



Independent Performing Arts in

Slovenia

Glej Theatre „Gilgrieveing“

© Ivian Kan Mujezinović

What is the current situation of the independent performing arts in Slovenia?

The independent performing arts sector – comprising a range of non-governmental performing arts organisations, non-formal collectives and individuals, producing primarily visual and physical theatre, experimental drama theatre, street theatre and other interdisciplinary theatre forms – is nowadays considered to be the most vital and progressive part of a vivid general theatre scene in Slovenia. With a population just below two million, Slovenian attendance at theatre productions of public theatres, independent professional groups and non-professional or amateur theatres in 2017/18 amounts to 976.000 sold tickets, according to The Letopis SGM - Annual survey of the National Theatre Museum 2017-2018. This represents a significant increase from the 880.000 tickets sold in 2016/17.

Coexistence of the institutional and the non-institutional sectors

Coexistence of the institutional and the non-institutional sectors in the performing arts has been a long-term aim of cultural policy. These sectors are interrelated in many ways: some professionals working at public theatres and ballet houses also take part in independent stage productions, and, from time to time, institutional premises are used for festivals and individual productions by independent cultural organisations, groups and individuals. Also, the non-professional or amateur sector is very active and important, with approximately 170 amateur groups producing drama. Often, these groups present future professionals with the opportunity to take their first steps in the performing arts toward a professional career. The three most prominent theatres, Slovene National Theatre Drama Ljubljana, Slovene National Theatre Maribor and Slovene National Theatre Nova Gorica, represent the core of the state-supported performing arts infrastructure. There are another nine public professional theatres in Slovenia: the Ljubljana City Theatre (MGL), the Mladinsko Theatre, the Prešeren Theatre Kranj, the Slovene People's Theatre (SLG) Celje, the Koper Theatre, the Ptuj City Theatre, the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre and the Maribor Puppet Theatre, as well as the Anton Podbevšek Theatre established in 2006 in Novo mesto.

In addition to the main theatres, a small number of independent performing arts venues maintain stages and technical equipment. These include the Glej Theatre (established in 1970, it is the oldest independent performing arts venue in Slovenia), the Dance Theatre Ljubljana (pioneering in the development and promotion of contemporary dance in Slovenia since 1984), the Mini Theatre, Stara Elektrarna - Old Power Station run by Bunker Institute, Center of Culture Španski borci run by EN KNAP dance group, CSK France Prešeren Arts and Culture Association in Ljubljana and GT22 in Maribor. Performing arts are also an integral part of other public cultural institutions, such as Cankarjev dom Culture and Congress Centre or Kino Šiška, Center for Urban Culture in Ljubljana or Culture events center National home Maribor. Across Slovenia, the professional independent performing arts are closely linked to regional theatres or to individual municipal cultural centres, sometimes also youth centres. Nova pošta is the latest performing arts venue, established in collaboration between the independent Zavod Maska institute and the „institutional“ Mladinsko Theater. With its tradition in modern and experimental theatrical research it is a real exception among public theatres. But performing arts events also take place at some independent galleries, such as Kapelica or Steklenik, in the context of gallery project Zavod Cona, developed by the Botanic Gardens of the University of Ljubljana, and at other collaborative working spaces, such as Poligon, Cirkulacija 2 and Osmo/za, which is a collaborative space set up in 2017 by a consortium of Ljudmila, Delak Institute and the Projekt Atol Institute.

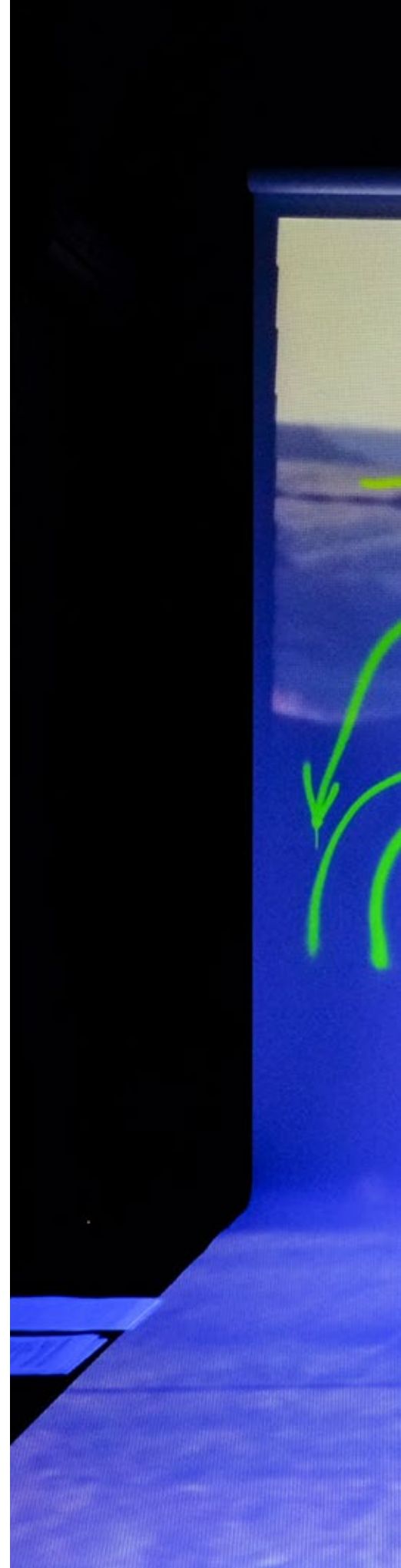
Differences in funding between the institutional and the non-institutional sectors

Despite successful coexistence and collaboration between the two sectors in Slovenia, there are still significant differences concerning funding. The independent performing arts are yet to recover from a series of cuts in funding opportunities that started in 2010 in the name of the financial crisis, as a 2009-2019 analysis presented by the Asociacija (Association of non-governmental organizations and individuals in the field of culture) shows. While all public theatres other than those in Ptuj, Koper and Novo mesto are home to a permanent resident company, the big majority receives direct

funding from the national budget. Only these other three (Kranj, Ptuj and Koper) receive funding from local municipalities. Youth performing art has mainly been developed in the context of grammar school theatre groups. Amateur groups are funded by the Public Fund for Cultural Activities of the Republic of Slovenia, which has branch offices across Slovenia and organises workshops and festivals. However, it only provides funding for fairly small-scale productions. Independent performing arts venues, non-governmental organisations, groups and individuals mainly receive funding through successful applications for open calls for general cultural programs and projects on a national and municipal level. Since the greater part of the Ministry of Culture's budget comprises fixed costs (salaries and expenses) of public cultural institutions, the independent scene is generally among the biggest contributors to public savings. And this situation has still not improved, despite the highest budget of all time.

While most of the basic public funding for independent performing arts projects in local communities is spent on an annual basis, there are some municipalities that follow the example of the Ministry of Culture, initiating open calls for projects lasting 2 to 4 years; but only direct project costs are eligible for project funding. When independent performing arts producers apply for the the ministry's open calls (this does not apply for the program financing of NGOs), they are competing with public institutions. This leads to unfair competition, because local cultural public institutions are also receiving funding directly from local municipalities. Besides open project calls, there are also open calls for independent performing arts producers. These funding opportunities are more substantial in that they ensure continuity and improve working conditions over a four-year period, thereby supporting cultural programs and covering NGOs' running costs. The Ljubljana Urban Municipality, which dedicates ca. 1/10 of its budget to culture in general, is the only municipality in the country that has applied this same type of grant scheme, but with a policy of four-year contracts for selected independent producers. You can now apply for the 2020-2023 open call.

The last open call by the Ministry of Culture was for 2018-2021 and had seen a significant decrease in funding and in the number of recipients. Only 8 programs by independent performing arts producers received funding (Zavod En-Knap, Plesni teater Ljubljana, Zavod Flota Murska Sobota, Društvo Gledališče Glej, Mini teater, Via Negativa, KUD Moment Maribor, Zavod Bunker), and funds were significantly lower than in previous years. As a result, some previously successful applicants and performing arts producers (Zavod Maska, Zavod Emanat, Zavod Delak and Nomad Dance Academy) took the matter to the administrative courts. The verdict concluded





that some of these performing arts producers should not be excluded from program funding. Some of them have since received contracts for the remaining years of the current funding period. But as Asociacija, an independent advocacy network of NGOs and individuals, warned at a recent press conference, the Ministry of Culture is extracting these extra funds from the existing programs for independent performing arts producers, because the overall budget for 2020 is going to be lower than estimated for the 4-year contract program financing in 2018.

The level of full-time or part-time employed personal in the independent performing arts sector also remains low, most of the jobs in the sector generally depend on the Ministry of Public Affairs's projects for professionalization of the NGO sector or on the subsidies provided by European social funds. The status of a self-employed professional in the field of culture (61 specialized professions are defined) is granted by a commission at the Ministry of Culture Slovenia. At the end of 2018, there was a total of 3020 cultural professionals with a self-employed status. 2110 of these were also granted the reimbursement of the minimum social and health insurance expenses that are covered by the ministry. Self-employed professionals are also eligible to apply for special annual open calls for working grants or scholarships, and the ministry has additional open calls for state-run art residences in Berlin, London, New York and Vienna.

Important actors and festivals in the independent performing arts scene

The Slovenian independent performing arts scene has a long tradition, with the first wave of theatres in the 1960s including such theatre groups as The Experimental theatre of Balbina Battelino Baranovič / Eksperimentalno gledališče Balbine Battelino Baranovič (1955-1967), The alternative Ad Hoc Theatre by Draga Ahačič (1958-1964) and Stage 57 / Oder 57 (1957-1964) and the later Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre / Gledališče Pupilije Ferkeverk (1968-1975) or The Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre (1983-1987). These were relicts of a strong cultural exchange between the capitals of former Yugoslavia. Today, the Slovenian independent performing arts scene forms an integrative part of the wider, collaborative European and international performing arts context.

Other important independent performing arts producers that are not funded through open call schemes for programs

but by open calls for projects are Contemporary dance Association of Slovenia (Društvo za sodobni ples Slovenije), festival „GIBANICA“ - bienale of Slovene contemporary dancing arts, Association of Ana Monro and international street festival „Ana Desetnica“, Vitkar institute and „Festival Rdeči revirji“, The City of Woman - Association and Festival for promotion Women in Culture Delak Institute for postgravity art Noordung Cosmokinetic Cabinet, Emanat, institute for dance and contemporary arts development and affirmation, Maska Institute, DUM Association of Artists, Fičo Balet, Federacija Institute, Sensorium_Institute_for_Sensorial_Theatre_and_Research, Kolektiv Narobov, KUD Ljud, Bufeto - institute for circus theatre art development and „Klovnbuif“, Plesna izba Maribor and platform of contemporary dance „Performa / Platforma“, Pekinpah Association and „Spider Festival“, the Exodos Institute and The Exodos International Festival of Contemporary Performing Arts, Nomad Dance Academy Slovenia and „CoFestival“ etc. In addition, the Bunker institute organises Mladi Levi Festival / Young Lions Festival in Ljubljana and Drugajanje Festival at Second Grammar School at Maribor. But there is also The international festival of independent performing arts Prestopi / Crossings by KUD Moment, and Flota Institute organizes Front@ Contemporary Dance Festival at Murska Sobota.

Problems and prospects in the independent performing arts scene in Slovenia

An independent performing arts scene is absolutely vital for institutional theatre in general. It is its generator of modernity, because independent artistic explorations are often transferred to institutions as new practises, aesthetics and forms. Even though the independent performing arts scene in Slovenia is no longer considered inferior to the institutional performing arts practises and it is accepted as a parallel and not at all separate field for producing performing art, there are still many problems it has to face. While the independent performing arts sector in Slovenia is among the most successful Slovenian cultural NGOs applying for EC Culture or Creative Europe programs, the last couple of years have also seen a record number of NGOs from Slovenia included in cultural collaborative projects in general. This year, 28 of the 106 approved projects are collaborations with Slovenian cultural producers, which represents 26% of all successful applications. And in 5 projects the lead partner or applicant is an

organisation from Slovenia. But one problem that needs to be addressed quickly is the question of a sustainable local and national plan to co-finance projects that have received funding from Creative Europe or other transnational funding sources. Also, the new cultural model and a national program for culture are yet to be developed and implemented, administrative regulations must be simplified and the definitions of quality criteria and public interest should be made more clear than they are at present. Lack of funding and a scarcity of performing, training and storage spaces for independent performing arts producers and individual artists must be resolved. Since artists are dealing with sensitive social subjects, such as migration, intolerance and poverty, there is also less and less media coverage that currently gives critical voice to independent performing arts or culture in general. If this is one of the main reasons for the marginalisation of the independent performing arts in Slovenia, the other two would also be the malnutrition of the whole independent arts sector and the overall awareness and value of Arts and Culture in Slovenian society.

Tomaz Zaniuk

