FESTIVAL POLICIES

Basic overview

The review we give here is the result of a survey “About Theatre” conducted by the Heartefact Fund and the Working Group for Performing Arts, in cooperation with the Creative Industries Council. Besides being a basic questionnaire on the methods of work, program and organizational structure, this survey also includes thorough research, interviews, and monitoring institutions and organizations dealing with performing arts for a period of three years. Out of the total of 103 invited, 76 institutions, organizations and individuals participated in the survey.

Some of the organizations that did not participate in the survey had non-theatre related remarks regarding the research, while the rest of organizations and individuals remained unavailable for contact.

A special challenge for the analysis of festival policies in Serbia was represented by so called "phantom" organizations that have received money in state and local cultural competitions over the past three years. Those “phantom” organizations do not exist today, or do not deal with performing arts and festivals at all.

According to publicly accessible data and preliminary results of the conducted research, in Serbia there is a total of:

- 35 festivals dealing with performing arts. This number also includes various informal festivals that have a multimedia character or include some of the performing arts practices.

- The number of magazines, local memorial festivals and other theatrical ceremonies and program orientations are not included in this number.

- Out of the above number, 14 festivals has been created in the last ten years with a program transformation or by changing a profile of an already existing festival, tournament or other program articulated in different or expanded content in relation to its earlier character.

- Out of the total number of festivals, 12 of them have been operating with decades of tradition, a relatively high quality program and international cooperations. These festivals are diverse and include high quality and artistic content, as well as commercial, educational and other programs that contribute to their development and their position in the local community.

According to the preliminary results of the conducted research:

- 7 festivals are of significance to the theater community and represent artistic and quality programs.

- The remaining 5 out of 12 include important and major festivals that primarily deal with other kinds of art, but which have, in the last decade, included performing arts in their programs. In this way, they expanded their target audience, but also significantly contributed to the survival of certain theatre troupes, ideas and practices at a time of smaller possibilities for presenting and performing plays and performances in the public space.

Division according to the criteria of establishment:

Out of 35 festivals engaged in performing arts, 22 festivals were founded and managed by institutions, such as theaters, local self-governments, cultural centers, etc.

The remaining 13 festivals function as private initiatives.

The largest number of them - 8 of them, was founded, managed and implemented by civil society organizations through associations, foundations or similar forms, and 3 festivals also include other forms of organization and work - such as entrepreneurs, limited liability companies, etc.

Also, out of 35 festivals of different types and program profiles - 19 belong to theaters and present their initiatives for opening and positioning programs in the artistic sense, but are also an important segment of the international exchange and profiling of the theater houses and their programs.

Artistic councils or specially formed collective bodies manage the programs of 34 festivals. These bodies are mostly professional, but according to the available data they are largely subject to the influence of political parties and their personnel policies, both central and local self-governments. Thus, the entire sector falls into the incidents of political, party or local voluntaristic arbitrary decision-making on artistic issues, whereby cases of undue prohibition, change of name, purpose and profile of the festival are possible, in relation to the current non-artistic interests of the centers of influence (local or republic authorities).

18 festivals have their own program selectors. Some of them practice the selection of an examiner annually, or share a selector's function with several members of the selection board; there are also cases where some festivals have the same selectors over longer periods of time, or have selectors who perform this function in more than one festival during a same time period, which is an undesirable practice according to all criteria.

Preliminary results and assessments indicate that at the 35 festivals, there was about 320 people engaged. This number includes the festival workers themselves, but also developers, performers, technicians and other contributors. In addition, festivals co-operate with more than 1,000 other actors, and employ around 80 volunteers.

Investments of the Republic of Serbia and the local self-government authority

Due to the lack of a coordinated and clear festival policy in Serbia, it is not possible to give a precise financial analysis of the support to various festivals. The research process used data that is publicly available: reports of cultural institutions submitted to state bodies at the republic level and other instances, as well as results of the competitions held by various ministries. In 2017, about 311 million dinars were allocated from the republic, provincial budgets and local self-government budgets for a total of 35 festivals, which does not include regular resources that theaters and other institutions receive from the founders for their regular work, as well as fixed assets and expenses which are covered through other forms of financing, for which precise informations were not available.

With regard to sources outside public finances (such as sponsorships, in-kind donations or similar market sources of financing), the largest number of festivals ensured significant funds in 2017, about 30% higher than in the previous years.

In the realization of the festival, the tickets sale represents a maximum of 30% of revenues at the festivals that have developed this practice, and made their programs more commercial.

Key Challenges

- problems and potential solutions –

- It is necessary to articulate and clearly position the Republic of Serbia at all levels through an active festival policy. This will ensure stable sources of funding, clear **long-term** capacity building plans for institutions and festivals, enhancement of sustainability and innovative approach, coordination of various levels of government and establishment of a clear system of evaluation and an accountability in implementation of such policies.

- It is necessary to create an institutional mechanism that will implement this policy, by working together with festivals and various state bodies. This unique mechanism should provide active long-term support, regardless of administrative barriers. At the same time, it is extremely important to evaluate and establish a liability system that can not be arbitrary, but must rather focus on the assessment of results and performance. It is particularly important that such a mechanism should provide better and more inclusive international cooperation, artists mobility and a space for exchanges.

- Having in mind the preliminary results of the research, in raising the goal of a better international aspect of the festival's work and recognizing the significance of the festivals for the local theater scene, the state investment in the development of festival policy should be **tripled**. With a commitment to a mere survival, without conditions for development and the delivery of new and innovative practices, it is not possible to expect the realization of these goals.

- A classification is necessary, a set of standards and an adequate evaluation of the festival and their practice. One of the offered systems is a mechanism that is already applied by the EU through a unique system of **registration and monitoring of institutions such as PADOR, PIC** etc. With clear standards of good governance, this system would provide overall higher quality.

- The increased financial and institutional support for artistic quality and non-profit and production risk programs of all festivals is particularly important. Through these **market-unrivaled** programs, the majority of the most valuable art works were created. Creating better governance and self-sustainability should not be an obstacle to free labor and investment in artistic production and representation, regardless of its direct and immediate profitability.

- On the other hand, it is necessary to invest in the development of a commercial and market festival approach. In addition to the fact that a large number of participants try to establish a system by themselves, it is necessary, in a better and more high-quality way, to promote self-sustainability and specific program profiling of the festival offer.

- Also, these festivals shouldn't remain only **revues of the content produced by other participants**, but it is necessary to create the conditions for the festivals to have their own production as well, and also to have the means to participate in international co-productions. It is of particular importance, both for their international affirmation and for the development and expansion of their base with the local audience, to provide festivals with the opportunity to be the initiators of such practices and to encourage their own production.

Possible conclusion

Even though the tradition of big and important festivals such as Bitef, Sterijino pozorje or the Yugoslav Theater Festival in Uzice preserved the idea of the significance and necessity of these manifestations for the development of our scene, Serbia still lacks a clear and active festival policy in performing arts. In spite of this, some festivals have managed to build their position and perspective, regardless of lack of institutional support.

In defining of a festival policy it is necessary to first classify the types and importance of the festival, to clearly and strategically position their programs and work with the audience, to provide long-term and sustainable financing, planning and management through the strengthening of institutional frameworks and ultimately to encourage the development of a large number of initiatives and festivals. The first step is to increase the budget for the festivals, but it is also of paramount importance to work on strengthening the capacities of the institutions that deal with them, and on management, programming, profiling and visibility both in the country and abroad. Tradition and knowledge are a great resource for festival strategies and practices, but it is important that their change is accompanied by a transformation and the establishment of a different system of support, and also establishment of an evaluation mechanism and a functioning method of the whole.