

An Introduction to Macedonian-Slovenian Theatre Relations (1990–2015)

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The articles published in this joint issue of *Amfiteater* (Ljubljana) and *Ars Academica* (Skopje) have been developed during the two-year (2017–18) bilateral research project *Macedonian-Slovenian Theatre Relations (from 1990 until the Present)* carried out by the Faculty of Dramatic Art, Skopje and the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television of the University of Ljubljana (UL AGRFT). It was generously supported by the Slovenian Research Agency and the Macedonian Ministry of Education and Science. The main goal of the project was to determine, record and valorise the mutual cooperation of theatre artists from both countries. The research comprised collaborative practices in all main fields of performing arts (drama, opera and ballet/dance theatre), including visits from individuals and whole ensembles. The reception, criticism and important artistic achievements accomplished by these artists and art institutions were also studied by the Macedonian and Slovenian researchers involved in this project.¹

The final results of the project were presented at a conference organised by the Faculty of Dramatic Art in Skopje on 5 November 2018. It was the first academic conference focused entirely on Macedonian-Slovenian theatre relations in the last 25 years. It should be mentioned, however, that during that same period several other conferences devoted to bilateral (and partly also regional) cultural cooperation took place in Macedonia and Slovenia. If we mention only a few of them organised by the project partners of the research presented in this joint issue of *Amfiteater* and *Ars Academica*: the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Skopje held several international theatre conferences (*Balkan Theatre Sphere*, 2003; *Intercultural Theatre*, 2005; *Theatre and Identity*, 2006; *Theatre and Memory*, 2007), where theatre scholars from Slovenia took part among other active participants while the most recent international conference organised by the UL AGRFT was *Performing Arts, Migration, Politics: Slovenian Theatre as an Agent of Intercultural Exchange* (in the frame of the Maribor Theatre Festival, 2015) where Ana Stojanoska presented a paper on the topic of Macedonian-Slovenian theatre relations.²

1 Members of the Macedonian team: Hristina Cvetanoska, Sasho Dimoski, Dragana Miloshevski Popova, Ana Stojanoska (head of the team), Sonja Zdravkova Djeparoska; members of the Slovenian team: Zala Dobovšek, Aldo Milohnić (head of the team), Maja Šorli, Gašper Troha.

2 Ana Stojanoska. "Makedonsko-slovenske gledališke povezave" [Macedonian-Slovenian Theatre Relations]. In *Uprizoritvene umetnosti, migracije, politika: slovensko gledališče kot sooblikovalec medkulturnih izmenjav*, edited by Barbara Orel. UL FF and UL AGRFT, 2017, pp. 281–306.

Macedonia and Slovenia were a part of the same state for almost seventy years: firstly, in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (between WWI and WWII) and then in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (1945–91). Cultural collaborations and exchanges between Slovenia and Macedonia in the last 25 years have been generated from the relatively rich cultural connections established in the previous decades. Macedonian and Slovenian theatres have their own history of continuous relations; relations that are based on similar and close theatrical traditions and the permanent desire for cooperation. During the institutionalisation of national theatres within the same state apparatus, especially in the time before and after WWII, that meant deliberately linking theatre centres from all cities of the former common country. In the preceding period, however, these relations were kept alive thanks to the travelling theatre practices as well as the vision and dedication of some theatre enthusiasts. In the last decades of the previous century, the relationship between Macedonia and Slovenia on the theatre level was built mainly through mutual participation on different festivals and visits of respective artists from both countries.

Because of various limitations (in terms of time, finances and human resources), our research could only be a pilot project aiming to provide a basis for further, more complex and more detailed research on the topic. One of the most useful tools developed within this project for future researchers of Macedonian-Slovenian theatre relations is a digital database containing information on theatre artists, performances and institutions that have participated in the bilateral cooperation in the last 25 years.³ Although we have collected relevant data from different sources (such as the *Slovenian Theatre Annual* published by the Slovenian Theatre Institute, an early version of the Macedonian theatre database maintained by Faculty of Dramatic Art, Skopje, the archives and documentation of theatres, reliable Internet sources, etc.) and we have done our best to create as complete picture of this bilateral cooperation as possible, we are completely aware that the database is still incomplete and needs improvement. Therefore, we would be grateful to any institution or individual who might contribute corrections and/or additional data.

The data collected within the project was processed according to several methodological principles set up by our research group. The main division was between guest performances and visits (or collaborations) of individual artists. Guest performances were further divided into two subcategories: first, the performances from one country invited by theatres from other county as occasional guest practices, and second, the performances from one country taking part in the programmes of theatre festivals in the other country. Bilateral collaborations of individual artists were also divided into two subcategories: first, the artists on short (or occasional) visits, typically for taking part in respective theatre productions or for contributing plays, music, etc. (we call this group “guests” or “non-residents”), and

³ The database is accessible at the following link: www.fdu.ukim.edu.mk.

second, the artists originally coming from one country and staying for a considerably long period (many years) in the other country (we call them “residents”). These divisions into categories and subcategories were the most important methodological tools not only in the phase of data collecting but also in the phase of data analysis.

Although it may be incomplete in the present state of the project, the database allows us to draft at least preliminary statistics. The most important finding of the quantitative part of our research is the fact that Macedonian-Slovenian theatre exchange is significantly asymmetric in all categories and subcategories. As in Bronislaw Malinowski’s famous description of “*Kula*”, a traditional form of exchange from Trobriand Islands, where two kinds of artefacts are constantly travelling in opposite directions,⁴ in Macedonian-Slovenian theatre exchange, performances are mainly travelling from Slovenia to Macedonia while theatre artists are predominantly travelling from Macedonia to Slovenia. It is quite obvious if we compare the data collected in our database: in the observed period (1990–2015), 69 Slovenian productions participated in the Macedonian theatre festivals and only 33 Macedonian productions in the Slovenian theatre festivals (in addition, 13 Macedonian productions were invited by Slovenian theatres to perform as guest performances at their stages). On the other hand, Macedonian artists accomplished 227 individual collaborations (105 as “guests” and 122 as “residents”) or on average 8.4 collaborations per season, while their Slovenian colleagues participated in productions of Macedonian theatres only 52 times (all of them as “guests”) or on average 1.8 collaborations per season. The most common professions of Macedonian theatre artists regularly or occasionally working in Slovenian theatres are: among “guests”, the first three professions are director, music designer and opera singer; while among “residents”, the two most frequent professions are dancer and dramaturg. In the case of Slovenian theatre artists collaborating in Macedonian theatres, the three top professions among “guests” are playwright, director and dancer, while we could not detect any Slovenian “resident” in Macedonian theatres.

Zala Dobovšek and Sasho Dimoski, authors of the text on Macedonian-Slovenian exchange in the context of theatre festivals, utilised the quantitative methodological approach in analysing the statistical data. On the one hand, the authors analyse the presence of the Slovenian theatre productions at the various theatre festivals in Macedonia, and on the other, the presence of the Macedonian theatre productions and theatre artists at different theatre festivals in Slovenia. In the conclusion of the paper, they present the cumulative results of the bilateral research, emphasising the most frequent exchange habits through Macedonian and Slovenian theatre festivals in the last 25 years. Two festivals deserve to be highlighted in terms of presenting Macedonian theatre productions in Slovenia and vice versa: the Slovenian festival *Ex Ponto* and the Macedonian festival *MOT – Mlad otvoren teatar* (Youth Open Theatre). During the

⁴ Necklaces of red shell in one direction, bracelets of white shell in the opposite direction; see Bronislaw Malinowski. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge, 1932, p. 81.

almost two decades of its existence, *Ex Ponto* presented to the Slovenian audience a lot of different genres, artists, themes and formats of Macedonian theatre. Founded in 1975, MOT is the leading Macedonian festival profiled as a festival of experimental theatre forms and stage laboratories. A special phenomenon, analysed more in detail in Dobovšek's and Dimoski's article, is the constant presence of the Mladinsko Theatre (SMG – Slovensko mladinsko gledališče, meaning "Slovenian Youth Theatre") at MOT; in the observed period, MOT hosted 25 performances produced by the Mladinsko Theatre.

This impressive number of guest performances by the Mladinsko Theatre at MOT is also part of a wider topic elaborated in the text written by Sasho Dimoski, Ana Stojanoska and Hristina Cvetanoska. It is a phenomenological study analysing the individual factors of influence of the Slovenian theatre on the Macedonian theatre production. The main focus of the authors is on the influence of the aesthetics of the Mladinsko (especially through its continuous presence at MOT) and the influence of several contemporary Slovenian theatre directors to the poetics and aesthetics of the Macedonian theatre. A close research of the influence of Slovenian theatre on the trends in Macedonian theatre in the last three decades led the authors to the conclusion that the influence of many guest Slovenian theatre productions as well as the work of Slovenian directors in different Macedonian theatres has left considerable traces in the Macedonian theatre scene and significantly influenced its aesthetics.

In the period of its existence, the Yugoslav federation provided not only material support to professional theatre institutions, but also stimulated cultural collaboration among the federal republics. In their article on Macedonian-Slovenian relations in ballet and contemporary dance, Sonja Zdravkova Djeparoska and Aldo Milohnić explain that especially nonverbal forms of artistic expression, such as ballet and dance, were adequate communicators in a multinational and multilingual state as was the Socialist Yugoslavia. However, the processes of dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and the establishing of the independent states of Macedonia and Slovenia produced significant changes in the field of dance and opera theatre. The main characteristics of these changes were, on the one hand, a rapid diminishing of collaborations between national ballet and opera institutions, and on the other hand, a gradual increasing of cooperation between non-governmental organisations active in the creation, promotion and exchange of contemporary dance production. In the context of their article, Djeparoska and Milohnić also analyse the ratified agreements between Slovenia and Macedonia in the field of culture. The "Agreement on Cooperation in Education, Culture and Science between the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and the Government of the Republic of Slovenia," which was signed in 1993, provided an appropriate legal background for further normative acts that regulated concrete ways and forms of collaboration in culture. The main critique of the authors is that the level of intercultural exchange presupposed in these bilateral

agreements is rather modest and unambitious, especially in the field of dance where the exchange of folkloristic dance groups is explicitly stipulated while exchanges of ballet and contemporary dance performances are not mentioned at all.

Hristina Cvetanoska and Gašper Troha have labelled the sporadic presence of texts by Macedonian playwrights in the repertoires of Slovenian theatres and vice versa as “polite ignorance”. The exchange in the field of the dramatic text seems to be almost vanishing; in the period from 1990 till 2015, only six plays by Macedonian authors were staged in Slovenian theatres and eight plays by Slovenian ones in Macedonian theatres. Though at first sight it might seem to be a natural decline after the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, the authors think that it can be only partly the case. In their article, they analyse the reasons for a reciprocal ignorance and detachment for the recent, contemporary dramaturgy between these two countries. In their opinion, the reasons for this indifference are neither the scarce translation nor unsuitable motives and themes. Their analysis of the dramatic texts staged in Macedonia and Slovenia shows some similarities in the motives that inspired the authors and motivated the directors to stage particular texts. Their conclusion is that the mutual “polite ignorance” is probably the result of a more general turn of Slovenian and Macedonian cultural policies characterised by the decreasing of interest in historically and geographically closer cultural environments and the increasing of interest in the EU, the USA, etc.

These academic papers are complemented by interviews with two artists: the first, with Macedonian director Slobodan Unkovski who works frequently in Slovenian theatres, and the second, with Slovenian dancer and choreographer Dejan Srhoj who has a lot of experience in joint, collaborative choreographic projects and co-productions between Slovenian and Macedonian nongovernmental organisations, including regional dance platforms, such as the Nomad Dance Academy.

The bilateral research project *Macedonian-Slovenian Theatre Relations (from 1990 until the Present)* gives us an opportunity to explore the theatre ties between Macedonia and Slovenia in the recent decades and the impact of social, economic and political circumstances on collaborative theatre practices. A number of renowned directors, choreographers, performers, composers, set and costume designers as well as entire ensembles from Macedonia visit Slovenia and vice versa. Our papers published in *Amfiteater* and *Ars Academica* are focused on a theoretical overview of their activities, on an analysis of the mutual reception, impact on repertoires, manners, poetics and aesthetics of theatre practices as well as on the potential collaborations that might follow in both directions. We hope that our research will contribute to a better understanding of the past processes of exchange and stimulate a more intensive collaboration between Slovenian and Macedonian theatre artists and institutions in the future.