



Mapping The Performing Arts in Serbia

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With contributions by

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The Performing Arts in Serbia
IETM Mapping*September 2022***Editor:**

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on a template by Formula
www.formulaprojects.net**Published by**IETM — International Network
for Contemporary Performing Arts
Square Saintelette 19,
1000 Brussels, BE
+32 2 201 09 15 / ietm@ietm.org**ISBN:** 9782930897516

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This publication should be mentioned as follows: J. Knežević, A. Milosavljević, I. Ristić, J. Karaulić, I. Medenica, "The Performing Arts in Serbia, IETM Mapping", IETM, Brussels, September 2022.

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IETM thanks its supporters:

Co-funded by
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In relation to the mapping, please scan the QR code to find a complete list of all performing arts organisations in Serbia.

You can also view them [here](#).



Introduction

This IETM mapping is published in connection to the 2022 IETM Plenary Meeting in Belgrade co-organised by the 56th Belgrade International Theatre Festival, BITEF. With this mapping IETM intends to provide as much as possible, an overview of the contemporary performing arts in Serbia.

Bitef is a long-term member of IETM and a participant of numerous events organised by the network, so it was a natural progression for Bitef to co-organise one of the plenary meetings. This is the second IETM meeting organised in Belgrade. The first one was in 2005, organised by Dom Omladine Beograda and initiated by Milan Lučić – at the time a member of the IETM Board and Director of Dom Omladine.

It is almost impossible to list all the participants of the Serbian theatre system, so we will try to provide a framework which can support future research and make it easier for foreign guests to establish cooperation with local organisations. We will map out particular participants but also describe the context, structure, the current state, trends, challenges, limitations and the perspectives of the local theatre scene. The underlying idea was to analyse the theatre system in Serbia through three dominant models – public theatres, independent theatre organisations, and private theatres.

Following decades of socialist cultural policies, theatre in Serbia is still mostly seen as elite culture, but also as a public good. Dominance is still held by state theatres which have guaranteed funding, but are also under state control. This control is established mainly through appointing board members and managers from the political parties in power, often actors or directors by profession. The above factors combine to almost guarantee professional mismanagement. These are repertory theatres with their own, usually magnificent buildings situated in central city locations. They were founded to serve the public interest and support artistic excellence. However, most of them are slowly swerving from that mission towards commercialisation, as a result of decreasing state subventions, and failing to meet market demands. This is because of the underdeveloped market and economy and because of these theatres' privileged position which leads to complacency.

Although there has been an increase in private initiatives (entrepreneurial agencies and limited liability companies focused on profit), they are still comparatively rare in Serbia. Events that manage to remain on the market and make box office profits are very often of low artistic quality, while those with higher quality and higher production demands are dependent on state subventions that are not guaranteed but allocated on a project-by-project basis. The founders of private organisations are often politically suitable, with good connections. Private theatre is almost exclusively linked to Belgrade, while it is largely absent in small towns.

In order to avoid the dependence on state (political) control on one side, and cruel market survival on the other, some theatre practitioners opt for the 'independent' sector. This sector in Serbia is composed mostly of artistic organisations registered as associations, which means that they are non-profit and non-governmental, and take different civil sector forms (both formal and informal). Besides these legal characteristics, the independent sector is defined by a specific discourse and political artistic engagement. Independent organisations pay for their freedom with financial insecurity, eventually becoming dependant on donations from either the state (through annual open calls), or international donors (through project-based funding).

The insecurity makes for an unsettled scene, which makes it almost impossible to create a comprehensive list of all the participants. Similar to private theatres, the independent scene is mostly centred in Belgrade. Therefore, decentralisation of Serbian cultural policy is one of the biggest challenges – not only in terms of towns in inner Serbia, but also in terms of Belgrade and its suburbs.

The division into these three legal entities is only provisional and has served as the starting point of this research. The texts by Aleksandar Milosavljević, Irena Ristić and Jovana Karaulić, which analyse all three sectors in great detail, are focused on contextualisation and structure, but they also list concrete, successful, and relevant examples.



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Such sharp division is not favoured in the sector, where everything is much more complex and less consistent. The system of performing arts is so dynamic that it makes it hard to create a precise list. There are many hybrid forms and examples of inter-sectoral cooperation. Bitef Theatre, for example, although an institutional theatre, is recognised as a place (an open venue) which hosts projects made by the independent sector. Some institutional theatres (Terazije Theatre, Zvezdara Theatre, Theatre Puž, etc.) present shows whose very form, along with other features, is commercial, so it could be assumed that these theatres can rely on box office receipts. However, that is still impossible in Serbia, due to low ticket prices, which are due to the low standard of living and cultural habits. Teatar na Brdu is a private initiative which relies on the public venue of the municipality where it is situated and is an example of public-private partnership.

When we talk about the contemporary theatre sector in Serbia, it is firmly linked to Bitef. Bitef was founded in 1967, during this region's period of cultural democratisation, as an international festival which presents theatre practices from all over the world, particularly avant-garde ones, the new, the progressive, the revolutionary and the free. It always supported and emphasised the principles of the then dominant ideology, which entailed presenting Yugoslavia as a democratic country open to the entire world, although many non-freedoms lurked behind the scene. The same political wave gave birth to Bitef and the contemporary performing community in Serbia. The link between Bitef, Bitef Theatre and contemporary theatre is described in the text by Ivan Medenica. The relevance of that link is supported by the fact that our theatre community uses the adjective 'Bitef-like' for performances that are different, radical, provocative.

It is also important to emphasise that, besides the organisations that create theatre performances, this research also maps other actors in the Serbian theatre system as a whole (educational practices, theatre journals and publications, museums and archives, festivals, etc.). Bearing in mind the broad scope of the theatre system, we have acknowledged the potential for the list to undergo further changes, so the QR code of the publication will contain an open list.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that the greatest challenge for all theatre practitioners in Serbia (as in other countries) is the struggle for audience. Interest in theatre in Serbia is on the decrease, especially among younger audiences. While the theatre community cannot directly influence the direction of new technological developments, the coronavirus pandemic, financial crisis, or other challenges of the modern world, it surely can show more interest in audiences. Contemporary theatre simply cannot exist without audiences that are curious and aware.

SECTION 1

Public Theatre – the unassailable dominance and permanent crisis

Aleksandar Milosavljević

Public Theatre - the unassailable dominance and permanent crisis

Aleksandar Milosavljević

Historical framework

The history of theatre life in Serbia is closely linked to historical – often dramatic – circumstances that have determined, and still do, the fate and culture of these regions. Often conditioned by wars, occupations, utilitarian demands – from those related to preserving the national identity to affirmation of statehood through culture and creativity – theatre life has gone through different phases, had its ups and downs, enjoyed the support of the rulers and the states, but also been neglected, and left to the enthusiasm of dramatic and theatre practitioners.

Our first theatres emerged in the late nineteenth century, in Kragujevac (*Knjaževsko srbski teatar*) and, later, in Belgrade (Teatar na Djumruku), whereas the foundation of the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad in 1861 was a successful attempt at constituting a powerful weapon in the struggle of Austro-Hungarian Serbs to preserve their national identity. It moved to Belgrade in 1867 with its entire company and thus was founded the *National Theatre*, our first public theatre. Later, in time, opera and ballet departments were also founded within this theatre house, alongside the drama department. The same principle was also applied at the SNT of Novi Sad, so that these theatre houses operate in accordance with the model of national theatres housing three artistic units to this day. This model, grounded in dubitable political motivations (centralised modes of operation and control carried out by the founders¹) results in major hindrances in its operation (planning and staging the repertory).

Prior to World War Two, in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia there was a distinct division in terms of organisation between public and private theatres, and the ones controlled by the state, primarily the National Theatre in Belgrade, had more room (and money) for artistic development.

After World War two, the new state actively took control of theatre life in Serbia, both in terms of organisation and programming. This led to a repertory representing the ideology and politics of the new government, but also human resources policies (when engaging managers and actors' companies, the politically tried-and-tested staff had an advantage).

The case of the *Yugoslav Drama Theatre* (YDT) is specific: in the way it was formed in 1947 through a decree, the fact that the actors' ensemble comprised the finest talent from all parts of the former Yugoslavia, but also in the nature of its repertory policies. This theatre was established as the most representative public theatre institution, which, as a result of State intervention in the sphere of theatre, imperilled the position of the capital's National Theatre². Immediately after its foundation, YDT became the most powerful theatre in the country, and its productions set a high bar, introducing global trends to our theatre life.



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Still, local theatres have gradually and occasionally managed to achieve a certain autonomy in creating their own repertory policies. This was evidenced by the success of *Belgrade Drama Theatre* (BDT) in the late 1950s and the popularity of *Atelje 212* in the 1960s when, each in their own right, these theatres made significant steps out of the prescribed ideological, aesthetic, and thematic repertory frameworks. For example, BDT offered their audience the staging of plays by contemporary western authors, whilst *Atelje 212* produced local playwrights whose works addressed contemporary realities.

The state, in accordance with its interests, has both founded and abolished theatres right up until the late 1980s. However, the changes in political atmosphere, liberalisation and opening of the former Yugoslavia towards the world, primarily the West, in the 1960s and 1970s also resulted in the implementation of cultural diplomacy. Along with YDT, BDT, and *Atelje 212*, *Bitef* was of great significance in this regard, a festival that became a strong instigator of new theatre trends in local theatre³. The new subject matters tackled also led to different directorial concepts and artistic approaches.

1 | In the case of the National Theatre, it is the Ministry of Culture and Information, whereas the holder of founders' rights of the Serbian National Theatre is the Government of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

2 | This antagonism of sorts between these two theatre houses is present until this day, primarily in terms of operation of their drama repertory.

3 | Relativity of the changes in social climate and cultural policies of the time is also, however, reflected in the fact that it was in that same period that the State banned (or otherwise censored) the greatest number of theatre productions ever – primarily in Serbia. So, at the same time as *Bitef* was promoting theatre explorations – at times even shocking for our public – plays were being banned for addressing post-war history and politics.



Current problems of theatre life

Even though there has been an increasing number of private theatres and informal companies in the past number of decades, theatres founded by the Ministry of Culture and Information or local governments are dominant. The most numerous are, therefore, repertory theatres with permanently employed actors' ensembles, often also employing directors, dramaturgs, as well as set and costume designers.⁴ These theatres, despite increased diversity in their respective repertoires, have their own, most often strictly defined audiences, and thus a limited radius of any sort of influence. Their productions are realised following an 'industrial model' and a precisely determined procedure, most often through 40 or so rehearsals during the time frame of around two months. The mobility of these productions is determined by potential invitations to perform at festivals and collaboration contracts with theatres in other cities.⁵

To write about Serbian theatre today in general, and particularly about the dominant local theatre scene, apart from the observation that the funds allocated to production are decreasing⁶, is to witness how the art of theatre fares in transition times and the State's gradual surrender of implementing –and seriously defining – cultural policies, not to mention its consistent control of all aspects of contemporary creative processes. Some of the forms and results of contemporary creativity could become part of a national cultural heritage in the future.

A first observation is that this aspect of reality takes place in a mostly unordered space which is not systemically regulated – through an Act on Theatre, for example. Over this unordered space is the current Law on Culture, which combines anachronistic views of the purpose and function of culture and inadequately interprets and implements 'European' legal provisions. As such, it is evidently unable to regulate relations in the sphere of theatre. However, this law is not the only problem. The shortcomings and inefficiencies of the existing Law on Culture are also determined by the established context and the fact that other, so-called systemic laws⁷, disable normal (and in some cases *any*) functioning of theatre creativity. In such a situation, theatre producers (heads of theatre institutions) and creatives contrive to find different ways to stage productions. Theatre productions in Serbia are made *in spite* of the laws currently in effect, so that it sometimes seems that our theatre, regardless of the content and aesthetics of the shows, is some kind of an illegal, subversive activity constantly in danger of the state effecting one or other form of repression. Truth be told, nowadays it is without the involvement of ideological censorship.

For a long time now, the state has cared little for theatre because it is essentially not interested and does not even expect theatres whose programme activities it finances to fulfil certain (legally or otherwise projected) programme framework obligations (for example, the number of productions realised within a season). Assessing the quality of the production is never mentioned, let alone evaluating repertory policies.

We thus come to one of the fundamental characteristics of theatre life in Serbia: repertory arbitrariness.

Here, everyone performs – everything. This kind of diversity in terms of repertoires can be expected from provincial theatres because these theatres, as sole institutions of this type in their local environments, need to meet the expectations of diverse audiences. Repertory diversity is, however, hard to understand in major cultural environments such as Belgrade, and to an extent also Novi Sad and Niš, cities with a number of theatres with clear repertory profiles, respectively addressing children, young people, spectators who expect dramatic (opera and ballet) classics, but also spectators leaning towards various theatrical explorations – dramatic, dance, musical theatre, as well as those who expect entertainment in theatre – in sophisticated but also more superficial ways.

4 | There are, indeed, local repertory theatre houses without permanently employed actors, but such examples are scarce.

5 | Belgrade-based theatre houses naturally have a great advantage, with popular actors attracting spectators to their guest performances outside of Belgrade, ensuring the financial success of such guest performances. Guest performances of theatres from outside of Belgrade in the capital are rarely of interest to Belgrade audiences and are thus financially unprofitable. Lately, due to the financial crisis, co-productions between theatres from different cities have become common, so that collaboration between non-Belgrade theatres with ones from Belgrade has intensified, increasing the mobility of productions and numbers of spectators and prolonging the lifespan of such productions.

6 | Reduction in financial support results in decreased quantity and quality of the production, and also leads to large gaps in terms of updating and regular maintenance of technical-technological infrastructure, or even the maintenance of the premises themselves.

7 | Law on Labour, Budget Law, Law on Public Procurement, etc.

Under pressure from rising poverty and increasingly modest subsidies, our theatres veer towards commercial repertoires and box office profits. Some do this almost entirely, others by combining several repertory currents, which enables them to, along with productions intended for wider audiences, still create productions whose ambition is primarily reflected in the creative and performing teams' willingness to engage in various explorations. A non-standard approach to creating a theatre production implies giving up the industrial ways of working on a play. This increases the risks and results of the production, and thus also makes the success of the production and its profits uncertain. The situation gets even more complicated if the production surpasses the capacities and the experience of the producers, or if the directorial concept involves a system of work the actors' ensemble is not accustomed to, because the duration of the rehearsal period is then unavoidably prolonged.

The unfavourable situation in Serbia's theatre world is exacerbated by other factors: poor human resources policies that favour political suitability rather than skills and talent;⁸ the longstanding public sector ban on employment;⁹ the engagement of permanently employed members of actors' ensembles in film and television projects;¹⁰ decreased mobility of theatre production, i.e. less touring; and, by analogy, the festivalisation of local theatre life.¹¹

In such a situation, it would be logical to assume that, when it comes to more artistically ambitious projects or those facing all aspects of current crises, the advantage would be on the side of theatres in major cities. After all, there are several important elements working in their favour: proximity to centres of power and funding sources; numerous, mainly educated audiences who receive relevant theatrical and artistic information through Bitef (Belgrade), Sterijino pozorje and Infant (Novi Sad) or 'Teatar na raskršću' Festival and the theatre programme of Nišvil Festival (Niš); this is where guest performances of international theatres take place; and finally major theatres boast the finest actors, directors and other artistic collaborators. Things are, however, not as one might expect.

In recent seasons, it is at these same theatres in smaller cities where the more impressive plays have been seen in terms of audacious directorial procedures from very young directors (Jug Djordjević, Jovana Tomić, Patrik Lazić, Tara Manić, Mia Knežević, Djordje Nešović, Marko Torlaković, Veljko Mićunović, Marko Čelebić, Sonja Petrović), but also mid-career ones (Igor Vuk Torbica¹², Iva Milošević, Bojana Lazić, Andjelka Nikolić, Jelena Bogavac, Milan Nešković, Nenad Todorović, Snežana Trišić), as well as representatives of the older generation (Nebojša Bradić, Kokan Mladenović, Gorčin Stojanović, Andraš Urban, Boris Liješević, Zlatko Paković)¹³. These same theatres have also demonstrated the readiness of actors' ensembles to meet complex and ambitious directorial demands, along with theatre management's commitment to such productions. Even though in many ways their results lag behind those of theatres from cultural centres, primarily in terms of invested funds but also the modest acting experience or technical resources they have at their disposal, the productions created in recent years in Vranje, Piroć, Lazarevac, Novi Pazar, Leskovac, Kragujevac, Kraljevo, Subotica, Zrenjanin, Kosovo's Gračanica¹⁴, in Šabac, until recently, and even in Čačak, a city that barely has a professional theatre, surpass, due to the energy invested in them, many of the productions from Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš. The group of ambitious theatres by all means also includes the ones in Sombor, whose productions have long since demonstrated a high level of artistic achievement, as well as in Subotica, where, along with the National Theatre's ever-improving drama department (Narodno pozorište/kazalište/nepszinház), Kosztolányi Dezső Színház has also been operating for years and staging extraordinary productions.

A general characteristic of these theatre houses' predominant repertory is courage, seen in their readiness to not limit the process of working on new shows (implementation of workshop principles), and to not be limited by their audience's long-established expectations. The emphasis is, therefore, placed on presenting new information, different aesthetics and procedures, expanding the horizons of

spectators but also attracting new audiences with contemporary sensibilities and, naturally, expected results of concrete theatrical research. This type of specific challenge is undoubtedly down to the spirit and atmosphere set by Bitef. Good examples of this are rare exceptions in Belgrade's current theatre life – Belgrade Drama Theatre, Yugoslav Drama Theatre and, naturally, Bitef Theatre¹⁵, as well as, until several seasons ago, the National Theatre's Drama department.

One of the indicators of these theatre houses' audacity is their ability to engage international directors, primarily those whose works have already attracted the attention of the theatre-going public in the region and beyond (Bobo Jelčić, Jernej Lorenci, Sebastijan Horvat, Lenka Udovički, Ivica Buljan, Ersan Montag, Slobodan Unkovski, Aleksandar Popovski, Janez Pipan), as well as local directorial forces (Miloš Lolić, Jagoš Marković, Jug Đorđević, Andraš Urban, Jovana Tomić, Nikola Zavišić, Marko Manojlović, Iva Milošević, Milan Nešković, Boris Liješević). Due to increasingly fierce competition (because of lack of funds and decreased production), young people found opportunities outside of the major cities, and fortunately were not creatively suppressed by programmers in, for example, Piroć, Šabac, Novi Pazar or Lazarevac. On the contrary, they were offered full support, which resulted in dedicated commitment from actors' ensembles.

8 | One of the consequences of this policy is also the unequal treatment of theatre houses, primarily in terms of allocation of funds; in rare cases, theatre houses privileged in this manner do take advantage of this opportunity in a way evident in their artistic achievement; however, there are also theatre houses for whom even the increased funds have not helped improve the quality of production.

9 | Initially in the form of a recommendation, and then regulated by a Provision, this ban has until recently also had concrete legal form, which, in truth, the state gave up on but it has made the employment process at our theatres extremely difficult and is linked to very complex administrative procedures.

Restrictive employment policies have, on the one hand, disabled the natural process of filling actors' ensembles, and on the other hand decimated the staff employed at technical departments and, ruptured the process of transferring tacit knowledge (implicitly), virtually imperilling the operation of a series of specifically theatre-related crafts or even leading to their disappearance.

10 | The incredible number of shootings of TV series and films not only makes the process of rehearsals at theatres difficult (sometimes impossible), but hugely imperils the staging of productions, and is no longer limited to major theatre centres.

11 | Financial conditions lead to a decreased number of guest performances (outside of Belgrade: always the same spectators, decreased possibility of educating spectators, fewer performances – shorter life span of productions, etc.), and compensation for this was found in establishing new festivals which, on the one hand, is positive, but on the other makes the problem of the professional competency of selectors more pressing and urgent.

12 | Igor Vuk Torbica, Drvar, 1987-Rovinj, 2020.

13 | Only the names of artists successfully directing throughout Serbia are mentioned here, but Olga Dimitrijević, a playwright who also directs, could be added to this list as well.

14 | Where the National Theatre in Pristina was relocated to.

15 | Incentives that move and determine the YDP repertory, however, stem to a huge extent from this theatre's membership of the European Theatre Union.

Bitef Theatre was founded under the wing of the festival's 'New Theatre Trends', in accordance with the decades-long motto of the Bitef Festival. Its primary mission, to which this theatre has remained faithful, is affirmation of exploratory theatre in the broadest sense and maintaining a 'Bitefesque' tension between festivals, i.e. support of sorts to a sensibility initiated by Bitef.

It should also be stated that Bitef Theatre belongs to a category of theatre houses whose programme activities are financed by the state, more specifically the City of Belgrade. However, the theatre does not have a permanent company, which makes their productions more costly on account of the fees for every single engaged member of the cast, required for preparation of the production and performances themselves.

It is these projects that will serve as additional education for many ensembles in provincial parts of Serbia, providing actors and actresses with specific training and enabling them to get acquainted with systems of work which they had not previously experienced.

A particular problem of local institutional and publicly subsidised theatres is related to the contemporary dance scene and all other forms of non-dramatic theatre. Ever since the New Dance Forum of the Serbian National Theatre was abolished in 2016, the Bitef Dance Company has been the sole persistent and successful presence on our so-called public contemporary dance scene, continuing to establish not only dance-based but also fringe theatrical forms.

Even though some of the local repertory theatres increasingly perform musicals or plays with a heavy presence of music and songs, Belgrade-based Terazije Theatre is the only theatre house with musical theatre as the axis of its repertory.

With regard to theatre for children and young people, the state of things is, at least formally, slightly better than that regarding dance theatre. The former, profiled for children in terms of repertory and human resources (regarding trained puppeteers) exist in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Subotica, and Zrenjanin¹⁶, but every theatre in Serbia has an obligation to dedicate a part of their repertory to the youngest audiences. In practice, however, this means that productions are made on certain occasions, cheap in every possible sense of the word, whose purpose it is simply to fulfil the obligation. The greatest problem of such productions are the scripts, written as play texts for simple staging that is cheap in terms of production costs. Naturally, there are exceptions in this field too, and the efforts of certain local theatres to offer their youngest viewers a truly attractive introduction to the world of theatre through engaging good writers, high-quality plays and specialised, often international, directors are highly commendable.

16 | At National Theatre 'Toša Jovanović' in Zrenjanin, a Puppet Stage operates with great success.



SECTION 2

Pandemic and Independence

Irena Ristić

Pandemic and Independence

Irena Ristić

The independent performing arts scene of Serbia has developed gradually, preserving the Yugoslav heritage of the first collectives founded as early as the mid-1980s. New independent theatres were founded in Belgrade during the troubled 1990s, as an important device of the anti-war movement. In 1999, at the height of the war and political struggles, the Association of Independent Theatres [ANET] was founded. After the events of 2000, when the fall of the Milošević regime and transition to the neoliberal economic model took place, the roles and expectations were reversed: the independent scene now follows the development of the civil sector; it is no longer a hub of nominally democratic change, but is instead a space to which the state delegates its social functions. The struggle for independence thus gains new aspects. In the first decade of the new century, there have been important steps forward related to strengthening the contemporary dance scene, establishing self-organised models linked to communal spaces for both performance and activities, as well as the founding of *Druga scena*, a shared initiative of a number of groups active in the field of performing and visual arts, art theory, queer activism and cultural policies. Networking between cultural actors from different disciplines is the foundation of *Asocijacija NKSS (Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia)*, a key collaboration platform that, among others, gathers almost all collectives in the field of performing arts. Over the past decade, practices have expanded, paths have intersected, micro collectives have gotten stronger, and their activities have become the pillar of contemporary performing practices in local and regional frameworks.

Representatives of professional artistic collectives that nowadays comprise the independent scene¹⁷ were recently invited to describe their experiences. They were asked what they were doing in the past three years, how much their *modus operandi* differed compared to that in the period prior to that and what their main problems were. The following is a brief overview of their profiles, their activities and difficulties in the period of 2019 to 2022, during the pandemic and all other mounting crises.

Teatar Mimart, founded in 1984 in Belgrade, is one of the longest standing independent collectives in these regions. Director and founder, Nela Antonović, relies on the transmedial approach, addressing social phenomena and possibilities of performance as a tool for change. Mimart's activities have included more than 60 productions, 400 performances, hundreds of workshops for young people, a multitude of street actions, programmes for artists, exhibitions, lectures and debates. In the recent period, *SPOT* (festivals of artistic performance) and *Interpolation* authored by Lidija Antonović stand out in particular, along with *Algoritam sna*, *Vatralj* and *Aplauz za Hekatu*, and the upcoming production *Reminiscencija*, which will celebrate the 50th anniversary of Nela Antonović's work.

Dah Teatar was founded in 1991 by directors Dijana Milošević and Jadranka Andjelić, as a professional artistic company that devises methodology and operates, as they put it, 'at the crossroads between theatre, dance and visual arts'. Along with artistic productions, such as *Drveće pleše*, *Ti moraš biti Zenitista!*, *Za tvoje dobro* and *Zemlja* staged in recent years, Dah Teatar takes part in multiple international projects oriented towards education and research, most notably *Moving Memories*, *Antigona*, *Stardust*, *HEDA*, *Farce* and *Fate*. They nurture an activist, critical and didactical approach, as well as collaboration with universities and numerous civil society organisations.



© Biter Theatre Archive

Ister teatar is an independent theatre company founded in Belgrade in 1994. In their work, they focus on exploring and linking dance and drama techniques. They perform their productions on different stages and in the streets, taking part in numerous local and international festivals. Their memorable productions include *Tri sestre ili Okolo naokolo Čehova* (Three Sisters or Around and Around Chekhov), *Pustinja 2010*, *Smoking Kills*, as well as their latest author's project of 2021, entitled *Da, Jozef K. je ovde*.

Plavo pozorište is a laboratory founded in 1995, artistically and ideologically grounded in the work of theatre reformers Artaud, Stanislavski, Grotowski and Barba. Theatre is seen as a space for personal quests and transformations, through education and creating productions, among which are the recently completed *Ja igram Elektru*, *Sanjarenje – priča iz Terezina*, *Ahasverusov dan* and *Ostrvo cveća*, directed by Nenad Čolić.

Hajde da... was founded in 1999, as a group of experts in the field of psycho-social support, trained for working with young people and vulnerable groups. Dramaturg and theorist Marko Pejović develops theatre, dance and film projects, often in collaboration with ERGstatusteatar. He makes plays and films with deaf and visually challenged persons, persons with disabilities, war veterans, retired dance artists, occasionally together with other independent artists. Among the projects in the previous period, the most notable include the film *Gathering*, the video installation *Vanredno u zoni neživljivosti*, as well as training programmes for *Žive biblioteke*.

Projekat objektivna drama – POD Teatar was founded by ballerina and theatre pedagogue Tatjana Pajović in 2000, with the intention of focusing her strengths on the development of a specific methodology in her work with young people, artists and people with different needs. POD relies on practices of applied and participatory theatre, mostly in the range of community theatre, as well as on anthropological heritage of the previously mentioned reformers. Important European projects they have taken part in since 2019 include: *CaravanNext*, *DOPODO* and the production of *Hvatači oblaka*. Along with international collaborations, they work in collaboration with local schools, kindergartens, old people's homes and local community councils.

17 | In this text, the attribute *independent* will be assigned to practices that are not productions of public institutions or private entrepreneurs, although certain connections are necessary and expected, due to economic and technical requirements. The focus is on professional collectives comprising two or more artists systematically trained through formal or informal aspects of artistic training, who, through their artistic activity, receive payment in order to partially or entirely cover their basic needs.

BAZAART was founded in Belgrade in 2002, as a platform bringing together artists, researchers, educators and citizens focusing on the development of social cohesion and democratic values. In their practices they nurture a cross-disciplinary approach, and work based on collective creativity. Their important contribution to the scene in the previous period includes the productions of *Masochism*, *Value of a Woman and Welcome of the World (WOW)*, and particularly the professional-scientific conferences under the programme direction of Sunčica Milosavljević, including: *Centres and Margins – Forces of Rapprochement*, as well as *Cultural Education – Developing Competences for Non-Competence and Educating with Culture – Towards a Society Where Values Matter*.

ApsArt Centar za pozorišna istraživanja was founded in 2004 and is oriented towards practices of applied theatre. The director and founder Aleksandra Jelić and her collaborators have carried out multiple activities, productions and participatory projects, of which the following stood out in the past period: *Art Paket*, *Bolje polje*, *Priprema Pozor Nadzor* and *RawPlay*. According to ApsArt, 'We perform at penitentiaries, schools, streets, parks, hospitals, kindergartens – wherever life is lived. And we don't perform FOR the audience but WITH the audience.'

Stanica is an initiative of artists and cultural workers which was started in Belgrade in 2005. Their work is focused on consolidation and recognition of the contemporary dance scene in Serbia, communal learning, professional development, networking and providing better working conditions in the Balkans region. The most important projects in recent years include: *Nomad Dance Academy*, *Puzzle 1-6*, the *Kolo* dance performance by the group Neut and the piece *Blizina dodira* by Igor Koruga as well as the book *Feministički porno pejzaži* by Ana Dubljević.

Hop.La! is a company founded in 2005 in Belgrade. Their main field of interest and activities are collective practices in the range of performative and visual disciplines, social experiments and different aspects of exploration of the arts. Along with their authors' pieces, they carry out interventions focused on transforming cultural, educational and social models. During the past three years, all of their efforts have been directed towards activities outside of Belgrade: Seoski kulturni centar Markovac was founded including a Children's Club, as well as the 'Ekatarina Pavlović' library dedicated to gender-related and all other forms of (in)justice. In collaboration with the local population, theatre, literature, debating and other programmes were initiated. Parallel to this, in another part of Serbia, action research entitled *Višak vrednosti* [Surplus Value] was carried out, and an experimental piece entitled *Matematika mraka* [The Mathematics of Darkness] was staged outside Serbia.

Reflektor is an independent repertory theatre founded in 2012 after the enormous success of a youth production dedicated to feminism, entitled *Muškarčine*. They operate within a three-segment model in which artistic productions cross with media production [Zoomer], but also the programmes of peer education [E8]. They frequently perform their shows at Belgrade's Dorćol Platz and are dedicated to developing their audience. They see theatre as a tool for social emancipation, education, political agitation and a school of thinking in the struggle for human liberties and rights. In addition to a decade-long run of *Muškarčine* (and over 200 performances!), noteworthy projects include *Constitution*, *Betmen Robin Beograd*, *Čao svima* and *Urednik*.

Le studio is an independent theatre with a French flair, with punk-rock style – this is how this collective presents themselves. At the same time, it is another rare attempt at a professional repertory model surviving on Belgrade's independent scene¹⁸. They are committed to breaking the boundaries between audience and performers, and they see theatre as a meeting point, a place of exchange and communal creation, and to some extent also learning. The school and theatre are led by the French artist Jean Baptiste Demarigny, and the most interesting projects in the past period include *Zarobljeni momenti* and *Pod Mlečnom lujom*.

Cirkusfera has addressed the development of contemporary circus, artistic animation and street theatre for over ten years. They are prone to experimenting during the production of their shows, most evidently in *Dve desne noge*, *(Ne)spojive*, *Slava*, *Nula* and *Duel*, as well as through educational programmes including *Fabrika savremenog cirkusa*, *Talentarijum*, *Krug kreativnosti* and *Teorijski razgovori*. Their key annual programme, gathering circus artists from the entire region, is the travelling festival *CirkoBalkana*.

18 | The first independent theatre that successfully built their repertory and audiences in the period from 2011 to 2013 was *Scena Carina* in New Belgrade, under the artistic leadership of Nataša Milović. Despite its extraordinary achievements, evident in their productions of plays by Edward Bond, this theatre has not gained the support required to ensure continuation of their work.



Hleb Teatar is a company gathering activist artists of different generations, founded by actress and drama pedagogue Sanja Kršmanović Tasić. They are inclined toward a research-based approach and devised theatre, using different artistic languages and contents they recognise as politically relevant. Along with productions, great attention is paid to education through workshops and projects for young people. They staged multiple new productions over the past several years: *Iverje*, *Vrtenje*, *Majke*, *Marija Ručara*, *Narcis/e* and *2100: Skaska o Askii*, in co-production with *Pozorište Patos* of Smederevo.

Even this brief overview of the most vital professional collectives on the scene clearly shows that independent practices in Serbia have a broader range of activities than cultural institutions or private entrepreneur initiatives. Along with production, collectives are oriented towards educational and research practices; they rely on various methods, and display a certain amount of 'undisciplinedness', as Rancière would put it. Indeed, there is a high degree of disciplinary crossover, experimental and participatory principles dominate, pressures of economic dependence are resisted and 'processuality' takes precedence over productivism whenever possible. All artistic languages are employed and through the interplay between content and form, new methods are developed. The work in the arts itself takes on the function of collective organisation, whilst the focus is shifted from the artistic to the meta-artistic plane. Social relations and relations of production are examined so that productions themselves become a pillar of alternatives – not only artistic but social, partly economic and consequently political.

Engagement, addressing social issues and political phenomena, the porosity of boundaries between the world of arts and the everyday world, between performers and audience, between those who create and those who receive, those who have and those who have not, abolishing consumption, engaging in activism, demanding answers, reaction, change – these are characteristics demonstrated by almost all independent performing arts authors. Paradoxically, in this abolition of boundaries (theatre practitioners might call it 'the ramp'), issues of social segregation and exploitation of a profoundly unjust order are made thematically more acute. Rarely, quite rarely, independent artists allow themselves an occasional escapist slip or two in their productions – an escape into artistic exploration with no consequences. The rarity of this escapism is not because they don't long for it, but because they clearly recognise political necessities and experience them directly, under the pressure of everyday life which is getting increasingly difficult for precarious workers.

In these critical reviews, whose effects are at times confrontational, and sometimes quite subtle, as (self)reflections tend to be, issues of gender are addressed more and more frequently. Systemic misogyny is addressed within the range of family, pedagogical, employment and peer relations, whilst the patriarchal matrix with its destructive derivatives remains the focus of deconstruction, as part of a broader social struggle for gender equity. This is not merely an echo of major shifts dominating the public discourse, but is instead emerging organically, almost unexpectedly, as an outcome of united voices that recognise the right time for communal action (almost 80% of the independent scene is comprised of women, which is not accidental, considering the distribution of resources in the system of artistic production).

It should be emphasised that by expanding their reach and abolishing binarity, independent performing artists do not renounce their respective communities (dance, theatre, drag, etc.) – they fight in different ways, often together, for the work in the arts to be recognised as work, for being paid for this work and to be able to make a dignified living through this work. What sets them apart is a high level of awareness of their own position in the social hierarchy, their critical stance towards the arts being the exclusive preserves of the gifted and the educated, and their strong focus on work [not for but] *with* community, with inclusion of underprivileged and vulnerable groups with limited access to resources. This emancipatory character of practices on the independent scene is a result of precisely articulated ideological matrices, even though it is strongly influenced by socioeconomic conditions and donors' demands¹⁹. This becomes quite obvious when the frequency of educational and didactical programmes mostly focused on young people and people working with the young is taken into account. Given that children and young people are an extremely sensitive group due to

their developmental needs and risks, and educational context is optimal in terms of the potential for change, it is easy to understand why there is such a high degree of interest in working with them. Still, this points to the activities of reformist public policies as well. It is easier to obtain support for any type of training or education programme aimed at young people, refugees, etc. than for work related to political agitation or projects focusing on class or union struggle. This is not unknown and the actors of the independent scene very often discuss this and look for ways to preserve the reach of emancipatory practices, at the same time also providing space for political autonomy through new models of sustainability, and beyond the dictates of neoliberal agendas.

Only two collectives engage in the challenges of repertory models, in spite of technical and economic resources being virtually inaccessible. All other independent artists and collectives rely on project funding, with sporadic and most frequent festival performances²⁰. Unfortunately, cultural institutions that are prepared to share their resources are rare (such as Bitef Theatre and, to a limited extent, Little Theatre 'Duško Radović'). Therefore, the new forms of organisation around communal spaces allocated for art, culture and sociality are key in terms of production: *Magacin u Kraljevića Marka 4-8* is an example of a self-organised culture centre that, following an open calendar model, remains available on a daily basis and accessible free of charge to almost all actors on the Belgrade independent scene, as well as to other people who recognise its shared values. And just like *Magacin* nowadays provides conditions for independent production in Belgrade, the festivals are one of the more important cornerstones of postproduction. Sometimes they are short lived or are discontinued due to lack of support, even when they have extraordinary programmes as is the case with the *Van okvira* [Hajde da] festival. Some of them manage to persevere through different partnerships. The following list is but a few of these, important for the affirmation of independent performance practices: *Na sopstveni pogon* [Asocijacija NKSS], *Kondenz* [Stanica], *DESIREE Central Station* [KosztolányiDezsőSzínház], *Pokretnica* [Praktikabl, Novi Sad], *Mater Terra* [CEDEUM], *INFANT* [Culture Centre Novi Sad], *Patosoffiranje* [PATOS, Smederevo], *BAŠTeatar* [Kragujevac Youth Centre] and *Ex Teatar Fest* [Pančevo]. Among the more recent festival moves, the following stand out: *Umetnost i ljudska prava* [Dah teatar] and *Dani Smiljane Mandukić* [Hleb teatar], as well as *ASSITEJ Serbia Festival FAS*, oriented towards the development of artistic practices for young people. Even though ASSITEJ is a national affiliate of an international network gathering institutional theatres, independent collectives and artists, the festival that had its first edition in 2019 has opened a significant space for performances of independent productions, and its concept and method strongly resonate with progressive performing arts practices characteristic of the independent scene, particularly through its openness, exchange and participatory jurying throughout the festival.²¹ There are also two Bitef side programmes: the regional festival *CircoBalkana* and *Bitef Polifonija* – arguably the most important platform for experimental, educational and participatory practices of independent performing artists in Serbia. A new initiative entitled *Polifonija teatar* has also emerged from these practices, and its first premiers have already occurred thanks to the efforts of Ljubica Beljanski Ristić, the creator of the polyphonic concept and founder of the Centre for Drama in Education and Arts CEDEUM.

19 | From a historical perspective, it should be taken into account that the independent sector in culture, as well as in other fields, emerged in the West in the early 1980s, when non-institutional agents took over the abolished welfare state, which strongly conditions their professional (and by all means also political) engagement. After a certain period of resistance, these trends arrived in Serbia too; transition has its specificities, but similar dynamics can be recognised.

20 | Project financing entails a one-off budget framework for each individual production allocated through applying to competitions and provided in accordance with strictly defined criteria. Independent artistic collectives in Serbia do not have structural support, nor are there any procedures through which it could be attained. This makes continuous work significantly difficult, as well as regular performances and activities, maintenance of premises and technical equipment and infrastructural investment, so that establishing a repertory model of operation, with ticket sales that can partly cover the costs, is an enormous risk.

21 | This year Assitej Serbia initiated the project 'Incubator: the right of children and young people to arts' which is oriented towards exchange of ideas, good practices and recommendations for furthering work in the field of theatre for young people, with accompanying educational programmes for students of arts academies.



Asked about difficulties and obstacles they faced, people from the independent scene are mostly in agreement. It is not the pandemic that brought the problems – they had undoubtedly been there before. The biggest problems were simply exacerbated: lack of funds for productions, spaces for rehearsals and regular work, technical equipment which is necessarily rented, and which is in turn always more expensive than any artistic work, burn-out syndrome, particularly amongst authors who double as producers and who, along with their organisational tasks, also take on communication, PR, advertising the performances and selling tickets. Lack of resources is not only caused by absurdly low budgets allocated to culture, but primarily by questionable distribution of funds in public competitions and non-transparent procedures.²² The reviewing panels are not sufficiently informed about the achievements of the independent scene, and there are no long-term subsidies for collectives' operational costs. Disciplines are rigidly divided, much like districts, whereas experimental, exploratory and non-disciplinary pieces remain without support. At the same time, the competitions, much like their results, are announced quite late in the year, so that authors have just six months to stage the production. All these problems have been experienced by independent artists for years, and they mention them frequently. Public institutions in charge of culture are unreliable partners prone to arbitrary solutions, which destroy the huge enthusiasm and great work that exists, making it impossible to encourage renewed efforts. Every year, 'we die, god knows how many times in a row, from all the unknowns related to what we can actually count on', says Diana Kržanic Tepavac, president of ASSITEJ.

Thus, even before the introduction of the state of emergency, a high degree of uncertainty and apprehension, brought about by precarious working conditions, was already prevalent on the scene. March 2020 was merely an additional blow to the already exhausted independent artists and cultural workers. That year, all public competitions ensuring the production of new productions and pieces were cancelled. The funds were re-allocated. Arts were not considered a part of the group of essential professions. Certain collectives completely halted their work or their activities were reduced. The majority of international projects were also paused. Organising each and every programme is a risk. Performances are cancelled due to performers' illness, sometimes many times in a row, which decreased the audience's interest in each of the performances that followed. Due to transition to online activities, collectives were oriented towards research activities, partly educational and publishing related. The amount of work increased, in the absence of any and all conditions but still under the pressure of deadlines, resulting in people becoming frustrated and completely exhausted. Due to physical distancing requirements, workshop sessions became difficult and began

moving to online versions. New digital initiatives were developed or productions moved completely outdoors. At the same time, the crisis brought about alertness and increased effort, with certain collectives feeling defiant, 'refusing to fall through' as they say. They work more than they used to, although this is less visible: 'it turns out we're stuck in a metaphor from Alice in Wonderland: we run as fast as we can, just so we can remain standing', says the head of Reflektor, Milena Bogavac.

The gap is wide between activities in Belgrade and those outside of it. Even though everything is still taking place at the centre, there is a great desire for the scene to expand, to come to life in smaller and marginalised environments. Exceptions such as *Krik teatar*, *Savremeno pozoriste Kragujevac*, *Kulturanova* [within the *Teatarnova* programme] and *Per.Art* of Novi Sad are therefore all the more precious. And when it comes to expansion, collaboration may also be the greatest strength of actors on the independent performance scene: with other artists, with students, with experts, with activists, with neighbours, with locals, with children, with officials, with people who like theatre and dance, who are willing to explore and form new communities – throughout the country and beyond. Actors are connected, they become more agile, they start public advocacy campaigns, some of them even take on the role of regulating artists' social status [such as *Stanica* and *BAZAART*]; they fight for better production and labour conditions in culture. Gradually, trust on the scene is built and, in spite of ideological stumbling blocks, solidarity becomes a priority: a survival tool as much as the ultimate goal.

Finally, if there are three touchstones of independence – personal, economic and political – it is questionable whether actors on Serbia's independent performing arts scene can survive while remaining wholly faithful to all three touchstones. One thing is certain however: they have not given up on independence. The struggle goes on.

Acknowledgement: We would like to thank the representatives of all independent collectives who took part in the small-scale research, carried out in August 2022, for the purpose of this text.

²² | 2022 Research by the Association NKSS shows that 0.78 % of the annual budget of Serbia is currently allocated to culture, of which 3.86 % goes to contemporary creativity. Similarly, the independent scene receives less than 1.5 % through competitions, while enormous sums are 'won' by cultural institutions programmes and those of 'phantom' organisations unknown to the public [set up after the competition, registered to perform other activities], as well as 'predatory' festivals who snatch a large portion of the budget through corruption.

SECTION 3

Challenges of Creative Entrepreneurship in The Performing Arts in Serbia

Jovana Karaulić

Challenges of Creative Entrepreneurship in The Performing Arts in Serbia

Jovana Karaulić

In the context of the contemporary global market system in the field of performing arts, there are many private initiatives, but creative entrepreneurship in this field is a practice rarely seen in our region. The reasons for this can be found in the various cultural policy models in the post-Yugoslav region in recent decades: Serbia's model tends towards irreversible processes with centralisation and the public-administration cultural model at their core, with the goal of building a new national identity. In terms of political, ideological and systemic changes from the 2000s until the present, the culture space is characterised by transition dynamics, cultural confusion, uncertainties and pressures due to the challenges of (global) economic systems. Thus, the contemporary model of cultural policy in Serbia is determined by the historical context of belated transition and post-transition challenges deeply rooted in the individual segments of the system (Kočović De Santo, 2021).

This should not be considered unusual, as countries with sluggish transition processes usually develop models whose culture and cultural policies are still profoundly dependent on old models of administration (Dragičević Šešić, Stojković, 2003). All these aspects influenced the shaping of policies in performing arts, which in their meagre strategies almost entirely omit the combined financing model. This has implications on the rare (and successful) examples of international collaborations in this field, the overall absence of other financing sources, and the development of concepts for private initiatives.

On the other hand, in the global context, cultural policies increasingly merge different models, guided by principles of cultural production and consumption, often involving creative entrepreneurship. In the local context, the pace of social change surpasses the capability of public policy in the performing arts to learn, adapt, and adequately respond with measures that allow for growth in this sector, namely private production formats founded on the principle of creative entrepreneurship. These formats involve both artistic elements and entrepreneurial tools and skills that ultimately impact an organisation's economic capacity.

While commercial theatre in Europe has developed a broad range of new genres, repertoires, hits, innovative marketing and advertising related products (Klaić, 2016) in recent decades, in our region economic sustainability and profitability are often placed to the fore when developing productions. As such, the notion of creative entrepreneurship in performing arts in Serbia is founded on private capital, hampered by insufficiently developed management strategies that often do not stretch the audience artistically, save for the fundamentally established goal of 'having the audience entertained, pleased and laughing, enjoying themselves and shedding a tear or two, having a good time and recommending the show to others' (ibid).

It should be mentioned here that, due to lack of subsidies, it is not rare even for public institutions to resort to production models through which they risk straying from their fundamental mission and indulging in various and perilous forms of commercialisation. Even so, by mapping the scene from the perspective of creative entrepreneurship in performance practices in Serbia, we can distinguish **four basic models of production activities**: 1) private theatres, 2) venues hosting private initiatives, 3) projects of entrepreneurial legal entities and 4) private festival formats.



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The analysis of the first model (theatre organisations funded through private capital) demonstrates that existing repertoire practices and production frameworks are oriented towards popular titles that communicate with audiences easily. Due to the lack of permanently engaged ensembles, the casts most often include actors that are able to attract audiences to their own stages or while touring. Along with shared characteristics, there are notable differences between these organisations in terms of production approaches and capacities.

Opera and Theatre *Madlenianum* was founded in 1997, as the first private chamber opera house in this part of Europe (alongside Vienna, Warsaw, Moscow, Genoa, etc.). Its founder and patron is Madlena Zepter, and 70 professionals are employed in its various departments. The programme orientation of Opera and Theatre *Madlenianum* was initially based on well-known operatic works from the 16th to 18th centuries, as well as contemporary 20th century operas, with the goal of involving emerging artists in their projects and providing them with further exposure. Parallel to establishing their primary activities, Opera and Theatre *Madlenianum* also ran activities around publishing and founding the first sheet music collection and professional library, as well as initiating an Artistic Agency focused on introducing guest performances.

Nowadays, along with operatic works by national and international composers (Puccini, Mozart, Hristić), the repertoire of this house also includes musicals and dramatic productions with commercial potential and artistic aspirations: *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, *Love and Fashion* based on the successful motion picture of the same title, *The Great Gatsby*, adapted from the F. Scott Fitzgerald novel, *Žanka*, a play about the fate of the well-known Serbian actress Žanka Stokić, etc. Opera and Theatre *Madlenianum* belongs to the group of traditional, exclusively commercial private organisations, so that alongside the aforementioned major musicals or operatic titles it also runs contemporary artistic projects, most often at the Small Stage (e.g. the play currently running is *Lungs* by Duncan MacMillan, addressing ecological and ethical reflections in the present day).

Slavija Theatre was also founded in the mid-1990s. Unlike the previous example where the founder was also the patron whose capital stemmed from private business, the head and sole owner of *Slavija* theatre invested his own private funds and property in order to turn the devastated cellar of the one-time Beobanka into a theatre venue. After two years of renovation funded exclusively through their own means, the theatre began repertory performances in 1999, at a 350-seat auditorium on the premises of the Federation of Deaf and Hard

of Hearing Persons of Yugoslavia. This remains its venue where it is a long-term leaseholder and owner of the overall infrastructure. Although its production and technical capacities are much more limited, *Slavija Theatre* pays meticulous attention to repertory policy in accordance with the principles of commercial theatre. As such, it focuses on local writers that are well known to broader audiences. As founder and manager, the economist Batrić Žarković, stated in an interview that 'my audience is my sponsor', making it clear that this organisation has never in its history received state subsidies and is not focused on private sponsorships. He was emphasising their complete financial independence but also the risks involved with regard to communication with the audience and playing to a full house. In terms of repertory, *Slavija Theatre* performs 27–30 commercial titles a month, with casts well known to spectators, and some of these productions have been performed a hundred, if not two hundred, times. From this perspective, private organisations and initiatives in Serbia make efforts to overcome the risks of economic sustainability, which otherwise, and particularly under turbulent circumstances, have a great impact on the decision-making processes related to creative formation of a project.

Founded at a socially turbulent point in time, in 1995, *Pan Theatre* initially performed their productions only as guest performances on different stages due to the absence of a permanent venue of their own. With the support of the municipality of Zvezdara, they moved their projects to a permanent venue three years later. In the first decade of the theatre's operation, the repertory policy was oriented towards titles for the target group of three- to twelve-year-olds, with over 30 productions and up to four new titles per season. Ten years after the foundation, the permanent Evening Stage was also founded, with the theatre's own productions but also guest performances of touring productions.

The pressure of staging successful projects from the point of view of creative entrepreneurship is also mentioned by the co-founder of the most recent private theatre in Serbia, *Teatar na Brdu*²³. This theatre was founded by renowned Serbian actors Andrija Milošević and Viktor Savić, and it has achieved a fair amount of visibility in a relatively short timeframe. It boasts a regular audience interested in content with comical and romantic plots and well-known actors among cast members. *Teatar na Brdu* does not employ a permanent ensemble or technical department and hires popular (but also acclaimed) actors and directors in order to meet the imperative of successful projects, full houses and, consequently, financial sustainability. An example from this theatre is the production of a dramatic play – an adaptation of a well-known novel by Dragoslav Mihajlović, *Petria's Wreath*, which also had a successful screen adaptation, with internationally acclaimed and popular actress Mirjana Karanović playing the titular character.

Even though over the past number of years the following three examples of theatre organisations have gained the support of the city administration and thus become subsidised, it is necessary to mention them in this segment due to their significant contribution to the development of the independent private theatre scene in our regions. The first in the series of self-financing organisations is *Kult Theatre*, founded in 1993, at a time of social, economic and political turmoil. It started its operation with a 240-seat auditorium which was a part of what is now the cultural institution 'Vuk Karadžić'. The head of the theatre and its programme director is the experienced theatre professional Milan Minja Obradović, so it is unsurprising that this theatre soon achieved extraordinary results through project-oriented activities, primarily seen through the success of the anti-war production *Dark is the Night*. With an experienced cast and creative crew, and based on the play by Aleksandar Popović²⁴, this performance looks at the dramatic fate of a Belgrade family at the time of famous 1992 student protests. Along with the exceptional script and carefully selected cast, the musical number also strongly influenced the play's success. This was composed, and performed by a well-known rock musician from the region of former Yugoslavia, Bora Djordjević. The success of the first project of the newly established theatre is also evidenced by the fact that it was performed a hundred times, from its premiere in June 1993 until December of the same year, and during its two-year run the theatre had over 200 000 spectators, which was unprecedented in theatrical experience (Ostojić 2014). After its run at the newly formed Belgrade theatre house, the production successfully toured Europe and the USA.

Smaller scale productions are also characteristic of the chamber theatre *Moderna garaža*, founded in 1995 in a pre-war building²⁵ of the Automobile Museum, following the initiative of the theatre director and head of the museum, Bratislav Petković. The theatre, with its modest auditorium, had mostly staged smaller scale productions – monologues, four handers, cabaret forms, as well as staged readings of plays, for example the project by the *Association of Playwrights of Serbia* – 'A Step Towards Theatre'. The axis of its initial repertory included plays by the manager himself – *Granprix*, *Legion of Honour*, *Flowers of Evil*, *Žanka*, which are based on archive and factual material and focus on commemorating old Belgrade and its prominent personalities.

The 'International Art Centre KPGT' was founded in 1996 on the premises of the former Old Sugar Refinery in Belgrade. It is a theatre house and culture centre whose co-founders were director Ljubiša Ristić and Danko Lenđel. It enjoyed many successful projects led by Yugoslav theatre artists Ljubiša Ristić, Nada Kokotović, Rade Šerbedžija and Dušan Jovanović within the company *KPGT* (Kazalište, Pozorište, Gledalište, Teatar). This theatre, founded on the basis of a private initiative, handed over its founders' rights to the City of Belgrade in 2020, which now finances the organisation's operational costs.

The second group within this review includes organisations that programme and lease their own premises to private productions and initiatives. *Akademija 28* stands out among this type of organisation. It was founded in 1991 as a part of the business system 'Djuro Salaj' AD, as a separate programme segment oriented towards the arts and culture. Through this programme, little-known projects – often initiated by actors – have a venue where they can perform their projects, whilst PR and marketing activities are carried out by both the host venue and guest performers. This venue type was developed because a large number of actors felt the need for private initiatives, as they cannot always find their place within institutional theatres. The education system is divided into public and private academies, training approximately 100 actors a year for professional theatre life in Serbia, a number which far surpasses the needs of the local institutional/subsidised theatre system.

The third group of performing arts organisations founded on the principles of creative entrepreneurship in Serbia comprises project-oriented endeavours whose roots can be traced to the historic perspective of the theatre system and alternative production models in Yugoslavia. Thus, in the 1980s, a well-known example in the local context was the production of 'A Chauvinist Farce', a private initiative project that satirically addressed the complex relations between Serbia and Croatia and was performed over 1,800 times throughout the former Yugoslavia and the world. In the early 2000s, a private initiative production of 'The Graduate', produced by Milena Trobozić Garfield and Uliks Fehmiu, was unlike anything seen prior to that in our regions both in terms of performance concept and production approach. The production was based on Charles Webb's bestseller of the same title (adapted for the screen in the famous Mike Nichols film starring Dustin Hoffman) and had a 30-day run at Belgrade Drama Theatre. Due to the well-conceived and implemented Broadway marketing approach, all 11,000 available tickets were sold out several days ahead of the premiere.

In the last decade, there has been a growing trend for project-oriented formats, including elements of creative entrepreneurship along with the idea of artistic achievement. Private initiatives (eg. companies *Flying Ginger*, *Beoart*), in collaboration with institutional theatres throughout Serbia, stage projects that will attract audiences with their themes and artistic ambitions, but also employ experienced directors and cast members.

23 | Iza Kulisa, Radio Belgrade 1, February 1, 2020.

24 | 'Aleksandar Popović is not only our most prolific playwright of the second half of the 20th century, but also a playwright whose plays opened four theatres in Belgrade so far' (Milićević, 2002:24).

25 | The building hosting Moderna garaža was constructed in 1929, as the first modern garage in Belgrade city centre, designed by Russian architect Velerij Stashevsky.

The co-production format of public-private partnerships, in the examples of the productions of 'Prada' and 'Lepa Brena project' (in collaboration with Bitef Theatre), demonstrated in practice that collaborative principles of this type can contribute to the overall understanding of the concept of creative entrepreneurship: through selecting the ensemble of a production as well as its thematic framework, a certain artistic quality can be achieved along with a community dialogue about socially relevant or interesting phenomena.

Alongside coproduction formats with subsidised theatrical organisations, there are also entirely independent projects with notable results, albeit on smaller scales: for example, the production of *Krunska 54*, performed at a Belgrade apartment, or *Hotel 88*, a romantic story performed for over a year in a room of the hotel of the same name, and whose cast comprises Belgrade-based actors with broader visibility in the film and theatre scenes.

The final, fourth group comprises examples of private festival practices and formats, developed and carried out in the recent decades. The most prominent example in this group is the *Belgrade Dance Festival*, founded in 2004 as a private initiative of co-founder and artistic director Aja Jung. The festival has performed over 330 choreographic pieces from all over the world to Belgrade audiences, with over 20,000 visitors at its latest editions taking place on every single stage in Belgrade. While in terms of creative entrepreneurship this is a private project format, by implementing various strategic directions, the festival represents an example of combined financing and is thus supported by public funding as well as through sponsorship and donations by embassies, companies, the EU Delegation in Serbia, etc. Potential success of this example from the point of view of creative entrepreneurship is linked to discrepancies in terms of the scope of subsidies the festival receives at public competitions compared to other agents on the independent dance scene. As such, the question remains of how sustainable this festival's programme and production would be if the public support it received were in proportion with finances allocated to other projects in this field.

Another significant example of a private festival form with broader influence on the field of theatre is the international *Shakespeare Festival*, founded by the director Nikita Milivojević in 2014. Its programme orientation comprises contemporary international productions of plays by Shakespeare, and the festival takes place in the fitting surrounds of the Vila Stanković residence in Čortanovci, Indijija municipality. The idea of the festival is to promote Shakespeare's plays by presenting an attractive international theatre programme to a wider audience in this unusual venue, under the auspices of the public and private entities taking part in its financing.

The 20th edition of the *International Theatre Festival Slavija* will take place this year. In 2017, this festival received the *European Festivals Association label* (EFFE), with theatre organisations from Russia, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Bulgaria, etc. as the most frequent participants. Analysis of the festival's representation in the media indicates its insufficient visibility, yet over its two decades in operation, Slavija Theatre has nevertheless managed to attract regular audiences who follow these programmes, making the festival sustainable with no public support whatsoever.

On the other hand, private festival practices for children's theatre are not as rare in Serbia. Most notably the festival *Zvezdarište*, which, although a private initiative, always receives the support of public subsidies, the Ministry of Public Administration, and local government, as well as Zvezdara municipality. The programme concept of the festival has, during its 17-year existence, managed to ensure participation of relevant children's theatres from Serbia, as well as to establish its position on the map of children's theatre festivals in Serbia. In the context of the current environmental crisis, the international *Festival of Ecological Theatre* in Bačka Palanka is also worth mentioning. It has been addressing the dialogue between environmental protection and theatre for over 28 years, thus positioning itself as one of the oldest festivals on this subject matter in Europe.



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The examples of individual private project initiatives are numerous. However, due to the absence of more systemic strategic development of artistically high-quality commercial content in the field of performing arts, these examples are still reliant on the energy, enthusiasm, and vision of individual professionals – namely the producers that lead them. In this regard, this paper has not addressed the artistic achievements of the scene in which private theatre initiatives operate, as much as the phenomenon of parallel currents in the cultural space and the conditions for developing creative entrepreneurship in performing arts in relation to the dominant public model. Relying on the theoretically adopted understanding of entrepreneurship as 'initiative that brings about change, innovation and development', the envisioned goal that creative entrepreneurship in performing arts in Serbia strives for requires a systemic rethinking of the notions of cultural, financial, and social capital. Only then can this partially developed scene manage to blur the clearly set boundaries between cultural and economic capital, i.e., 'the field of limited production' and that which recognises the significance of economic capital, 'the field of mass production' (Bourdieu, 1993). In the former, the value of high artistic quality is created, and in the latter, commercial or economic value. In the context of performing arts, the latter, if it exists independently, has been and will be questionable.

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SECTION 4

Bitef's Impact On The Local Scene

Ivan Medenica

Bitef's Impact On The Local Scene

Ivan Medenica

This text provides a basic mapping of the impact of Bitef's 'New Theatre Trends' on Serbia's, or more specifically, Belgrade's theatre scene – both institutional and independent. It is mainly a mapping of the current situation, but with some brief glances into the past.²⁶ The slogan 'New theatre trends' defines the artistic strivings of the Belgrade International Theatre Festival from its inception, in 1967, to this day. This direction was determined by Bitef's founders, the legendary Mira Trailović (theatre director) and Jovan Ćirilov (dramaturg). At the time the festival was founded, the emphasis on 'novum' as an inherent part of modernism was perfectly justified as this was the period of the final wave of historical avant-garde in theatre. In today's post-postmodern era however, such an orientation must constantly be tested and questioned.

According to Jovan Ćirilov's famous 'chart', Bitef's greatest impact was on local theatre critics and audiences, followed by its impact on theatre direction. Its impact on acting was less significant. The older generation of Serbian theatre critics – for example, Vladimir Stameković, Muharem Pervić, Jovan Hristić, Slobodan Selenić, and later Dragan Klaić – shaped their artistic criteria largely on the bases of their experiences at Bitef. This is not to say that all of them were favourable towards the 'new theatre trends' or that they systematically supported them, but they at least had the opportunity to get to know them well and formulate their positions on the bases of knowledge and understanding. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were very few places in the Iron Curtain divided world where theatre-goers, including professional ones, had the opportunity to see productions by Jerzy Grotowski and Living Theatre, Jiri Menzel and Richard Schechner, Otomar Krejča and Ingmar Bergman, etc. at one and the same festival. It was a school of contemporary theatre in its own right unlike any other available to critics anywhere else in the world at that point in time. Initially these critics had to have a predominantly intuitive relation to the new stage forms that were being created; to accept and understand them based on their own experience and knowledge, primarily philosophical and literary. In time, though, more relevant criteria and analysis apparatus for contemporary performing arts were developed.

As far as the artistic scene is concerned, recognising, accepting and experimenting with new theatre forms has always been more a feature of the independent performing arts scene, often referred to as 'alternative theatre', than of institutional, repertory theatre houses. This is quite logical and not unique to Serbia: the 'alternative scene' is by definition more open to new production and artistic approaches, more flexible, more independent of economic, cultural and, perhaps most importantly, educational centres of power.

The latter I point out because it appears to me that when it comes to different theatre-related professions, particularly acting, the source of resistance to new practices, and a stronghold of poorly understood tradition, can be traced to schooling itself. The incredible fact is that at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade – a leading national institution in the field of theatre education – the acting curriculum for students' main, professional classes has remained unchanged for years. The situation is slightly different when it comes to theatre directing, as the programmes are more flexible and do change. More importantly, theatre direction students feel more at liberty to question and be trained outside of their school setting, at Bitef for example. The success of 'Bitefian' influences in institutional (subsidised, repertory) theatre depends primarily on having directors who want to search for different forms. In Serbian theatre, it is directors who have the main say in terms of repertoire, as well as selection of plays, subject matter, materials and poetics, since theatres more often than not do not have highly developed artistic policies.



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As such, directors themselves have the power to decide whether and to what extent contemporary theatre forms will be present in *mainstream* theatre. Since there are usually no developed artistic policies in place, and everything is incidental, one cannot predict the extent and manner in which poetics will find fertile soil at any given theatre house or how long they will linger there.

The best example thereof is Atelje 212, a theatre house from which Bitef originated (both institutions were founded by Mira Trailović and she managed them both for a long time). At its inception, Atelje 212 was also oriented towards new forms, with the theatre house and a festival developing parallel to each other, in mutual harmony. The repertoire of the theatre comprised mostly local and international new plays, ranging from theatre of the absurd to *Hair* the musical, and more infrequently new interpretations of drama classics (the famous staging of *Pere Ubu* by Alfred Jarry, directed by Ljubomir Muci Draškić, with Zoran Radmilović as the titular character, is a good example of this 'side' current of repertoire programming). Following Trailović's departure from Atelje 212, which coincided with the start of the fallout of Yugoslavia, this theatre's repertoire took a turn in the opposite direction: ranging from light comedy to conventional stagings of classics. With the exception of the 1997-2009 period when Svetozar Cvetković was managing director and oversaw a cycle of productions such as *'Woods are Glistening'* (by Milena Marković, directed by Tomi Janežič), *'The Travelling Troupe Šopalović'* (by Ljubomir Simović, directed by Tomi Janežič) or *Heroes' Square* (by Thomas Bernhard, directed by Dejan Mijač), this theatre's repertoire and artistic oscillations have lasted until present. It has largely abandoned its founding mission and lost the artistic and social relevance it once possessed.

26 | Readers requiring more information on the festival itself can find it in other, easily accessible sources.

There are different examples too. Yugoslav Drama Theatre has always ensured and maintained their audiences through a constant repertoire of good, but more traditional, dramatic theatre, which then enables them to occasionally take risks with more radical artistic steps. In the past forty years or so, this persistent repertoire was primarily maintained in productions of new local plays and classic international and local plays directed by Dejan Mljić and Egon Savin. These stagings of classic pieces, were often based on a re-coding in terms of genre and interpretation, not unlike the ones done in the UK by Peter Brook with Shakespeare plays, in Czechoslovakia by Otomar Krejča with Chekhov plays or in France by Patrice Chereau with plays by Marivaux. Like their international counterparts, these Yugoslav Drama Theatre productions have come to Bitef, although the festival always favoured the more artistically radical projects of this theatre.²⁷ In the same period of the past forty or so years, such steps out did take place, primarily in the productions directed by Haris Pašović in the 1980s (*Spring Awakening*, *The Birds*) or Eduard Miller (*Baal*) and nowadays in the projects by Miloš Lolić (*The Dreamers*, *Othello*, *Kaspar*) or Bobo Jelić (*Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?*).

The 'case' of Belgrade Drama Theatre is a very interesting one indeed. In the 1950s and 1960s, this theatre house stood out – in the social sense more than in the artistic one – because in a country governed by 'state socialism', it mainly staged new American plays. Productions of these plays were artistically relevant primarily due to actors' achievements, but they never stood out in terms of stage form. After this 'golden era', this theatre house significantly lagged behind the two above-mentioned theatre houses for decades, until its recent revival. Nowadays, this theatre house is one of the most artistically vibrant in Belgrade, and is where Bitef's impact is most prominent. This impact is not only reflected in its theatre poetics, but also in its specific choice of authors. In other words, many of the relevant European and regional directors, whose work Belgrade has in the past years grown familiar with primarily through Bitef, were invited to work at this theatre house. Two of this theatre's most significant productions in terms of stage form are *Cement Beograd* directed by Slovenian director Sebastijan Horvat and *Living Room*, by German director Ersan Mondtag. The crown jewel of managing director Jug Radivojević's artistic approach is expected to be the production of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and currently directed by Frank Castorf (premiere scheduled for late October 2022).

We conclude this brief overview of Bitef's impact on Belgrade institutional theatre by looking at Bitef Theatre. The relationship between these two sister institutions is fairly unusual. Bitef Theatre was founded significantly later than the festival of the same name (in 1989), albeit by the same person – Mira Trailović. Its goal was similar: to be a local 'branch' of the *new global theatre trends* that were already being promoted by the festival. From its beginning, Bitef Theatre has been unique in that it does not have its own permanent actors' ensemble, but is organised on a 'project' basis. This is despite it receiving funds from the city (like all of the aforementioned theatre houses). However, Trailović died in 1989, so she never got the opportunity to fulfil her final great mission. Her idea has never been fully realised, partly due to objective circumstances. This theatre house has a small budget; the lack of permanent actors' ensemble has never proven to be an advantage, but rather an aggravating factor; finally, even though Bitef Theatre has always taken upon itself the organisation of Bitef Festival (being in legal terms its *superior*), it has always been overshadowed by its 'older sister', with for instance, sponsors being drawn to the festival rather than the theatre.

Bitef Theatre's weakness is also its strength in that its small scale and artistically inconsistent production activities also enable it to be one of the rare institutional venues/platforms that is always open to the independent scene. This unusual theatre is in fact a combination of a theatre house with its own productions done in accordance with a project-based model and an 'open stage' for independent companies. Such companies otherwise have extremely poor, almost non-existent, infrastructure in Belgrade, and in Serbia as a whole. And this is not all in this 'organisationally modular' theatre: within the framework of production of Bitef Theatre itself, are contemporary dance productions realised by Bitef Dance Company. Paradoxically, in a theatre house with no permanent actors' ensemble, there is a permanent dance ensemble. In reality though, its dancers must seek other engagements (usually completely unrelated to contemporary dance), because the Company only manages to realise a maximum of two productions a year due to insufficient funds. Still, thanks to the continuous efforts of Bitef Theatre and the head of Bitef Dance Company, Jelena Kajgo, dancers do manage to stay connected to the company for longer periods of time. In this way, one generation of dancers moves on, they are replaced by new, professionally trained dancers with creative potential.

27 | It is interesting to note that the managing director of Yugoslav Drama Theatre, Jovan Ćirilov, was at the same time the artistic director of Bitef Festival for a long period of time. After Mira Trailović's death in 1989, he succeeded her as the head of Bitef where he remained until his own death in 2014.





Bitef Dance Company is one of the best illustrations of the immediate impact that Bitef Festival had not only on Bitef Theatre, but on Serbian theatre in general. Namely, contemporary dance has emerged on the Belgrade scene almost exclusively as a result of encouragement from the Bitef Festival. Productions by some of the greatest contemporary dance choreographers – Merce Cunningham, Pina Bausch, Carolyn Carlson, Sasha Waltz, Josef Nadj, Saburo Teshigawara, Johann Kresnik, Wim Vandekeybus, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker – could be seen at the festival.

Bitef Theatre and its Dance Company are not the sole venues and contexts for contemporary dance in Belgrade. Nowadays, one of the most significant platforms of this theatre is Stanica, a service for contemporary dance, which also has its own venue, and Culture Centre Magacin. However, both of these are shared with other organisations on the independent artistic scene, so these are not reliable infrastructure partners. The work of choreographers primarily connected with Bitef Dance Company (Isidora Stanišić, Miloš Isailović, international choreographers) and those connected with Stanica (Igor Koruga, Ana Dubljević, etc.) mutually differ in several key points. The former work with trained dancers; their main goal is artistic excellence; they are not radical in political and poetical questioning; and have higher production standards. In accordance with the latest trends in contemporary dance, the latter deconstruct the 'perfect' performing expression; they often dance themselves or work with untrained dancers; they raise and radically address political and poetical issues; they often step out of the framework of contemporary dance towards performances, performance-lectures, etc.

The most significant institution on the independent artistic scene in Belgrade, which is also a leading centre for peace- and other human rights-related actions, is the Centre for Cultural Decontamination. Its founder, guiding spirit, and until her death in 2019, managing director was Borka Pavičević, a dramaturg who had for decades been strongly linked to Bitef Festival (among other things, she moderated the panel discussions with artists at the festival for years). One of the more important aspects of the work of Centre for Cultural Decontamination in the second half of the 1990s, along with post-dramatic projects by director Ana Miljanić, were dance productions by choreographer Sonja Vukičević, one of the pioneers of this kind of theatre in Serbia. She calls her productions 'plays in motion', and the roots of her poetics can be traced to the work of Pina Bausch.

Under the influence of Bitef's 'new theatre trends', other forms and companies on the independent performing arts scene also developed, nurturing poetics that differ from the dramatic theatre model dominant in Serbian theatre. Unfortunately, the majority of these companies work in precarious conditions, due to non-systematic financing and infrastructure-related problems (space and technical equipment). For this reason, some have ceased to exist, even after several decades of operation. Dah Teatar, whose founders and leaders are Dijana Milošević and Jadranka Andjelić, has survived the longest, with the greatest local and international visibility. The greatest impact on their work has been intercultural theatre, particularly that with pronounced ritualistic foundations. By this I specifically mean Eugenio Barba's Odin Theatre, with whom Dah Teatar has enjoyed ongoing and intense collaboration, and who also took part in the Bitef Festival several times.

Recently, on the independent scene and even at institutional theatre houses where some of the members of these scenes work, different forms of 'devised theatre' are increasingly present, as well as works in which the notions of creative hierarchy and *professionalism* are deconstructed (viewed in the sense of a 'school' for a certain artistic profession). Thus, we have examples of performances created, but also performed, by playwrights and dramaturgs (Maja Pelević, Olga Dimitrijević, Dimitrije Kokanov) or productions in which directors, dramatic authors and visual artists contribute an equally as authors (Bojan Djordjević, Tanja Šljivar and Siniša Ilić). These productions often critically question the very institution of theatre, as well as the modes and condition of working in it. It is interesting that playwrights from this circle, prior to starting to create and perform their own performances, wrote plays (and still do) in which they deconstructed classic dramatic forms to a greater or lesser extent, corresponding to what German theorist Gerda Poschmann calls 'the no longer dramatic texts' for stage. The majority of authors of such contemporary texts are women: Milena Marković, Maja Pelević, Olga Dimitrijević, and Tanja Šljivar.

Indeed, it could be stated that the artistic emancipation of Serbian theatre over the last several decades, with the exception of contemporary dance, first occurred in writing for theatre. Also, as we have already pointed out and as can be easily concluded from this brief overview, women were at the forefront of these largely Bitef-inspired emancipatory efforts in Serbian theatre.

