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1990s Beyond Institutions: Zagreb Independent Theatre Scene

In 1998 the organizers of the Festival of Alternative Theatre Expression (Festival alternativnog kazališnog izričaja or FAKI) in Zagreb published the following call for collaboration on the pages of the programme booklet: “All interested in collaboration should contact us [...], all not interested in collaboration should contact the Ministry of Culture.” Although it was issued half-mockingly, the invitation was indicative of a relationship they had with the key government body in charge of preserving and overseeing the development of culture. Namely, at the time the Croatian Ministry of Culture mainly supported the infrastructure and the programs of cultural institutions with no clear criteria or procedures for financing less formal and alternative projects from its domain. The statement and its origin suggest the socio-cultural context, the temporal frame, the self-sufficient nature and, in a way, the parameters of the autonomy of the theatre scene I intend to discuss in the following text. To be specific, I will focus on Croatian theatre practice of the 1990s choosing the representative examples from the largest, most influential and best-researched scene of the Croatian capital Zagreb. Furthermore, I will present single artists, less formal groups and professional theatres which were not established by the state, county, city or municipality but whose projects were for the most part financially, logistically and also aesthetically independent from the state-funded network of professional public theatre institutions responsible for shaping the mainstream.¹ As a fraction of the larger field of non-institutional culture in Croatia, during the 1990s, non-institutional theatre was connected to a number of then-circulating denominators, such as “alternative culture”, “subculture”, “urban culture” or “counterculture”, but since 2000s the term “independent culture” which was “actually introduced by its actors” has been gaining prominence² and thus serves as the basis for the terminology I will be using in the following text. It is worth noting, however, that independent theatre, just like the rest of the independent culture often relies on external financial or infrastructural support, and rarely, if ever, achieves complete independence from its economic, political and cultural surroundings. Instead, its representatives mostly retain the ownership of the organisation and some autonomy in determining the direction and the dynamics of its development. Accordingly, in the following survey, I will include artists who did not avoid direct or indirect connections with various state, local or international funds, non-theatrical institutions, or institutionally

- 1 The study will exclude examples coming from independent contemporary dance or performance art scene, although a certain number of projects belonging to hybrid categories (theatricalised performance art and physical or dance theatre) will be presented. It will also omit theatres and individual artists whose work in the 1990s only partially satisfies the criteria of organisational, financial and aesthetic independence laid out above. For example, more aesthetically conventional private theatres such as Little Scene (Mala scena, 1987-) or other private professional theatre organisations with clear commercial trajectory will not be included in this text, nor will I analyse the work of notable theatre directors, such as Branko Brezovec, Ivica Buljan, Bobo Jelčić and Nataša Rajković, which was considered methodologically and dramaturgically innovative but was realised within institutional theatre or, at the time, mostly abroad.
- 2 Dea Vidović. *Nezavisna kultura u Hrvatskoj (1990–2010)*. In: M. Mrduljaš and D. Vidović (eds.). *Dizajn i nezavisna kultura*. Zagreb: Savez udruga Klubtura/Clubture, UPI-2M PLUS d.o.o., KURZIV – Platforma za pitanja kulture, medija i društva, 2010, p. 20.

supported events. Although such relative financial and organisational independence results in disputes about the justification of the term,³ as I hope to show, it still provides them with the frame flexible enough to enable artistic emancipation or critical and even subversive action while relating “independent” to “innovative” or “experimental”. As stated by the “manifesto” of the independent performance group The Studio of Kinetic Figurative Sculpture Line of Least Resistance or LLR (Studio kinetičke figurativne skulpture Linija manjeg otpora/LMO): “LLR has no fear. LLR cannot stand criticism. LLR has strong evidence for everything we do. LLR never lies. LLR can adapt to all supernatural and unnatural phenomena.”⁴

II

Given the established parameters of its autonomy, the 20th century pre-history of independent theatre in Zagreb can be traced back to the period of historical avant-garde, although the “scene” would not emerge until the second half of the century. Among isolated events and short-lasting ventures whose contribution to the history of national alternative and experimental theatre, as well as position within a wider cultural context, are still being investigated, performative actions of the high-school group Travellers (Traveleri) represent early Dadaist provocations, while their single theatre performance *They Are Coming* (I oni će doći, 1922) named after Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s play of objects follows the form of a cabaret. That collage of Zenitist and Futurist texts with geometrical costumes and set design included the controversial intrusion of reality (when they brought a living donkey on stage, claiming that it came from the auditorium where their teachers were also seated), but unfortunately also ended their future artistic activities in Zagreb as the gesture was considered offensive for the teachers. Thus, the majority of group members were expelled from school and forced to continue their education elsewhere (mostly in Belgrade). Avant-garde elements re-occurred in the postwar performances of The Youth Group (Družina mladih, 1939–1948), which was founded within the French Institute in Zagreb. Although they initially presented the classics of the French theatrical repertoire in French, in 1945 the ensemble staged early plays and choral recitations of the foremost Croatian surrealist author Radovan Ivšić. On the level of articulation, they experimented with the possibilities of collective vocal expression, as described by one of the group members, composer Ivo Malec:

We did choral recitation as a sort of musical-vocal piece. We spoke the text in such a way that the word or the sentence would shift

³ *Ibid.*, p. 20–21.

⁴ Redcurrant Bomb. Program Booklet of Eurokaz. In: N. Ivančević (ed.). *Ljubav i otpor Ivane Popović. Katalog izložbe*. Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2019, p. 87.

from one mouth to the other creating a certain musical surrounding. It was immensely advanced and formally immensely interesting choral work. It's never been practised again anywhere else.⁵

Even more so, according to Ivšić, after the third performance of his texts all the future public performances were banned by the Yugoslavian Ministry of Education and severely judged as “a misapprehension”.⁶ Thus, in the first half of the 20th century, such obvious discontinuity of the relatively independent performative initiatives could be attributed to institutional and ideological restrictions, but also to general unfavourable socio-political circumstances in Europe or the underdeveloped theatrical scene in Croatia. Among multiple reasons, however, one should not neglect the belief among certain patrons of “new theatre” in the period between the two world wars that “the avant-garde scene” should not be established as independent, but mainstream and institutional. In the words of the playwright, critic and theoretician Josip Kulundžić: “It is not enough for our best South Slavic theatre to be one of the best theatres on the continent, it must also open and enable the paths towards scenic progress.”⁷ Nevertheless, in the latter decades of the 20th century, aesthetically independent and self-organised theatrical units would be established both as ground-breaking and influential for the forthcoming generations of theatre practitioners. The 1960s became famous for its student theatre which has been evolving since the late 1940s with the support of the national May Festival of Student Theatres (Majski festival studentskih kazališta, initially Kulturno-umjetnički Majski festival Narodne studentske omladine Zagrebačkog sveučilišta, 1947–1970). Not burdened by the expectations of the professional scene, students were more often prone to risky topics presented through fresh forms as well as the provocation of the immediate unconventional reaction from their spectators. Also, due to the temporary student status, they were considered relatively “harmless” from the perspective of the authoritarian state regime of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija, 1943–1992) which usually monitored early attempts at achieving theatrical independence with various control mechanisms. Thus with groups such as Student Experimental Theatre (Studentsko eksperimentalno kazalište, 1956–1990) famous for its investigation of group performance, slightly enhanced physicality and the voices of contemporary playwrights, and events such as the International Festival of Student Theatre (Internacionalni festival studentskog kazališta, 1961–1974), founded by the Yugoslav Union of Students as a “window on the world”, the decade saw the encouragement of both, the internationalisation of the local scene,

5 Ivo Malec, Seadeta Midžić. Radovan je u svemu bio spiritus movens. Razgovor u povodu smrti Radovana Ivšića. In: S. Midžić and N. Bezić, (eds.). *Družina mladih. Čudesna teatarska igra*. Zagreb: ArTresor, Hrvatski glazbeni zavod. 2017 p. 161.

6 Radovan Ivšić, Dalibor Foretić. O Družini. In: S. Midžić and N. Bezić (eds.). *Družina mladih. Čudesna teatarska igra*. Zagreb: ArTresor, Hrvatski glazbeni zavod. 2017 p. 157.

7 Josip Kulundžić. Avantgardistička scena. In: I. Matičević (ed.). *Hrvatska književna avangarda. Programski tekstovi*. Zagreb: Matica hrvatska. 2008, p. 307.

and the dispersion of innovative contemporary aesthetics. During the 1970s and the early 1980s, the prominent position of the apparently weakened⁸ student theatre was taken over by the inventive youth and mostly amateur theatre. As emphasized by the theatre manager Gordana Vnuk, the latter category was not derogatory in the self-managing socialism, on the contrary, it highlighted strong convictions of those theatre-makers operating “outside of any ‘system’”.⁹ Although the term “independent scene” itself was not in use, the new theatrical wave was often perceived as non-institutional, “established with the intention of abandoning the organisational, productive and reproductive schemes that significantly determine the message”, “of abandoning traditional ways of producing signs”, “to realise itself through a different working process which sees the performance as an origin of the new vision of theatre and society”.¹⁰ Correspondingly, it was promoted by manifestations such as The Days of Youth Theatre (Dani mladog teatra, Zagreb 1974–1977, Dubrovnik 1980–1982), a renamed continuation of IFSK, still supportive of the “international” and the “original”, and even more politically and aesthetically aggressive, but no longer limited to the “student”. The shift was evident in the work of neo-avant-garde groups from different parts of the country separately investigating political and activist performance, collective creation, environmental work, physical expression, visual emphasis and puppet theatre, and fresh creative methodologies while often shifting between independent and institutional frame: Kugla glumište (Zagreb, 1975–1983), Coccolemocco (Zagreb, 1971–1986), Theatre Workshop Pozdravi (Kazališna radionica Pozdravi, Zagreb, 1973–1982), Akter (Zagreb, 1978–1983), Theatre Lero (Dubrovnik, 1968–), Theatre Daska (Sisak, 1976–), etc. As noted by the theatre scholar Marin Blažević, in the second half of the 1960s and during the 1970s, the representatives of experimental theatre found themselves “in the ambivalent and risky zone between relative institutional independence, particularly in the early phase of self-organisation, and conditioned political, and therefore financial shelter of the existing social organisations and unions which had the responsibility to gather and, along the way, control [...] students (Yugoslav Union of Students) and the youth (League of Socialist Youth)”.¹¹

Among the institutions which provided often inadequate or insufficient support for this scene, Blažević places the emphasis on Theatre &TD

8 Full history of student theatre in Croatia is still underresearched, however one of its major representatives, theatre director Miroslav Medimorec, links the trajectory of student theatre with the ideological circumstances of the time. According to Medimorec, since the early 1960s, state support which greatly contributed to the development of student theatre and international theatre exchange was a means of presenting Yugoslavia to the world as a „place of artistic freedom and cultural diversity”. Miro Medimorec. *Studentsko kazalište. Kazalište: Časopis za kazališnu umjetnost*, 2008, vol. XI, n. 35/36, p. 144. Similarly, since the middle of the 1970s the once-leading student theatre event International Festival of Student Theatre lost financial support as the government was no longer able to hold ideological sway over the festival. M. Medimorec. *Studentsko kazalište*, p. 145.

9 Gordana Vnuk. *Hrvatska alternativna scena sedamdesetih. Kazalište. Časopis za kazališnu umjetnost*, 2010, vol. XIII, no. 43/44, p. 46.

10 Miro Medimorec. *Kazalište izvan institucija. Okrugli stol Prologa. Prolog. Časopis za kazalište i ostala pitanja kulture*, 1973, vol. VIII, n. 27, p. 6.

11 Marin Blažević. *Izboren poraz. Novo kazalište u hrvatskome glumištu od Gavelle do...* Zagreb: Disput. 2012, p. 148.

(Teatar &TD, initially Komorna pozornica, 1962–) which was established within the Student Centre of the University of Zagreb, The Academy of Dramatic Art (Akademija dramske umjetnosti, initially Akademija za kazališnu umjetnost, 1950–) in Zagreb where some of the groups started their work, and The Centre for Cultural Activities (Centar za kulturnu djelatnost Socijalističkoga Saveza Hrvatske, from 1967 until 1990s when it was re-organised as AGM) which was formed by the Socialist Youth of Croatia to produce a variety of cultural activities including theatre.

The theatrical explosion on the alternative scene slowly died away in the second part of the 1980s with some of the well-known young artists (such as the members of the various fractions of Kugla glumište) continuing their intriguing and nowadays relevant non-institutional theatre practice while others who would evolve in the forthcoming period (such as the group DR. INAT (Pula, 1984/1985–) or Theatre Group Pinklec (Čakovec, 1987–), appeared with their initial works. However, the end of the decade saw the inauguration of a project which would prove seminal for the introduction of alternative and experimental contemporary performing arts and, at the same time, serve as a crucial promotional platform for Croatian independent theatre throughout the 1990s including the majority of the artists whose work would be analysed in this text. Under the leadership of its artistic director Gordana Vnuk, The International Festival of New Theatre Eurokaz (Međunarodni festival novog kazališta Eurokaz) was established as a part of the cultural programme of the international biennial student sports competition Universiade occurring in Zagreb in 1987 and was held annually until 2013 when the festival was transformed into a production platform. Although it was conceived thematically, the manifestation was focused on recent breakthroughs and courageous research on the international scene of performing arts, regardless of its somewhat limiting title. Throughout the years Eurokaz presented the work of a large number of influential international artists from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s while proposing and elaborating new historical, theoretical and critical perspectives on performing arts as well as terminology. It often inspired strong reactions from theatre professionals and critics, whether because its programme was aesthetically significant and provocative or because it was, in their opinion, unjustifiably presented as such. Terms used to describe Eurokaz range from “crucial”, “educational”, “changing”, to falsely “mythical”, “insulting” and “tiring”. Still, during the 1990s its ambitious scheme was mostly considered one of the rare windows into aesthetically daring performance outside of Croatia while it repeatedly provided local representatives of experimental performance with the stage and the audience. For example, in 1995 Eurokaz devoted the off-programme to the Festival Forum of independent Croatian theatre-makers with the aim of “defining common interests and the strategy of independent producers”¹²

that might serve as the basis for the formation of The Croatian Association of Independent Producers and Theatre Groups (HUPNIK). Furthermore, disappointed with the stage results of the “new Croatian theatre”, in 2000 festival organisers handed over the off-programme to the aforementioned FAKI which presented its own selection of the oncoming youth independent alternative scene.

III

Croatian War of Independence, which was fought between former Yugoslav republics, began in 1991 as aggression of neighbouring Serbia and Montenegro against Croatia (whose government supported by the majority of the population wanted to sever ties with the SFRY, while maintaining the borders of the republic) and ended in 1995 when most of the occupied Croatian territory was liberated while the rest was peacefully reintegrated into the country by 1998. In addition to the war, the introduction of the new political system and the transition to a new economy brought a number of negative processes such as the decline in economic growth and corruption, but no clear or systematic cultural policy. Consensus on their value and justification has still not been reached, however, the dominant cultural tendencies can be more or less accurately determined even when described from completely opposed standpoints. Thus, theatre scholar Ana Lederer believes that the authorities in the nineties “strengthened the idea of the representational nature of the institutional national culture” while “the Ministry of culture was, understandably, primarily focused on the cultural and especially theatre infrastructure which was devastated during the war” which was in accordance with “fulfilling the aim of protecting the foundations of the national culture and its functioning”.¹³ On the other side, as emphasized by the director of Kultura Nova Foundation Dea Vidović “many critics and analysts coming outside of the conservative political factions consider the dominant Croatian culture in the 1990s as mostly nationalistic, traditional, conservative, closed, exclusive, anti-educational, passéistic”.¹⁴ Accordingly, “state budget did not include organisations and informal initiatives which during the 1990s started appearing with the aim to produce cultural and artistic practices”, which were “critical towards social reality” and “affirmed contemporary cultural and artistic trends on the local and international level, such as urban culture, youth culture, new media culture, etc.”¹⁵

13 Ana Lederer. *Kazališno upravljanje u devedesetima*. In: M. Petranović (ed.). *Devedesete u hrvatskoj dramskoj književnosti i kazalištu. Prvi dio. Krežini dani u Osijeku 2020*. Zagreb – Osijek: HAZU, HNK u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet, Osijek, 2021, p. 185.

14 D. Vidović. *Nezavisna kultura u Hrvatskoj (1990–2010)*, p. 11.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 12. The same author indicates The Open Society Institute – Croatia (1992–2006) founded by George Soros as another possible source of financial support for this scene.

From the political and economic point of view, the war encompassed the whole country but the battlefield spread to a limited part of Croatia allowing for the continuity of theatrical life even during the war period in most of key urban centres like Zagreb, Split or Rijeka which suffered military attacks but were not under siege or occupied.¹⁶ However, the institutional theatre was perceived as somewhat uninventive in its performative aesthetics which rarely left “the modest frame of conventional text-based theatre”.¹⁷ With the occasional visits from foreign theatre directors such as Janusz Kica or Eduard Miler who brought refreshingly modern theatre to Zagreb stages, opportunities increased for the new generation of young playwrights and theatre directors who would emerge to introduce new conceptual and stylistic frames mostly within the safe haven of Zagreb’s small Theatre &TD (Teatar &TD) which continued following its exploratory trajectory.¹⁸ At the same time, “at the beginning of the 1990s, topics from the national history took precedence,”¹⁹ particularly on the stage of the largest Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb which in 1991 obtained the status of the mother ship of all national theatres in Croatia and lead the affirmation of the repertory with a strong national identity in this period.²⁰ Similar topics were often presented within large-scale, even spectacular productions (for example adaptations of non-dramatic literary works *Osman* by Ivan Gundulić or *Berenice’s Hair* by Nedjeljko Fabrio which were respectively staged in 1992 and 1995) within “theatre repertories in the spirit of the revival, which were in apparent aesthetic collision with the new plays”.²¹ The strong propagandist and conservative trend in the institutional theatre submitted to the promotion of traditionalism and national culture as key segments of public culture thus participating in the ideological formation and reinforcement of the new state. According to the theatre scholar Marin Blažević, the thematic union of the national theatre and national politics was reinforced by the formal analogy. The strictly hierarchical conservative government, following the nearly absolute authority of the president Franjo Tuđman, was reflected in the logocentric mimetic “theological stage” of the mainstream which was ruled by the absent playwright, served by the director as the interpreter, and the actor – merely a student.²² Symbolically, that analogy was confirmed

16 A sad confirmation of this statement came in May 1995 when, during the aerial attack on Zagreb with cluster-bomb projectiles, the building of the Croatian National Theatre was hit and a number of ballet dancers who were preparing the large international production of *Donau ballet* were wounded.

17 Agata Juniku. Teatar (u teatru) devedesetih. In: O. Obad and P. Bagarić (eds.) *Devedesete. Kratki rezovi*. Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, Jesenski i Turk, 2020, p. 183.

18 In the 1990s, Theatre &TD which was self-financed or supported by the Student Centre of the University of Zagreb, with students as its target audience, low production costs and a small ensemble, served as the incubator for the young contemporary Croatian playwrights while also supporting the early experiments in new creative processes and the search for new topics. See: Agata Juniku. Teatar (u teatru) devedesetih. In: O. Obad and P. Bagarić (eds.) *Devedesete. Kratki rezovi*. Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, Jesenski i Turk, 2020, p. 165–167.

19 Ana Lederer. *Vrijeme osobne povijesti*. Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2004, p. 32.

20 Iva Hraste-Sočo. Uloga nacionalnih kazališta u kontekstu razvoja identiteta nacije. In: M. Petranović (ed.). *Devedesete u hrvatskoj dramskoj književnosti i kazalištu. Prvi dio. Krežini dani u Osijeku 2020*. Zagreb – Osijek: HAZU, HNK u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet, Osijek, 2021.

21 A. Lederer. *Vrijeme osobne povijesti*, p. 32.

22 Marin Blažević. 90s How to Kill a Ruler. *Frakcija. Performing Arts Magazine*, 2000, n. 16, p. 6–16.

by the celebration of the president's birthday on the stage of the leading national theatre in Zagreb in 1997 with a performance entitled "The End of all the Ways of the Cross" which metaphorically acknowledged him as the saviour of the nation. As noted by the dramaturg and theatre director Ivica Buljan, "in accordance to the retrograde political processes, the destroyed contemporary art scene did not manage to establish itself as a means of democratisation".²³ Independent theatre in the 1990s was not different in nature from the rest of the independent cultural scene, which was slowly emerging in different parts of the country as a series of scattered individual initiatives, attempts and actors who only occasionally collaborated (not even the term "independent scene" would dominate until the beginning of the new millennium). The relative scarcity of the scene, however, cannot be equalized with its homogeneity in content or form. Even more so such status quo contributed to the visibility of artistic practices on divergent sides of the production spectrum, whether they were future long-term commercial initiatives which expanded the repertoire provided by the institutional theatre or spontaneous and inconsistent theatrical experiments with neglected performance forms and expressive modes relying on the usual presentational models such as sporadic theatre festivals (especially the aforementioned Eurokaz) or other cultural events. They were commonly influenced by historical alternative and non-institutional artistic practices on the domestic and international scene and drew both from their aesthetics and their critical position. Independent artists explored new reasons for and ways or means of creation, often transferring basic principles governing the artistic organisation, such as loose or non-existent hierarchy, curiosity and flexibility, on the methodological and expressive level which occasionally also included their further dispersion into the audience. Moreover, implicitly opposing the prevalence of national history on certain institutional repertoires, they frequently investigated new available subjects and realities on the stage, from the undeniable actuality of the living bodies to various fictional worlds, hyper-realistic and everyday, or surreal and fantastic. The following examples varied in importance and recognisability at the time of realisation: some attracted attention of both critical and non-professional audiences, whereas others remained almost invisible and have become relevant mostly in retrospective. However, arranged in somewhat chronological order they will serve to demonstrate the variety of those performative "missions and visions" which were developing during the 1990s: production contexts, organisational models, prevailing aesthetic elements as well as beliefs and intentions governing presented projects.

23 Ivica Buljan. Institucionalna i nezavisna scena. *Frakcija. Magazin za izvedbene umjetnosti*, 1998, n. 8, p. 23.

IV

Kugla glumište or “soft” fraction did warm, small stories about small people experiencing hallucinogenic events which were the result of the schizophrenia of life [...]. On the other side, Kugla, which is now called D.B. Indoš – House of Extreme Music Theatre, is a “hard” fraction, ritual shamanic rite with the aim to banish unnatural reasons for dying.²⁴

As the influential neo-avant-garde collective Kugla glumište splintered into several unequally successful fractions, one of its prominent members Damir Bartol Indoš grew into an unrelenting force of the Zagreb independent scene. Hybrids of theatre and performance art, his projects mostly displayed his tormented body under pressure, costumed in tattered underwear and placed in the harsh recycled environment stuffed with discarded metal and wooden objects, bottles or tubes. Their associative structure often problematized a psycho-physical trauma while providing a hermetic metaphor for the audience. As one of the ever-present representatives of the local alternative on Eurokaz, during the 1990s he presented a number of performances such as *Laborem Exercens* (1992), *Horse Tail* (Konjski rep, 1993), *Jedadde-Jedadde* (1994), *Door* (Vrata, 1995), *War Kitchen* (Ratna kuhinja, 1996), *Laika – The First Dog in the Universe* (Lajka – Prvi pas u svemiru, 1999).

“I think we should destroy all our theatres and build football fields in their places. Theatre has proven pointless. I admire the audience who goes to the theatre expecting something to happen there”,²⁵ claimed the sculptor, costume designer and visual artist Ivana Popović whose early performative activity reflected, one might say, a somewhat Brechtian conviction that theatre needed “more good sport”. Although her later work as a costume designer includes numerous collaborations with both the independent and institutional scenes, this text mostly relates to her work within two theatre groups active in the late 1980s and during the 1990s. As a student, Popović founded them to promote a rare project of the theatricalisation of fashion on the local scene²⁶ and celebrate stage costumes used to modify, supplement and estrange the body or glorify its imperfect natural state.²⁷ Under

24 Suzana Marjanić. *Kronotop hrvatskoga performansa: od Travelera do danas*. Zagreb: Udruga Bijeli val, Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, Školska knjiga, 2014, p. 765.

25 Đilas, Milivoj. Intervju s Ivanom Popović objavljen u časopisu Metro br. 11, svibanj 1999. In: N. Ivančević (ed.). *Ljubav i otpor Ivane Popović. Katalog izložbe*. Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2019, p. 23.

26 It is interesting that an earlier, still insufficiently explored project of theatrical research of fashion also occurred on the independent Croatian scene under the name *Fashion Show*. It was a solo project devised in 1984 by Dunja Koproščec, the ex-member of the influential independent theatre group Kugla glumište, and inspired by her impressions of Arabian and Islamic culture.

27 Similar intentions were also present in her work as a fashion designer, namely, Popović often transformed the catwalk into a theatrical stage and perceived the fashion show as a perfect example of the immediate and even frightening reality penetrating contemporary performance: “There is no more beautiful theatre than a catwalk, which is for me the proper Theatre of Cruelty according to Artaud and Grotowski. So, you have a scared model, a victim, a lamb; then you have the light, the *briiight* costume, the brutal music, and the audience eager to see blood. Then put *that* actress in a corset, stick her ass out, and put her on high

the recognisable influence of the Soviet avant-garde, Fluxus and dada but also national folklore and mythology, music and popular culture, their performances promoted the artisanal approach—as Popović sewed, knitted, embroidered and dyed all the costumes by herself, and capitalized on the basic theatricality of the given scenic situation, as they rarely formally surpassed the initial simplicity of performance art. Thematically, they were rooted in the emotional experience of the daily reality and child's play but the material was presented from the parodic and auto-ironic viewpoint, evident also in the names of performance collectives. Thus the Studio of Kinetic Figurative Sculpture Line of Least Resistance (founded in 1989) explored the relationship of various media enveloped by the performance while creating ludic stories with personal, fantastic and ethnic references. For example, two formally identical parts of their performance *Redcurrant Bomb* (Ribizl bomba, which premiered on Eurokaz in 1991) were named after an everyday anecdote involving a cake and “wrapped” in the nostalgic red and white chequered pattern of tablecloths in old-fashioned Zagreb taverns while a simple story about a pair of twins and their revelatory transition from artisans (bakers) to artists (sculptors) presented another variation of the twin theme which Popović also examined in her sculptural costume design. Virus Theatre Michelangelo, on the other side, was founded in 1992 on March 6, Michelangelo's birthday and the day when the computer virus of the same name would be activated, and it applied “infectious” high-tech procedures to the performative approach while persistently fusing artist's life and creative work. At first, the group engaged in a somewhat “parasitic” activity with performance interventions and diversions in urban and theatrical space or literal intrusions into ongoing theatre performances in order to test their sustainability and spread “theatrical virus and joy”.²⁸ Later performances, however, such as *Chicken for Eda Čufer* (Kokoška za Edu Čufer, 1993)—repetitive running in circles around the stage, or *Basketball for Gordana Vnuk* (Košarka za Gordanu Vnuk, 1994)—a basketball game between the group and the Eurokaz team, staged the relationship between the artist and Slovenian dramaturge and theoretician/Croatian curator whose names were mentioned in the titles, while *To Čogrljevo Lake* (Na Čogrljevo jezero, 1993) took the audience for a day trip to the environment in which the author grew up with the actors embodying people from her childhood.

As opposed to the playful elaboration of often intimate Popović's preoccupations the dynamic socially engaged art collective Montažstroj threw the scene off-balance in quite a different way. Founded in Zagreb in 1989, when some of its members were still teenagers with no institutional theatre education, the group was affected by pre-war anxiousness and war aggression

heels. Here you have it. A sacrifice.” Suzana Marjanić. Priča bez kraja i kroja: izvedbe modne ljevičarke koja je kiparila tkaninu. In: N. Ivančević (ed.). *Ljubav i otpor Ivane Popović. Katalog izložbe*, p. 109.

28 Vladimir Stojasavljević. O fenomenu kazališta u stvaralaštvu Ivane Popović. In: N. Ivančević (ed.). *Ljubav i otpor Ivane Popović. Katalog izložbe*, p. 34.

and formally inspired by popular culture and the Soviet avant-garde. The influence was evident in their name chosen as a combination of the word “montage” which referred to the editing technique in film and video and the field where Soviet filmmakers and theoreticians made a major contribution, as well as “stroj” (machine) as “the futurist ideal from the beginning of the 20th century applied to all kinds of arts and referring also to ‘lining up’ (*postrojiti* in Croatian) and discipline”.²⁹ Opposing the institutional theatre the group announced their five-year plan for the period between 1990 and 1994 to “theatricalise football pop-culture” by loud electronic pop music, impressive visuality, agitprop, youthful energy, sport and physical theatre bordering on violence but based on a disciplined approach to the performer’s training, biomechanics in particular. In the words of their manifesto: “We are the children of real-socialism. We support the soccer club Dinamo Zagreb. We are combative and of sporting spirit. We are the athletes of the heart.”³⁰ Montažstroj worked in various art fields, such as music, video and live performance producing an electronic music album *Dynamo* (1994), a patriotic video-clip *Croatia in Flame* (1991) and a dance video *I Love You! Montažstroj* (1995). Nevertheless, they believed that “in the transition period the body is the only remaining asylum and the engine for the spirit liberated from ideology and utopia”,³¹ which is why their projects, particularly theatre performances and live actions, heavily relied on the predominance of the performer’s body, “real” choreographic material derived from the every day (and often made more impressive through repetitive presentation) and immediate somatic impact on the spectator. For example, in their early performance *Vatrotehna* (1990), a fusion of the myth about the betrayed bearer of changes Prometheus and the destiny of the revolutionary Soviet theatre director V. E. Meyerhold, and their *Achtung Alarm!* (1990), a drive around the city centre in a fire engine, performers used deafening fire alarms not only to noisily announce their “arrival”, but also to materialise the uneasiness of the times.³² *Rap Opera 101* (1991) presented the story of M. T. Kalashnikov (the inventor of the machine gun widely used in the Croatian War of Independence) as the modern Philoctetes using the frame of popular music videos and elements of physical theatre, while a raw presentation of female and male physicality in their work-in-progress project *Everybody Goes 2 Disco from Moscow 2 San Francisco* (1994) toyed with the idea of contemporary relationships as a chaotic blend of hostility and dependence. Their increasingly popular forceful expression attracted audiences in Croatia and abroad, where they toured extensively, inciting one of the most respectable Croatian

29 Montažstroj [online]. Available at: <http://www.montazstroj.hr/montazstroj/#> (accessed February 2, 2020).

30 Montažstroj. Manifest. *Frakcija. Magazin za izvedbene umjetnosti*, 1996, n. 2, p. 90.

31 Goran Sergej Pristaš. Teatar tranzicije. *Frakcija. Magazin za izvedbene umjetnosti*, 1996, n. 1, p. 109.

32 Montažstroj renewed the performances *Achtung Alarm!* and *Vatrotehna* in 2010: the first was re-enacted, while the second was re-envisioned with new performers of the same age of the original ensemble at the time of the premiere and in relation to new social circumstances. While revising their loud warnings and the metaphor of the Prometheus myth in the context of wild neoliberal capitalism which is rapidly swallowing public resources and acquisitions, the group also problematized the faults of activism in contemporary society.

theatre critics Dalibor Foretić to describe the above-mentioned project as “the triumph of an authentic stage work” which “perfectly blends the universal and local” and possesses the quality that “has not been seen in our alternative theatre since the sixties”.³³ On the other side, although they were registered as a private theatre in 1991, a reliable production basis was difficult to obtain. Significant in the context of this overview is the fact that two of their theatre performances *Vatrotehna* and *Rap Opera 101* were blatantly named after sponsors—a company providing protection from fire and Radio 101—and that in 1997 some of the key members chose to continue their professional careers in the Netherlands. It would take several years for Montažstroj to re-emerge on the Croatian independent scene at the beginning of the new millennium. This time, however, they would operate as a highly active and aesthetically more diverse production platform still prone to socially sensitive projects and often working in coproduction with institutional theatres.

In spite of Montažstroj's activist pedigree, the gloomy underside of the postwar national euphoria was perhaps most lucidly unmasked by the *Bank Worshipper Sect* (Sljedba štovatelja banaka, 1994–1995), a project balancing between a realised metaphor and a mirror image of the absurd reality. Placed symbolically in the middle of the decade of both political and economic transition, it was inspired by the notion that the contemporary god was money, which a group of Zagreb artists (Boris Bakal, Nataša Lušetić and Stanko Juzbašić as performers/co-authors of the concept and Tomo Savić-Gecan, Nicole Hewitt, Ela Agotić, Aleksandar Acev and Katarina Barić as performers) considered a prevalent belief. The grotesque name of the self-proclaimed sect justified their collective transposition of cultural performance of religious devotion to banking-related practices in order to transform them into an obvious competition to the everyday absurd. As expected, they gathered in banks—churches of the contemporary god—to engage in various forms of worship: opening a bank account at one transaction window only to close it at the other, trying to exchange the dinar—the currency of the former Yugoslavia, for Croatian kuna or a silver coin with the image of Josip Broz Tito (the life-long president of the larger and politically more significant SFRY) for the gold coin with the image of Franjo Tuđman (then president of the Republic of Croatia which was still fighting for its independence and political status), etc. Meaningful rituals were enriched with dedicated choreography such as sweeping the floor of the “beloved” institution or waiting in line only to bow to the “priest”—a member of the bank personnel. The unannounced events beyond the limitations and, as observed by the dramaturge Katarina Pejović, the safety of the theatrical frame,³⁴ occurred in various banks and

33 Dalibor Foretić. Svjetska montaža. *Vijenac: novine Matice hrvatske za književnost, umjetnost i znanost*, 1995, vol. III, n. 27.

34 Pejović, Katarina. Bakal, Boris navigator izmještanja i diskontinuiteta—portret multimedijalnog umjetnika. *Up&Underground Art Dossier*, 2004, n. 7/8, p. 26.

were intended for the “found” audience and a few invited friends as a subtly distorted and illuminating parallel reality. Needless to say, the artists were (unsuccessfully) persecuted by the bank authorities but occasionally, and surprisingly, welcome even by the bank employees.

In contrast to the previously analysed artistic efforts, the unswerving example of the Zagreb Theatre Exit in the 1990s presents a move towards a more commercialised, albeit alternative creative practice as one of the common roads taken by independent theatre-makers. It was founded in 1994 by the actor and theatre director Matko Raguž who worked on the Croatian independent scene of the 1970s, in groups like *Histrioni* and *Akter*, adopting the advantages and the joy of performative exploration. Unsurprisingly, Raguž felt a need for the actor's greater freedom of expression while at the same time recognising a niche worth filling when he set up the future institution of the “actor's theatre”: “For me as an artist it was, partially, an exit from the war context we were in but also an exit from the theatre into another theatre—the kind of theatre I and we wanted. Theatre as an exit.”³⁵ Their stellar beginning, a theatre performance *Dekadence* (*Dekadencija*) inspired by a play by Steven Berkoff problematizing social divisions between the upper and the working class through the interconnected affairs of two couples, premiered in 1994 and would remain on the repertoire for the next ten years. The performance established a more commercial variant of the “poor theatre” where the radically reduced set, props, costumes and makeup functioned both as a challenge to and a guarantee of the physically demanding expressive acting with the emphasized potential for onstage transformations. The actor as the origin of the total scenic act remained essential and was further explored in their famous projects *Imago* (1995) inspired by *Knots* by R.D. Laing where the neurotic world of contemporary yuppies was expressed through mime, as well as *Bouncers* (*Izbacivači*, 1996) based on John Godber's play which, transformed into stories from the Zagreb nightlife, heavily relied on the actor's authorial contribution and improvisation. Although their later work also included experiments with the new media, music and dance, the elaborate ensemble performance has continued to dominate their aesthetics until today. When creating the repertoire, Exit chose voices of less known foreign playwrights based on their capacity for provoking a larger debate, dealing with contemporary social issues such as social inequality and taboo topics like youth aggression but also an ability to entertain and attract larger audiences, mostly younger and middle-aged. The theatre also promoted successful devised projects or those that were text-based but reinvented and localised by the ensemble. Their dedicated and prolonged work on a single project, which often continued after the opening night, was praised from the very beginning, both by the audiences and the critics. Mostly due to the

35 Željka Turčinović. Matko Raguž. Tražeći svoj izlaz. Razgovor. *Glumište*, 1998, vol. I, n. 1, p. 45.

dominance of the performer on stage, in comparison to the mainstream, it was perceived as a peculiarity and sometimes even interpreted as an act against the authority of the director's vision. In the words of the prominent actor and early Exit collaborator Nataša Lušetić: "Due to the discontinuity, the clear difference between the mainstream and the off doesn't exist here. It turns out that anything not mainstream is avant-garde or experimental theatre".³⁶ Ultimately, Exit was accepted as a "good ratio and a good connection between the new and the old expression"³⁷ which proved to be extremely commercial—it steadily attracts a large number of spectators and has until today brought over 170 awards to the theatre. Their continuing success was facilitated by the agreement on cultural cooperation with the Centre for Culture and Film "August Cesarec" in the late 1990s. Initially "homeless", the theatre relied on the existing infrastructural resources outside of the institutional theatre, such as the multifunctional art spaces within Zagreb student residences, but since 1998, it has been permanently placed in cultural centre. However, while formally responsible for the theatre programme of the centre, Theatre Exit has acquired an informal status of one of Zagreb's most popular repertory theatres no longer labelled as "off" and significantly less independent.

Atomised independent practices and individual projects continued developing throughout the decade with a particular twist on the Zagreb youth scene where a new creative wave emerged in the second half of the 1990s. It included a few handfuls of mostly student or youth groups, which is why some participants tend to perceive it as the revival of the energetic experimental student theatre of the 1960s, and was generally localized in the state capital. Similar groups did appear in other cities in Croatia (for example Fraktal Falus Teatar which was founded in 1994 in Split) but more often as separate initiatives rather than interconnected networks. The momentum of the phenomenon slowly waned with the beginning of the new millennium but not before the scene established itself as genuinely different, self-made and strongly independent. It did not evolve within the state or other institutions, nor did it receive (at least initially) much, or in certain cases, any kind of financial and infrastructural support. Closely related to their position beyond the institutional horizon was the diversity of their participants who did not show any attempts towards aesthetic uniformity stemming from common artistic role models, manifests or aims. At the same time, strong personal ties among them resulted in transfers of influences, performative genres and individual aesthetic principles, while the common denominator became somewhat generalised and variously interpreted as "alternative" to the traditionalist institutional theatre. More than one aesthetic and organisational aspect of this scene can be traced

36 Goran Sergej Pristaš. Krug se širi. Razgovor sa glumicom i redateljicom Natašom Lušetić. *Frakcija. Magazin za izvedbene umjetnosti*, 1996, n. 3, p. 10.

37 *Ibid.*

back to the unfavourable practical conditions and impulsive nature of their work as many young artists simply turned the disadvantages such as a lack of government funding in their own favour. A number of groups chose a version of theatrical “poverty”, reducing and recycling theatrical equipment or finding inventive surrogates for the intricate staging. Being prevented from using conventional theatre stages often forced them out into spaces serving non-theatrical purposes such as nightclubs or, more often, everyday spaces such as city streets. For example, one of the most prominent theatre groups of that period, Schmrzt Theatre frequently developed different street actions claiming that the performance on the street was the most immediate test of the quality of their work and increased the possibility of their interaction with the audiences. Even more so, according to the founders, the previously mentioned festival FAKI was initiated within this scene with the intention of “conquering and contaminating the public space with alternative content”³⁸ and presented its programme in the open urban environment. In addition, although some of them also produced text-based performances relying on realistic acting, most groups adopted those performance forms which enabled instant expression and intrusion of the real while at the same time diminishing the limitations resulting from the lack of conventional performer’s skills such as articulate stage speech. They often opted for experimental group happenings and theatricalised performance as a means of exploring (and anticipating) many elements of postdramatic performance aesthetics in the contemporary Croatian scene. The final important aspect of the new youth scene was its lack of interest in any kind of formal organisation that could have provided it with the necessary legitimacy. Groups were mostly (although not exclusively) decentralised and dehierarchised with participative approach to creation and other responsibilities or at least less formal distribution of authorship, as young authors devised their own organisational formats. In retrospect such organisation was interpreted as a form of resistance to the institutional theatre, however, it was also shaped by the lack of logistic and infrastructural support which often forced the members to take over more than one creative function. Membership was fluid and varying and new groups often grew out of the existing ones or shared their members. Certain individuals joined forces to create a single project or two, others purposefully limited their working period or, in rare cases, continued working for years. Still, these promoters of artistic independency founded three noteworthy performance festivals: FAKI (1998–) and Test!—Theatre to the Students! (Test!—Teatar studentima!, 2000–2014) in Zagreb, and Humphrey Bogart (1998–) in the nearby city of Velika Gorica, which served as a more appropriate substitute for the previously existing festivals accessible to the non-professional scene. The first manifestation was initially self-financed, but developed into an occasionally

38 Višnja Rogošić. Svi nezainteresirani za suradnju neka se jave ministru za kulturu. Izvedbena okupljanja studentske i alternativne scene. *Kazalište. Časopis za kazališnu umjetnost*, 2010, vol. XIII, n. 41/42, p. 89.

well-supported city event; the second mostly relied on the institutions in charge of students' interests and the third on the local non-governmental organisations. As another attempt to enrich the local cultural offer, many of the participants were involved in the development of the two organisations/venues Autonomous Cultural Centre ATTACK! (Autonomni kulturni centar ATTACK!, 1997–) and Močvara (1999–), which would serve as the incubators for the future independent art scene and, until today, host numerous alternative theatrical manifestations and events. On the whole, this phenomenon was more relevant as a “movement” than as a catalogue of individual incidents, therefore instead of listing a number of names and performance titles, I would present three works by three notable youth groups. In addition to serving as springboards for some of the well-known Croatian theatre artists, they show the diversity of their thematic interests and performative principles but also similar organisational and status features of the whole scene.

Of the three examples, the first presents an impulse to create a socially engaged work. It was a performance art piece with theatrical elements named *Olga on vacation* (Olga na dopustu) and created in 1998 by the student group Theatre des femmes (1995–2003) in the halls of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences where most of them studied. The group was founded at the time when its fluctuating members were still high-school students and has acquired its name and exclusively female perspective by accident, however, they used it to point out the debasement of the national culture and a pessimistic vision of the future. Inspired by the play *Three Sisters* by A. P. Chekhov, a dozen Olgas (performers representing one of the sisters disheartened by the monotonous everyday routine) wandered through the halls of the faculty carrying suitcases and guideposts and “dreaming” about leaving for Moscow. Sadly, the performance anticipated the emigration of numerous young people who were oppressed by the Croatian postwar reality and in search of a more fulfilling life.

The second example, from 1999, accounts for the aesthetic shift of this scene and was provided by the Schmrtz Theatre (1995–2000), an informally arranged fusion of a performance art collective and a punk band inspired in its subversive appearance by the historical and neo-avant-garde and programmatically limited to a five-year existence. Working in “ad hoc ensembles” which could include up to fifty participants, the collective nurtured the rough aesthetics of anarchy, joke, sensationalism and manipulation, but also social engagement firmly rooted in the “do it yourself” principle that they eagerly embraced. Accordingly, their performative intervention *Out, Demons, Out!* consisted of a series of mock-exorcist actions (such as throwing eggs, performing martial arts attacks or juggling) in the attempt to evict demons from the building of the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, at the time the symbol of a conservative theatre institution substantially funded by the government.

Finally, the site-specific performance *Cricket* (Cvrčak, 2000) confirms the inclination of young self-taught artists to deal with everyday politics. It was performed by Le cheval (1995–2001) as a medieval morality play at a major Zagreb square with the building of the Serbian Orthodox Christian Church in the back. Notorious for their mercilessly playful approach to authority as well as predominant stereotypes, Le cheval were prone to the fusion of social actuality and theatrical fiction all in the name of the “revision of political reality”.³⁹ Thus, toying with the concepts of sacrifice and the redemption of guilt, the performance parodied the collectivisation of the responsibility for war crimes evident in Croatian politics of the time: the performer cut their hand and smeared the hands of the audience with blood claiming that everybody was responsible and that they should look at their own hands. According to the authors, both Croats and Serbs interpreted this performance as the imposition of guilt on their respective ethnic groups. An obvious temporal exception, the last illustration was chosen purposefully, as an indicator of the connection between specificities of this scene and its peculiar future. In a rather surprising turn starting at the beginning of the new decade, a significant number of prominent representatives of this scene (for example Anica Tomić and Jelena Kovačić from Theatre des femmes, Mario Kovač from the Schmrtz Theatre, Oliver Frlić from Le cheval – to mention only those who participated in the previously described performances) gradually joined the institutional theatre and nowadays continue to shape it from the inside as theatre managers, directors, dramaturgs, performers, producers, but also critics and scholars, both in Croatia and abroad.

V

In spite of a relatively small number of its representatives, independent theatre in Croatia established certain historical continuity in the second half of the 20th century. Although unbound by the demands and limitations of conventional theatres, in SFRY it operated in financially, organisationally and promotionally inadequate circumstances, bounded by ideological restrictions. Still, it provided an important performative legacy and methodological and procedural resources for the forthcoming independent scene of the 1990s. Political, social and economic circumstances during and immediately after the Croatian War of Independence in the 1990s brought a turn towards greater ideological and organisational freedom while introducing another set of obstacles to the development of artistic autonomy. At the time, state funding was predominantly intended for cultural institutions and, since cultural heritage was perceived as a major resource for the development of national identity, emphasis was mostly placed on its

39 Boris Čeko. Reseciranje unutarnjih organa Le chevala. *Kazalište. Časopis za kazališnu umjetnost*, 2010, vol. XIII, n. 43/44, p. 56.

preservation and affirmation in contemporary art. Consequently, the state budget mostly excluded theatre scenes which sought to describe themselves as organisationally, formally and thematically “off”—investigative and probing, anti-authoritarian and critical, ludic and tongue-in-cheek. Many representatives of the Zagreb independent theatre scene, however, proved resistant to such a critical lack of finances and facilities. Most of those whose work was analysed in this text are still active in the independent sector, or in co-productions with the institutional theatres which have opened to the scene, although more as a result of individual initiatives, not of a general strategy. In addition, the new millennium brought a fresh cultural policy instigating further progress and the professionalization of the independent theatre. Institutional support increased from the year 2000 after the coalition government led by the leftist Social Democratic Party of Croatia took office. The Ministry of Culture became more open toward financing various cultural organisations and, in order to increase the transparency of the financing process and “diversify the factors influencing the decision-making process”, the parliament passed the new “Law on the Councils of Culture” which explicitly stated “the need to support alternative culture and amateurism”.⁴⁰

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40 Maciej Falski – Tomasz Rawski. Cultural Politics in (Post)Socialist Croatia: The Question of (Dis) Continuity. In: D. Jelača – M. Kolanović – D. Lugarić (eds.). *The Cultural Life of Capitalism in Yugoslavia: (Post)Socialism and Its Other*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 295.

Abstract

The study aims to present independent theatre in Croatia during the 1990s while focusing on the examples from the leading scene of Croatian capital Zagreb. It provides a recent history of the field, from the precedents to the formation of the somewhat fragile continuity in the second half of the 20th century. It explains specific political, social and cultural circumstances that influenced the development of the independent theatre in the 1990s, in particular the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995) and the postwar cultural policy of the new state which privileged cultural institutions. The aesthetics, the development and the most important works of the following groups and individual artists are presented in detail: D.B. Indoš – House of Extreme Music Theatre, Line of Least Resistance, Virus Theatre Michelangelo, Montažstroj, Theatre Exit. In addition, the analysis includes a separate project *The Bank Worshipper Sect* and a phenomenon occurring on the Zagreb scene of the late 1990s when a number of relatively short-lasting but exceedingly active non-formal performance collectives appeared under the general label of “alternative theatre”.

Key words: Croatian theatre, independent theatre, alternative theatre, the 1990s, D.B. Indoš – House of Extreme Music Theatre, Line of Least Resistance, Virus Theatre Michelangelo, Montažstroj, *Bank Worshipper Sect*, Theatre Exit