

The paper proposes that the experimental theatre scene in Slovenia in the years 1955–1967 formed a community. The performative visions of experimental groups acted as subtle gestures opposing the prominent aesthetic trend that dominated the performing scene in central institutions of postwar theatre creativity. The latter found it difficult to connect with its audience since it dealt with issues of lesser concern and lacked a true connection with progressive theatre currents (predominantly coming from France).

Keywords: artistic influence, theatre experiment, continual dialectics, need for transformation, subtle gesture

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Hibernation Works for Bears but not for Theatre:

The Notion of Community among Theatre Institutions and Experimental Theatre Groups in Slovenia (1955–1967)

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Speaking about theatre forms in the 1950s when the term “experimental” was coined in Slovenia, the spatial principle of the “theatre-in-the-round” as the first Yugoslav experimental theatre format was the initial impulse for the establishment of a more up-to-date relation between audience and actors and thus the perception of the theatre event. The three non-institutional collectives (the Experimental Theatre of Balbina Baranovič, Oder 57 (Stage 57) and the Ad hoc Theatre of Draga Ahačič) presented the first wave of the theatre experiment in the years 1955–1967. These collectives (all with professional theatre actors) arose from direct correspondence with the institutional production, more precisely as its alternative – they took an oppositional stance, especially towards the rigidity of the so-called “Burgtheater acting manner”, which dominated the Slovenian National Theatre in Ljubljana. Performing what would be impossible to stage within the institution, they anticipated the future by encouraging new repertoire possibilities and modifying the general artistic paradigm. Their persistent “blows” ended the absence of the avant-garde activity. Eventually, they led to the strengthening of cultural pluralism and the capabilities of the national theatre context as a whole.

Performing in the Knight’s Hall, the apparently marginal space in the eminent, centrally located cultural complex Križanke in the Ljubljana city centre, ascribed by the local authorities, played a role of key importance. After WWII, the Knight’s Hall, the oldest venue in Ljubljana, was designated for experimental theatre groups that were not part of institutions.¹ In 1952–1956, the architect Jože Plečnik adapted the interior of the former monastery of the Order of Teutonic Knights, built in the 13th century. The

¹ Jesenko, Primož. “The Edge in the Centre (Theatre Experimentation in the Knight’s Hall in the Križanke Complex 1955–1972).” In: *Occupying Spaces: Experimental theatre in Central Europe: 1950–2010*. Ljubljana: National Theatre Museum of Slovenia, 2010. p. 470–521.

Knight's Hall, a simple, ascetic, long room with three windows on every side that was used as the former monastery's refectory, was located on the edge of the complex as well (Plečnik focused chiefly on the open atrium). The paper will take a closer look at the imposed logistics ("production model") of many co-existent theatre collectives on the same stage. Thus, the social and theatrical perception of the non-institutional theatre groups in the 1950s and 1960s provided the continual appropriation of the alternative theatre modes into the institutional framework.

Having this in mind, a brief note about the complex story of experimental theatre in Slovenia is necessary. The theatre of a nation which only exceeds two million inhabitants usually surpasses the awareness of cultural phenomena and fails to meet the broader interest of the global context. The Yugoslav cultural scene after 1945 very often included Slovene theatre into the broader picture of Yugoslav theatre. In this way, a clear distinction between different republics of the state went missing. Nevertheless, the results of Yugoslav artistic creativity that stemmed from Slovenian theatre artists were chosen to appear and got presented on the international theatre floor as the most representative achievements of Yugoslav theatre. The conditions that allowed the growth and evolution of Slovenian theatre mastery have all along – and since the 1920s, even more so – been already privileged from the geographical point of view. Due to their closeness and the ongoing need to take part and interact with (neighbouring) cultural happenings, trends and currents outside of Slovenia, the whole cultural identity of Slovenian artists has been shaped differently ever since the painter August Černigoj's stay at the Bauhaus in 1924 (for financial reasons, his presence at the renowned art school was cut short after only three months). This experience proved Černigoj a creative sponge and presented a model of how the influences of inspirational foreign artistic impulses enter an "autochthonous" culture. This subtle, indirect way has left significant traces on the Slovenian artistic scene – always adding a specific additional trait of the original local creative context at its base, while its spirit draws recognisable traits from the encountered creative current.

At the institutional level, connections of Slovenian theatre with the rest of Yugoslavia were prolonged after 1945. However, the situation in 1952 was critically observed in newspapers by Herbert Grün: "Any visits of renowned stars are fully absent." But the artistic staff had to be allowed to look around the world: "There is no quality theatre that could live like a bear in hibernation just from its own hall. Every central theatre also lives from living initiatives from major centres of theatrical activity. In the past, contacts with the world have raised our central theatre from the provincial level to the European one".² The dialectic of transformations was realised in Ljubljana by regular hosting of theatres from all over the world and from other capitals of Yugoslavia (guest visits followed the pattern of return visits in an agreed time). The longing for representative tours from the West was pronounced. Grün elaborated further: "The touring policy has

² Grün, Herbert. "Dramaturgija province (Iz izkušenj Prešernovega gledališča v Kranju)." *Naši razgledi*, 26. 7. 1952. p. 16–8.

already provided us with many instructive experiences. For example, we could see at least the most important European (and also some non-European) theatres.”

Internally, the history of theatre experiments in Slovenia was also a result of connections between institutional and non-institutional activities in the period after 1950. This period was continuously stimulated by contact with creative currents outside of Slovenia, or rather outside Yugoslavia. The times were also defined utilitarianly and felt the need for an immediate gain of a positive influence in return, possibly with an exemplary performance of the home house. A clear insight into the phenomenon of artistic influences in a certain period remains rather hypothetical and elusive. Visits and guest performances to neighbouring performative spaces are crucial and confirm the importance of the theatre medium’s ability to trespass national borders. To grasp a definable dialectics of these changes, a precise reconstruction of guest performances and interactions between them would be necessary – but a thorough reflection in this respect (that would include the way how tours were perceived in public and how they enabled a slow yet continual change in aesthetic perception) is difficult, especially if we wish to avoid a line of the imaginary.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that experimental theatre groups in the 1960s were included in the programmes of Yugoslav theatre festivals as equivalent act(or)s – even though their presentations may have seemed difficult and unrealistic from financial, infrastructural points of view. Already in 1961, this was not the case in Yugoslavia: experimental performances from Slovenia were considered since their substance, and formal presentation was adequately appropriated to the institutional performing stance and could thus equally compete with them. Moreover, the approach of the experimental theatre community functioned as a novelty and exceeded the patterns of the institution. The notion of professionalism needed no new definition.

After 1955 when international visits became a regular practice in Yugoslavia, they also served the role of an experience of the variety of different theatre conceptualisations. Yugoslavia – and consequently Slovenia – consciously did not decide on isolation and remote observation but on active and creative involvement in world cultural and artistic trends, which creates dependence on the mutual flow of forces and impulses. A frequent venue for the tours in Ljubljana was the Opera house (situated in the former Provinzialtheater/Deželno gledališče, built in 1892). An organised network of Yugoslav theatres was arranged for renowned theatre groups and artists from abroad to perform in Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana. Over time, Ljubljana received both foreign tours and opportunities for return tours in the remaining two cities, both of which played an important artistic and cultural-political role.³

³ Some names of the prominent guests after 1945: Burgtheatre Vienna, Théâtre National Populaire Paris, Beijing Classical Theatre, MHAT Moscow, Piccolo teatro Milano, José Limón Dance Company, folklore groups from Indonesia, Ukraine, France, Hungary, Shanghai Opera, Academic Choir of Oslo, choir from Guinea, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre Stratford, Narodni divadlo Praga, Old Vic Theatre London.

In the meantime, the central institution heightened its pride with outstanding success on another level. In 1956, the most representative performance in the country was sent to the second edition of Paris festival Théâtre des Nations: there, Slavko Jan's staging of Cankar's *The Serfs* (originally presented in 1948 at the SNT Ljubljana Drama, it had 109 repetitions) was recognised as a model example of a refined realistic direction, it exceeded all expectations of Parisian visitors. The perception of the professional public in Western Europe, and a foreign spectator in general, was based on ideologically motivated stereotypes that shaped a dialectic according to which theatre from Yugoslavia was considered an "exotic" from a socialist state whose stage results could offer no surprise whatsoever. However, lesser-known aspirations spoke of overcoming this prejudice. Lojze Filipič, the dramaturg heavily involved in introducing the modern dramaturgical concept into Slovenian theatre, writes about the participation of the Ljubljana Academy of Performing Arts (AIU) at the University Theatre Festival in Erlangen, Bavaria, already in 1952, where AIU resounded as one of the top European theatre academies.

But above all, the transformation of the Slovenian theatre context appeared through the activities of agile individuals who, with their sophistication and non-conformist personal attitude, shifted the horizon. First, by drawing attention to the established genre, stylistic and writing approaches happening place abroad, such as the theatre in the round or the introduction of choreographed movement into stage expression, as well as the drama novelties that were about to change the face of the global theatre world. At this point, the experimental theatre groups that formed their activity method in the mode of the experimental community as healers took the situation into their own hands.⁴

In the period 1955–1967, the three non-institutional collectives – the Experimental Theatre of Balbina Batellino Baranović, Oder 57 (Stage 57) and Ad hoc Theatre of Draga Ahačič – introduced the first wave of experimental theatre, which developed as an alternative to the central theatre institution in Ljubljana with its rigid acting

4 The search for different possibilities of theatrical representation was simultaneously taking place on different geographical levels of the Slovenian theatre context. On the level of theatre institutions, the theatre community proved active and successful in meeting its goal. In Trieste/Trst, the performance of *Brez tretjega* by the Croatian author Milan Begović was staged in January 1956 (directed by Jože Babič). The play was designed for the theatre in the round format and proved that the Slovene Permanent Theatre in Trieste was "capable of taking on the role of an avant-garde theatre". The Trieste staging was the third Slovenian example of "the theatre in the round" and meant a risky (and courageous) attempt of a genre novelty outside Ljubljana – before the première in Trieste, Baranović even published an extensive article on the phenomenon of the theatre-in-the-round and its growing out of desire for new stage expression – as if to make the city ready for this effort to return to the origin, "to the oldest form – to the circle", as shown in the USA and by the European theatre reformators. Baranović embodied the potential of an experimental community but her failure in Celje was instructive enough. The critical response in Trieste was in favor of the avant-garde, while the response of the Trieste audience was less enthusiastic about the modernisation, imposed upon the conventional theatre. The performance was presented at the 4th Ljubljana Festival (July 1956) in the Knight's Hall of Križanke and in Koper and Maribor; later, Fran Žižek also adapted the staging of Jože Babič for television broadcast. In 1957, another staging of *Brez tretjega* was announced at the Celje City Theatre (where *Attentat* was unsuccessful in 1953); but in order to show an even greater ambition, *Rok and Lea*, another play for theatre in the round was now written by Janez Žmavc, an author from Celje, and staged in 1960.

method (the so-called Burgtheater style) and its non-inventive repertoire programme. In doing so, they ended the absence of avant-garde activity, modified the general artistic paradigm, and finally strengthened pluralism in the performing arts.

The generational gap

Balbina Battelino Baranovič (1921–2015) began her studies in Vienna at the Institut für Theaterwissenschaft already before WWII. She was thus shaped by the German context and by the classical outlook on theatre. Being educated in Vienna gave Battelino Baranovič a different view of the theatre. She directed her last production on Slovenian stages in 1969. The attention for the aesthetics of over a decade of work at the Experimental Theatre became scarce after 1960. Baranovič deliberately withdrew when she became aware of the specific unresponsiveness and non-recognition of the environment in which she worked. The absent sense of community among artists that she felt stemmed from harsh differences in the aesthetic approach. There was no connection between the creators who belonged to different generations (Baranovič was a decade older than the members of the so-called critical generation who founded Oder 57). The heated political context also made any way of interaction between them impossible.

At first, Oder 57 united the generational representatives of the interwar period (1918–1941), the exemplary one among them being Jože Javoršek (b. 1920), who takes credit for the inception of Eugène Ionesco to Slovenian stage in 1958 (*Učna ura/La Leçon*). At that time, Javoršek was distinctively close to the Oder 57 personnel – Taras Kermauner (b. 1930) later defined this affinity of Javoršek as “the genius”, which was more modern than the prevailing playwrights.⁵ Javoršek (similar to Balbina Battelino Baranovič and Draga Ahačič, b. 1924) was a decade older than Kermauner’s generation, a generation that was congenial with the collaborators of the socially proactive journal *Perspektive* (Perspectives). Javoršek’s expertise on current artistic waves and the initiation of Ionesco as the herald of progressive drama and theatre innovativeness left a significant trace after he parted from Oder 57. The progressive steps initiated via the attachment to contemporary drama writing did not at first stage include Slovenian plays: the inaugural piece was by Ionesco (dir. Žarko Petan, 1958). According to Marjan Rožanc, the relation to Slovenian drama was not yet fully defined. At first, the presentations of foreign plays played an informative role and influenced the authors of Oder 57.⁶ Javoršek’s publicistic era and his theatre critique (1953–1957) hints at his congruity with experimental groups. Still, more

⁵ Kermauner, Taras. *Kristus in Dioniz: razprava o slovenski dramatikii zadnjega pol stoletja*. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1990. pp. 17–18.

⁶ “Round table: Oder 57”, in: *Maske* 1989, no. 12. p. 23.

doubt can be raised by his eventual crossing over to the gravitational field of Josip Vidmar (b. 1895), the patriarch of criticism in the 1960s, who had no understanding of modernist drama. The francophile Javoršek, who was greatly influenced by the French drama of the absurd and Ionesco's texts on new theatre writing, partly shared the tendencies of the younger generation. On the other hand, he never took part in uttering the social criticism that was felt as essential and unconditional to Kermauner (less by the remaining part of Oder 57). In contrast, Kermauner grew his ties with the cultural scene in a centripetal manner (in the "manner of a mycelium," as he called it).

The intent for a revolution of the aesthetic expression, which in its dramaturgy opposed the bourgeois theatre, persisted and was consistent. Likewise, the generational differences between the authors remained since this affiliation was likely to defeat even the strongest inclination for change within the given state of things. This side of divergence/discrepancy persists, as can explicitly be observed in the case of experimental groups, even though its authors indirectly spoke of that or were not conscious about it. The problematic "theatre instant" was too topical and too serious. The younger authors more distinctly felt this mood. They nevertheless did not wish to utter it in the metatextual dimensions of their writings (journals) and their stage realisations, as the temper of the transformational intent did not allow it. The proactive striving maintained a decent level of communication. Younger authors did not negate, denounce or cancel older associates with different horizons and moments of inertia since they formed an alliance and wanted to retain the imperative of respectful distance. This is why the mutual bluster against the given state of theatre omitted the generational split as an argument. Every message was passed indirectly, candidly. The points of differences were not destructively argued. The parameters of dissent were simply not articulated.

The organisation of the infrastructural conditions for art, which was created outside the public institutions and drew attention to the narrowness of the "official" theatres, shows the rudiments of the unenviable situation that non-institutional theatres still experience today. Their production found a home in a centrally-located but relatively inadequate space within the former monastery complex in Križanke. This became a creative focal point and the scene of a wide range of culturally and socially significant events. It was also a time of many unrealised initiatives and doubts about the work of the experimental groups that set makeshifts, fragmented, burdened with financial, spatial and technical difficulties and demanding endless compromises. Nevertheless, the theatrical concepts of experimental groups continuously influenced the SNT Drama to break away from many conventions. The 1960s' audience recognised that the work of the first non-institutional groups was in the community's interest. As the case of Oder 57 shows, these had no difficulty articulating their interests, at least in terms of content. After that, in the second half of the 1960s, theatre activities in Slovenia spread in several directions.

Sources of influential impulses between national theatre horizons in Europe were at that point determined only partly. The time was too fresh, too “young” for that, even though considerable inspiration could be felt from France. This influence was first recognised by experimental theatres that appeared as the ones with courage and vigour that sufficiently started to invade the Slovenian theatre performing. The example of Ionesco is very telling. After his first appearance in Slovenia (as well as Yugoslavia) with *Učna ura* (La Leçon) at Oder 57 in 1958, SNT Drama affirmed its caution by staging Ionesco’s *Žeja in lakota* (La Soif et la faim) only in 1967. The director was again Žarko Petan; the staging of Ionesco’s most recent play (from 1966) confirmed the prompt and up-to-date approach of the institution but appeared “cautiously”. This later work by Ionesco had already exposed the playwright’s weaker impact; in the meantime, he had become an established European author, thus showing that Oder 57 had captured the revolutionary traits of Ionesco’s novelties at the right time. In 1967, the institutional theatre was only trying to recapture the surpassed bewildering drama strength of the author. The same situation appeared with Beckett’s arrival. His *Čakajoč Godota* (Waiting for Godot, 1952) was famously staged at Atelje 212 in Belgrade in 1958, the inception of Beckett on Yugoslav stages. On the other hand, Slovenian theatre first decided for his *Konec igre* (Fin de Partie, 1957) at the Experimental Theatre of Balbina Baranovič in 1961, while *Godot* entered the SNT Drama only in 1968, in the direction of institutional director France Jamnik. In this sense, the cautiousness of the central theatre institution in Slovenia twice proved a superfluous brake.

Balbina Battelino Baranovič

After the war, having witnessed the invasion of Vienna by the Red Army, Balbina Battelino Baranovič immediately tried to “smuggle” the production model of the “theatre in the round” to Slovenia. She first tried this novelty in 1953 at the municipal theatre in Celje. The artistic director Lojze Filipič offered her “carte blanche”. However, the response to the first experimental approach after 1945 in Celje was limited. The experimental staging concept, which tried to “adapt theatre-in-the-round to Slovene conditions”,⁷ failed to mobilise additional audiences. Perhaps it even drove them away – because the public in Celje felt suspicious of the term “experiment” and needed to be grasped with a pre-set methodology, even though Baranovič chose to stage a thriller *Attentat!* (1935) by Swiss author Willy O. Somin which was supposed to attract even more. The performance was a flop. It did not even help that the actual première (in its yearning for exclusiveness) took place outside the usual black box in the theatre’s newly renovated foyer. Only the repeat performances took place on the central stage,

⁷ Battelino Baranovič, Balbina. “Gledališče v krogu pri nas.” Theatre programme for *Mož, žena in smrt*, no. 2 (1955/56).

where the stage setting and auditorium were next to each other. This only made Balbina realise the necessity of moving to Ljubljana to meet and address a different, more “worldly” audience. She wanted the audience to feel what she had experienced in Paris while watching a group from Philadelphia. It was exactly the stereotypes that Baranovič was trying to leave out.

The Cultural Department of the Municipality of Ljubljana administration enabled her to work within the framework of Križanke. The first performance in the capital in 1955 (which was also the first performance in the Knight’s Hall) was a dramatisation of Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin*. It was presented as a rather traditional example of literary theatre. As Vasja Predan noted, the performance was “in many ways a direct transfer of the ‘conventional’ interpretation to a round platform”.⁸ The basic guideline for initiating the circular stage layout was the loosening of the rigid staging expression in central institutions in the mid-1950s that locked actors at a distance from the spectator. The theatre-in-the-round was received well, although some critics expressed concerns since performances have hinted that not all drama plays are suitable for this format and that selectivity in this regard was necessary.

The Experimental Theatre’s mobilising element existed in its good actors. They belonged to younger generations not tied to the routine of the traditional German theatre. For them, the round stage, the closeness of the audience and the rapid conversational style were not a hindrance. Moreover, the repertoire was not that far from what the audience was used to from the Slovene National Theatre programmes. Battelino Baranovič reached further, but not too far; in a way, the eclectic nature of the programme was without any particular connection to the modernist tradition. A more marked radical approach could thus be found in the organisation of this “new theatre” rather than in the stage result. Even though the Experimental Theatre signified a deviation from the established form and strove for aesthetic autonomy, its content did not explicitly include a different equation suitable to the spirit of the time. The ideological stance was not emphasised. The group did not explicitly dispute traditional theatre, the bourgeoisie or the Communist Party (the Central Committee had a few tickets booked for every performance). But in fact, the performances of Experimental Theatre could easily be included in the programme of the Ljubljana Festival as the grand summer event in Ljubljana with an intended international resound.

The director of SNT Drama, Slavko Jan, thus called Battelino Baranovič two years after her theatre first appeared and proposed that the two theatres merge. She rejected the proposal out of fear that, within a large institution, they would no longer be able to work according to their established model. In a talk with representatives from the Ministry of Culture, she insisted that it was not possible. “I knew that if we moved to

⁸ V. P., “Gledališče v krogu.” *Ljudska pravica*, 21 June 1955.

Mala drama (the SNT Drama small stage), it would backfire on us.” After this, she did not believe that her Experimental Theatre would survive. The SNT Drama theatre kept wishing to establish an experimental stage and finally did so in 1963 (Mala drama).⁹

Aesthetic contributions made by the Experimental Theatre in the mid-1950s provided the objective change upon which the experimental groups later built. Also, the relation to particular foreign prominent theatres that visited Ljubljana to provide examples of stable contemporary theatre production suddenly received representative theatre of genuine Slovenian “counterparts”. The situation was turned upside down. It happened almost immediately and simultaneously, most of all due to Balbina Baranovič’s design of the staged programme. This was possible because the anchor point of Battelino Baranovič’s staging procedure was literature which allowed the introduction of up-to-date authors and, at the same time, tried out classical authors who were granted a good promise already with their names. Baranovič was updated with new authors who were invading French stages of that time, and this is why her approach seemed logical and unpretentious: after Zola’s *Therese Raquin* (1955), Plato’s *Last Days of Socrates* (1957) and Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun* (1958), Goethe’s *Faust* (1959) followed, the second staging of the text in Slovenia (after the performance by Osip Šest in 1929), which in agreement with Festival Ljubljana was this time staged as a rather lively ambient performance in the foyer of Križanke. *Faust* offered something quite contrary to the usual perception of theatre medium as a pathway to stiff academic events with less spark. The choreographic interventions of Henrik Neubauer resulted in a non-stereotypical performance, where dance appeared in every scene on a stage surrounded by the audience on four sides. It thus provoked the general imagination and provided an incentive for future work in this direction.¹⁰ This performance was followed by a staging of F. G. Lorca’s poetry (1960), Beckett’s *Endgame* (1961), Albee’s *Zoo Story* (1962), Dylan Thomas’ *Under Milk Wood* (1963) – authors who were soon taken over and integrated into the programmes of institutions. A soft but recognisable scent of elitism thus led to this sort of experimental theatre production. Alongside the outstanding collaborators (translators, actors), even the invited choreographers figured as best of their profession.

9 Another theatre founded in 1955 and artistically led by Balbina Battelino Baranovič was the Mladinsko Theatre. It also staged its first performances in the Knight’s Hall. The first idea for such a theatre arose because of education: it was intended to stage occasional theatre performances for children and young people. The first four performances were tied to the activities of the children’s Pionirska Knjižnica (Pioneer Library) and were actually just the final production by extracurricular drama classes, where the young participants appeared together with professional actors from the SNT Drama and the Ljubljana City Theatre. We could even talk about the activities of a “theatre-in-the-round” for the “pioneers”, within the limitations provided by the young actors. The Experimental Theatre and the Mladinsko Theatre developed in parallel: a theatre for adults with a progressive outlook and a theatre aimed at the young.

10 “The Knight’s Hall seemed just a fraction too small,” remembers Battelino Baranovič. “The foyer, on the other hand, did not function as a Greek amphitheatre, but as a Roman arena. Some people sat on balconies, even on the pavilion roof. I went around, also asking my colleagues to do the same, to see how the whole functioned in this space and the experience was incredible. We had two repeat performances, sadly, no more.” (“Balbina Battelino Baranovič: ‘Ozko usmerjeni in enostransko izobraženi ljudje niso v posebno korist, kultura in umetnost zahtevata široko oblikovanega človeka. Takih v tistem času ni bilo veliko.” In: Jesenko, *The Edge in the Centre*, p. 297.)

Oder 57

After the francophile Jože Javoršek withdrew from Oder 57, Taras Kermauner took over the tactical management of this group of like-minded theatre practitioners in 1959. It was clear to him that Oder 57 needed to be laid on new foundations: on questioning the problems of the current social environment with which the audience could identify, and at the same time include dealing with issues of a historical moment that seemed common across Europe. This brought a significant change in the ideological and programmatic orientation and perspective of Oder 57; the “critical generation” got mobilised by the philosophical foundations of existentialism and modernism. This required a different type of playwriting. This is why it established close ties with the circle of emerging writers: it strengthened the generational commitment and the will for political and organisational engagement in society. The analytical approach desentimentalised the theatrical expression. The dilemma of “Aristotelian postulates: pro and contra” became secondary. The chamber stage style came to the fore, with a play without pathos, pursuing a non-illusionist visual image. The orientation and vision of the (predominantly male) Oder 57 were more rigorous and articulated.

In 1962, Kermauner, the principal theoretical proponent of Oder 57, focused on the very distinction between two types of experimental theatre:

It is questionable whether this loosened experimentation is essential if, through all this, a regeneration of the theatre, a return of truth to the theatre has been achieved. If it is not just a secondary, technical activity, which any official, the already existing bourgeois theatre could apply and adapt to its goals? (And the facts show us that the official theatres do precisely this, but they still do not exceed their limitations.)¹¹

No one is mentioned explicitly, but the following makes it clear to where such an evaluation pointed: “What is needed is confrontation, comparison. And even at this point, we can eliminate all those theatrical endeavours, which are experimental only in technical terms – externally – but which, in fact, follow the same goals as the official theatres.”

Foreign drama accentuated the insufficiency of the traditional psychological realism in theatre and drove to considerations of different directorial and acting approaches to performing on stage. This continually shaped the idea, which Vasja Predan retrospectively labelled as the main thesis of Oder 57: theatre – as an emancipated art form which grows out of itself and is pledged to its theatrical structural sense – should and may not rely solely on reproducing literature, but should also do more than just present a mirror image of reality.¹²

¹¹ Kermauner, Taras. “Kaj je današnje eksperimentalno gledališče?” *Perspektive*, no. 17 (1961/62): 885–8.

¹² Predan, Vasja. *Slovenska dramska gledališča*. Ljubljana: Mestno gledališče ljubljansko [Knjižnica MGL], 1996. p. 136.

In the experimental community, differences persisted, but these did not spring out, neither on the plane of the mutual solidarity nor did their rationale allow them to b(l)oom further. Since the activity parameters of Oder 57 followed an entirely professional approach, it is interesting to note that in his later writings (in the 1970s), Kermauner refused to label the performances of Oder 57 as “experiments” and attributed this term a pejorative undertone.

Community worked!

Due to the activities of three experimental and other theatre groups,¹³ the Knight’s Hall became a cultural centre, in which several events were organised and performed every year. Draga Ahačič also found herself within this framework and focused her Ad hoc Theatre on staging (new) French drama. As recipients of all these (sub) cultural activities, educated people, artists, students, youth and others met in the Knight’s Hall. This experimental theatre domain was visited by a permanent and very heterogeneous audience of 1,000 to 1,500 people annually. The Knight’s Hall was also open for various other events, conversations and debates (not only) on cultural issues. The fact that the city (and state) enabled the operation of experimental groups offers a more democratic – and externally representative – image of Yugoslavia (and Slovenia) from an international perspective.

As a space designated for the (theatrical) experiment, the Knight’s Hall enacted the thesis that architecture and urbanism are “privileged areas of ideology”. Hence, the directors of cultural policy in Ljubljana in 1955 acted wisely. The constitution of a creative gathering point that marks the urban context neither marginalised experimental theatre to the margins of cultural policy interest, nor did it enact the tendency to totalise in the name of a single, dominant aesthetic. It became inhabited by theatre discourses, with which the artists searched for different possibilities related to the cultural field. In this sense, theatrical art was considered as something special; in many ways, it was attributed to a representative role and position among the arts. The precondition for a community was thus fulfilled. Until the designation of premises on Gregorčičeva ulica 3 for the Experimental Theatre Glej in 1983 – and from today’s point of view –, the Knight’s Hall was a sheer delicacy.

¹³ As the theatre forces were modernised and actualised, the borders between amateurism and professionalism (at least for the authorities in power) were not clearly formulated. Several phenomena existed, such as the Artisan Stage (Obrtniški oder), the Worker’s Stage (Delavski oder) and the various incarnations of informal theatre groups led by the actor Jurij Souček, that all expanded the purview of performing practices at the time.

Points of difference

The discussion “On Some Problems of Slovene Theatre” by Kermauner (published in four sequels in the *Perspektive* journal in 1961 and 1962) gives a comprehensive anamnesis of the state of theatre production in Slovenia and turns the established hierarchy of values upside down. He no longer uses the provocative and declarative manifesto form but analyses it realistically and critically.¹⁴ As Kermauner later admitted, this led to a rather one-sided and reductive view of our own ideas; this is one of the reasons why the “anti-perspective” mood awoke among people, no matter how unreflected it was. The point of difference was “thought” – this was, as Peter Božič points out, “the only possible and active weapon that could destroy a closed and ideological totalitarian system, which at most resembles a closed pressure pot in which everything is cooked in a few seconds in the gravel. I saw that vigorously in the theatrical production of the middle generation, which, especially its literary part, completely gave up thinking.”¹⁵

This included a rather minimalist design of the set and the absence of colours (“black and white” photography) since the designated set was not perceived as a crucial constituent of theatre presentation at Oder 57. The actual aim was to simplify and shrink the visual information to a single perspective and light tone, which in its basic concept and creative attitude tried to comment on the current sociopolitical situation in the country. However, Oder 57’s interaction with political authorities followed a specific dialectics of a game that was experienced daily, a game of power play, incentive, pretence or even bluff. Politicians took up the role of constant staging where actual moves are being taken in the background. Nevertheless, the socialist authorities in Slovenia can not be labelled as the enemies of Slovenian theatre.

While the methodology of Balbina Baranovič relied on the act of doing, of an immediate act, Oder 57 was the most conceptually consolidated group of all. It was supported by the journal *Perspektive*, which brought together a group of intellectually strong, partly established playwrights, essayists, philosophers, sociologists: Taras Kermauner, Dominik Smole, Veljko Rus, Dane Zajc, Peter Božič, Primož Kozak, etc., stood out. As a result, the group was strong in its conceptual orientation, the strongest in the early post-WWII period. The state took them seriously as otherwise unpleasant but respectable interlocutors. The Oder 57 member Mija Janžekovič, director and later television documentary filmmaker, recalls that the Oder 57 collective did not closely observe the activities of other experimental groups. They went to see some of their performances, but mostly did not discuss them or their authors. This is why one can

¹⁴ Kermauner, Taras. “O nekaterih problemih sodobnega gledališča (I-IV)”. *Perspektive* no. 1. 9–10 (1960/61). *Perspektive* no. II. 11–12 (1961/62).

¹⁵ Božič, Peter. “Iluzija in vizija sta meso postal”. In: *Oder 57: pričevanja*. Ljubljana: Mestno gledališče ljubljansko, 1988. p. 48.

hardly speak of aggression or competition between the groups. Antagonisms never surfaced. In a rather abstract sense, they formed a community, but every group was busy realising their intentions in front of a relatively small but steady, loyal audience.

Such were the general dynamics between groups and also the understanding of the community that stemmed from the organisation and the ideological priorities. Agreements that concerned the shared space of the Knight's Hall were made by mutual consent, and the activities were carried out at a relatively fixed rhythm. There were hardly any differences of opinion, conflicts or distrust among the co-users of these premises, so there was no need to resolve any situation by compromise. The artists felt good in this visually far from alternative space, better than in an institution. The venue offered a certain privacy in which they could work quite intensively for a limited period of time: occupy the hall, carry out their business, and then leave the venue to those who came after them. The use of the hall varied: between theatre performances, there were musical events, and in 1958, Janžekovič even attended a discussion after the miners' strike from Trbovlje. This was the first (and perhaps the only) strike after 1945, and Janžekovič remembers a similar charge of rebellion from this discussion as from the première of *Antigone*.

A slight dialogue with the individual enlightened representatives of the authorities existed. Partly, the theatre experiment seemed like an intrusion of the West and that the spirit of the time was trespassing borders. The group members could feel their tense relationship with authorities. But these latent pressures and uncertainties did not hinder the groups from performing. The police called a few of them after the evening *Ivan Cankar and Slovenian Actors* (which happened three weeks before the violent shutdown of Oder 57 at the première of *Topla Greda*, April 1964), in which almost the entire set of Slovenian professional actors performed. Still, amongst themselves, they did not even speak about it.

At Oder 57, the tactics of self-censorship were never used. Connections to the Yugoslav area existed: Oder 57 and Ad hoc Theatre also attended Sterijino Pozorje in 1962, the central Yugoslav theatre festival in Novi Sad (with productions *Vojaka Jošta ni* by Peter Božič and *Afera* by Primož Kozak, 1961) – on this occasion, Oder 57 was completely synonymous to institutional theatres. (In 1964, Oder 57 also visited the International Theatre Festival in Sarajevo, with *Kaznjenci* by Peter Božič.) The inclusion of experimental groups into festival programme selections was not the only gesture of acknowledgement, giving the group a specific weight – they even took home awards. In the 1960s, actor Jurij Souček won five awards for acting and directing at the principal Yugoslav theatre festivals (in Sarajevo and Novi Sad). Two of these were for his roles in experimental theatre groups. In this way, theatre contributed to the permeability of the system. Something was leaking on all sides; the genie wanted to get

out of the bottle. With such micro-interventions, experimental theatres contributed to the continual changing of the system. Political power in Slovenia seemed to change more quickly than in other parts of Yugoslavia.

Jurij Souček (b. 1929), who was one of the central bearers of the modern acting style at Oder 57, Ad hoc Theatre and at the same time a member of the Slovenian National Theatre, also established his first theatre group in 1966. Likewise, the group used very basic, self-arranged or re-arranged props and costumes, in collaboration with many emerging visual artists. It was fuelled mainly by the enthusiasm of its members (studying and performing after their regular job in theatre ended for the day and without being paid). The activity of Souček sets an example of the interaction between institutional and non-institutional theatre scenes in the 1960s. It is a sign of how both “communities” strove for the same goal despite heavy infrastructural differences and indirect (yet obvious) interactions. The experimental scene was equipping the institution with binding forms and contents.

The experimental theatre groups that appeared in Ljubljana in the second half of the 1950s were originally dependent on contributions received from the city and republic authorities (the fund aimed at accelerating cultural activities), but later also on sponsors. There was thus awareness about the culturally important work they were performing (the contractually determined number of repeat performances co-financed by the Municipal People’s Committee amounted to ten in the years 1963 and 1964). Each group had to annually submit an application containing their repertoire to the Ljubljana Cultural Community. But despite the recognition in the press that short bursts of creativity were not the way to organise the cultural sector, no noteworthy financial support was forthcoming. In *Perspektive*, Ahačič described the experimental search for new forms of expression as too casual, fragmented, and full of financial and spatial difficulties that demanded constant compromise.¹⁶ (Ahačič was also looking for a separate space for her group, planned to open a basement theatre, but failed because the financial support was cut off in 1964.)

The described narrative tells the story of the broader network (community) of creative happenings. However, the analysis confirms that Slovenian authorities – although they followed the prescribed ideological principles and from time to time exhibited their dominating methods – allowed this diversity. This was a prerequisite for the growth of Slovenian theatre in the modern and urban sense, in line with foreign trends. Precisely with experimental groups, especially with the theatre activities of Oder 57 at the beginning of the 1960s, the field of art became creatively independent to such an extent that the regime was no longer able to impact the groups directly, not even the institutional theatres.

¹⁶ Ahačič, Draga. “Slovensko sodobno gledališče.” *Perspektive* (1960/61), pp. 1129–1133.

The silent interaction of experimental groups with two main institutional theatres in Ljubljana actually took place the whole time. Soon after 1955, the experimental qualibrator played a visible role in shaping the genre of intimate performances in Slovenian regional theatres. The principle of cultural regionalisation was very present in the cultural scene after WWII.

The community and communitarian relations were very different from how these terms are perceived in the current mediatised world of the accentuated calling for public attention where the arsenal of knowledge, at least its basic traits, can easily be attained via the world wide web. Since 1955, the activity of experimental groups has stemmed from the notion of resistance that was, however, not calculated with public exposure or managerially devoted to refined networking. The collaborators were not driven by the impulse of the struggle to survive; the core of their innovation/novelty was creating and performing new drama pieces. However, they did not feel the urge to surpass or undo the social system in the manner of a direct confrontation with it.

The memory of the war condition and the decade of radical manifestations of Nazi fascism was still fresh; its political and social consequences meant too serious a deviation from all humanistic principles. In the world structure after 1945, the notion of a culture expert did not yet exist, neither were there studies and conclusions on the real quality of human life. Doubt in the notion of the human as the “big idea” was the most vivid in the empirical experience of the survivors of concentration camps.

Mija Janžekovič, 4 May 2021

Mija Janžekovič recalls:

Speaking of the communitarian moment in the context of experimental theatre groups and the institution and their theatre approach in the years 1955–1967 seems rather strained/forced since the current understanding of community is somewhat completely different. The reality was much more simple. An idea appeared, was developed and carried out piece after piece. The structure of the programme was flexible. The addressed values were inscribed in texts. This procedure went on year after year, without a previously determined plan or pretensions. There was also not only one individual who would lead Oder 57. The stage did not have a sole ideologist; the group was far from homogeneous, which is crucial for reflecting on this phenomenon. Oder 57 only had “an operator” who managed all individual projects. Oder 57 was happening in a spontaneous, organic, natural way, simultaneously, gradually, unified. After having gained financial support, a group was formed that would stage a certain play. We got along splendidly when we worked, but otherwise, it was all about various interest groups that collaborated with each other. Concentrated thought, sheer asceticism, took the forefront. This type of drama had no vast audience and did not necessarily address

the masses. Oder 57 was slowly withering. Eventually, it would wither away on its own; the exemplary drama can not be produced indefinitely. The mission/enterprise was over after four or five seasons. Strivings lasted this long.

It was all held up by very scarce means, the actors got only a small fee, but this meant a lot. It is impossible to talk of the supposedly lead times in the 1960s; such interpretations are given too much attention. It is important to recognise the meaning of the existence of Oder 57 and its accomplishments in a long-term historical light. Of course, the institutions further developed the medium of theatre. An experiment is always an experiment if we decide to call it this way (this category was initially not used by Oder 57 and appeared later). The core was foremostly the contemporary, free spirit that always radiates from an independent theatre group and trespasses to the institution subsequently. Individual spirits joined, the institution noticed them, attested and integrated them into its own approach and working technique. At this point, the experimental mission was already over. Experimental stages are a short-lived phenomenon.

Meetings took place at the seat of *Perspektive* (above the bookshop of Državna založba Slovenije close to the City Hall) since the domain in Križanke needs to be paid additionally: at the Pod lipco inn, often in the “smoky kitchen” at Mija and Savo Janžekovič in Rožna ulica, after the end of the night rehearsal. Everyone respected other groups. They knew each other, occasionally went to see each other’s premières and performances, and the plays of Oder 57 in which one was not participating. They discussed them internally as strong, designed personalities yet abstained from all other contacts with each other. When a piece was being staged, they hung about with each other more, as grown-up friends not. Balbina figured as an interesting theatre madame; the communication was polite. The interaction with leading structures of Drama was missing. Later, only Taras Kermauner (he directed *Otroka reke* by Dane Zajc, took part in Peter Božič’s *Vojaka Jošta ni*, dir. Žarko Petan) formed this link. In 1970, he (for three months) became the artistic leader of Drama but realised that this profession did not suit him, so he returned to the call of a free writer. Already in 1964, Kermauner did not take sides in current political happenings; he skipped the première of *Topla greda* and kept a low profile. At the same time, Petan started to direct fresh drama pieces from the United States (Albee, Kesselring, Kopit) in 1963, in the programme of Drama and Mala drama (which at that time had its domains in the Knight’s Hall), to great success.

Bojan Štih, the head of Drama (1962–1969), was not fond of experimental groups. As Janžekovič tried to pin the flier of the première of Peter Božič’s *Kaznjenci* (The Convicts, 1963), which she directed at Oder 57 (the majority of actors came from Drama), onto the noticeboard of Drama at its reception, Štih loudly expelled her from the building.¹⁷ The mutual influence between the institution and the experimental scene and the

¹⁷ The fury of Štih was an obvious sign of antagonism which in later years ceased and was “forgotten” already in the 1970s when Janžekovič filmed a TV documentary on *Revolutionary Songs of the World* and also included Štih as the then leading figure of the Celje theatre.

dynamics of their relations remained unspoken, even though clearly visible.

Interactions among the collaborators of Oder 57 mostly took place at meetings that were at the same time not abundant. Otherwise, everyone lived his life, followed their own employment commitments; not all actors at Oder 57 were members of Drama. Telephones were not used (they mostly did not have their stationary versions), so communication caused problems – but in the night hours, they made agreements about who was free to work. In a way, the theatre was not the principal intent of collaborators; their work took place as a border activity. The basic course and point of identification at Oder 57 were to present new drama plays. To remain credible, the group absorbed a different attitude to reality. Of crucial importance was the generation of splendid authors who grew up at Oder 57 and whose works were then staged in a manner that was not tried out by directors and artistic leaders of previous generations. Experimental groups, above all Oder 57, thus penetrated the theatre scene with special, unique styles. Owing to the spirit of the time, the accent of Jurij Souček was always put there. Even though it was impossible to exit Yugoslavia since the borders were closed, the spirit of time trespassed the administrative borders and steadily entered Slovenia. In this respect, the situation in Slovenia was no different than elsewhere in Europe. Oder 57 had no firm connections with colleagues from Yugoslavia; only the writers met at literary and theatre festivals. (In the sense of connecting with like-minded individuals, festivals had a large impact.) Great(er) transitions and uptakes between groups of theatre practitioners never took place. At guest performances of Oder 57 at Yugoslav theatre festivals in Novi Sad and Sarajevo, the crew mainly stuck together and generally returned to Ljubljana immediately after the show. They worked together with a usual productive pace and rhythm. The notion of community existed in this sense. Jurij Souček, as the principal acting persona at Oder 57, Ad hoc Theatre and likewise in SNT Drama, was not regarded with hostility, the principal care being devoted to the piece that was being staged. The pledge to the experimental community was thus tangible and significant. Though hidden under the surface, it could intuitively be felt – its central aim to accent the fresh drama pieces that defined Oder 57 and hint at the beginning of a whole new chapter in Slovenian drama. This did not rely on determined/resolute opposing of a political type since nothing of a kind was possible at that time. It is only possible to talk of Oder 57 as a propulsive and proactive political factor in the sense of political opposition with an insight into the society's problems that manifested artistic and civil activism through theatre that omitted a potentially provocative stance.

Protests in the theatre were rare since protesting with political connotation/charge involved an imminent risk.¹⁸ It was well known who in the theatre was a member of the

¹⁸ We can name the protest in front of the Drama theatre building in late March 1962 due to the halt of the performance of Jože Javoršek's *Povečevalno steklo* (Magnifying Glass), directed by Andrej Hieng, which was a consequence of an "anonymous directive" from politics that expelled the performance (of the otherwise officially awarded play) from Drama after six performances.

Union of Communists. The “Party” (as the union was colloquially termed) ceaselessly tempted to attract new members through its active informers, but some artists (e.g., Balbina Baranovič) kept rejecting such concessions in a determined way. Some of those who did not want to join the Party still were not against it, while the rest simply felt like second-class citizens. Still, it was possible to live a rather normal/usual everyday life in the 1960s and 1970s. Current accentuating of the supposed antagonisms of that time is strongly exaggerated, utters Janžekovič. “The social context was different immediately after the war when ‘gods are thirsty’ like every time after the revolution, from the French revolution on. Blood gives blood, and the war never ends with its closing but remains heavily engraved in people even after every peace treaty. However, Oder 57 never discussed these matters with a political diction.”

The official stately forums did not support the newly created drama writing. Political structures could not grasp the core of the new drama and could not establish a true connection with what was taking place in the heads of Oder 57. They attributed the group the role of a bystander, a marginal phenomenon whom they only gave sufficient money to survive. A rather small circle of young intellectuals were interested in experimental groups, and the authorities must have noticed that this scarce audience does not present a particular threat/danger. Massively populated events would surely make them more attentive. The groups of Baranovič and Ahačič also did not have repeat performances that would exceed ten. The authorities were more bothered by the journals. Thus, the publishing of *Perspektive* was finally prohibited in 1964.

Interestingly, the first and second experimental theatre groups, the forerunners of the experimental community, were formed as missions of two women, Balbina Battelino Baranovič and Draga Ahačič, both belonging to the generation of the 1920s. This owed mainly to the situation where women were cast aside and automatically felt the need to assert their place. Applying their own idea of the theatre was modelled on the impulses from Vienna, Paris and the USA. Baranovič played the role of a trigger, a catalyst that set the movement in motion. Thus, several groups of agile creators emerged, but all outside the institution and with a different approach. She traced new spaces of acting, which turned out as extremely important for community and audience creation. Even when they worked at Drama, they left it at a certain point, either due to the cancellation of the working contract (Draga Ahačič) or because the collaboration did not work out for aesthetic reasons (Balbina Baranovič). Disputes with the leading figure Slavko Jan appeared easily; the dislike of the director led to inconveniences. However, it was Baranovič who first opened the door to contemporary forms of theatre to these spaces and stimulated a tolerant, inclusive attitude in society towards experimental attempts. Staging their “attempts” (as Baranovič called them), they set the tone and signalled the direction the theatre scene should take in the future. The “theatre in the round” stage format was labelled an “experiment” and initiated

as a specific act of inception. Both the format and her groundbreaking introduction of choreographic elements into the theatrical image were later upgraded by others. Male authors later took over with a well-reflected and not at all ambiguous theatre concept and with original drama plays of local authors that are still recognised parts of Slovenian drama and theatre history.

In this sense, the reproach of Kermauner that Štih grabbed the spirit of Oder 57 and transferred it to Drama is rather exaggerated, says Janžekovič. "This literally happened, but in an entirely organic way." Such were the long-term structural changes, the interaction of experimental groups with theatre institutions and even the appropriation of some of the experimental aesthetic models by the institution. Although in the 1950s, Drama played none of the drama authors who evolved at Oder 57, this practice changed in 1960 and 1961 when the directors of Drama staged *Antigone* by Dominik Smole and *Afera* by Primož Kozak, a mere six months after their respective premières at Oder 57. Oder 57 thus enacted the role of a testing field for the institution, and its end came up as soon as the wave of new drama writing ceased. This method of supplying the institution with a fresh drama course is significant for Oder 57 and SNT Drama. Also, the institutional affiliation gave Smole and Kozak the possibility to be paid for their work, which Oder 57 could not afford. Most of all, Oder 57 triggered the whole movement, just like the concept of Mala drama appropriated the working principle of Oder 57. Seven years after Oder 57's (1971) extinction, the Experimental Theatre Glej followed a different storyline of its own. But at that point, Drama could not transfer anything from Glej that did not already exist in Drama.

Conclusion

The leading experimental theatre proponents (Balbina Baranovič, Draga Ahačič and, above all, Taras Kermauner) were highly informed about foreign drama and philosophical currents. Their experimental theatre groups – Oder 57 being the most pulsive and influential – functioned as a community. This made them a superior and challenging dialogic partner, albeit internally based on a very loose (or even non-existent) network of interferences between groups and the consistent strategy of using an indirect yet recognisable semantic vocabulary. They all followed the line of "otherness" that grew out of distancing from the prevailing programme, acting and directing patterns in the institution that seemed worn out and having lost the connection to the modern theatre approach. The loose relations of groups reflected the implicit nature of experimental broadening of the performative horizon that very rarely feels the need to connect and implies the urge for independence. As the paper points out, the notion of "community" with its subtle yet decisive form of operation enabled and opened up the dialectics for the future.

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