self-identification and belonging

Finally, feeling lost is completely normal state in an organization that strives for its beliefs no matter what the public expectations are. Identifying ourselves through and in the work we do, is the only measure for success that we can rely on in a society that has lost its values and discredits the critical thinking. The line between “lost” and “free” can be thin and seductive – that is why we carefully choose to freely belong to a lost collective. However, the process of creating a piece of art is precious and priceless. It is an exhausting process, full of curse and blessing at the same time. But through all the peaks and valleys, we re-discover ourselves over and over again, new horizons lay in front of us after every premiere, our emotional memory is enriched, and we appreciate more this short and transient life. It is then when we realize that we truly belong to that creative process full of imaginations and inspirations, not to the outside world full of greed and violent struggle for power and popularity.

3.6 Relations with society, audience, institutions

Our motive is building and development of cultural and social networks for children coming from different local environments, as well as implementing the dance theatre as a creative process which is able to directly transform an individual or a group. Our goal is creating prospects for new friendships which will further evolve into deeper collaborations, exchange of experiences, and eventually they will be inspiration for broadening the culture as a media which belongs to each and every one of us, especially in the field of alternative theatre in different local environments.

We build our relations with the society on everyday basis endeavoring to initiate new forms of collaboration and bring theatre on and outside the stage. The collaborative process is generally positive although again burdened by the nonchalant behavior of the institutional representatives which do not recognize our efforts as important for the development of the independent scene and social values as such.

The audience does not have rich historical potential to recognize, and afterwards analyze, justify and criticize the theatre we make. After the performances the critiques are concerned that maybe the children are too “small” to affect social injustice etc. which is just a marker that the social structure does not make the difference between children and infants, here we relate explicitly to critical thinking, which is lacking as a phenomenon in Macedonian society. But as the time passes we recognize that the audience is becoming more aware and sensible, thus confirming

our effort to educate through theatre. After three editions of our theatre play THIS IS NOT A DREAM, although we were forced to cut a scene which was about the process of waiting in line, from 20 to 10 min, the audience finally took the patience to enjoy in the process of watching a theatre of waiting instead of being impatient and chat on their phones etc.

In these terms we constantly participate in different events reconfirming our efforts for social influence through theatre and confirming our attitudes concerning different questions such as: decriminalization of Cannabis, patriarchy domination, children's critical mass, autism awareness etc.

4. Dance theatre as a tool for education and youth expression

Through our work in the area of dance theatre which merges acting, dance, music, puppet and shadow theatre, we have created a collage of games and exercises which helps us to act on integrating the sensory, emotional, intellectual and social dimensions within the child, in a protected environment, and in a discreet and subtle form. During the entire process we must observe the child's development as complex phenomenon which is not only a plain set of different developmental aspects. We must recognize the child's changeable capacities which Erick Erickson puts in precisely defined time periods in which every developmental phase is consisted of potentials and obstacles through which the child grows and becomes conscious and aware. Every experience that the child might obtain and every aspect of awareness that it might assemble in the previous phase, transforms into immunity but also into vulnerability in facing future challenges in the next subsequent developmental phases. Exploring and observing this process through the prism of non-verbal theatre (children aged 6 – 13 which are in a latent phase and at the beginning of adolescence), we witnessed that the fusion of dance and theatre, especially the methods that imply conducted/aimed games, help the children to explore and express their emotions, wishes, needs, fears, to correct certain experiences but also to enrich themselves with new answers for their selves and the world that surrounds them. This mixed approach allows the children to gain awareness for their mind and body, helps them to stimulate their imagination in a constructive manner by creating a story with a problem for which they should find possible solutions. In this way we encourage their associative and divergent thinking versus lethargic fantasy. As Hermann Hesse highlights the game as a method for reproduction the entire spiritual content of the world, we insist that an individual must continue to play in order to continuously feel the pleasure of solving new challenges and responsibilities

versus sterile and uncritical self-acceptance as an individual and social being that should only sustain, unable to understand that they can be a major factor for change.

4.1 New performance esthetics in the field of children's theatre

Macedonian traditional theatre practices according to Ana Stojanoska are practices of the deceased. In the book "Macedonian Postmodern Theatre" (Faculty of drama arts, 2006) Stojanoska states that occasional fragmented appearances of postmodern theatre may be noticed as practices of certain individual directors but yet again only in application of postmodern actions and rarely in research of the postmodern itself. In this relation we underline the fact that the Macedonian theatre praxis as well the contemporary Macedonian theatology scarcely experiments and researches with the actors play, body language, nonverbal theatre and the postmodern actions are directed towards inclusion of digital technology on the stage. Today, after 12 years since this book was published the situation did not change drastically. There are exceptions of this rule either in theatre plays or the existence of few independent collectives⁶ but the exceptions don't make the rule, therefore being "born" in this era, the Collective Veternica is experimenting with different theatre techniques especially with concentrating on the body and its own development through "play". We experiment with non verbal physical theatre, dance, and puppet theatre as well as with the methodology how to make them interesting in a society where the stigmas of this arts are all around us especially in the sense that benefit from it is impossible. But nevertheless we practice this experiments in which the children find themselves very comfortable and free to express. As the graphic novels are visualization through drawings our common creations are visual narratives through our bodies. One generally new form we use in our performances is the collaboration between us – the adults and the children on the stage, i.e. we appear in every performance either with real roles besides the children, either playing the circumstances, playing with the scenography, announcing something and alike. Being together on the stage with the children, gives them incredible self confidence, and puts us and them on the same level in many ways, but also let us learn from each other in a priceless manner.

Traumatized in this period of constant transition we do not seek perfection of technical performance but freedom of expression and revelation through body freedom since our bodies are being imprisoned by buildings, we are chained to chairs, texts....In this sense the greatest

⁶ THEATRE FOR ALL, ARTOPIA and THEATRE FABRIKA (in period since 2016).

experiment is our communing; since everything is made from scratch, and the final product is created through common work by all members of the collective. As educators, we locate or articulate the children's ideas and afterwards we create the final result together. This process always passes through different phases of creativity and conflicts but one thing is for sure, conflicts are here to tempt us and after its resolution we always find something new that was not familiar before.

4.2 The thin line between “an animator” and “an educator”

The importance of the play lays in its educational character which must contain a certain goal that will activate the wish and the will to act and experience new challenge to finally create new values. In contrast with the above, the focus of the “animation” is sensation in order to keep the public/ the group entertained or in other words to create a spectacle. Therefore when “the play” is creatively guided it becomes a process that unites subjectivity and objectivity and the creator, the process and the result are a medium within which the social and individual development is integrated. Our need for permission to give tangible form to certain idea or wish, and to realize it in concrete shape is internal motive and tension to perceive the self and the persona as an individual who is making authentic contribution towards its social integration. In this case we would notice a practice example when we play the game of guided fantasy either the one of three improvised body movements, in the first instant the clever observer / educator may notice how the child attempts to concur its own space and own movements, if the gestures and nonverbal body language is stiff or loose, tensed or free, the inspiration to research something new, besides the fear if it socially right or acceptable, thus to create a first “draft” profile of the child's personality. Our approach consists of creating a free and secure place where the children may develop and understand their own impulses and desires, evolve initiative and curiosity instead of fear, frustration and adaptation in direction towards motivation of creative solutions, and integration of the experience which they can recall up intuitively in different situations.

We are aware that every process takes time to be understood and receipted but it is always disturbing to put the effort to explain the above state differences between animator and educator especially among professionals from different cultural institutions and fight against the notions of being paid less, work for free only because we are women who work in theatre.

5. Professional theatre work with children is possible

When Aristotle (“Art imitates life”) and Stanislavski (“What if...”) meet – one can play (act) as long as there is Brook (one person) to watch. That is all it takes to “make” theatre.

If you want a child to talk clearly at an early age – you have to speak to them like they are adults. Respectively, if you want a child to act as a professional – you have to treat them as professionals. Of course, this is not simple or effortless at all. But, as Aristotle says in his “Poetics” – it is human nature to learn through imitating. It is also our nature to want to learn – but at some point, children stop asking “why?” – that is when we stop giving them real answers. Anytime they ask a question – we must take that opportunity to teach. Anytime we don’t have answers – it is the right time to question ourselves and inspect our methods. As much as it is important for them to have the freedom to interrogate everything, it is also essential to let them answer as much as question we can think of. They have to know that we care for them, for their trivial thoughts and big fears, for their imagined friends, for their preferences or disfavor. It is the only way we can build a bridge of trust and respect which is an unbreakable foundation for creating together. This is the next point that brings us closer to “a professional theatre piece”: creating together as well as learning how to efficiently create together while learning together. Every child wants to help and feel needed, so by giving them assignments that are a bit higher than their level – we challenge them and give them a powerful sense of belonging, but they also acknowledge that success happens when people work together and share with each other.

Treating children like adults with their own significant personality also prevents us from needing “discipline” but also builds up their independency. And independency goes hand in hand with responsibility. By encouraging them to take responsibilities, we show them that we value them. The result is that they believe in themselves more than before, they feel that they matter, and they become stronger no matter the results. The more confidence they gain at an earlier age, the more durable they will be when they face obstacles.

From the above, we can conclude that there is no “magic approach” towards children in order to create a professional theatre piece. All of the methods we use are every day practices for developing a child into a socially responsible person with high conscious about the world inside them and the one that surrounds them, always ready to rediscover the world inside, and to delayer the world outside.

6. Post-dramatic/actor theatre

Nowadays the collective is sustainable by itself i.e. its participants identify themselves as part of the group and realize that its existence is dependent on each of us. The children are the ones who believe that they will become the adults who will continue its work as a synthesis of a will for common creation. Since the children are not professional actors with previous education or knowledge in the field of drama, the process in which they create their characters is the essential alchemy of the post actor's theatre. Since most of the time children are at an age when they define the emotions they have or for which they were not aware what they were, this process presupposes reflection and personal introspection as well as personal interpretation. In this process they become aware for themselves and the authenticity of their own character as well. Indirectly discovering different situations and how they feel in them, they directly participate in this process in which instead of abiding by already given social constructions they recreate them with individual and group interpretations. In this way we commonly create values which are not already given, as a dogma, but personally experienced and afterwards intertwined in the narrative. The freedom is a difficult process especially when the society outside is hierarchical and boss oriented, but since we are not here to disappear we reconfirm our theatre over and over again.

7. Short portfolio

Working in the last five years Collective Veternica managed to create more than 15 theatre premieres on different stages around the country as well as outside the stage in variable experimental forms. Every premiere was visited by a minimum of 150 people in the audience and some of the premiere survived to be replayed for a few times (like ROBOCITY and THIS IS NOT A DREAM). We have cooperated with few national and international festivals as the International children theatre of shadows THE CLOUD'S DREAM, FRIK Festival, the Feministic Festival FIRST AND FEMALE, GIFFONI Film Festival. We have established collaboration with the Municipality of Center for the project GROW AND LEARN WITH THEATRE, initiating change of the school curriculum with introduction of drama games and storytelling as part of the learning process. Drawing Experimental laboratory was a one year project in the Museum of contemporary art in which we managed to attract more than 500 children in the Museum as part of 2 hours long workshops.

The Children's Critical Mass is an initiative that in the last five years is trying to raise the voice together with the critical bike mass NATochak for bicycle paths and save traffic environment for children.

We have established cooperation with the organization for specific children RIZOMA 21 and in last year we have been working with atypical children with Down syndrome through drama and theatre. This we also started cooperating with AUTISM AWARENESS MK on public events which suppose to raise awareness and social integration of atypical children.

In the last five year we have been organizing summer and winter schools of Dance Theatre, where in specific environment we commonly create theatre.

Collective Veternica was established in 2013 and since then we work in the same space where we pay a rent of 240EUR on a monthly basis, from which 200EUR go for the private owner of the space and 40EUR for the state in form of taxes. In total, we annually invest 480EUR for the state and 2400EUR for the private owner. Adding the costs for electricity and water which is approximately 100 EUR a month, it adds to sum of 3700 EUR a year just for having a space where we can experiment, work, share, create and develop new worlds of solidarity, expression and creative freedom As Jelena Luzina would state in her book TEATRALIKA, this may look like a typical Balkan stereotype of a theatre worker especially in the independent scene, but our vision is to change the stereotypes and we will not easily give up the fight.