

Bringing Miracles to Slovak Countryside: Site Specific Projects of Poton Theatre

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Pôtoň Theatre was founded in 2000 as originally an amateur theatre ensemble and in 2003 was transformed into an independent professional group. During the first active years the group worked in a town Levice. Currently, Pôtoň Theatre resides in a small village of Bátovce, located 15 kilometres from Levice town. It has founded its rightful place there in 2008, when the members of the theatre decided to move from unwelcoming conditions in Levice town to a rural area. The idea of replacing a contemporary theatre and creating a centre of contemporary culture in a village seemed at first to be a somewhat crazy idea. Independent culture often resides in bigger towns and cities. Pôtoň Theatre still holds a solo position in Slovakia, being the only professional theatre group located in a countryside.

The core of the theatre is playwright and dramaturge Michal Ditte and director Iveta Ditte Jurčová. Both are the leading personalities of the theatre not only in official terms.

Since 2007, the major focus of the creators is on social themes that have been long-forgotten and intentionally avoided, such as poverty, national identity and xenophobia, search for home, decline of values, emigration, rise of extremism, environmental crisis etc.

„Ever since it was founded in 2000, Pôtoň Theatre has been closely interconnected with southern Slovakia, with Levice region. Creative professionals of the theatre develop their theatre activities in the territory of this region. Currently, Levice region is repeatedly listed in statistical surveys among the regions of Slovakia at risk of poverty, which has had an impact upon the development of Pôtoň Theatre. Its keen interest in documentary type of production with a markedly social message is, logically, an outcome of the receptiveness of its members to the environment in which they are engulfed and shaped. Its operation in marginalised regions, oftentimes affected by deprivation of different kinds (material, cultural and mental) has become its artistic and civil manifesto. Theatre professionals have voluntarily chosen a socially problematic region and population to become their home, which has determined their mission to employ artistic and non-artistic activities in elevating the milieu and to gradually mitigate the above deprivations.” (Elena Knopová)

When asking Iveta Ditte Jurčová about what she thinks is her role as an artist, she says it's being able to use artistic approaches to balance the current environment. To predict and try to prevent the pathological symptoms in the society.



American Emperor, 2018

In the context of Pôtoň Theatre we can list several of such tendencies, notably in theatre productions *Terra Granus* (2008), *Misery* (or. Psota, 2011), *A Land of Unmown Meadows* (or. *Krajina nepokosených lúk*, 2013), *Military Name Rama* (or. *Vojenské meno Rama*, 2017), *Emperor of America* (or. *Americký cisár*, 2018), *Terra Apathy* (or. *Terra Apathy*, 2021).

"The productions in the line of documentary theatre are preceded by research in the given localities, and the creators search for source materials in the available archival materials. An important part of the research is also oral history with memorials to events, which provide the creators with valuable and intimate statements, " said Michal Ditte, dramaturge of the Pôtoň Theatre.

Productions are thus often based on a sociological or ethnological field research. Collected authentic material is significantly enriched by exaggeration, elements of surprise, hyperbole and grotesque. Works are characterized by a distinctive play with styles, different means of expression and search for the new theatre and art forms.

New line of productions – site specific projects

In 2009 a first site-specific production was produced in Pôtoň Theatre. *Bride from the Mountains*. The production made artistic interventions to urban spaces by bringing a performance inspired by a Slovak classic folk drama to exterior urban locations: suburbs and town neighbourhoods. It contrasted present world with folklore elements, the urban environment with nature, fantasy and dreaminess with expression and naturalness. In this production the audience was also intended to walk a certain distance to see the production, having a guided commentary in their ears while wearing headphones. This moment we mark as a first production of Pôtoň Theatre which introduced concept of connecting artistic and cultural experience of the visitor with walking and with relocating from traditional theatre space to untraditional spaces.



Bride from the Mountains, 2009

This concept was not further developed up until 2015, when Pôtoň Theatre organised a project called *Night Wanderings through Batovce (or. Nočné potulky Bátovcami)*. Pôtoň Theatre invited other professional artists and art groups to join the project and created a guided night walk through the village. Several historical buildings in the village were revived by artistic interventions from the field of contemporary dance, film, videoart and light design. <http://trakt.sk/en/night-wanderings-across-batovce/>



Night Wanderings through Batovce, 2015

Surprisingly to the creators, this type of production attracted a mass of audience. Almost three hundred people attended the production and surprisingly to the creators, the vast majority were the local people. Thanks to this production, the creators of Pôtoň Theatre realised, that these site-specific productions create an opportunity for the locals to come closer to the process of creation, to artists themselves, seeing them creating and rehearsing several days or weeks on the particular spots proved to be a good way of promoting the future event itself. It operated with the concept of local patriotism in a positive way, when local people were intrigued to see how the ordinary or particular locations, they grow accustomed to, could be made extraordinary by artistic intervention.

In 2017 Poton Theatre invited three independent progressive theatre groups Debris Company, Med a Prach and a performer and director Sláva Daubnerová to cooperate on a project called *Miracles*. Four site-specific performances on the theme of miracles were created and they were introduced in 4 different locations of village Bátorovce during one night. The event was a huge production and it had a festival character. Several theatre critics stated it to be one of the key significant productions of the year. ¹



Miracles, 2017

“The enthusiasm in the faces of numerous spectators in Bátorovce was contagious. The more than four-hour, three-kilometre pilgrimage offered, in addition to metaphysical sensations, various (also qualitative) experiences from contemporary dance, physical theatre, classical music, opera, video art, sound and art installations. The spring nature and the non-theatrical space of the church provided them with a magnificent, generous scenography.”²

The project *Miracles* was later nominated to represent The Slovak pavillion on Prague Quadrennial 2019.³

Miracles, 2017

¹ <https://www.poton.sk/miracles/>.

² <https://dennikn.sk/771717/nazriet-pod-povrch-priestoru-a-casu/>

³ <https://www.pq.cz/projects/event-detail-en/?exhibition=53>

Later in 2017, Poton Theatre adapted the project Miracles into a smaller production a site-specific performances and installations during the research project Apel lokality. The aim was to introduce local people from poorer areas to contemporary art, with which they have no experience with. ⁴



Apel lokality project, 2017

⁴ <https://www.poton.sk/aktuality/apel-lokalit/>

In 2018, Poton was invited by the organizers of Saint Nectaire Vallée Verte Festival in France to create and perform a new site specific event for the festival as an opening piece.



Saint Nectaire Vallée Verte Festival, 2018

All of above mentioned events had several common features. They consisted of several smaller site-specific productions: performances, visual installations, sound installations, videoarts. Productions were spread to different locations within a village or a town, thus creating a journey, that the audience had to pass to experience the whole show. This creative approach for connecting cultural experience with walking and sightseeing has worked for us in attracting the audiences from the beginning, so with each next project we were thinking of new ways we can make it even richer experience.

Nočné potulky Bátovcami
18. júla 2015

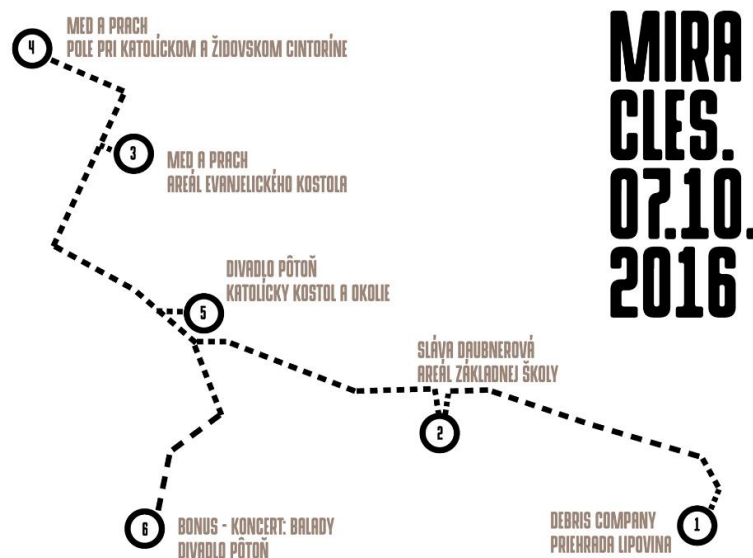


Kúria Schneideriana ~ Mestský dom / Obecný úrad
Kino Hviezda ~ Barokový oblúkový most ~ Divadlo Pôtoň

Začiatok ~ Kúria Schneideriana ~ 21:30

Oživujeme verejné priestory

www.poton.sk



**MIRA
CLES.
07.10.
2016**

4 MED A PRACH
POLE PRI KATOLICKOM A ŽIDOVSKOM CINTORÍNE

3 MED A PRACH
AREÁL EVANJELICKÉHO KOSTOLA

5 DIVADLO PÔTOŇ
KATOLICKY KOSTOL A OKOLIE

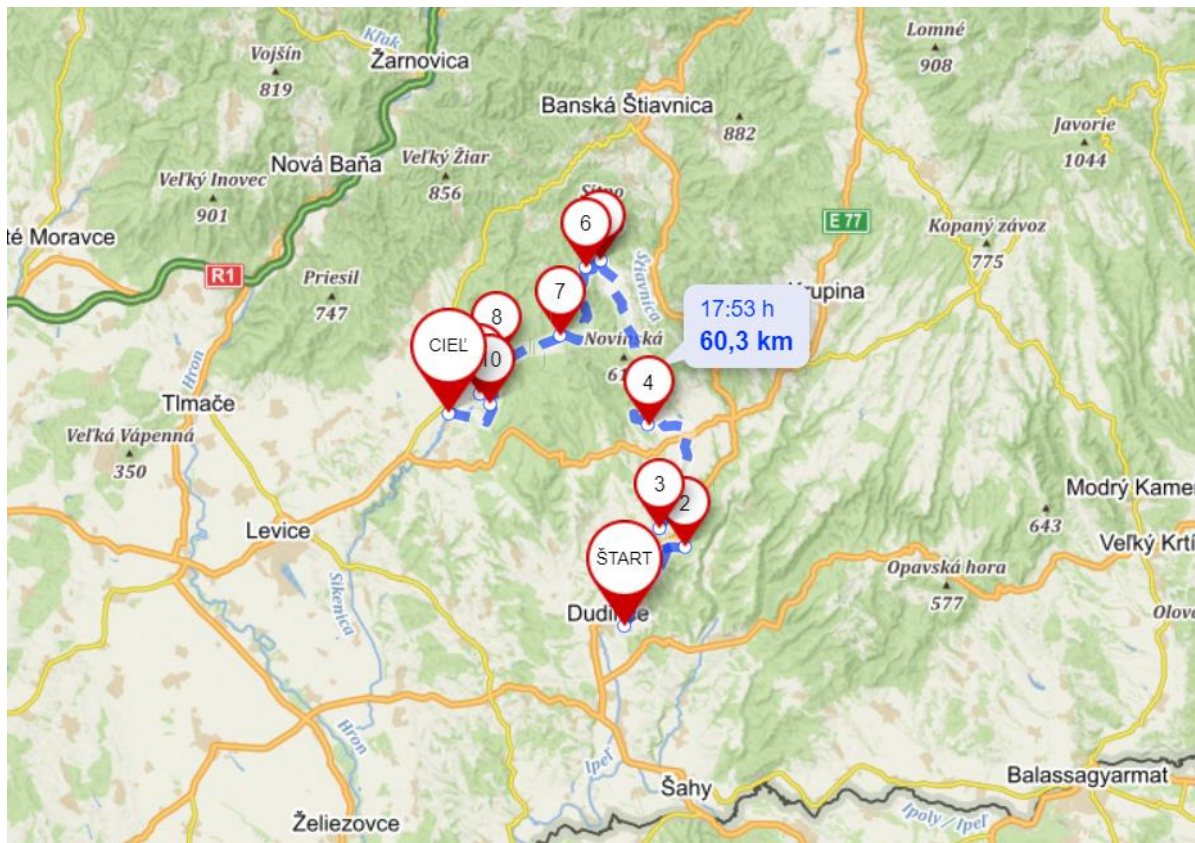
2 SLÁVA DRUBNEROVÁ
AREÁL ZÁKLADNEJ ŠKOLY

6 BONUS - KONCERT: BALADY
DIVADLO PÔTOŇ

DEBRIS COMPANY
PRIEHRADA LIPOVINA 1

So, in 2019 an idea came, to organise an international site-specific festival. We were lucky enough to find great partners for this idea. And in last summer we started to work on the project. Our site-specific festival should happen in beginning of summer 2023, and will

last 4 days. We want to place about 20 art productions on hiking trails of approximately 60 kilometres. We will be creating some kind of a pilgrimage for the audience to pass. The name of the festival is *Into the Miracles*.



Journey of our future festival Into the Miracles

While planning this event we are talking a lot about our future audiences and about the things we need to consider to attract them, to communicate with them and to make their experience extraordinary. For this lecture, I wanted to summarize several useful notes that we recommend considering to organizers of such an event. Those notes summarize our experience with projects we already implemented, and they summarize some of our outcomes we came to during our festival planning.

1. Know that your audience is a vital part of the show

It sounds cliché, I know. But considering the fact that you are “forcing” your audience to walk, you are basically making them part of the whole event. Their walk, their movement, their talks become part of the whole experience. Without their willingness to overcome some distances the show would not happen. Also, the audience is more vocal about the experience, especially during the walk from one station to another, where a lot of people like to discuss and share, what they saw and experienced. The mood of some can

influence the mood of others. You have to remember that you are creating a community of people who are going through very similar process.

2. You witness a rise of empathy towards all involved

Artists, organizers, audience... Everyone is considering what the others are going through. As organizers, given the fact that these productions demand the audience to overcome some distances and given the fact that a lot of the productions are happening during the night, we know that the audience will be exhausted. We as organisers need to have in mind that we need to take care of our audience more than usually, because we want them to be exhausted, but happy.

From the side of organizer, it is very important to communicate with the audience what they need to consider, what to expect, how to prepare and what to wear, what to bring. So the communication is very important to avoid any misunderstandings or misleading.

From the side of artists, it is good to consider in what energy the audience comes to see their production. Is it in the beginning of the walk, or in the end? There is a difference. It is not recommended to put a heavy and long production in the end of the whole journey.

From the side of audience, I personally experienced a lot of appreciation and empathy, when they saw how much effort you put into taking care of them. They also appreciate it more when they are witnessing artists and organizers working in difficult conditions.

3. There are many opportunities to make the show even more interactive to your audience

Site specific shows give you many opportunities to put various interactive features for the audience to experience. It is recommended to develop these opportunities.

4. Use the potential of the type of event – diversify your audiences

It might be a good idea to reach to other groups of people, not only your fans and traditional audience. Reach to hikers, tourists, people who like to go sightseeing. You have an opportunity to attract diverse audience because you are offering unusual experience. You can add sites of cultural or natural heritage to your journey, or you can work with them directly as a site for the particular production. In our experience, site specific events are great for bringing together really diverse audiences from all generations, economic or social backgrounds, culture seekers with random bystanders/bywalkers.

5. Use the potential of the type of event – attract and involve local people

Site-specific projects seem to attract a considerable amount of local people, even those who don't usually visit culture events. We realised that it helps, if the locals come closer to the process of creation, to artists themselves, seeing them creating and rehearsing several days or weeks before the event takes place, outside in public space helped them understand how the artist works, and it promoted the future event itself. It also operates with the concept of local pride, when local people were intrigued to see how the often ordinary or "uninteresting" locations, by which they pass daily, could be made extraordinary by artistic intervention.

It is also good to ask for help from the locals, even if you don't really need it. It creates a sense of ownership towards the whole event. You can publish an open call for local volunteers, for example. In the end, any extra hand will be appreciated.

Thank you for your attention.