

In Slovenia, amateur cultural activities are strongly present. In the past, they had a particularly strong cohesive effect – “a combination of the pleasant and the useful”. For many, especially those in rural areas, these activities were the only or most accessible option for spending their leisure time. In the 1930s, and after World War II, many amateur theatres formed, some later transformed into professional theatres, others reinforced their infrastructure and number of members. The latter is the case with the Studenec Summer Theatre established in 1949. Almost every summer since then, the Miran Jarc Cultural Society Škočjan stages its own theatrical productions. The first performance was under the local hayrack (*kozolec*), nowadays they are held in the modern covered theatre with approximately 1,000 seats. The drama group was originally brought together by a few local enthusiasts; the initiators of cultural creativity were the Stražar brothers. Today, the Studenec Summer Theatre combines local amateur and professional singers and actors. It stages its own productions; mostly light-hearted and accessible Slovenian plays and comedies with an aim to please the audience.

Keywords: Miran Jarc Škočjan Cultural Society, Studenec Summer Theatre, amateur theatre, Stane Stražar, Alojz Stražar

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70 Years of Amateur Theatre in Studenec

The rich archive of the Miran Jarc Cultural Society Škocjan (KDMJ) offers insight into the past work of one of the amateur stages that connects fans of theatre creativity in a rural environment. The article *70 Years of Amateur Theatre in Studenec* begins with some thoughts on the concept of amateurism in theatre and continues with a rough sketch of the amateur theatre activity in Slovenia. The central part focuses on the historical record of how theatre activity developed in the village of Studenec near Krtina (in the Municipality of Domžale), in which every year (since 2000 as a part of the Kulturni poletni festival Studenec (Studenec Summer Cultural Festival)) the cast prepares a “home” theatre production, as the association members call it. The first production, Josip Ogrin’s text *V Ljubljano jo dajmo* (Let’s Send Her to Ljubljana), was produced in 1949 under the carefully prepared village hayrack (*kozolec*) and was directed by Stane Stražar. A prolific chronicler of Domžale life and a cultural worker, Stražar also inspired his younger brothers France and Alojzij to set up cultural activities in their native village. The latter became the president of the association at the age of eighteen, soon after directed his first piece, and has been working in both capacities ever since. In addition to including his thoughts on the Studenec amateur theatre in the article, the author has also included her own observations (having been a KDMJ member since 2007).

To begin drama activity in a village in which there had traditionally been none, the Stražar brothers first invited people living nearby who professed either interest or potential and who joined to fill their time – “to mix work with pleasure”. It was often the desire to socialise that tipped the scale: it consolidated the community even further. Special attention is given to the only original drama text that was written within the association, a drama in three acts – seven scenes – known as *Bratova kri* (Brother’s Blood, published in the catalogue celebrating the association’s 30th anniversary in 1979). The drama showed actual events that occurred in World War II in the village and which the villagers knew well, the central tragedy is the death of their young fellow villager, the adolescent Stane Kovač. The production of this play in 1962 is also recorded in the history of the association as the first open-air production, until then, the association performed in smaller halls and in the nearby Krtina Primary School.

That same year, the drama group of the fire department association became independent and called itself the Miran Jarc Cultural Society. The article briefly summarises their endeavours to acquire their own premises and the construction of the stage that was later enlarged, added to and renovated. The stage of the Studenec Summer Theatre is today 40 m wide and 60 m deep, dimensions that allow for large ensembles: every year, between 50 and 80 actors meet onstage. The theatre has

around 1000 seats and is the third-largest covered open-air theatre in Slovenia.

As the years passed, artists trained in theatre or singing joined the local ensemble, the technical and organisational crew grew, but many of the new members are still volunteers. The stage at the same time is considered a good entry point into the world of performing arts, as it often provides the first point of contact with theatre for young people who then frequently go on to upgrade their skills with formal education. Thus, this amateur stage is considered both “a stage and a school”. The selection of texts is adjusted for the increased professionalisation of the cast and theatre capacity.

The director Alojz Stražar tailors his production plans to the selection of the participants. He tries to indulge, as he says, any desire for participation, so he often adapts the texts. On the other hand, he aims to please the audience, which he believes comes to Studenec to see productions with comical elements and familiar local themes. Notably, the dialogues are usually simple and carry an easy-to-understand message.

A quantitative analysis of the theatre repertoire (1949–2019) confirms this; the 67 included productions (premières only) show that 1) most of the authors are Slovenian; and 2) a large percentage of the productions are comedies, although drama and tragedy also figure importantly. A noticeable constant is also the almost immovable set. If we add to this a large number of performers and frequent inclusion of specific additions into the productions (for example, animals, carriages, cars) we have actually listed the reasons why touring to other stages is difficult, even impossible. Therefore, every summer in Studenec, there are over ten reprises of the annual production, which is seen by between 10,000 and 12,000 spectators.

An important characteristic that the theatre in Studenec shares with other, albeit smaller, village projects, is its permanence. We also find that organisationally, the theatre group is strong, and the division of work is more or less constant and similar to the one in professional theatre. Also noticeable is the (often decades-long) continuous collaboration of the director with other theatre artists, such as the costume designer, set design master, music producer, language consultant, stage manager, etc. For years professional and amateur theatres, opera houses and bands have been guests on the stage in Studenec, as a part of the summer festival programme, taking place at weekends from May to August. What is slightly less promising is the change in the structure of the association’s membership. If at the beginning of the 1980s, the association had 88 active members and only 28 of them were older than 27, as Velimir Vulikić finds in the monograph *60 let Poletnega gledališča na Studencu* (60 Years of the Studenec Summer Theatre), the membership structure today is much different, as the majority of members are older. From this follows that a concrete generational overhaul is necessary for the association to continue operating.

Translated by Barbara Skubic