INDEPENDENT SCENE

This sector of performing arts is the least explored, and there is no exact in-formation about the number of active organizations or their methods of work in this field. While there are some excellent examples of valuable works made within the independent scene, the lack of clearly defined cultural policies and systematic support makes these examples results of individual efforts, while their impact on the overall scene is very limited. The lack of visibility and analytical data regarding the independent scene are among the basic problems preventing this sector from further systematic development.

It is indisputable that significant works of contemporary production and creativity have been achieved within the independent scene, but these successes, due to the absence of clearly defined cultural policies and system support, are primarily the result of individual efforts and incidents, the work and expertise of these individuals and small groups, and thus their effects on the overall scene remain limited, and the mechanisms that led to the highlight - unknown to the wider professional community. This lack of clear overview and analysis of the state of the independent scene and, in general, performing arts in Serbia, is one of the main obstacles to planning incentive measures that should contribute to their improvement. So far, no comprehensive research has been carried out in this part of the performing sector, and the following data are only available so far in terms of attempts to systematically review the scene.

According to the preliminary results of the research that was published for the study "About Theater" by the Heartefact Fund and the Working Group for Performing Arts in cooperation with the Creative Industries Council, the following data was obtained:

- The number of independent institutions and organizations in the performing arts sector in Serbia is still indefinite;
- We have identified 103 organizations in this field - and this is an indefinite number;
- Of the 103 registered and invited organizations, 76 responded, which also indicates that there are a number of non-transparent organizations, also known colloquially as "phantom" organizations in the sector, which exist "only on paper" and for the needs of the award contest;

- Among these organizations, there are 9 different business models, while the specifics of some of them are not even legally recognized;

- The 9 different business models are the following:

    1. Associations
    2. Foundations
    3. Entrepreneurs
    4. limited liability companies
    5. professional associations
    6. syndicates
    7. artistic collectives
    8. independent artists who work in hubs or other modern models of associations, and
    9. non-formal groups;

- Independent organizations are divided into **for-profit** and **non-profit** organizations;

- In the field of performing arts in the independent scene, mostly smaller entities with limited annual budgets are active;

- Half of the interviewed organizations have the annual budgets between 10.000 and 50.000 euros, 30% of them has budgets over 50.000 euros (with a few organizations with budgets over 100.000 euros), while 10% of them has budgets under 10.000 euros;

- Even though they are in an unsettled financial situation with unstable sources of financing, the surveyed entities manage to realize a large number of activities on an annual basis;

- Generally speaking, most of the organizations spend 65-80% of their budgets for their programs and 20-35% of the budget for the running costs and organization;

- For the most part, for the financial reasons, the actors of the independent scene in the field of performing arts are mostly limited to programs that are implemented at the national or regional level;

- Most of the projects of the independent scene are limited to Serbia or the region; in the context of Europe, organizations from Serbia mostly participate as partners in programs supported by Creative Europe and Erasmus+ but rarely as project carriers.

Even though there is no systematic and comprehensive research on public participation in public cultural events in Serbia, it can be assumed that our situation is close to that of other similar European countries. A large number of activities during the year does not necessarily result in a large audience for performing arts, and its composition comes primarily from the civil sector. This is primarily due to the lack of systematic work on the development of the audience, because only a continuous and constructive approach to the audience can have visible, measurable and long-term effects. Due to the low financial and organizational capacity, communication with the audience is currently limited to individual events, and organizations lack practical knowledge and skills that are related to the issues of audience development. The research has shown that the majority of organizations surveyed lack the elaborate and precise communication strategy, as well as the continuity of care existing and access to the new audience, and when it comes to promoting programs and particular activities.

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

An analysis of the results of the Ministry of Culture and Information competition for financing and co-financing projects in the field of theater arts in 2017 and 2018 shows **a great difference in the treatment of the public and the independent sector**.

In 2017, a total of only 17% of the budget for the field of theater arts or 10.700.000 dinars was granted to the independent sector for only 12 projects.

The approved funds range from 700,000 to 2,000,000 dinars per project, and the supported projects in most cases envisaged:

- new productions (6 projects),
- Prizes (1 project),
- Festival organization (1 project),
- Implementation of the annual program of the organization (1 project) and
- Competition for contemporary drama texts, debates and other public events (3 projects).

In 2018, civil society organizations, professional associations and entrepreneurs active in the field of performing arts received 25% of the funds allocated to the contest - **(16,000,000 rsd) for 24 projects.**

Despite an increase of 8%, financing of an independent scene at the national level continues to face many problems, which are primarily reflected in: the lack of clearly defined criteria applied in evaluating projects in the competition (formal criteria that exist do not support program excellence, while at the same time they are to a large extent limiting and contrary to European tendencies that encourage the development of new business models and greater market competitiveness in culture and creative industries), lack of control of spending of resources and lack of evaluation of supported projects. This prevents a better allocation of public funds and results in the absence of more tangible effects and results of previous investment in performing arts.

Key Challenges

- It is necessary to classify and define all subjects of an independent cultural scene active in the field of performing arts and to precisely position these actors in order to develop the mechanisms necessary for improvement and raising the level of their functioning.

- There is a need to create a more coherent system that will balance the relationship between independent, private and public initiatives, enable their linkage, as well as intersectoral and interdisciplinary cooperation. Contemporary business models, cooperation and partnerships within different fields of activity are currently on the margins of interest, although these cooperation can greatly contribute to the functioning of cultural and artistic organizations, the quality and availability of their programs, as well as the positioning of culture as an economic and development potential in the broadest sense.

- Poor cooperation with the public sector limits organizations to the realization of programs in areas that are not adequate and technically satisfactory. In addition to the lack of space that is detrimental to program continuity, organizations have indicated that the space for the realization of activities will enable a better and more focused work on the development of the audience. In this sense, it is necessary to establish mechanisms of permanent cooperation and dialogue between different actors in the field of performing arts, and equally important is the establishment of dialogue mechanisms and continual cooperation of all government levels with the participants of the cultural scene.

- The main characteristics of the current model of performing arts financing in Serbia, including the competitions of the Ministry of Culture, provincial and city competition, represent the first and fundamental challenge in the functioning of civil society organizations dealing with this area. General non-functionality of public finances is reflected in:

    1. Uneven distribution of funds between the public and civil sector;
    2. Lack of control over the spending of allocated funds and the evaluation of implemented programs, especially in the public sector;
    3. Inadequate amounts of allocated funds for individual programs or annual program of individual organizations;
    4. Political voluntarism and subjective interpretation of formal, otherwise insufficiently precisely defined, funding criteria and
    5. The lack of continuous and clear forms of contractual financing at different levels of government (public partnerships) and from the corporate sector.

The basic conclusions are that the independent scene is the most endangered part of the performing arts sector, and that, at the same time, it is most susceptible to dissociation, fragmentation and division, lack of consensus on the needs of reforming the sector, as well as self-isolation and auto-marginalization of artists and administrators in this vulnerable area. A greater measure of lateral cooperation is needed in the sector itself, as well as a more serious treatment of independent actors of performing arts by decision-makers in the public sector and the distribution of public funds.