

The collection of the Slovenian Theatre Institute preserves the legacy of actor, director and set designer Valo Bratina (1887-1954) with an extensive map of his architectural plans and sketches for the construction of workers' and amateur theatres and stages in Ljubljana and Kočevje as well as in the Slovenian countryside. The map also contains some scenic drafts for his amateur performances.

His designs include the renovation or redevelopment of the stages of *Sokolski dom* in Zagorje, *Enotni sindikati* in Ljubljana, *Sindikalni oder* in Trbovlje, *Šeškov dom* in Kočevje, as well as the designs for the façade and stage of *Dom kulture* in Hrastnik and the architectural project for the entire building, hall and stage of the *Društveni dom* in Štore. Since the *Ljudska prosveta* set forth the building standards for stages only in 1951, he had to develop some of his own solutions. He chose the form for the new amateur stages leaning on historical, naturalistic box stage with flats, which he based on his own proportions using some stage examples from literature. This article introduces the unknown period of Valo Bratina's work for the workers' and amateur stages in Slovenia from the end of World War II until his death in 1954.

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# Valo Bratina: Architectural and Scenographic Work on the People's and Workers' Stages (Hrastnik, Zagorje, Trbovlje, Kočevje, Štore, Duplica, Ljubljana (Moste, Bežigrad))

Actor, director and stage designer Valo Bratina (1887–1954) worked within the network of amateur associations after his retirement (1946). The collection of the Slovenian Theatre Institute keeps an extensive portfolio of his architectural plans and sketches for the construction of workers' and amateur theatre halls and stages in Ljubljana and Kočevje as well as some in the countryside. Likewise, several of his stage design concepts for amateur productions have been preserved. The last preserved plan is dated 17 June 1954, just before his death. The extensive material was thus far unknown and unresearched. Thus, it was first necessary to start with the basic identification of each sketch, floor plan and connections to the already identified and catalogued material from the same portfolio and with the records in the sources while connecting and comparing them to the built and already existing theatre buildings.

After World War II, the Yugoslav politics encouraged amateur activity in education, theatre and culture. Strengthening the culture among workers was even seen as an important vehicle for economic and political success. Therefore, all larger towns in Slovenia established educational boards that had the task of renovating demolished and ravaged cultural homes, as well as establishing drama, choral and other cultural groups and organising additional education for youth. The first congress of the Ljudska prosveta Slovenije (People's Education and Culture Society of Slovenia) was in March 1947, which coincided with the dates of the first plans for the renovation of stages and halls in Bratina's preserved portfolio. His architectural theatre work after World War II was thus a part of these new cultural-political guidelines.

As a renowned theatre artist, Bratina became a key personality in the renovation of countryside stages. We must emphasise that he got requests for constructions, but without any set standards. He had to develop and establish them himself. Ljudska prosveta, which was responsible for that task, only established them in 1951. The stages and building that he worked on were in a deplorable state. And some of them had to be rebuilt.

Among the studied plans, the ones that stand out are the renovation, or remodelling, of the stage in Sokolski dom (Sokol Home) in Zagorje, the stage of Enotni sindikati

(United Syndicates) in Ljubljana, Sindikalni oder (Union Stage) in Trbovlje, the stage in *Šeškov dom* (Šeško's Home) in Kočevje, the plan for the façade and stage of the Dom kulture (Culture Home) in Hrastnik and the architectural project for the entire building, hall and stage of the Društveni dom (Association Home) in Štore.

As it appears, Bratina appears to have created the basic standards for the planning of new and renovated stages – a blueprint which he then adjusted to the proportions of each hall and existing stage. The foundations for the amateur stages were created following a single concept: after reviewing the status quo, he prepared the plans of the existing stage or hall, created the proposals for the new design and prepared the lists and orders for stage equipment, set elements, technical equipment and props.

He selected the basic shape of a naturalist, box stage with wings and a cyclorama, which he designed according to the proportions he developed based on European examples. He suggested the basic stage equipment: the main curtain; flats (left and right) on hinges; a supplementary curtain (which also functioned as a teaser curtain and could be pulled up); neutral drapery that could be pulled left or right or pulled up; a movable cyclorama (that could move back and forth); and a gallery. In addition to that, [he also created] detailed plans for installing the main curtain and the circular neutral drapery, spotlights and all smaller elements of stage equipment (pillars, hinges for wings and bolts). Likewise, he created a detailed list of the most basic settings or flats that needed to be made for each renovated or new stage. He recorded the different measurements of the stages into a special list and compared them to the more important international and Slovenian stages, for example, the Opera in Paris or the National Theatre in Ljubljana. Because of the meagre financial situation, unavailable materials and stage dimensions, he simplified and unified certain stage elements. Likewise, he standardised some basic settings for folk plays, which he even designed himself: a peasant room with a window and a flower on the shelf (2 flats); a hunter's room with an arched door (2 flats); a bourgeois salon (2 flats); another bourgeois room with a door stage left and with a red curtain on the curtain rod on it (2 bare flats); a façade of a peasant house, with an arched door (2 flats); a shack with a window and a carnation stage left and a door stage right (2 flats); a modern villa with a round window stage right and a door (2 flats). These few settings, which were based on naturalistic scenography, should thus suffice for all the productions. His decision for naturalism was at that time of course already outdated, but obviously still acceptable for amateur stages. Professional theatres in Slovenia had already started letting go of naturalist scenography in the 1930s. After World War II, in accordance with the new social realism in art, the so-called plastic (three-dimensional) scenography was proposed, so that the buildings and settings onstage were as realistic as possible. Among his most extensive projects are the renovation of the façade and stage of the Culture Home in Hrastnik and the construction of a new Association Home in Štore, in

which he also acted as the architect and not just as a consultant for the renovation of old stages. For the building in Hrastnik, he devised a semicircular colonnade façade. He named the nine columns after the Muses from antiquity, the goddesses of arts and sciences. Because of the high theatre tower and a long rectangular core of the building, the exterior of the building in Štore resembled a church construction. The stages of both structures were conceived according to the previously described criteria, with the obligatory semicircular cyclorama.

Bratina was thus an important creator of the design of the Slovenian amateur theatre stages as well as productions in the first decade after World War II. He came to be known not only as a meticulous planner and constructor but, in the post-war time when professional stages preferred the “plastic” scenography, also as a slightly conservative creator of stage spaces and scenography. His model was a box stage with flats, which he used in his time as a director and stage designer between the two wars, although our professional stages started leaving it behind as early as the 1930s and the new era leaned towards constructing three-dimensional and abstract settings.

The preserved material testifies in detail about Bratina’s extensive work on amateur stages after World War II and presents a new view of his rich theatre opus which began in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Translated by Barbara Skubic*