

The Čufar Days (Čufarjevi dnevi) Festival of Amateur Theatres, which takes place every November in Jesenice, is one of the major cultural events in Jesenice and the Gorenjska region. In its 30-year history, it has evolved from a non-formal gathering of amateur theatre groups to an important theatre festival. In 2017, a new prize "Nova gaz" (New Path) was introduced for the best production of youth theatre groups. The article presents the history, development and meaning of the festival for the local community and the wider region. It has become a vital meeting point for amateur theatre groups from Slovenia and neighbouring countries, creating a special atmosphere in Jesenice. The latter is an important reason for the continued development of the festival and amateur theatre.

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Kaja Novosel (1995) graduated in dramaturgy from the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television of the University of Ljubljana. She writes plays as well as texts on the theory of drama. For her bachelor's thesis, she received the Prešeren Award for Students of the Academy. She is a co-editor of *Oder* (Stage) on the web platform *Koridor*.

novosel.kaja@gmail.com

Čufar Days: From a Meeting to a Festival

The festival of amateur theatre Čufar Days (Čufarjevi dnevi) at the Tone Čufar Theatre Jesenice has been taking place and developing every year since 1988 when the theatre staff led by Milan Kenda first prepared it as a meeting of amateur groups. At that point, the festival was not competitive, as it was conceived as a social event attended by the invited groups from Slovenia and Slovenian territories outside its borders. The emphasis of the festival in the early years was on the meeting of amateur theatre artists and dialogue about the position of amateur theatre in the Slovenian theatre landscape. It is worth pointing out that since the very beginning of the festival in Jesenice, Slovenian theatre groups from Austria (mostly Carinthia) and Italy (particularly Trieste and its surroundings) have attended it regularly. Their attendance adds to the festival's pulse and diversity, and at the same time testifies to the theatre activity among Slovenians beyond Slovenia's borders.

Despite the organisers' original scepticism, the festival grew roots; it has been occurring annually and has secured its place in the cultural landscape of the municipality. The year 2000 was a milestone, because 14 November – Tone Čufar's birthday – was finally set as the opening day of the festival. That same year, the festival acquired a competitive status and subsequently increased the quality level of the participating performances. This novelty led to re-structuring the programme and organisational concepts of the festival. Consequently, bringing a rise in the quality of productions as well as the programme itself. The competition also meant the selection of new participating members, that is, a selector who is a professional theatre artist and who chooses the best productions for each year, and a three-member jury that evaluates the productions and presents the Čufar Awards for the best creations of the festival – these are bestowed for the best actress, the best actor and the best production according to the jury. The expert jury proportionately consists of professional and amateur theatre artists and workers in the general cultural sector who regularly follow amateur theatre activities. This structure ensures a good ratio between individuals from professional and amateur theatre environments, which enables dialogue and a plurality of opinions within the expert jury. In addition to the awards from the expert jury, the annual audience award for the best production is presented; this way, the audience of the Čufar Days also actively co-creates the festival. The spectators evaluate the productions with anonymous ballots and reward the production which addresses them best. A step further in the competition nature of the festival and an important contribution to it is the youth segment of the festival introduced in 2017, in which youth theatre groups compete for the "Nova gaz" (New Path). The youth selection – which is at its beginnings and has fewer entries than the

regular one – is evaluated by a separate three-member jury that presents the Nova gaz Award for innovation and an outstanding element of the production, and it serves as an incentive for the continuous work and development of the individual youth theatre group. With this gesture, the festival further supports amateur theatre activity among young people, gives them a voice and the space to present their work, and rewards particularly strong elements that appear within the endeavours of youth groups.

The festival, as an important meeting point of the professional and the amateur, offers an insight into the current activity in the field of amateur theatre in Slovenia and beyond, which it co-creates with its activity. It also leans on tradition, particularly the legacy of Tone Čufar, whose name the festival and the theatre institution bear. The decision to take this name indicates leaning on tradition and, at the same time, the continuous connection between the culture and the industrial activities in the city, in the spirit of which several successful productions of ensemble of the Tone Čufar Theatre were created that also very successfully participated at Čufar Days. We must particularly mention the production of Čufar's text *Polom* (Collapse) from 2005, which was even selected for the competition programme of the 36th Week of Slovenian Drama, and the documentarist play *Zadnja tekma* (The Final Match) that speaks about current problems linked to the destruction of hockey in Jesenice. The production won the best production award from the jury at the 27th Čufar Days in 2014. Both productions are made more meaningful by the identification with the local environment and contemporary time of production; above all, the previously mentioned intersection of theatre-cultural with other current levels of the city, which is also linked to the development of the Čufar Days Festival itself.

The festival is one of the most important of Upper Gorenjska, if not the entire Gorenjska region, and its creators try to modernise and improve it every year by changes in content. Because it is so broad, full of meaning and message, the Čufar Days Festival importantly contributes to the wealth of the cultural landscape of the Municipality of Jesenice as well as the activities of the Slovenian amateur theatre.

Translated by Barbara Skubic