

The article explores amateur theatre in Slovenia and developments in this field after 1991. Although significant social and political changes took place in 1991, the analysis shows that the system of state financing and local community support for amateur theatre remains virtually the same as established in the period between 1945 and 1991. The same goes for educational and professional support of amateur theatre and amateur culture as a whole. The recent empirical analysis of amateur culture carried out by the Union of Cultural Societies of Slovenia (2019) shows that the most significant shift can be detected in the nature of the functioning of amateur theatre. While amateur culture used to allow professional artists the opportunity to try out and develop alternative theatre practices as well as to express dissident ideas, this is no longer the case. After 1991, such practices mostly moved over to the strong NGO sector, which is funded directly by the state and offers a space in which alternative theatre can develop.

Keywords: amateur theatre, amateur culture, cultural policy, alternative theatre, financing of culture

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The Situation and Image of Contemporary Amateur Theatre in Slovenia¹

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Introduction

The article is based on research which is part of the comparative research project of STEP (Project on European Theatre Systems) that embarked on an empirical review of European amateur theatre in 2018. In Slovenia, the amateur theatre has been relatively under-researched. Thus, with the aid of the Republic of Slovenia Public Fund for Cultural Activities (JSKD), we decided to map out the field with a survey addressed to every theatre group that participated at any of the theatre festivals organised by JSKD in 2019. The survey was coordinated with other STEP members to allow for the comparison of amateur theatres in different European states.

Unfortunately, our survey received hardly any responses. For a while, it appeared as though we would not be able to conduct the research at all. Later, it turned out that this was because the Union of Cultural Societies of Slovenia conducted an almost identical poll in 2019. In their questionnaire, they posed virtually the same questions. While their aim was to “find out the needs and determine priorities in the areas of networking and advocacy for the area of amateur culture based on an analysis of the state of finances, human resources and venue capacities of cultural societies; the area of artistic mentorship; advocacy; counselling and informing; networking and collaboration with associate organisations” (4), we were able to use their results for our research, that is, for mapping the field of amateur culture in Slovenia. They received 517 completed questionnaires, which represents 16% of all associations active in the field of amateur culture. Of those 517, 24.8% are active in theatre and puppetry, while 3.1% are active in contemporary dance. Thus, a relatively higher percentage of associations dealing with performative arts responded to the survey, as, according to the Ministry of Culture data for 2012, only 13% of all associations are active in this field. Thus, it is safe to assume the results to be representative of the current state-of-affairs in amateur culture and especially amateur theatre.

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There is a long tradition of amateur theatre in Slovenia, reaching back to the 18th century and the circle of Žiga Zois. An important stepping stone in the professionalisation of Slovenian theatre also began in 1867 with the founding of the Dramatic Society (Dramatično društvo), which was, in fact, an amateur theatre. Much later, various societies hosted alternative theatre (e.g., the Oder 57 (Stage 57) group, Glej Experimental Theatre, the Pekarna (Bakery) Theatre) looking for new ways of expression and playing a key role in stimulating Slovenian playwrights. In 1991, Slovenia gained independence, bringing about radical social change which also included changes in the area of amateur culture and, more specifically, amateur theatre.

So what is the landscape of amateur theatre like today? How is it financed? How are its creators perceived? What is their motivation? What are the biggest challenges they face?

We will look for answers to these questions through a short introduction of amateur culture in Slovenia based on the recent empirical analysis of amateur culture (Union of Cultural Societies, 2019). But first let us give a brief review of amateur theatre following World War II since that period saw the establishment of the cultural system which, with certain modifications, endures to these days.

Amateur theatre and amateur culture after 1945

Immediately following World War II, culture became one of the primary instruments of propaganda of the new ideology. The principle cultural-political goals during the first seven-year period, which was still strongly modelled upon the example of the Soviet Union, were as follows: 1) to raise the overall level of culture of the population; 2) to facilitate the accessibility of culture to a wide range of people; 3) to enhance socio-political consciousness, that is, the indoctrination of masses into the new social order. Goal number 2 appears the most interesting, as it stipulated mass cultural production and consumption. The state undertook widespread infrastructural projects, building local cultural centres, theatre venues, libraries, etc., and establishing cultural societies (Cf. Čopič).

Until 1947, amateur culture was under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. In 1947, a special organisation, the Ljudska prosveta (People's Education and Cultural Society), was founded to further develop this area. The latter continued establishing union cultural societies, youth cultural societies and cultural-educational societies (Gabrič 565–567). The name of the organisation changed several times until in 1977 it became the Zveza kulturnih organizacij Slovenije (Association of Cultural Organizations of Slovenia). It had a widespread network of local branches and oversaw all cultural activities throughout the state. It organised numerous workshops

and trainings for members as well as meetings on different levels, thus overseeing the quality and proliferation of amateur culture.

After Slovenia gained independence, the state founded the Javni sklad Republike Slovenije za kulturne dejavnosti – JSKD (Republic of Slovenia Public Fund for Cultural Activities) in 1996 and delegated to it the execution of the national cultural programme in the field of amateur cultural activity. The Association of Cultural Organizations was renamed to the Zveza kulturnih društev Slovenije – ZKDS (Union of Cultural Societies of Slovenia) representing the interests of its members.

The Republic of Slovenia Public Fund for Cultural Activities is a well-established organisation with 59 local branches covering all of Slovenia as well as Slovenians abroad, while also establishing international connections. As they describe their own functioning, the JSKD “organises cultural and educational activities, publishes magazines and other publications, assists cultural societies and their associates in Slovenia and abroad with expert and organisational support” (*Javni sklad*). It oversees cultural activities across the state and offers professional and educational support to amateur culture, just like the Union of Cultural Organizations did earlier.

Thus, it is no wonder that Slovenian amateur culture is well developed, including amateur theatre. In 2011, the then-director of the JSKD Igor Teršar briefly presented amateur theatre in his introduction to the book on the Linhart Meeting (Linhartovo srečanje), the biggest and most important festival of amateur theatre groups in Slovenia.

Amateur theatre today makes up for an important part of theatre production in Slovenian culture. As a total art form [...] it connects over 450 theatre groups of adults who each year create approx. 150 theatre pieces. [...] If we add to that more than 600 children’s and 100 youth theatre groups [...] we can grasp the impact of theatre on our society in the cultural education and formation of our youth, in socialisation and establishing social bonds, as well as in preserving the cultural heritage on the one hand and following contemporary theatre on the other one (Šmalc 3).

The situation remains similar to this day. Thus, in 2019, 524 groups² applied to different festivals organised by the JSKD (267 applied to the Meeting of Children’s theatre groups of Slovenia; 58 to Festival Vizije – the festival of youth groups of Slovenia; 122 to the Linhart Meeting – the festival of theatre groups for adults; 77 to the meeting of puppet theatre groups of Slovenia). The applied performances alone featured 6634 actors, actresses and puppeteers, to which we must also add all other members of production teams, as well as everyone else who otherwise participates in these groups but was not involved with the performances which applied for the festivals. This means we are dealing with a large number of persons participating in theatre.

² This data was gained from an interview with Matjaž Šmalc, the expert co-worker for theatre at the JSKD.

Amateur culture is mostly financed by the state through the JSKD, which in 2018 received 3.5 million EUR from the state budget. This amount makes up over 2% of the entire budget of the Ministry of Culture. As we will see later, the production costs of these groups are largely covered by local communities, but we were unable to get exact information about the amount. We can, however, estimate this amount on the basis of the analysis conducted by the Union of Cultural Societies of Slovenia in 2019, which also inquired about the amount of financing contributed to amateur culture by the staff responsible for social activities in Slovenian municipalities. The research shows that, on average, municipalities give 4.54€ per resident per year (Cf. Breznik et al. 16). Multiplied by the current population of Slovenia (2,089,310, Republic of Slovenia Statistical Office), this amounts to 9,485,467.40€. Thus, the total sum of support the state and municipalities give to amateur culture amounts to 13 million EUR.

This indicates that amateur culture has always held an important position in Slovenia. After 1945 it began receiving systematic state subsidies. It was attended by a separate organisation which established a widespread network, thus enabling progress across the country. Planned education and the organisation of meetings allowed for the further development of amateur cultural activities. And as it was organised in societies, these allowed for the development of new performative approaches and even artistic fields (e.g., contemporary dance) in given as well as throughout its existence facilitating youth to come into contact with culture. It is no exaggeration to say that virtually all professional artists today were first active in the area of amateur art.

Today the situation is quite similar to that before 1991. The JSKD, established and financed mainly by the government, oversees amateur culture. Inside this field, theatre holds a prominent position despite not being its largest part. According to the Ministry of Culture, in 2014, 13% of the cultural societies and associations pursued theatre (Cf. Eden 20). For us, the content of their project is more interesting than the infrastructure and system of functioning of their organisations. Here, too, the 2019 survey by the Union of Cultural Societies of Slovenia allows for up-to-date insight.

The self-image of amateur theatre

In 2019, the Union of Cultural Societies of Slovenia, which after 1996 became the representative of civil society in the area of amateur culture, conducted an extensive survey about the situation of amateur culture. Its results were published under the title *Analiza stanja, ugotavljanje potreb in oblikovanje prioritete v okviru mreženja, zagovorništva in razvoja področja ljubiteljske kulturne dejavnosti za dvig kvalitete in kulture bivanja v Sloveniji* (Breznik et al.). The research was based on an extensive survey conducted among amateur cultural societies across Slovenia.

The questionnaire explored various aspects of the functioning of these societies: finances, human resources, venue capacities; the area of artistic mentorship; advocacy; counselling and information; networking and collaboration with associated organisations. The results were later interpreted through the perspective of the role of the Association of Cultural Societies or rather how the association could support these societies with the needs and challenges they are facing today. For our purposes, the raw data is more interesting and can be interpreted from the perspective of our own research questions. Let us thus attempt to describe the state of Slovenian amateur theatre and determine the main challenges it is facing. To this end, we will also rely on some other statistical reviews of the field published by the Ministry of Culture.

The basic make-up of cultural societies

The majority of cultural societies, 62.8%, “have a membership of 3 to 50. Among these, 20.9% have 11 to 20 members. Just over 10% have 100 or more members, and there are two instances of societies with over 1000 members” (Breznik et al. 5). The most represented age group among society members is aged 46–60 years, the least represented is aged 0–15, followed by the 15–29 age group. These numbers indicate that there is generally less interest for amateur culture during the period of schooling and immediately following it when people tend to be building their family life and career.

	No.	Per cent
Under 15	145	28.3
15–29	297	57.9
30–45	348	67.8
46–60	370	72.1
Over 61	304	59.3

Table 1: Membership age structure (Deutsch 9, Table 7).

The membership primarily consists of mixed-gender groups in which men and women are equally represented, or rather, women tend to be “slightly overrepresented” (Breznik et al. 6).

Cultural societies most often produce 1–3 première productions per year. This overall average is even more characteristic of smaller societies which presumably include the ones from the field of performative arts.

	3 – 34 members		35 and more members		Total	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
1–3	166	66.1	146	55.7	312	60.8
4–6	41	16.3	58	22.1	99	19.3
7–10	11	4.4	22	8.4	33	6.4
More than 10	10	4.0	19	7.3	29	5.7
We do not have our own productions	23	9.2	17	6.5	40	7.8
Sum total	251	100.0	262	100.0	513	100.0

X^2 -test: X^2 (sig.) = 11.330 (0.023)

Table 2: Première productions, according to the size of society (Deutsch 17, Table 20).

Financial and organisational make-up

“For the majority of amateur cultural societies (61.7%) their municipality is the main source of financing, for 11% it is gainful activity on the market, while 8.7% say it is the Public Fund” (Breznik et al. 6). Other sources of financing include membership fees, sponsorships, donations and subsidies from the Ministry of Culture. Thus, the local community appears to be the principal source of financing for these societies, which, as a rule, are strongly involved with the local cultural activities. In smaller places, amateur culture often represents the majority of culture on offer. No wonder over 90% of societies apply to local community tenders. They represent a fixed source of income, despite some warnings that the funds are not inflation-adjusted. If we take into account the financial crisis endured during the recent decade, it is surprising not to see a sharp decline in subsidies, unlike the case of funding public institutions and non-government organisations at the national level.

	No.	Per cent
Municipality	319	61.7
Public Fund for Cultural Activities	45	8.7
Ministry of Culture	1	0.2
Own funds (entrance fees, etc.)	57	11.0
Sponsorships	34	6.6
Membership fees	29	5.6
Other	32	6.2
Total	517	100.0

Table 3: Main sources of financing for societies (Deutsch 19, Table 27).

The results indicate that municipalities “contribute to amateur culture from 0.80€ to 11.70€ per resident, averaging at 4.54€ per resident per year. In budget percentage, this represents between 0.14 to 1% of the respective municipality budget. The average percentage of funds intended for amateur culture is 0.42% of the budget” (Breznik et al. 15).

To 51.5% of societies, the local community also provides space for rehearsals and performances, free of charge, mostly covering the operating costs.

	No.	Per cent
Yes	292	56.7
Yes, rehearsals only	56	10.9
Yes, events only	50	9.7
No	117	22.7
Total	515	100.0

Table 4: Access to appropriate space for rehearsals and events (Deutsch 40, Table 48).

As shown in the above table societies are mostly satisfied with the spaces for rehearsals and performances at their disposal. Only 20% of respondents felt that there are no appropriate spaces for rehearsals and performances at their disposal in their municipality. More than half of societies have their own space for rehearsals and performances, while some only have space for rehearsals. Thus, we can see that local communities mostly take care of the basic conditions for the functioning of amateur societies, offering them space for rehearsals and productions and financing the majority of their activities, as demonstrated in the table below.

	No.	Per cent
The society owns the space	15	3.8
The society manages the space	14	3.5
The society rents the space free of charge, at no operating costs	205	51.5
The society rents the space free of charge but pays for operating costs	60	15.1
The society pays rent and operating costs	60	15.1
Other	44	11.1
Total	398	100.0

Table 5: Type of available space in municipalities (Deutsch 45, Table 51).

Mentorship

Amateur societies are led by mentors. They can be members of the society and amateurs themselves, meaning that they usually have no formal education in the artistic area in which they are active. But some of the societies are led by formally educated artists. As seen from the table below, most mentors do not have a formal education in their artistic field. In the field of theatre and puppet theatre, this is true for 72.7% of the mentors.

	Yes		No		Other*		Total	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Choir music	39	33.9	49	42.6	27	23.5	115**	100.0
Instrumental music	70	60.9	38	33.0	7	6.1	115	100.0
Folklore	13	12.7	76	74.5	13	12.7	102	100.0
Contemporary dance	9	45.0	8	40.0	3	15.0	20	100.0
Literature	32	39.5	41	50.6	8	9.9	81	100.0
Theatre and puppets	26	20.3	93	72.7	9	7.0	128	100.0
Visual arts	34	45.3	37	49.3	4	5.3	75	100.0
Film and video	4	19.0	15	71.4	2	9.5	21	100.0
Intermedia	4	33.3	6	50.0	2	16.7	12	100.0
Other fields	10	19.2	35	67.3	7	13.5	52	100.0

* International certificates, informal education outside formal educational institutions, etc.

Table 6: Formal education of artistic directors (Deutsch 46, Table 54).

Interestingly, mentors often work in societies on voluntary bases – in the field of theatre and puppetry, this goes for 64.1% of the mentors – which is probably due to a lack of formal education and professional engagement in respective artistic areas. In the field of theatre and puppetry, the percentage of mentors without a formal education is among the highest, while the percentage of paid mentors is among the lowest.

	Yes – fixed monthly fee		Yes – occasional fee		Yes – travel cost reimbursement	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Choir music	62	23.5	49	18.6	75	28.4
Instrumental music	40	34.8	13	11.3	18	15.7
Folklore	16	15.7	12	11.8	26	25.5
Contemporary dance	5	25.0	2	10.0	6	30.0
Literature	2	2.5	7	8.6	7	8.6
Theatre and puppets	5	3.9	20	15.6	18	14.1
Visual arts	1	1.3	18	24.0	9	12.0
Film and video	0	0.0	3	14.3	1	4.8
Intermedia	2	16.7	2	16.7	1	8.3
Other fields	4	7.0	8	14.0	8	14.0

Table 7: Fees for artistic directors (part 1) (Deutsch 47, Table 56).

	No – voluntary		Other		Total	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Choir music	72	27.3	6	2.3	264	100.0
Instrumental music	42	36.5	2	1.7	115	100.0
Folklore	46	45.1	2	2.0	102	100.0
Contemporary dance	3	15.0	4	20.0	20	100.0
Literature	61	75.3	4	4.9	81	100.0
Theatre and puppets	82	64.1	3	2.3	128	100.0
Visual arts	44	58.7	3	4.0	75	100.0
Film and video	15	71.4	2	9.5	21	100.0
Intermedia	6	50.0	1	8.3	12	100.0
Other fields	33	57.9	4	7.0	57	100.0

Table 8: Fees for artistic directors (part 2) (Deutsch 48, Table 57).

The above tables indicate that amateur theatre does not offer career opportunities to artists, although their professional careers are ever-more subject to precarisation and scarcity. This is probably due to a strong independent scene which evolved in Slovenia as early as in the 1960s. After 1991, it continued to function in the form of societies and private institutions, or rather non-government organisations (NGOs). This segment engages professional artists, mostly with formal education. The distinction between both areas appears to be strong and based on the notion of amateur culture which associates it with lesser artistic ambition.

The exception here is the field of contemporary dance which may be showing the potential for future developments in the entire field of amateur theatre. This is the field

with the highest percentage of non-voluntary mentors. “One of the reasons for this might be that this field is strongly associated with precarious forms of employment, and thus mentors depend on fees from amateur societies to make ends meet. This is corroborated by the highest percentage of mentors with the status of self-employed in culture coming from the field of contemporary dance” (Breznik et al. 8).

	Yes, employed, working in their profession		Yes, self-employed in culture		No		Other		Total	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Choir music	98	37.3	22	8.4	124	47.1	19	7.2	263	100.0
Instrumental music	53	46.1	6	5.2	45	39.1	11	9.6	115	100.0
Folklore	5	5.0	1	1.0	91	90.1	4	4.0	101	100.0
Contemporary dance	1	5.0	6	30.0	8	40.0	5	25.0	20	100.0
Literature	17	21.0	6	7.4	54	66.7	4	4.9	81	100.0
Theatre and puppets	18	14.1	14	10.9	88	68.8	8	6.3	128	100.0
Visual arts	17	22.7	12	16.0	38	50.7	8	10.7	75	100.0
Film and video	5	23.8	1	4.8	14	66.7	1	4.8	21	100.0
Intermedia	3	25.0	1	8.3	7	58.3	1	8.3	12	100.0
Other areas	7	12.7	5	9.1	42	76.4	1	1.8	55	100.0

Table 9: Professional employment of artistic directors in the area of culture and art (Deutsch 53, Table 67).

Thus the field of contemporary dance might suggest potential future development, in which amateur theatre might offer career opportunities to professional creators, thus also enhancing the quality of the field. The surprising element here is the field of theatre and puppets, as we know of some professional directors and actors (e.g., Gojmir Lešnjak Gojc, Jaša Jamnik) who often direct in amateur theatres. However, it is true that the poll asked about the mentors/leaders of the groups who are usually their members and are not professional artists.

Networking

The JSKD appears to play a vital role in the development of amateur culture as well. To this effect, it organises meetings of groups at the local, regional, national and international levels. This allows for comparison of productions and progress in quality. 95.5% of the societies thus connect to other societies at the local, regional or national levels, while 49.1% do so at the international level as well. Most of these collaborations take place once per year, while some responses indicated twice or three times per year.

Almost half of the societies (49.3%) attend competitions abroad, mostly in neighbouring countries (Italy, Austria, Croatia). As a rule, these societies also collaborate with foreign organisations in their productions.

Also worth noting is inter-sectoral networking. Societies mostly collaborate with other organisations in their local surroundings – e.g., tourist societies, schools and kindergartens.

The data once again confirms that amateur societies represent an important factor in the life of local communities. Collaboration with other sectors indicates that culture is looking for points of intersection with other related fields (principally education and tourism through the presentation of local traditions). Besides, such societies can serve as a means for connecting local communities internationally, demonstrated by frequent participation in competitions and collaborations with organisations from abroad, thus strengthening their networking and quality work.

Conclusion

Now we can attempt to give some answers to our starting questions. The situation of amateur culture changed after 1991. The state established the Republic of Slovenia Public Fund for Cultural Activities (JSKD) and delegated to it most of the tasks formerly handled by the Association of Cultural Organizations of Slovenia, thus preserving the widespread support infrastructure with 59 branches of the JSKD. This structure allows it to compare productions, oversee the development of members' skills and help organise cultural productions. Concerning the number of societies, members and productions, Slovenian amateur culture appears to be in very good shape.

A bigger shift happened at the content level. Prior to 1991, amateur culture was also a space for professional artists to look for alternative artistic practices. After 1991, however, this function was relegated to the field of the so-called non-government organisations (NGOs). While these entities are also organised as societies or private institutes, they apply for funding at the Ministry of Culture and mostly do not collaborate with the JSKD.

A common approach to involving professionals into amateur culture is the system of mentorship, that is, artistic direction, stage directing, etc. Sometimes these professionals also receive payment for their work, but often they work voluntarily or only get reimbursed for their travel costs. A larger share of professionals can be noted among the mentors of groups in the field of contemporary dance, who, as a rule, also receive payment. In this perspective, amateur culture provides an opportunity for additional work and income.

Contentwise, it appears that the majority of amateur culture is oriented towards maintaining traditions, which is probably correlated to the fact that memberships predominantly include older people (46–60 years). Reasons for the lack of younger members listed by the respondents include: “lack of interest for such activities, competition with other leisure time activities, the different lifestyle of youth, desire for a different repertoire and functioning of societies” (Breznik et al. 8).

This is not to say that it is impossible to find experimental performances based on innovation in amateur theatre. According to JSKD information, there are individual cases proving the opposite (e.g., KUD Franc Kotar from Trzin with its performance *Blaznost igre* (The Madness of Play) written by Nebojša Pop Tasić), this is predominantly the result of personal coincidence, that is, a creative team with the ambition to delve deeper and produce contemporary theatre. It is, of course, hard to maintain such engagement in the long run, which was also characteristic of alternative theatres (e.g., the first generation of Glej Experimental Theatre with Dušan Jovanović and Zvone Šedelbauer; the Pekarna Theatre).

To a large extent, amateur societies are satisfied with their situation. They have fixed sources of financing, even though most would like more money for productions. They have the basic infrastructure, space for rehearsals and performances, mostly provided by the local community. They are well integrated into local, regional and national activities; almost half of them are also active internationally. Thus, amateur theatre is an important artistic platform which at least for the time being involves mostly amateur creators. Despite the problem of precarisation especially affecting young people, the amateur theatre has so far failed to assert itself as a space for developing their artistic potential while working in some other field. A more common practice is to look for additional income or work opportunities by mentoring amateur theatre or dance groups.

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