

The article deals with relations between the institutional-repertory theatre scene and experimental, alternative, and later non-institutional performing arts, often related to as "amateur and dilettante" by the "drama theatre" critics. It explores how, at the turn of the 1960s to the 1970s, a specific form of student experimental theatres emerged in Slovenia in interaction with the student and civil movements and alternative culture (Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre, Pekarna (Bakery) Theatre, Vlado Šav and Vetrnica (Windmill)). The new movement consciously decided to exclude classical theatre actors from its circle and to replace them with non-professionally-trained staff. Thus, the phenomenon of student experimental theatre blurred the boundaries between artistic genres, high and low cultures, professional and non-professional actors. It created a new, liberated performative territory, from which the alternative theatre and culture of the 1980s and the non-institutional performing arts scene of the 1990s emerged. The article aims to establish to what extent the theory and practice of American theatre avant-garde (Richard Schechner, The Performance Group, etc.) as well as the theatre of Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski influenced these movements.

Keywords: experimental theatre, student theatre, performance, Pekarna Theatre, Pupilija Ferkeverk

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Between Seduction and Suspicion: Experimental, Amateur and Professional Theatre¹

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1. The text-to-body turn

This article deals with the opposing but at times very constructive and creative relations between the institutional-repertory theatre scene and experimental, alternative, and later, non-institutional performing arts, often referred to as “amateur and dilettante” by the “drama theatre” critics. We will look into the experimental theatres and performance groups at the turn of the 1960s to the 1970s, that is, during the performative turn from textual to body culture, such as the Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre, the Pekarna (Bakery) Theatre, Vlado Šav and the group Vetrnica (Windmill). In our investigation, we will ask how and why these groups consciously decided to exclude classical theatre actors from their circle and replace them with non-professional staff with no formal theatre education. How and to what extent did the theory and practice of American theatre avant-gardists, for example, Richard Schechner and The Performance Group, as well as the theatre of Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski and others influence these movements?

Let us begin with a quote by Theodor W. Adorno from almost 50 years ago. It aptly sums up the performative turn in Slovenia and the fundamental reevaluation and restructuring of theatre and performing arts in general: “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, [...] not even its right to exist” (Adorno 1). This trait also characterises the phenomenon of the neo-avant-garde performative turn that was so clearly identified by Venó Taufer, one of the key figures of the first experimental wave of the Oder 57 (Stage 57) theatre and the critical generation, in his review of the staging of Rudi Šeligo’s short novel, *Naj te z listjem posujem* (Let Me Cover You with Leaves), directed by Lado Kralj:

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The Pekarna Theatre has created a distinct and recognisable profile of theatre which could be designated as an idiosyncratic type of ritual theatre in search of some basic theatre signs or acting and mise-en-scène expressions of such signs of human existential practice (Taufel 154–5)².

This new experimental theatre practised by various groups is what succeeded in overwhelming Yugoslav festivals of alternative and student theatre. It became synonymous with the resilience and endurance of small theatre groups which proliferated during the 1970s and started to present an alternative to the so-called professional repertory drama theatre with formally educated actors. The *Vjesnik* newspaper from Zagreb even promoted the new generation by stating that the “theatre guerilla” is gaining the upper hand against the flagship “theatre cavalry” (“Kazališna” n.p.).

In his programme of the Pekarna Theatre, Lado Kralj highlighted its origin in the tradition of Slovenian experimental theatres, particularly the Oder 57, the Experimental Theatre and the Ad hoc Theatre. But he also emphasised that Pekarna was a “class theatre” and as such looking for its own means of expression, particularly in participatory methods, a special psycho-physical acting training, emphasising theatre as ritual, and the group (today we would say participatory) creation of the performance. Such class theatre represented the aesthetic action of one particular social strata – the at the time in Slovenia still self-unaware subculture. He was not interested in experimental or avant-garde theatre, which, in his opinion, imagined itself to “aspire to be better and more progressive than traditional theatre” (Kralj, “Zanima me razredno gledališče” 21). Rather, he was interested in a new type of theatre which would no longer be mere theatre, but an aesthetic revolution or “aesthetic action, as ritual, as speaking the unspeakable” (Ibid.).

Here the process was more important than the final product, an experiment “about the essence of acting and human impersonation, about relationships between the physical and the psychical” (Kralj, “Hipijevsko” n.p.). At first, critics mostly failed to understand this innovation; they viewed it as amateur and student theatre. Pekarna’s actors themselves, however, were well-aware of this new relationship between the physical and the psychical. As one of its noted performers, the “non-professional” actor Zdenko Kodrič – Koči notes:

The Pekarna Theatre defied the theatre mastodons with mere peanuts from the cultural community, in the spirit of Stanislavski, Grotowski and Brook it restarted the theatre wheel of history which politicians so violently stopped with Oder 57. [...] This Slovenian theatre featured an original physiognomy, superb actors and directors, ushers, musicians, stage-designers and audience (Slana 27).

² All translations of quotes from sources in Slovenian are by Jaka Andrej Vojavec.

Cognisant of the European and American frameworks of such research and experiments, the Pekarna Theatre tried to connect it to the situation in socialist Slovenia: “To find and define a home ground, to refresh it, reshape it according to the needs of our audiences and social space, to change it or maybe even reject part of it” (Lado Kralj on the Pekarna Theatre, quoted in Andres 112).

The Pekarna Theatre realised that it needed to establish a daring dialogue with the Polish (Grotowski, Kantor) and American theatre avant-garde (Schechner, Chaikin ...). Kralj mentions this in Ivo Svetina’s book on the Pekarna Theatre:

Richard Schechner, my mentor, stripped the halo of religious rapture off Grotowski and added elements of absurdist theatre as well as irony and grotesque, topped with anthropological research of tribal culture in New Guinea and Australia and bizarre aspects of Americana [...] And what I’ve learned from Schechner and later adapted by myself, I brought to Slovenia, where Ivo Svetina and I founded the Pekarna Theatre (Svetina, *Gledališče Pekarna ...* n.p.).

The quotes above demonstrate that the Pekarna Theatre was founded in dialogue with diverse phenomena of contemporary performative practices at the intersection of East and West, socialism and capitalism. It was a dialogue that shifted the boundaries of the reception and interpretation of contemporary art in experimental and student theatres at the time, which also aided in breaking down the hierarchy and dichotomy between high culture and pop culture.

2. Student, amateur, professional

In his comments on the IV International Student Theatre Festival in Zagreb in 1964, Kralj presented a notable classification of theatre. In it, he established a separate category of student theatre, comparing it to professional repertory theatre on the one hand, and amateur or dilettante theatre on the other. Thus, he noted, at the festival “there gathered a very diverse company of students among which there were only two groups from actual theatre schools, while the majority of groups were made up of enthusiasts joined by a shared desire to express themselves despite different study courses or professional inclinations” (Kralj, “Mednarodni festival ...” 1238). He proceeded to highlight the specifics of student theatre as experimental theatre. Since his classification and argumentation is closely connected to our topic, let us quote it at length:

It is a very special layer of acting, different from both professional and amateur performers: the professional actor is characterised by the attachment to one’s work which, like any other kind of work, is an inevitable social necessity as well as means of self-realisation. In the professional actor who has not been professionalised by one’s

own occupation, there is a kind of symbiosis of some external, objective, and internal, psychological, necessity. Stuck between the rock and the hard place of these two necessities, one ideally searches for a third dimension: one's own social correlation, a correspondence to the social being. Meanwhile, the amateur actor is characterised mostly by the social optionality of one's work: one indulges in an educational activity which, as beneficial and necessary as it might be, is however not caused by an existential want for approaching the social being, but rather the psychological want of the most appropriate kind of self-realisation in one's leisure time. Most often, this is determined by efforts to formally approximate true, professional theatre expression. – Student theatres, however, belong to that larger group of theatres which, for want of a better term, I will dub experimental (Ibid. 1238–1239).

Kralj follows this up with an insight that was downright revolutionary for a time when the professionalisation or rather Europeanisation of the acting and other theatre professions barely finished in Slovenia and Yugoslavia:

The student and non-student experimental theatres allow both professional and non-professional theatre people to mix. They are characterised by a kind of continuous experimentation that affects not only their manner of stage expression and selection of the repertoire but also the ensemble itself: by experimenting with acting they are constantly testing their attitudes towards social reflection and attempt to creatively affect it. Characteristic of these occasional and existential interest groups is an accomplished conception of the role of theatre in society. They do not perceive theatre merely as a profession or means of self-realisation but as an inalienable part of their immediate presence in society, through which they attempt to reach some kind of active correspondence with society. To them, professional theatre does not represent a model to which they liminally aspire; rather, their notion of theatre often even contradicts the conventional one (Ibid. 1239).

According to Kralj, student theatre is thus equal to experimental theatre. Experimental theatre introduces that which, in an article on the social phenomenon of experimental theatre based on the Slovenian experience, Peter Božič describes as “completely new principles of horizontal dramaturgy with a different sensibility/awareness of time”. He also talks about conceptual or participatory theatre “which represents a consistent approximation to the ideal of self-management, author, director, costume designer, technician etc.” (320).

Lado Kralj's programme was but the tip of the iceberg of the performative turn that introduced architectonic shifts to the understanding of the professional-student-amateur triad. This transformation demonstrated that there was nothing self-evident in art, not even the division of actors into drama (matrix), student (experimental, non-matrix) and amateur (spontaneous non-professionals). In the survey on the

“Slovenian theatre situation (Slovenska gledališka situacija)”, carried out by the journal *Sodobnost* in 1969, Kralj points out (as if addressing the current situation) that it was about “seeking out and defining ‘social minorities’ and ‘social majority’ and enabling each one appropriate affirmation since only such a situation allows for radically new solutions surpassing the level of personal quarrel and exhausting running in circles” (Kermauner 593).

Kralj’s argumentation, which, to a large extent, is still relevant even today, goes as follows. Inside any developed theatre landscape, both experimental and national-repertory theatres need a clearly demarcated area of activity. The former are dedicated to “experiments in the area of performance, acting, the idea of theatre, the dismantling or deconstruction of the only Slovenian theatre form – the Burgtheater adaptation of Stanislavski – and replacing it with new, unattested, experimentation with mixed media, the radicalisation of gesture, word, stage technique, etc.” (Ibid.).

Thus, in Kralj’s opinion, experimental theatre enters the scene at the point where “central theatres are unable to risk so much because of their special institutional conception” (Ibid.). However, the central theatre situated at the very centre of the cultural and theatre semiosphere also has the function of absorbing the experiment into its logic of functioning, which is in its nature primarily informative and aimed at representing the nation. Both types of theatre have their respective logic and sense. However, they are still situated in the logic of the thematisation and radicalisation of the concept of European bourgeois theatre: “To establish a normal correlation between the institutional and experimental theatre” (Ibid.).

3. Šav’s open theatre of active culture

Besides Lado Kralj, Vlado Šav also argued for a complete departure from the bourgeois and repertory model at the turn of the 1960s to the 1970s. Šav, who graduated in drama acting in 1970 from the Academy for Theatre, Radio, Film and Television in Ljubljana, successfully entered the selection for a six-month specialisation at Jerzy Grotowski’s Acting Institute at Teatr Laboratorium in Wrocław, Poland in 1973. As early as September 1973, mere months after returning from Poland, Šav founded the group *Vetrnica* and started gradually developing various (existential and performative) praxes of active culture.

Šav introduced the ideology of primitivism derived from Grotowski and Schechner (Innes 1–5) which, similarly to Kralj and Grotowski, he built on an alternative scale of values concerning contemporary culture and society, while at the same time emphasising a return to nature and the fellow human being, from intellect to body and

instinct. More emphatically than Kralj, who, in his own words, dealt in the Pekarna Theatre with Slovenian pathology and schizophrenic society, Šav declared a return to the roots, the origins, and “anti-materialism directed towards spirituality (interest in religion and other spiritual practices of non-European cultures, experimenting with techniques of reaching altered states of consciousness, an inclination for founding ritual communities and blurring the boundary between performers and spectators), and belief in the transformative, or rather therapeutic force of ritual (self-)representation” (Schuller 400).

After featuring in a number of roles at the Koper City Stage (Mestni oder Koper, 1964–1968) during his studies, in the early 1970s, Šav founded and headed the experimental theatre group *Beli krog* (White Circle) which announced the abolition of the distinction between professional and amateur, acting and not-acting, theatre and ritual. This activity represented a kind of introduction into Šav’s para-theatre, or rather, an active culture. As the critic Janez Povše pointed out in the magazine *Mladina* following the group’s 1970 performance in Ljubljana, the group “follows the example of The Living Theatre, as well as the laboratory-style, introspective acting expression of Grotowski”, while the performance “presented its attitude towards the world which might seem a bit too simplistic, lacking in problematisation and critique”, but nevertheless “a promising start of successfully posited work in the formal as well as the specifically-expressive sense ...” (Povše 20–21). The performance *Pot* (The Path) was placed on a meadow, performers and spectators were separated merely by a white chalk circle, it emphasised performative rituality, an autopoietic feedback loop between performers and spectators which formed through physical and vocal actions by the performers ... who were not acting out roles, but rather attempted to express who they were by using archetypes.

In the spring of 1974, Šav and the group *Veternica*³ organised a special performative event modelled after Grotowski, which he entitled *Srečanje* (The Meeting). It was conceptualised as “the spontaneous improvisation of individuals who endeavoured to involve everyone present in unified action through their expressive strength” (Šav 4):

This can hardly be called a play since members of the group do not represent anything, rather they are who they are. It is something different, something that still lacks a name. We make use of the terms: confrontation, soirée, meeting. [...] This isn’t theatre in the traditional nor in the modern sense, but something utterly new, singular [...] a meeting between a visitor and the group, a meeting of certain people in space, close contact between them, a moment of relaxation, a moment when perfect strangers join in that which is most beautiful and intimate to humans. It is a psychological and physical

³ The group was founded in September 1973 in Ljubljana as part of the student cultural association Forum. It was active from 1973 until 1981. Its members included Vesna Dvornik, Milan Kristan, Jani Osojnik, Slavica Rukavina, Vlado Šav, Zdena Virant and Andrej Žumer. The group was also active internationally, touring in Europe and to Israel and Canada.

activity shared by everyone present. Each member of the group takes on this mission; they attempt to create such moments, to discover that most profound in themselves and to pull everyone present into this experience of the self, thus triggering a similar experience in them as well. To meet with the Other as human to human (“Študentsko gledališče Vetrnica” 20).

Spectators in the Vetrnica theatre (to borrow the words of Erika Fischer-Lichte) thus become “fellow actors who create the performance by participating in the play, that is, through their physical presence, their perception and their reactions. This happens as the result of interaction between actors and spectators” (47).

4. Pupilija Ferkeverk and Dušan Jovanović

At this point let us indulge in a brief flashback to the time when Pupilija Ferkeverk performed in Zagreb in 1970. To quote the presentation, or rather, mini-manifesto of the group published in the student newspaper *Studentski list* announcing the performance *Pupilja, papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki* (Pupilja, papa Pupilo and the Pupilceks) in Zagreb:

We want to destroy the basic characteristics of traditional and some avant-garde theatres, which is the illusion of life to which theatre has always been subservient. The performance is no longer a play, a copy, or enactment of life, but rather a total and all-encompassing reality [...]. Performers are no longer actors [...], the actor is on equal terms with the spectator, while the performers through their presence create a concrete social [?] environment [...]. The Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre is an experimental, non-literary, open and living theatre (“Gledališče Pupilije Ferkeverk”).

Pupilija substituted the theatre performance with an event – an action. Its protagonists were absolved from taking on the roles of somebody else. The actor, or rather protagonist of the theatre event, thus became “an authentic and physical figure. [...] There is no more pretence onstage, nothing is feigned, everything is happening for real, and it really happens. [...] The actors’ means are adapted to this end, so they can use them in order to really function, as they really cause blood to flow. The blood actually flows onstage” (Toporišič 230). Pupilija established the student-experimental theatre with non-professional actors who never intended to persuade the audience that they were anyone else but themselves. The quality no longer consisted of acting, but of not-acting (in the sense of Michael Kirby’s theory). Professionalism and drama were replaced by non-professionalism and non-drama, the actor was replaced by a performer. This theatre no longer functioned as a hierarchical community inside a drama or repertory theatre, but rather as a “tribe”, of which Dušan Jovanović, who

in many ways oriented Pupilija, wrote: "I became a fan of the tribe. For a long time afterwards, I missed the tribe, a community where I could feel at home" (92). Like Kralj, Jovanović perceived Pupilija as an aesthetic, political reaction to the deceptive harmony of the society and its official art:

Pupilija was not art with a capital A. According to professional standards, it was almost dilettante. But it contained the liberating power of parody, ritual sacredness and a thirst for unlimited freedom. [...] Pupilija had an unusual power; it had the culture of authenticity typical of tribal communities (Ibid. 91).

The similarities with the ideas of Vetrnica, Pekarna and other neo-avant-garde groups, including the OHO group, are evident. Lado Kralj's reflections on the student theatre festival in Zagreb and later on the Pekarna Theatre and the neo-avant-garde movements in the 1970s, the mini-manifesto of the Pupilija Ferkeverk group, Tomaž Kralj's short programme notes, and Vlado Šav's reflections on his group Vetrnica all point to the fact that there was a specific form of student experimental theatres that emerged in Slovenia at the turn of the 1960s to the 1970s in interaction with the student and civil movements and alternative culture. These theatres and collectives paved the way for the non-institutional scene. It was Peter Božič who, in the article for the magazine *Pozorište*, aptly described its aesthetic diversity, radicality and consistency:

There are many performances, their array spanning from ritual theatre to the so-called "upgraded realism", which introduced utterly new principles of horizontal dramaturgy with a different sensibility/awareness of time which in this dramaturgy substitutes verticality. [...] Members of this company are neither better nor smarter than the next man; they merely have infinitely more opportunities to experiment in their own social environment, representing a consistent approximation to the ideal of self-management, author, director, costume designer, technician, etc. (320).

These theatres turned their focus towards a specific kind of "spirituality" or ritual presence of someone not acting, but rather being in reality. Kralj's Pekarna and Šav's Vetrnica, as well as the Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre before them, all proceed from the postulates of Artaud's theatre, from his realisation that theatre, which made use of Western psychology's "obsession with the defined word which says everything", led to "the withering of words" (Artaud 118). "I am adding another language to the spoken language, and I am trying to restore to the language of speech its old magic (...) for its mysterious possibilities have been forgotten" (Ibid. 111). This way, they reached the special state which Rudi Šeligo so aptly named "immediate presence". This state called not only for the emotional states that were well-acted (presented) but, first and foremost, that were really present.

Lado Kralj who, besides Šav, most coherently developed this new theatre and

performance also introduced a special acting-performing method through which in the performance *Potohodec* (Pathwalker) and later he searched for a type of acting that would stem from the actor's very blood, body, biology, situation. This makes his exclamation *Be alive!* written at the end of the manifesto published in the bulletin of the student theatre festival IFSK (Internacionalni festival studentskih kazališta) so much more meaningful.

5. New theatre for a new age and a new spectator

Lado Kralj, Vlado Šav, Dušan Jovanović and Tomaž Kralj, each in their own right, introduced the systems of neo-avant-garde procedures into Slovenian performative practices as derived and developed mostly after Jerzy Grotowski and Richard Schechner. Schechner's ritualism was especially evident in the first three performances by the Pekarna Theatre: Dane Zajc's *Pathwalker* directed by Lado Kralj (1972), *Gilgamesh* directed by Ivo Svetina (1972) and Rudi Šeligo's *Let Me Cover You with Leaves* directed by Lado Kralj (1973), while Grotowski's influence was felt in the performances and actions of the Vetrnica group in the 1970s: *The Meeting* (1974), *Soočanje* (The Confrontation, 1974), *Kopanje* (Bathing, 1975) and the community in Petkovci (1976–1980). Characteristic of all these authors and groups was collective creation in which the end product (that is, the performance) was not the main goal; rather, they abided by a special kind of process, as well as the interaction of all participants.

Ivo Svetina defined this new type of actor, or rather performer, counting on and proceeding from the autopoietic feedback loop as follows:

All performers were becoming agents, a new type of actors who were no longer based on "enacting" individual drama characters, but rather used their individual energy and presence, gesture and spoken word to give a new image to poems as well as their authors (Svetina, "Prispevek za zgodovino ..." 41).

As Barbara Orel notices (while speaking of Pupilija Ferkeverk), the series of performances and performative procedures triggered by the theatre in the performative turn, which in essence was still the student-experimental theatre as defined by Lado Kralj in his notes on the Zagreb festival in the 1960s, ought to be understood as the defining moment in Slovenian theatre history when the "transition to performance" took place. The reason is that they provided a "fascinating confrontation with reality" in their descent from literature to immediate stage presentation:

The assemblage of scenes, from the introductory urban ritual – watching the TV evening news and thus the world as it appears in the moment of performing, to the concluding

ritual of slaughtering the chicken, was founded in a dedicated and ruthless exploration of the real (Orel "Pupilija..." 196).

To summarise: As demonstrated in the cases of Pupilija, Pekarna and Vetrnica, there is no doubt that the student-experimental theatre that blurred the boundaries between artistic genres, high and low culture, professional and non-professional actors, was derived from novel theories of art and culture as argued for by, for example, Lado and Tomaž Kralj and Taras Kermauner, who built on Artaud, the American theatre avant-garde, Grotowski and Schechner. By breaking down boundaries and taboos, this theatre created a new, liberated performative territory, from which the alternative theatre and culture of the 1980s and the non-institutional performing arts scene of the 1990s emerged, as well as, to a certain degree, today's post-repertory theatre in its more daring forms. Thus, we can confirm the hypothesis suggested by Rok Andres that Lado Kralj's programme (as well as those of Vlado Šav, Dušan Jovanović and Tomaž Kralj) to a major extent "corresponded to the current theatre moment, for what else are audience participation, specialised psycho-physical training of actors, ritual elements of theatre, team (group) creation of performances, new possibilities offered by the visual and audio elements of performance, but elements of contemporary (dare we say, postdramatic) theatre?" (Andres 26).

Meanwhile, all avant-garde groups at the turn of the 1960s to the 1970s ought to be understood in connection to the hippie culture, its ludic elements, the student and civil movements such as the new-left movements, the critique of culture (and politics) of their fathers and to new art practices. Miško Šuvaković thus concludes that this means "there are no longer any clear stipulations of what theatre, literature, visual arts and film actually is". Thus, theatre became a thing of the tribe, which set off to discover "its sociality and presented it through art" (Tanko 1585). In the avant-garde student theatre, all of these genres and tactics entered into an intensive mutual dialogue and began creating in an experimental, sometimes excessive, way. It was this generation's need to redefine its artistic and social role which undoubtedly led to the abolishment of the hierarchy between the repertory and the experimental, the professional-drama and the amateur-student theatre.

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