

Ad posse ad esse:

The independent performing arts scene in Kosovo

The independent performing arts scene in Kosovo is relatively small and faces significant difficulties, ranging from infrastructure, human resources, legal framework to sustainability issues. All this is largely due to a lack in infrastructure and institutional support since the independent performing arts scene has had a notable lack of financial support from relevant institutions, although, since the pandemic things have seemingly started to move in the right direction. Nevertheless, on an educational level, there are simply not enough cultural programs at public universities for this kind of artistic work. Also, independent performing arts workers are still not properly represented. This article aims to describe the general situation of performing arts in Kosovo: from problems and difficulties to actuality. In conclusion, although small in number, the work of the independent performing arts scene still gives much hope for the future.

Since the end of the war in 1999, Kosovo had been administered by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), until, on February 17, 2008, it was declared an independent state. The performing arts were in a dismal state, as was the cultural and social life in general. The National Theater of Kosovo, located in Pristina, the Capital of Kosovo, started to fill this gap by offering performances and other stage activities. The situation at the theaters in other cities of Kosovo was similar: damaged by the war, without proper management, and without ideas on how to rebuild. Most cultural and other social institutions were dysfunctional and, in some places, different international missions were established and housed inside existing cultural institutions to make up for the loss of cultural life in Kosovo. The Italian KFOR troops were stationed in the City Theater of Peja, while the city's only cinema was

transformed into a cinema theatre. The only organizations of the independent performing arts scene that characterize the post-war period in Kosovo are related to the activities mainly carried out by various ensembles and cultural and artistic associations.

Kosovo has 8 public theaters financed by the Municipalities. They are: „Bekim Fehmiu“ Theater - Prizren, City Theater - Gjilan, „Hadi Shehu“ Theater - Gjakovë, „Istreg Begolli“ Theater - Pejë, „Adriana“ Theater - Ferizaj, Theater „Muharrem Qena“ - Mitrovicë and „Avdush Hasani“ Theater - Podujevë. At the national level, the Government, and respectively the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (as these are considered the categories of cultural life in Kosovo), directly finances the National Theatre, the National Ensemble of Songs and Dances „Shota“, the National Ballet of Kosovo, and others. In legal terms, all these fields are regulated by specific laws. Also, according to these respective laws, the possibility exists to establish theaters, ensembles, ballet troupes, and independent cultural institutions. Although there is a legal basis, it is considered problematic, because most of them are outdated laws created in the time of the UNMIK administration. However, a new law on culture is being created at the time of writing this text.

Looking at the above list, it becomes clear that the field of performing arts in Kosovo is relatively small, which automatically results in organizational difficulties for the actors of the independent performing arts scene. In the absence of spaces to carry out their activities, this scene is forced to use scarce institutional spaces, whether at the local or national level. This need for space has not always been properly addressed or given any priority by the institutions. So there is a permanent danger that the independent initiatives, organizations and individuals that are part of the independent performing arts spectrum are dependent on political will.

SOHO
THEATRE



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Another problem is that existing spaces do not even offer optimal conditions, neither for artists nor for the audience. This is the case with the National Theater of Kosovo, which since July of this year has begun a process of renovation. Meanwhile, to compensate for the shortage, they have started to build an alternative space. But the situation is different for Teatro Romano „Nexhip Menkeshe“, the Romani theater founded by the non-governmental organization „Durmish Aslano“.

„Durmish Aslano“ is one of the oldest organizations in Kosovo and one of the oldest organizations of the Roma community in Europe, founded in 1969 in Prizren. Since its foundation, „Durmish Aslano“ had functioned as a cultural and artistic association, while in 2001 it was registered as a non-governmental organization. Years later, in 1989, the first theater would be formed under the umbrella of this organization. When asked what the aim of this theater is beyond the promotion of heritage, Sejnur Veshall, representative of „Durmish Aslano“ has a simple answer: „Since the basis of our theatrical performances is the community, we aim to emancipate and sensitize the community“. The Roma Theater of Prizren does not have its own space, and for rehearsals it uses the halls of the House of Culture. However, this is not a sustainable solution, because the House of Culture is used by most of Prizren's cultural organizations (that space is also used by the Professional Theater of the City, the Amateur Theater in the Albanian Language, two Turkish Amateur Theaters and the Roma Theater). But what can be done in the absence of a rehearsal space? Sejnur Veshall adds that they use the organization's offices for rehearsals from time to time. This situation, as well as the small financial support, significantly reduces the number of performances of independent theaters in Prizren.

But let's go back to the current legal framework: The current theater law states almost nothing about the financial support of stage performances by independent organizations. There is not even a regulatory mechanism. Financial support from institutions relevant to the independent performing arts scene has been minimal: In some cases in the past, extremely small sums have been allocated per performance. Oftentimes, the commitment of the artists of the independent performing arts scene has been less enthusiastic, precisely because they are forced to do other work to ensure their livelihood. On a positive note, though, the institutions have begun to provide more financial support to the independent cultural scene since the beginning of the pandemic, with the independent cultural scene benefitting the most financially this year, and independent performing arts are rumored to receive more support in the current lawmaking process.

On the other hand, there is no common network or organization representing the interests of the independent performing arts scene, although some of the organizations in this field are part of local cultural networks. Cultural workers largely remain underrepresented, especially those who are part of the scene that is considered independent. The National Theater, however, is an exception in this case and provides an important example. The National Theater Union, through several initiatives, has managed to secure a more favorable position for theater workers, constantly criticizing the unfavorable conditions at this institution. This has apparently accelerated the restoration of this cultural space. Actor Adrian Morina, in addition to being the Chairman of the Union and coming from the independent scene of performing arts, emphasizes that one of the successes of



Artpolis
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the Union is the change in regulations that determine the salary of cultural workers. As a result of their efforts and the general strike of institutions, it was possible to increase salaries by 30 %.

In addition to the difficulties and problems facing the independent performing arts field, the lack of professional groups is yet another issue. Most choreographers who still practice professionally in Kosovo have completed their education abroad. Although there is a choreography department at the private AAB College, public institutions such as the University of Pristina do not have choreography programs. However, there are some interesting initiatives that want to address this lack. Choreographer Robert Nuha, who is a professor of choreography at AAB College and director of „Noa Dance - Theater Company“ in Prishtina, uses the spaces of his college for contemporary dance activities, rehearsals and choreographic research. The organization that he represents consists of students and alumni, and it aims to create dance troupes that could join different productions in the future. Another interesting initiative aimed at mitigating this situation is that of ACY (Active and Creative Youth), located in Prizren. This organization, which deals with performing arts and programs for children, started as an initiative to promote classical ballet and contemporary dance. Prek Memaj, who is also a choreographer and leader of the ACY organization, started an initiative to establish the Theater for Youth and Children in Prizren. Among other things, this organization has established ballet branches at the primary school level in Rahovec and Gjakovë, while until now only Pristina and Prizren have had them.

Difficulties have made the actors in the performing arts scene more cooperative. Even though some types of

performing arts are still being developed (performance arts and independent dance) in Kosovo, there are other types, such as Circus Theater and Object Theater, that do not exist at all. The Puppet Theater is part of the Dodona Theater which has been designated as the City Theater in Pristina. As far as cooperations exist, resident artists of performing arts institutions and those from the independent performing arts scene regularly collaborate. They often meet in independent productions and festivals where they perform together. Mainly but not limited to the Oda Theater, which is the only independent theater that has its own space. Extraordinary contributors to the independent scene are also Artpolis - Art and Community Center, which, in addition to organizing the international festival of artists and activists FEMART, recently founded the first independent resident troupe. On the other hand, the Multimedia Center, whose shows have been played in over 100 theaters and theater festivals in the USA and across Europe, has currently just finished the Kosovo Theater Showcase, one of the largest performing arts events in the country. Integra also constitutes one of the important productions.

Valton Marku

Ad posse ad esse - from possibility to actuality, the independent performing arts scene in Kosovo can be said to have passed the test and looks towards a brighter future.

