

This paper explains how the modern staging or re-enactment of *Škofjeloški pasijon* (Eng. *Škofja Loka Passion Play* or, Latin, *Processio locopolitana*) constructs distinct controversies: (a) between amateurism and professionalism; (b) between play and performance; (c) between theatre and community; (d) between history and the present; and (e) between epistemology and faith. Around 1715, Father Romuald (1676–1748), a member of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, wrote a script for a passion play, the oldest preserved dramatic text written in the Slovenian language and the oldest preserved *Regiebuch*, a script with stage directions, in Europe. The passion play was performed during Lent until 1768 in the form of a penitential passion play procession. After Slovenia's political system changed in 1991, interest in the passion play revived, but since there have only been a few performances, in 1999, 2000, 2009 and 2015. The performance of the passion play is deeply affected by collective amateurism and the construction of a distinct passion play theatre community. Even if the future productions of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* will eventually develop to a higher professional level, the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* will always remain a communal theatre that demands a theatre community with Medieval cultural elements in a modern secular society.

Keywords: community theatre, passion play, re-enactment, theatre community, secular society, controversies, Škofja Loka

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“THE PASSION PLAY HAS A HEALING POWER!”: The Controversies of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*

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For the quality of the text and performance of passion plays are less important than the manner in which a community, usually a small one, driven by a communal idea, expresses religious feelings which tens of thousands of spectators share.

Robert L. Erenstein (30)

Introduction

Not so long ago, I was attending a lecture given by Marjan Kokalj, the first stage manager¹ of the modern re-staging of *Škofjeloški pasijon* (Eng. *Škofja Loka Passion Play* or, Latin, *Processio locopolitana*). In the middle of his presentation, one member of a small and closely acquainted audience, – a reasonably well-educated woman, a former director of the local public library, recognised and appreciated among the people for her devout and honest religiousness, – rose on the chair, popped her head out to reach the speaker’s attention and spoke out with a solemn voice: “The passion play has a healing power!” The audience silently and approvingly nodded to her, while the speaker responded with reservation towards her enthusiasm. Perhaps I was the only one in the room who found her gesture slightly odd. Her reaction certainly raises many provocative and intriguing questions. How could the passion play possibly be a factor in the process of healing? Who is the “patient” and who the “physician”? Was this action of support an indicator of turning back towards the “dark” Middle Ages, when religion and mysticism were considered to be in possession of producing “beneficial” effects, even in the realm of people’s physical and mental health? And even further, I might add.

The origin of the passion plays in Europe can be traced almost a thousand years back

¹ Traditionally addressed as a *magister processionis*. Since the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* is more determined in advance in comparison to the productions of professional theatres and thus less open to personal creativity, I prefer to use the expression “stage manager” over “theatre director”.

to the times when the application of logical reason and modern rationality were not to be found around every corner (see Podgoršek 13–23; Marin; Drnovšek).² Nowadays, we like to assume that the level of human knowledge was much lower and less complex at that time. People were cognitively “entrapped” inside Medieval civilisation by superstitions about the social or the physical world, and the supernatural realm as well. Consequently, one could easily endorse the explanation that either our Lady “provocateur” meant the de-secularisation of Slovenian society or she was after some kind of individual religious healing. The first explanation could be plausible, as, after 1991, there were attempts made by the Slovenian Catholic Church to take a more active role in addressing the structural changes of Slovenian society (Jogan), while about the truthfulness of the second, we can only speculate.

This article’s modest aim is to deliver a series of comments on how the modern re-staging or re-enactment of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* produces various controversies, which need to be negotiated and (at least partially) resolved, through the transformation of the passion play theatre community each time the passion play is produced in order to reach the state of “healing power”.³

The *Škofja Loka Passion Play*

The *Škofja Loka Passion Play* is a script written by Father Romuald at the beginning of the 18th century (Ogrin). The preserved version of the script has the form of a *Regiebuch* (Andres) and is archived in the monastery of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin in Škofja Loka. While the text is written in old Škofja Loka dialect, German and Latin languages, for the purpose of re-staging, the language of the performance was modernised (see Kaluža). The passion play is performed during Lent, except that the procession is now repeated eight times every six years, while initially it was performed only once, yet every year (Florjančič 76–82). The form is a penitential Passion procession. It starts on the outskirts of the town at the so-called *Pasijonski tabor* (Passion Play Camp), winds through Mestni trg (Town Square), then descends towards Spodnji trg (Lower Square), to return back to the place where it started. Each square has two stations. The integral version of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* was performed only in the 18th century and in the years of its modern revival (1999, 2000, 2009, 2015). In several other examples, it was either reduced to only a few scenes or significantly adapted to be performed on

² Contrary to many who may believe that the passion play is restricted to the Catholic Church, other religions are also familiar with this form of sacred ritual (see for instance *An Eye-Witness*; Ale-Mohammed).

³ The *Škofja Loka Passion Play* community, like any other theatre community (Krpič *Building* 104–9), consists of seven elements: (a) a group of participants (spectators, actors, performers ...); (b) theatre conventions; (c) a sentiment of belonging together; (d) non-deliberate construction; (e) wider goals; (f) locality and relative permanency; and (g) communal epistemology (see also the article on the elements of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* in Krpič *On the Elements*).

theatre stages or broadcasted on the Radio (Florjančič 76–82).

Most of the participants come from the local surroundings, that is, from Škofja Loka, Poljanska dolina (Poljane Valley) and Selška dolina (Selška Valley). The casting of the participants is based on communal, parochial, familiar and friend-related relationships and can be labelled either as collective or individual (Gartner *Romualdov*; Štukl). During the initial 1999 re-staging, the passion play's scenes were distributed among the local communities. Each community had a leader who recruited and selected the participants from the local environment. However, some participants are personally invited to take part in the passion play because of their professional skills. The participants have one year of preparation to build their characters and train their performing bodies. The number of participants is more than a thousand, though not all of them participate in the procession. Since no one receives any financial compensation for participating – the exceptions being the stage manager and the production manager – the passion play is rightly considered amateur theatre. The participants express being in positive spiritual, social and cultural relations with each other (Krajnik; "Pasijonci o škofjeloškem pasijonu"; Slatnar; Smukavec).

Does a participant's religiousness play a decisive part in the selection? This question does not have an easy answer. The passion play is, naturally, heavily loaded with religious meaning. Consequently, one might expect that it attracts only religious people to volunteer. However, this is not the case. Many participants do not practise any religion. In the case of the religious participants, the social "glue" that binds them in the passion play theatre community is their religious devotion.

In contrast, the non-religious participants mostly look for the lost feeling of being part of a wider community. Small wonder that one of the broader goals towards which the participants strive is a stable and permanent passion play community. Such stability is hard to gain as the passion play is not produced every year. Building a unique communal epistemology,⁴ a combination of personal epistemology (Kant) and collective stock of knowledge (Schutz), is an attempt to bridge the gap between the stagings.

The controversies

Being a cultural, political, religious and social phenomenon, which ideologically originated in Ancient Rome and developed further on through the Medieval times, was written and mostly performed in Baroque, to be finally re-staged in the secular modern Slovenian society, the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* unavoidably embraces numerous controversies, namely, that: (a) between amateurism and professionalism;

⁴ A reader should see a more dense description and definition of "communal epistemology" in Krpič *On the Elements*, 90–91.

(b) between play and performance; (c) between theatre and community; (d) between history and the present; and (e) between epistemology and faith. Nevertheless, amateurism lies in the kernel of these controversies as an essential mechanism which propels the phenomenon of the passion play.

The controversy between amateurism and professionalism

The *Škofja Loka Passion Play* heavily depends on the volunteerism of the local inhabitants. Considering the number of passion play participants needed, we can hardly expect that the performing is always of the highest quality. However, we cannot begrudge the poor quality of performance to the participants, as we would professional actors, for they are trying to be as good as their talent and spare time enables them (see Bachmann). On the one hand, it is accurate that “[g]ood acting has little to do with faith and much to do with technique” (Erenstein 38). On the other hand, one needs to consider that the religious content of the passion play nevertheless has a significant impact on its quality. Namely, there is a long history of the Catholic Church’s relationship to theatre and actors⁵ according to which “[t]he result of mimicking is not much more important than the effort itself”⁶ (Grdina 25). The quality and the professional attitude are put aside, despite that the scale of the organisation and the ambitions of the participants of the passion play sometimes desperately “call” for the application of higher professional theatre standards (Golob 2016). Yet there is a positive aspect of the “withdrawal” of theatre standards: the intentions to understand and to accept the often poorly-developed humble performing body (Civetta 2008) not as something deeply problematic but, on the contrary, as a silent mechanism, which allows the participants to build the passion play theatre community with fewer conflicts, can be noticed among the passion play participants.

The controversy between amateurism and professionalism escalated in the 2015 re-enactment of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*. In the past, the stage manager Borut Gartner (see for instance *Romualdov, Pasijonu*) had often given preference to the creation of the passion play community over the professional production of the play. His primary goal was to include as many participants as possible in the production. Indubitably, the result in numbers was impressive. Still, at the same time, it demonstrates a need to push the organisation of the passion play to a higher, more professional level. Whether this was the reason why a professional theatre director directed the next passion play (2015) is unclear. However, this solution sparked several conflicts between the stage

⁵ While theatre was oppressed by the Catholic Church, and actors, minstrels and mimics were many times prosecuted and ghettoised during the Medieval times, the clergy nevertheless allowed “re-enactments” of different scenes from the Bible during the Latin mass. This was possible because the masses were mostly illiterate and books were scarce and far too expensive to be available to common people.

⁶ All citations from Slovenian sources were translated by the author.

manager and a number of the passion play participants (see Golob 20; Neubauer 114) over the dramaturgical aspects of the passion play. Interestingly, although the amateur character of the passion play is evident to all involved, every stage manager and the members of his crew have claimed that their work was highly professional, thus indicating the highly negotiable character of the term “professional”.

The controversy between play, performance and re-enactment

Is the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* a play or a performance? The script of the passion play might, at first, direct us to the interpretation that what we have here is just a play. We assume that the story written by Father Romuald of the life and death of Jesus Christ is just a play because we might believe it is fictitious. No one can tell for sure whether the protagonists of the passion play really were historical figures or if the events really took place as depicted in the passion play. A well-educated and regular theatregoer of modern dramatic theatre is familiar with such aesthetic distancing. But how about a sincere believer? Can he or she produce the same aesthetic attitude? If not, then this must be because his or her perception of the passion play is of a different nature. It comes from religion, not aesthetics. A true believer would have little doubt that Jesus Christ was in some distant past really sacrificed for the benefit of humankind. Therefore, the passion play, despite including many theatrical elements, is partially not about the creation of fictive narration, but about acceptance and how to become accustomed to comprehension and revelation (Grdina 26).

Are the participants of the passion play thus rather performers than actors? In dramatic theatre, the dilemma of what makes an actor is (partly) resolved by building the aesthetic distance of an actor from the impersonation of a character. There is no reason why an amateur actor could not be able to achieve the same condition. However, in post-dramatic theatre and performance art, a union between the performer and the impersonation was addressed in different way. The performer was presenting him or herself. How does this go along with the passion play? When one is a part of the religiously intensively “coloured” communal theatre, one presents his sincere devotion, which is in alignment with that of the protagonists of the passion play. Of course, a participant cannot be identical with Jesus Christ, yet he (or she) nevertheless may identify with his feelings and emotions, no matter whether one is religious or not. This point brings us to another notable issue. While in dramatic theatre, contemplation is no doubt on the spectator, and only rarely on the actor, in religious communal theatre, contemplation seems to be on the amateur performer. And if the audience goes along with the performers, even better.

If the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* is a performance, can it also be a re-enactment? In some sense, it is at least a re-enactment of the 18th-century version of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*. Since archives are thin on historical documents about the performance of the passion play, we can only discuss the possible differences. We can rightly speculate on the richer and more spectacular nature of the modern staging. But, can it be a re-enactment of the life and death of Jesus Christ? Or perhaps even documentary theatre (see Martin 9), in which the performing bodies overlap with the supposed-to-be-living body of those being represented on the stage? Well, until the true nature of the life and death of Jesus Christ is unveiled, this question shall remain unanswered.

The controversy between theatre and community

The performance of the passion play should not be reduced merely to a presentation of the script, for it should be as theatrical as possible, that is, live, rhythmic, natural, anticipating the performing body, sound and music, costumes, make-up and scenography (Andres 59). Although I agree about that, according to some, the very utterance of the passion play's text is still underdeveloped and subordinate to the spectacle (Kaluža 109). Besides, if we focus our epistemological curiosity merely on the final aesthetic product of the passion play, we might come to the misleading conclusion that what we observe on the stations is simply a production of another amateur theatre. However, there is more going on in "the backstage" of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*. The participants refer to this as the passion play community, built by the participants and their "groupies", that is, the audience and everyone who enjoys and supports the passion play. The extent and shape of the community oscillates throughout the year in accordance to the proximity of the staging.

The participants of the passion play launched the project of the passion play with an honest intention to strengthen their community, for religion and performance are brought together through the community (Grdina 28; also compare Fischer-Lichte "Culture"; McKenna). However, on the way to reach this goal, they encountered a severe obstacle; in the predominantly secular Slovenian society, they were unable to collect enough means and resources to produce the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* alone. They needed to rely on the wider community (the municipality and the state). Somewhere in this process, the leaders of the passion play community learnt how to "use" the theatre community that is organically constructed each time the passion play is staged for their own purpose (on building a community in theatre and performance see Krpič "Building").

So, a distinction should be made between the theatre community of the passion play,

which encompasses all the participants of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*,⁷ and the passion play community, which consists of only a smaller number of participants, who compose a narrow passion play circle. The level of religiousness, inclusiveness and amateurism of the participants is the main difference between both communities. The average member of the passion play community is deeply religious, has more influence on the production of the passion play, or at least he or she is more engaged and is less professional in terms of modern theatre standards.

The controversy between history and the present

The *Škofja Loka Passion Play* presents a set of “historical events”, for instance, Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Paradise, Samson’s fight against the Philistines, the life and death of Jesus Christ, and more. The truth of Jesus Christ’s historical existence (the same assumption goes for the other protagonists of the passion play as well) is perhaps not that important. At the current point, the evidence of historical science does not unequivocally support either side; either those who believe in his existence or those who do not. Yet, the historical gap between “then” and “now” is recognisable and significant. The story of the Redeemer, once told by the four evangelists, went through many transformations caused by social, historical, political and translational influences before it finally reached the people who live in the modern society. Many still share beliefs about the life and death of Jesus Christ, despite the influence of modern science and political formation of secular society. Such is the power of religion. But the bottom line is that the origin of the passion play and its ideology is now so far away in history that it naturally raises a question about how, if at all, it still relates to the experiences of currently living human being. Namely, some of the elements of the passion play are evidently in contradiction with modern cultural and political standards.

However, the tension between the conservatism and progressivism of the Catholic Church has been proven many times in the case of the passion play. For instance, when the church in South Africa organised the *Durban Passion Play* in 1952, it was an act of rebellion against the newly established apartheid. However, the “Marian Congress, the Passion Play, and the procession seem publicly to have endorsed colonialism, separatism, and white domination” (Lambert and Hammerschlag 75). The contemplative writings of theatre director Borut Gartner (*Romauldov* 121), the stage manager of the 2009 passion play, in which he distinguishes the passion play as a religious event and contradicts the demands of some that the performance should be heavily advertised and become a municipal milk cow. In this matter, he despises

⁷ By definition, the theatre community also includes the audience. However, in the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* the audience’s influence on the creation of the theatre community of the passion play is important, yet nevertheless small.

the commercialisation of the Oberammergau Passion Play. He speaks about passion plays as being a gift with which one should arouse one's own spirituality and turn away from the materialism of neoliberalism.

What is shared by any living being beyond history is the experience of death and suffering (see Gartner *Romualdov* 122), hence often reminding us of those who write positively about the passion play, of its universal meaning and timeless message. Since everybody is mortal, everyone should thus benefit from taking part in or in any other way supporting the passion play. However, it seems they forget that people understand, react and resist/accept their own suffering and death differently depending on the place and time so that in this respect there cannot be only one answer given. But there are other even more controversial themes embedded in the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*. For instance, the guilt of the Jews and the infliction of collective penalty upon them for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. While at the beginning of the 18th century, when the passion play was created, the guilt of the Jews was still considered a self-evident fact, nowadays, religious and ethnic intolerance is no longer acceptable. After *Nostra Aetate*, even the Oberammergau Passion Play – the passion play of all passion plays – was modified in 1969, when “some of the more offensive anti-Jewish passages” were removed or changed (Lambert and Hammerschlag 80). No such decision was made in the case of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*.

On the contrary, there is strong support against any possible changes of the original text of the passion play. One could also rightly ask why until now every stage manager of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* has been a man. Unfortunately, the author of this paper does not know how many female theatre directors ever responded to the calls for the post of the stage manager but were not selected for the job. However, we do know that the reaction of one of the influential members of the passion play community to gender-mixed Last Supper scene performed two decades ago in the production of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* in the Slovenian National Theatre Drama Ljubljana, directed by Meta Hočevar, was a radical refusal.

The controversy between epistemology and faith

Soon after the first two modern stagings of the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* (in 1999 and 2000), a distinct process also started as one of the constitutive elements of the passion play community. Although every participant of the passion play slightly differently perceives and understands the passion play, which is reasonable since different characters are played or because the participants have various obligations, in the end, through “silent negotiations”, all the participants together construct a

relevant collective stock of knowledge or so-called communal epistemology about the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*. Each year a special monograph titled *Pasijonski almanah* (The Passion Play Almanac) and the journal *Pasijonski doneski* (The Passion Play Contributions) are published. Several other publications related to the passion play have also been published separately in the last few years. Public lectures, round tables, expert meetings, and similar should keep the condition of the passion play community in good shape.

Although the passion play participants aim to build an honest collection of empirical material and to build reasonable objective knowledge and explanations about the passion play phenomenon in general, we should be clear that the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* participants undoubtedly follow a certain agenda. The passion play participants would like to send us a powerful message that this is how they understand and feel about the passion play, and that those are the reasons why they believe the passion play should be executed this and this way! Although such an attitude is entirely legitimate, it nevertheless begs the question, in what proportion religious epistemological spectacles provide the creators of the communal epistemology with an asymmetrical perception.

While I appreciate and value the communal epistemology, I nevertheless dare to point to another possible asymmetric strategy of those who contribute to the building of the stock of knowledge. Although in social sciences and humanities, many times, researchers and scholars try to prove their theses and theories, we should accept that such knowledge is only temporarily valid. A process of the critical falsification of theories and explanations based on logical and rational argumentation is much more important as a verification of scientific knowledge. Being only after the verification of collected knowledge, something more or less true for the knowledge provided by the communal epistemology in the case of *Škofja Loka Passion Play*, certainly contradicts some basic scientific values and norms and may lead to the creation of religious passion play ideology. Consequently, the contributions to communal epistemology are often rather amateurish and religiously oriented.

Conclusions

In 1991, the Slovenian people decided to transform the political and economic system, expecting a prosperous effect in a short period in terms of economic, political and social results. Changes in culture also came along. The *Škofja Loka Passion Play* can be understood as a part of the post-independence enthusiastic religious wave that tried to overflow Slovenian society. While the majority of Slovenian society was (and still is) nevertheless oriented towards the present-near future timeline, some longed for

the distant times, although in order to move on. Being overwhelmed by the memories of once gone social, political and cultural relationships, – in which they honestly believe their own society will flourish again, can be a highly controversial endeavour. A curious look back is something we all do either in hope to avoid old mistakes or to seek inspiration for new solutions to apply in the present. Kurt Vonnegut once said that this human characteristic is the reason why he likes Lot's wife. While her family was fleeing from Sodom and Gomorrah, she turned back to see the scourge of punishment, although God had forbidden her to do so. Hence, she was turned into a salt pillar; a valuable thing but arrested. So, in the end, it seems plausible to ask whether the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* shares the destiny of Lot's wife: it is precious in building a "healthy" passion play community, but if taken with us into the future without a critical engagement with its controversies, the passion play may just arrest our transformation into a better society.

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