

The function of theatres and theatre schools in creating the human dimension of the city

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The function of theatres and theatre schools in creating the human dimension of the city

I am doubly engaged in this topic: I founded and managed the Centre for Experimental Theatre in Brno¹, Czech Republic. It is a city cultural institution, which houses two leading Czech professional alternative theatre ensembles and various theatre activities. I also run one of the studios of dramaturgy and direction at the Theatre Faculty² of the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Brno³.

Thus asking questions concerning this topic and trying to answer them is part of my everyday work – both practical and theoretical, artistic and pedagogical.

How do theatre and theatre schools co-create the human dimension of the city?

The well-known theatre semiotician, Professor Emeritus of our Theatre Faculty Ivo Osolobě called his crucial study *Theatre as communication of communications about communication*. To define what theatre is, he needed only variations on one single word: communication. And this is not a play on words, but a serious attempt to define the quintessence of theatre.

Communication forms our relationships with another person, with the world, with God.

Communication creates our relations inside the community, interconnects them, it is the mechanism and model of its positive and negative, critical and cathartic inner dialogues that fill it with sense.

Culture and so even art are fruits of the community. The community needs them because they are its way of seeing, naming and forming itself; they are its communication with itself.

Theatre – which we must not mix up with entertainment – has the ability to define problems, conflicts and crises of the community. In its paramount performances it is its vision: it can anticipate problems and can help to cure them on a spiritual level.

Culture – and also theatre – in the environment of the current consumer society acts as a defence of the content and sense of our lives. This request should be an ethical imperative in programming our artistic and pedagogical activities.

However, it is not possible to instruct a student that his future theatre work must be subjected to any ethical imperatives. We cannot limit the freedom of his future work and artistic choice.

An art school must be a place of free and open dialogue, where the teacher's voice has the same importance as the student's.

It must be a place of common search.

Thus if we want to examine the phenomenon of the influence of theatre and theatre schools in society and also in the community of the city, we have to focus on questions of the social responsibility of theatre together with our students.

In programming pedagogical activities – lectures, seminars and workshops – at a theatre school, dialogue research in the following topics must be included:

1. *The position of art and artists in society.* The relationship of society towards what is known as living culture.
2. *When, and through what, is a feeling of community introduced into society?* Which art forms and what cultural activities are capable of evoking this feeling.
3. *The mission of art in society.* In what sort of political (judicial or economic) state of affairs does art begin to become a substitute for other functions of society.
4. *The relationship of art and ethics.* Can the supreme quality of an artistic work protect it against unclear ethical reverberation. Under what circumstances is the ethical quality in a work of art more important than the aesthetic. Does catharsis exist in a contemporary theatrical (or other artistic) work? What can evoke a feeling of catharsis in the present day?
5. *The relationship of artistic fiction with reality.* The issue of authenticity in an artistic work. The resonance of the specific theme of theatre (and other artistic) reflects the material, legal or judicial and intellectual or spiritual state of affairs in society.
6. *The issue of the theatricality of contemporary public life, especially politics.*

1 <http://www.ced-brno.cz/>

2 <http://difa.jamu.cz>

3 <http://www.jamu.cz>

This programme of intellectual searching however must rest on cultural anthropology and performance studies, and must move to interdisciplinary frontiers. The theatre (or art) school is the best environment for this research.

However, we cannot deal with these questions only on a theoretical level; they must be included also in programming the school's practical artistic activities, which should try to generate the answers.

Permanent open and live discussion should prepare students for entering the artistic practice not only on a professional but also on an ethical level.

The theatre school as a part of the theatre environment should be programmed to be connected as much as possible not only with active theatre and the social environment of the city in which it is located, but also with the environment of the region, state... and Europe.

Here comes the question for the discussion:

What can hinder theatre from interactive connection with the environment of professional theatre and with the city?

No doubt there are many obstacles which can hinder this live connection. However, a theatre school as a dynamic organism should be able to deal with them in a positive way.

Let me present two examples of active, creative common life of our theatre school and the community of the city.

The City of Brno⁴ is the second largest city in the Czech Republic, the seat of the Constitutional Court and other top judicial institutions of our state. It is also an important cultural and university centre in Central Europe. The rich cultural environment is dominated by a developed network of theatres. The theatre life of Brno has a significant humanist history. In the last quarter of the 20th century, theatres were a leading force in the fight against Communist totalitarianism. Two of Brno's theatres – Theatre Goose on a String⁵ and HaTheatre⁶ were initiators of the strike of Czech theatres that – together with a students' strike – started what came to be known as the "Velvet Revolution" in November 1989.

The tradition and contemporary situation makes Brno an ideal space for developing theatre school activities and for verifying creative models of common school and city life.

The first example:

The international festival of theatre schools SETKÁNÍ/ENCOUNTER⁷



The Theatre Faculty of the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts has been organizing the international festival of theatre schools SETKÁNÍ/ENCOUNTER for twenty years. At present it is one of the most important festivals of this kind in Europe. It was held in the school theatre studio only for the first time. The faculty gradually initiated cooperation with theatres in Brno (of course, first of all with the theatres housed by the Centre for Experimental Theatre, which I run, but not only with them). Now the festival performances and events are held at several places of the cultural centre of the City of Brno in very well-equipped theatre locations.

4 <http://www.brno.cz>

5 <http://www.provazek.cz>

6 <http://www.hadivadlo.cz/>

7 <http://www.encounter.cz>, <http://www.facebook.com/setkani>

A festival of this kind is a meeting of the particular field on a professional level; therefore it is closed within this field. Participating schools from abroad together with the organizing school – our faculty – form an audience large enough to fill all the performances. However, SETKÁNÍ/ENCOUNTER has been trying to open up for the community of the city since the very beginning. There are performances in the programme chosen especially to be offered to the general cultural public of the City of Brno. It tries to be open for the whole city through well-spread information, even to those citizens who are not regular theatre-goers prepared to watch performances in a foreign language. The festival enters the public space thanks to posters, leaflets in trams, through cooperation with the regional and nationwide media – newspapers, radio and TV stations. It also comes onto the streets of the city with a street theatre event prepared by the students of our faculty who are joined by their foreign colleagues. The SETKÁNÍ/ENCOUNTER festival has become not only a live part of the cultural life of the City of Brno, but it is also a prestigious local event and is appreciated and financed by the city authorities regardless of the political situation. The Theatre Faculty has a positive influence on the life of the city community with its artistic / aesthetic and civic / ethic contribution.

The second example: THEATRE WORLD⁸

The Theatre Faculty as a co-initiator of an international cultural and theatre festival



In June this year (11–19 June 2010) the first THEATRE WORLD festival was held, initiated by all Brno theatres and the Theatre Faculty. The aim of the festival, which became the biggest cultural event of the city, is to express support for a democratic civic approach. Therefore every year it will be dedicated to a great contemporary ethical personality of world theatre. In 2010, Václav Havel was logically chosen as the principal personality.

Both teachers and students of theatre management at the Theatre Faculty played an important role in creating the organizational model of the festival. They used their experience from organizing the festival of theatre schools. The Theatre Faculty also actively participates in creating the programme of the festival. Two schools – from Poland and the United States – have been included in the main programme of selected professional theatres from Europe, Asia and South America on the recommendation of our faculty.

It is very important that students of drama and musical acting, of directing, dramaturgy and other fields were creatively involved in two great street events: Jugglers' Night, which opens the festival, and The Festival of Masks, which closes the festival.

The final Festival of Masks is an attempt to start a new city tradition of an open and free spring carnival-like fair. It was undoubtedly a daring attempt but we were encouraged by the fact that carnival has always symbolized a shift from normality, the state of a renascent and renewed world. All the Brno theatres and the Theatre Faculty of the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts joined

8 <http://www.divadelnisvet.cz>

together and sent out parades in masks prepared especially for this occasion. Even Brno inhabitants were urged to come in their masks.

The festival attracted more than 35 thousand people to the main square fittingly called Freedom Square. The students march was significant first of all thanks to its experimental character. The Theatre Faculty, through its active participation in these events, has become one of the important focuses of cultural life in the city and students are this way prepared for their professional artistic careers.

At this moment in time theatres should be active and live, with artistic and civic focuses on the city's community. And theatre schools should be laboratories of the future development of theatre and laboratories of social contacts with the community at any period.

