

The article presents the distinction between urban and rural amateur theatres based on the ethnographic field research of two amateur theatres in Škofja Loka and Bohinjska Bela and a review of literature on the topic. The urban or rural environment does not affect amateur activity to the extent that such a distinction is necessary. The main differences are visible in the organisation of theatres and the division of tasks within them. Thus, we can divide between half-professional and amateur theatres.

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# Amateur Theatres in Urban and Rural Environments: a comparison between Loka Stage and Bela Theatre

The article presents the distinction between the urban and the rural amateur theatres. Based on the ethnographic field research of two amateur theatres in Škofja Loka and Bohinjska Bela [both in Slovenia] and the review of literature, it compares the amateur activity in two – seemingly – different environments.

The assumption that there are differences between the urban and rural environment is reproduced on several levels of our life – through institutions and science, as well as everyday life. As early as 1887 in his work *Community and Society*, Ferdinand Tönnies stated his underlying sociological assumptions and divided social groups into a community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*). A community – represented perhaps by a typical European village – is characterised by collective, binding relationships; the members of the community being mostly related. Urban communities – which Tönnies called *society* – are characterised by rational and structured relationships; their members do not know each other.

This distinction can also be seen in theatre activity. Already in 1880, August Hartmann distinguishes *Volksstück*, *Bauerntheater* and *Volksschauspiel*. The first one is a play about rural life intended for townspeople. The second one appears in the countryside, the plays are from the urban stages and show the characteristics of urban life. Small and modest plays belong to the third category, they do not require a stage or special decorations, and acting troupes often performed them on house calls.

Among other topics, Marko Terseglav draws a line between the productions which thematically source from country (rural) life and environments, but are not intended solely for country people but more for urbanites seeking the idyll of country life. This type of theatre is closer to the general perception of people's theatre which remains very popular even today and has seen its renaissance with the expansion of television, which, at least in Austria and Germany, regularly broadcasts these productions. The second form is the so-called peasant theatre, that is, the one that is created in the countryside but flirts in themes, design, acting and scenography with urban stages and urban theatres; its creators and its audience are county folks. These productions are the closest to the notion of amateur theatre.

The very division between urban and rural amateur theatres encouraged the author to reflect on the distinction. For this reason, she chose two theatres – Gledališče Belansko (Bela Theatre) from Bohinjska Bela and Loški oder (Loka Stage) from Škofja Loka – were chosen, which are, at first glance, from two different environments. The author tries to find out if the differences between amateur theatres and their practices are indeed as noticeable as certain authors claim.

The differences between the two theatres appear predominantly in their organisation. They both operate as a part of a cultural association, with Loški oder being semi-professional, as its artistic manager and technical staff are salaried employees. In this respect, Gledališče Belansko is a non-professional, volunteer amateur theatre with no staff on payroll. As a consequence, the differences show in allocating tasks and in the source of financing. The major part of the operating funds for both theatres come from municipal tenders for cultural associations, with the remaining part coming from the public tenders from the Public Fund for Cultural Activities (JSKD), box office income and seasonal tickets, as well as from renting out their halls. In the case of Loški oder, the Municipality of Škofja Loka pays the employees' salaries.

The division is also obvious in the distribution of tasks. In the Škofja Loka theatre, the organisation is the task of the artistic director, who first invites the director, with whom she selects the appropriate play, she helps with casting, participates in the reading rehearsals and notifies the actors. Additionally, she chooses the productions for the season ticket holders, both adult and young audiences. The chief technician participates in setting up the scenography; a paid external collaborator designs the lighting, set and costumes; a paid external professional dressmaker sews the costumes; the sound designer is also paid. In Gledališče Belansko, the cultural association members divide these tasks among themselves. The director finds the text and takes care of the stage, costume and sound design. The association president sews the costumes. The local carpenter constructs the set and is partly remunerated for his work.

While researches of all levels question the claims that there are significant differences between urban and rural life, such ideas are still firmly rooted in the general public. Differentiating from and comparing to village/city are the basis for creating individual and community identity. Urban or rural categorisations are a means of legitimising, motivating and understanding. The division into urban or rural categories also exists in amateur theatres, which, depending on their geography, are still subject to different treatment in academic circles as well as institutions (JSKD, etc.), and among the participants themselves. The differences are seen not only in the organisation itself and the method of production, but they also appear primarily in the relationships and identifications – in the very thinking of thespians. They express their belonging to the

village/city mostly in their interactions with others and search for the reason for the differentiation in the urban/rural as well.

Some thus see rural theatre as more connected, but less successful, the urban theatre as of better quality, with more audience, better organised, etc. If we are looking for differences, we can find and ascribe them to different factors. For the case studies of Loški oder and Gledališče Belansko, at least we can claim that the urban or rural environment is not the main reason for the differences in certain characteristics of the theatre. The urban or rural environment, at least for the selected cases, does not have such an influence to make the differentiation into urban and rural stages necessary. The main differences between the studied theatres are primarily in their organisation – on the one hand, a semi-professional and on the other, a non-professional – which influences the division of tasks in the theatre.

This article only studies two cases that cannot fully explain the heterogeneity of theatre activity in Slovenia. Slovenian theatre activity is an extremely variegated field, so there are plenty of themes to be researched in the realm of amateur theatre activity. The division between the urban and the rural type of theatre stage would thus benefit from the further study of more cases and the questioning of the values of the categories urban/rural.

*Translated by Barbara Skubic*