

Participatory Trends in Performing Arts

Case Study on the Divadelná Nitra Association

“From Artistic Experience to Active Citizenship”

The lecture deals with the current trend of participation in performing arts as a way to activate the public and enhance the sense of social responsibility. The text documents different types of active experiences implemented within *Association Divadelná Nitra*, a key player in the performing arts scene in Slovakia. By taking a look back on its history during the past thirty years, it documents a shift in approach towards audience development in the direction of co-creation and the development of a community. Particular attention is paid to the international project *Be SpectACTive!* which represents an important impulse for the concept of audience development. First, the lecture introduces the background of the *Association* which has been playing a significant role in the activities focused on audience development. Finally, it draws the future perspective of the *Association* through *bod.K7 – a Space for Culture, Creativity and Community* which is the first year-round cultural center managed by the *Association*.

The Association Divadelná Nitra – Its Background and the Beginnings of its Approach Towards the Audience

The Association is an independent and non-governmental organisation operating in the area of performing arts, with overlaps with other disciplines.¹ It is the main organiser of the International Theatre Festival Divadelná Nitra – the largest theatre event held in Slovakia since 1992. Besides the Festival, the Association organises a wide scale of cultural activities, such as co-production projects and activities focused on audience development.

The festival was established with the ambition of becoming a platform for cultural exchange between the community of Western countries and Central/Eastern Europe. As for its historical context, the event belongs to the family of European festivals established in reaction to the opening of the borders after the fall of the iron curtain. With those events, natural awareness of the value of active citizenship arose significantly.

The festival's program evolves around a wide range of innovative forms of performing arts and interdisciplinary overlaps. The main focus is on introducing theatre companies from abroad and presenting remarkable productions of local provenance. The main ambition of the Association, its attempts to stimulate the sense of citizenship, can be best observed in the festival's program concept. By thematizing them, the festival's attempts to start a public debate on society-concerning questions in every edition, e.g. in 2015, *Empathy* reacted to the immigrant crisis that started in 2014; in 2019, *Faces of Freedom* reacted to the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, etc. The huge variety of festival events conceptually reflects upon the central leitmotiv through theatre performances, concerts, exhibitions, or discussions.

At the time of the founding of the festival, bringing a progressive festival programme to the table meant a potential conflict with the habits and expectations of the local audience in Nitra.² Until that time, the local audience had been formed mostly by the traditional repertoire of

¹ The Association was founded in 1997 on the basis of the original Foundation Divadelná Nitra (established in 1995).

² Nitra is a regional town located approx. 100 km from the capital city of Bratislava and the centre of the Nitra Region.

already established theatres. In that context, the founding of the festival responded not only to the need for a cultural connection with Europe, it also reflected the necessity of establishing an independent theatre scene after the totalitarian era came to its end.

The then-forming student community on the town's universities (today counting with more than 13.000 students) was where the festival found a nourishing field for reaching out to people and establishing new connections with the audience. Focused on attracting young audiences, the organisers defined the student community as the main target group of the event and started searching for new forms of participation in the festival's organisation, especially in form of volunteering.



The young audience has influenced the programming of special activities during the festival, e. g., the program segment *Festival to Children* provides annually theatre performances, workshops and activities for children and schools. The segment *Young Theatre* provides a place of presentation for students of art schools from the Nitra region.



Besides the theatrical performances, since the 1990s, the Association has been including its audiences through informal educational events. The call for projects focused on audience development came with the knowledge that communicating values through art becomes more effective when supported by a systematic work with the audience. Till today, the project *How to Understand Theatre* intended for high school and university students across Slovakia helps broaden education in the area of contemporary art.

Participatory Approach and the Project Be SpectACTIVE!

In 2018, the Association started to shift its focus from education to involvement and community development. The key impulse came during the second edition of *Be SpectACTIVE!*, an international project in which the Association took part. The Association followed the trend observed by Charles Leadbeater in the 2009 “*Cultural Activities Have Undergone a Shift from Production to or for Audiences to Creation with Audiences.*”³

Be SpectACTIVE! is a large-scale European cooperation project co-funded by the EU’s Creative Europe Programme and focusing on performing arts. Its activities help foster audience engagement in the creative process using art productions and other participative activities.

The network consists of 18 organisations spread across 18 cities in 15 European countries, led by the *Kilowatt Festival* (IT). Experimenting with participation in performing arts is supported by profound research conducted by *Fondazione Fitzcarraldo* (IT), *Universitat de Barcelona* (ES), *Université de Montpellier* (FR), and *CNRS* (FR).⁴

In connection to *Be SpectACTIVE!*, the Association expanded the engagement of the public at different levels of the organisation.

The main output of the **Audience Programme Board** imports audience engagement to festival programming. The first open call was in 2019, and until today, four editions of the Audience Programme Board were held. Today, the group consists of 26 “Nitranchans” (the inhabitants of Nitra) that regularly meet with the festival organisers to co-select the productions for the festival. The Board recommends 4-5 theatrical pieces every year, which later become part of the Divadelná Nitra festival program. The selection process includes several types of particular active experiences, such as watching theatre shows, both live and online (including attending theatres), and discussions with festival organisers and creators. The Board members play a significant role in the evaluation of the festival. Two or three debates held at the end of the year usually provide a space for exchange of opinions, comments, and reports between the Board and the organisers of the Divadelná Nitra festival.

Members of the Active Programme Board are all inhabitants of the Nitra region with no professional relation to art. The group is heterogeneous in the age (age level 14 – 70 years) with the domination of young people. The open call issued in 2022 focused on seniors with the ambition to establish an intergenerational dialogue and help smooth the negative impacts of the epidemic of COVID-19.



³ The Art of With, Charles Leadbeater, 2009)

⁴ www.bespectactive.eu



European Art Commissioners is another *Be SpectACTIVE!* output. It is a project which provides a close connection between artists, organisers, and the local community through co-commissioning. “A *bottom-up and trans-local project based on processes of cultural democracy, that intends to involve, at the same level, citizens with different social and cultural backgrounds to express their thoughts and feelings, sharing contents, needs and problems in a public arena.*”⁵

Following these principles, the Association and its partner *Tanec Praha* started the realisation of a co-production dance project *ICARUS*, inviting teenagers from Nitra and Prague to engage. The project aimed to support contemporary dance in Nitra by connecting a troupe of first-rate dancers from the Czech Republic and Slovakia and teenagers from both localities. Approximately 20 teenagers participated in the project.

The project involved participation at numerous levels of its structure, from the selection of the artists through all creative processes to the final presentation. The initial contact started during the visit to the *Tanec Praha* festival in June 2019. The involved teenagers were tasked to form an artistic team for the production. Attending workshops, discussions, and performances, they became familiar with the work of artists Petra Fornayová, Jaro Viňarský, Marie Gourdain, Dano Raček, and Bára Látalová. Upon returning to Nitra they consulted their ideas about the piece’s theme and prospective artistic team with festival representatives.

The group of teenagers chose to have their piece directed by Marie Gourdain, a visual artist, scenographer, and director from Paris. Since 2019, the group worked under her guidance through discussions, workshops, and creative residencies. Their artistic team also features Jaro Viňarský and Václav Kalivoda.

The creative process was influenced by the COVID-19 epidemic. It peaked with live rehearsals organized during five residencies held in Nitra and Prague, and with individual workshops with acclaimed artists held in both cities. The creative process took the form of tasks from the fields of dramaturgy, musical composition, and choreography, given to the participants by the artists. Finally, the teenagers presented the final piece. After the COVID-19 postponing, two premieres (in Prague and Nitra) took place in September and October of 2022.



Perspectives of *bod.K7* – Space for Culture, Creativity and Community

A new project of the Association, a year-round cultural centre provides a place for further stimulation and activation of spectators and for concentrating them in a community through creative experience. *bod.K7 – Space for Culture, Creativity, and Community* (opened in 2021) moved the Association closer to the public. Its location in the busy pedestrian zone of Nitra provides “Nitranchans” with daily contact with contemporary art. Its creative program, the focus on audience development, and capacity-building activities aim at interlinking different target groups and gathering them in one community.

