

The Role of Contemporary Vernacular Theatre Performances in the Life of Community in Slovenia

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In this article, through selected examples of local theatre activity in rural environments in Slovenia, the author describes how and in what way the actors come together to draw material for their vernacular theatre performance. Their own heritage, with which the entire community is familiar, since they grew up and lived with it, thus becomes an inspiration to creators. It is for this reason that people draw on heritage for materialisation through staging. The article shows how, in seeking identity, the materialisation of past events is carried out at different levels of theatre-making. It tries to provide an insight into how performing such an act affects the life of the entire community and how it reflects on a daily basis.

Key words: vernacular theatre, cultural heritage, creativity, community

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Introduction

Vernacular theatre-makers are everywhere. Each week, year after year, people come together to put on theatre. They rehearse in village halls, community centres and other public buildings; they also meet and create in garages and even in pubs. Yet vernacular theatre inhabits a paradoxical space in the study of expressive culture. On the one hand, for its participants and audiences, vernacular theatre is deeply enmeshed in the rhythms of village life, while following the patterns of people's daily lives and generational changes. On the other, however, vernacular theatre is frequently unrecognised as part of the cultural ecology of contemporary theatre that is largely invisible in academy, hence in professional theatre and popular culture, amateurs have been at best largely ignored (Nicholson – Holdworth – Milling 2018: 3). In Slovenia, especially in the rural environment, there

are numerous examples of vernacular theatre performances, which are also unrecognised as part of theatre studies, anthropology and folkloristics as vernacular theatre cannot be easily defined within the established disciplinary boundaries (see Vrtovec Beno 2023). However, dealing with such displays can reveal what vernacular production and performance can do and how people can shape their expressive culture to suit their needs.

There are numerous ways in which theatre performance can be appreciated and analysed. In this paper, are outlined vernacular theatre open-air displays in Slovenia, with an emphasis on performances that are thematically based on the heritage of the community. Slovenia has seen a huge rise in communal public display events during the past century, particularly during the past few decades. Among them, long-forgotten annual

cycling festivities have been revived, anniversaries are celebrated, and the founding of towns or glorious victories in medieval battles are commemorated. Vernacular theatre is performed at parades and processions and is part of the programme at various festivals and fairs; especially in spring and summer when the weather is suitable for outdoor activities. It is this rise in the different ways of performing the heritage of various communities that aroused, in me an interest in carrying out a detailed study.

Since 2012 I have been gathering data and observing forms of Slovenia's vernacular drama by using the ethnographic method. In the field, a semi-structured interview and participant observation was used. Over the course of ten-years of research, I have carried out numerous key informant interviews¹ and performance observations throughout Slovenia. Most of the data in this study was collected in the context of wider research. The research focused on different groups of participants (e.g. from scriptwriters to organisers and performers) related to amateur theatre performance. In doing so, I was interested in what performances mean to them, how they understand theatre and how they perform. For the purpose of this paper, the study has shown how, in seeking identity, the materialisation of past events is carried out at different levels via vernacular theatre performances, whilst also providing an insight into how performing such an act affects the life of the entire community.

Contemporary vernacular theatre performances in Slovenia

Throughout history, theatre has changed and evolved as society has developed, gaining different functions and forms. Each theatre production has its own stamp and the audience is informed in advance about what kind of performance they are about to see (i.e. a professional classical theatre production or an amateur, non-professional production). On this basis, they know what to expect from the performance.

The most common dividing line in distinguishing theatre-making is its professionalism, i.e. whether it is professional or amateur. A professional theatre is one in which the artistic, technical and administrative staff work as a profession (GB 2007: 145) or have full-time artistic and other employees. It is also a theatre with permanent premises and an established organisation, set up and financed

mainly by the state or a municipality. As a counterpart to professional theatre, there is so-called non-professional or amateur theatre, which is "a permanent or occasional group of theatre enthusiasts who, for amateur motives, produce theatrical performances and for whom the work of the theatre is not a profession and therefore does not constitute a livelihood" (Logar 1994: 18). In Slovenia, a principle is still applied that was established comprehensively in the 19th century, i.e. that professional theatre is linked to a certain level of education and payment that actors receive for their work. In contemporary amateur theatre, therefore, this relates to voluntary groups, which, as a rule, do not receive payment for their work or individuals, who, as a rule, are not employed by a theatre institution and who have not studied at the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television². All members of amateur theatre groups are volunteers who are involved in the theatre in their own free time, it is a hobby and all their activities (rehearsals, performances) mostly take place in the afternoons and evenings. Today, it could be said that the biggest dividing line between amateur and professional theatre remains payment for the work done and the leisure nature of the activity itself. In the last decade, there has been a move towards professional theatre,³ particularly in the selection of plays and the performance of individual theatres⁴ (Vrtovec Beno 2020: 34). However, as amateur theatre has always been an important part of artistic creation, it is preserved and practiced in various forms of amateur theatre-making.

Theatre, as Erving Goffman suggests, is a specific arrangement that cannot be obtained in everyday life. The arrangement is a conceptual frame that "transforms an individual into a stage performer who may be 'looked at' and 'looked to' by persons in the audience-role" (Goffman 1974: 124). However, what if theatre performance derives from everyday life, reflects the lives of the performers and is based on living tradition? Slovenia has witnessed the (re)invention and (re)interpretation of past elements, which often include various forms of vernacular performing activities of individual communities, especially in rural environments. Awareness of the value of a custom, dance, song and other forms of performing arts, the need to restore, revive and preserve 'lost' things and display memories has led to them being performed on stage. That is why many amateur theatre companies invest in

preserving, narrating and transmitting their local history and cultural heritage through events and material culture. Such theatre is not necessarily professional or polished, but it has an authentic voice and human approach.

I understand these kind of amateur performances as a particular manner of vernacular theatrical performance among many others; it is a special kind of amateur theatre and vernacular creativity. By vernacular creativity I mean a wide range of everyday creative practices. The term vernacular signifies the ways in which everyday creativity is practiced outside the cultural value systems of either high culture (art) or commercial creative practice. Further, vernacular signifies the local specificity of such creative practices, as well as the need to pay attention to the material, cultural and geographic contexts in which they occur (Burgess 2007). These kind of vernacular theatre performances feature local materials and are performed by local people – the stories are gathered by local people and performed by them. It is a form of amateur theatrical activity that draws on the past and, by employing various theatrical elements (such as the use of text and costumes), ‘stages’ or ‘revives’ it on special occasions for the audience. Outdoor locations are typical for this form of theatre and classic indoor stages are very rarely used. Three basic forms of display can be observed: parades from house to house, performances on a(n) (improvised) stage, or performances in another public venue, such as streets, squares, city centres or lawns. Every performance of such a drama is unique, but this is especially the case with outdoor displays, where the stage or even whole locations are not under cover.

The main difference that separates vernacular theatre performances in this study from other amateur theatre productions are the contents or texts of the plays, which reflect the lives of the performers and are linked to the tradition or heritage of a community. Topics for such forms of performance are taken from a community’s intangible heritage, history and tradition. While some belong to a long-standing tradition, others are newly composed by a member of a troupe. Drama writers are amateur local individuals who wish to present and preserve the tradition of their community. There are numerous plays that are ultimately based on folk stories; the most commonly performed content in Slovenia encompasses local legends and the way of life of ancestors.

The aim is to represent a unique play performance, using the costumography and language of ‘that’ time. According to one of the interviewees for this study:

“It’s kind of somewhere from some time in our local history. Of course, there’s also a bit of fantasy... But it’s all taken from history, and we try to make it as authentic as possible.”

The content is often presented in a loose and superficial way, stereotypically and lightly, and, if possible, a hint of humour is added. This is because the creators want the content of the show to be accessible to a wider audience and is intended to relax them. A similar tendency was noted by Rebeka Kunej in the case of the Slovene version of folklore group competitions, where in the “folk dance is a means to present modern creative ideas and stories which interpret the past to a lesser degree, distancing themselves from it consciously to get closer to the contemporary audience” (Kunej 2023: 46). This can also be observed at many public events where vernacular theatre is performed.

When we talk about vernacular theatre, we must remember that community is important for the performance and performance-making. Unlike many individual forms of amateur expression, “amateur theatre is highly dependent on social integration” (Nicholson – Holdworth – Milling 2018: 7). In fact, vernacular theatre relates to the intersection of two different communities – the theatre ensemble or performance group, and the wider, local community.

Joining a theatre group

Amateur theatre exists and develops because of people. In most cases, performance troupes consist of amateur individuals, who have a desire to imitate, write and create. Within the theatre group, there is an informal separation according to the content and performance that the group wishes to perform. In the case of a dramatization of content that relates to the heritage of a community, i.e. in the case of the researched vernacular performances, the members of the group usually draw on their own amateur creativity and knowledge. In the case of performances linked to literary dramatic proposals, they are more likely to attract professional and expert individuals with more professional skills (directing, set design, costume design). Nowadays, many vernacular

theatres are often intergenerational, because ensembles unite performers of different genders, ages, statuses and occupations. They are organised with different goals that reflect group interests and can gather on the occasion of a special performance, rather than spontaneously, and without professional help.

Vernacular theatre groups can be connected via different factors and they are interested in perusing a particular activity, in this case performing and preserving their heritage. Their roles are clearly divided: a director, performers or actors, a technical team for props, stage design and lights, musicians, costumier and others. When staging a play in a vernacular theatre, the group most often includes an individual who leads and coordinates the group and is the conceptual scriptwriter of the drama text. These leaders are one of the actors, a member and part of the group, and although they are the leader of the group, they – according to the interviewees – are most

often still ‘one of them’. Since such groups are in most cases organised as voluntary associations, within which a given group can establish its own goals and bylaws, this has a deep impact on the nature of the groups and their role in community life (Bendix 1989: 46).

People are motivated to join different associations by the “desire to socialise, the desire to help others and to overcome certain obstacles together and to spend leisure time with like-minded people” (Bendix 1989: 46). Individuals bring to these groups their interest and talents, which shows a set of different functions of that of vernacular theatre. According to Regina Bendix, the factors that influence an individual to join an amateur theatre group are “the personality of the participants, the choice of themes and the ideological trends currently prevailing in the community. Organising them into a group or a non-profit association enables them to put all this into practice” (Bendix 1989: 44). What distinguishes vernacular theatre



Fig. 1. Vernacular theatres are often intergenerational. Krvava peč, 28. 9. 2013. Photo by Ana Vrtovec Beno

from classical amateur theatre is its greater openness, which allows different members of the local community to join the group and does not require permanent membership. The main question is: What benefit can this person bring to the entire community. According to one of the interviewees for this study: *“Even if you aren’t talented at acting, you have been given a role or a task. It’s about company and having fun.”* Unlike professional theatre, everyone from a local community can join and get involved, especially those who want to showcase the local past. Both younger and older generations are involved, with young people being brought up in the theatre from childhood. The importance of a continuing link between the generations should be emphasised, whereby tacit knowledge and experience is passed on from one generation to the next. In vernacular theatre in particular, the boundaries and expectations are very flexible. Therefore, examples of vernacular theatre cannot be found in every community or association, but their formation is conditioned by the actors in the group, their interests and, last but not least, the (positive) response and support within the local community. For instance, it is interesting to note that more than 600 volunteers and about 80 horsemen were involved in staging Škofja Loka’s Passion Play⁵, and an additional 200 volunteers helped with the organisation itself as well as with the preparation for the staging.

The findings of Regina Bendix’s narrations and interviews from my research reveal a similar number of reasons why people are motivated to join a group and be involved in theatre-making. The responses include: *“It’s relaxing.”* – *“I enjoy transformations and performing on the stage.”* – *“It is an important and popular way to socialise.”* – *“You gain the confidence to speak in front of a crowd.”* – *“You always learn something new.”*⁶ Thus, vernacular theatre as a leisure activity is first and foremost a form of expression for the members of the theatre group, which is why they decided to join the group. Few activities can offer a way or such a specific form of socialising that allows individuals to express themselves and show their heritage through theatre-making. This is also supported by those narratives that stress an inclination for other forms of expression, such as dancing, music and singing. *“It is obvious that people interested in this domain often felt distinctive enjoyment and need to perform on stage”* (Stavělová 2023: 24).

Heritage, creativity and community building

Creativity bursts forth when inventive people are brought together. It depends on the social environment in which it occurs and the inner motivations of its audiences. Creativity is promoted or hindered by institutions in society and to ‘move the world’ it must resonate with people’s deep emotions (Liep 2001: 1). That is why we should view creativity in terms of a social and cultural process (see Liep /ed./ 2001). For instance, Liep suggests that creativity must be defined “as activity that produces something new through the recombination and transformation of existing cultural practices or forms” (Liep 2001: 2). The diversity of creativity can thus manifest itself in numerous ways, from drawing and designing materials to music, singing, literature and, last but not least, theatre. In addition to the fact that creativity is intended for a wider range of people, it encourages the expression of individuals or communities, while at the same time, as a common tradition, it strengthens identity and binds communities together.

In *Making is Connecting*, sociologist David Gauntlett writes extensively on “the power of making and connecting through creating” (Gauntlett 2011: 1). Key to Gauntlett’s proposition is the idea that making requires individuals to come together in productive ways. The production of cultural forms is not the creation of something out of nothing. Every creative effort emanates from familiar forms and methods of production. According to Barnet: “Every innovation is a combination of ideas.” (Barnet 1953: 16) The cultural geographer Harriet Hawkins writes in *Creativity*: “One of the key dimensions of discussions around making and connecting has been attention to how the actual practices of creative doing, and doing together, can come to form communities.” (Hawkins 2017: 169) The central connecting thread is around ideas of making: making performance and how making helps to shape subjectivities and build communities. Liveness of the theatrical experience is valued as a socially generative force. This not only raises questions about the relationship between the rehearsal process and production values, but also draws attention to the temporal qualities of theatre and its power to affect communities. In this case, the interactions between group members are characterised by *artistic communication*.

The groups and venues may be different, “the actors change their garb and their appearance; but their

inward motions arise from the same desires and passions of men” (Lovely in Geertz 1973: 34), i.e. to create a theatrical performance. In theatre, making takes place in the rehearsal process, which the theatre scholar Gay McAuley describes as “the time when the multiple material elements that will constitute a unique work of art are progressively brought together” (McAuley 2012: 5). As people rehearse, build sets, design and make costumes and props together they build the foundations for and reinforce social bonds that can be understood in terms of Putnam’s work on how engagement in community groups helps forge networks of reciprocal social relations or ‘social capital’ (see Putnam 2000). Bringing a production together is part of the power of the experience and integral to its creative satisfaction. According to one of the interviewees for this study: *“I especially like to make a whole line through which I express myself, so I choose a theme, I remember the text, I write it down and finally I direct and act it out.”*

Amateur theatre companies create theatre within specific material constraints of limited time, resources and a reliance on goodwill and volunteer labour, which all inevitably impact on the making process. Temporal restrictions dictate that rehearsal time must be focused and productive. Limited resources demand a culture of creative problem solving, recycling and borrowing. For theatre-makers, the time-pressure of productions provides an important impetus for people with different forms of craft-knowledge to collaborate. In this case, creativity is also evident in the creation of the text, wherein a local author writes the script and incorporates local stories and people from the past. The fact that all the actors in the vernacular theatre are locals has many advantages: all the participants know each other, they know each other’s habits and characteristics, and they know the skills and knowledge of their fellow participants. The leader thus has less difficulty in assigning roles and tasks within the team, and it is often the case that when writing the script, the scriptwriter has already foreseen certain actors and their roles and is matching the characters to the actors’ characters. That is why vernacular theatre-making is a “social and relational practice reliant on cooperation, collaboration and participation in a shared space and [...] these creative ‘doings’ have the potential to contribute to the construction and

sculpting of dynamic communities” (Nicholson – Holdworth – Milling 2018: 194).

The social aspects of the process – learning, generosity, joy and connection – are an important element of the making, and these values are apparent in performance and often remarked upon by the audience. As “art forms evolve to be constituted by and through relations built between people, time must be spent reflecting on the form and nature of these relations. Reflecting not only on how art might bring about social relations, but also whether or not these should be about bringing people together around things in common [...]” (Hawkins 2017: 179). Unlike some forms of amateur creativity, folklore and theatre groups depend upon collaboration and regular social interaction. In contrast to more individualised forms of amateur craft, theatre is dependent on social networks, friendship and shared histories, with companies often sustaining their own in-jokes, playfulness, rivalries and rituals over many years. As Daniela Stavělová noted, within performance groups there has “always been a certain parallel between what was for the stage and what remained, so to speak, under the stage” (Stavělová 2023: 3).

In the case of researched vernacular performances, in addition to creativity itself, which can be identified as a link between the various creative activities, there is another, more important factor that binds the community together – heritage. As previously mentioned, in the field of vernacular theatre, there are many performances in Slovenia that revive the folklore traditions and intangible heritage of the community and are based on, among others, historical tales, stories, memories, former living persons, customs and traditions. Based on the interviews conducted for this study, individuals or groups decide to perform their past due to ‘patriotic elements’, ‘validation of culture’, or because they ‘want to be special and unique’ or ‘want to showcase local heritage’. On the one hand, they use vernacular drama for celebrations and festivities, while on the other it is used for teaching, propaganda and even tourism. Every group has its own reasons and motives, because contemporary vernacular drama is a response to the current situation in culture and society. In a new context, the same whole and the same elements receive a different interpretation. Wearing a costume allows a person to switch to a world of different and socially excluded values. They belong to

the past and thus create a kind of fairy-tale landscape of paradise lost (Stavělová 2023: 35).

But why heritage? Heritage is very much an organic phenomenon in the sense that it is an integral part of culture. In the creation of performance, performers draw on different areas of heritage, from the material (props, costumes) to the intangible (texts, knowledge) and even the natural (choice of venues). Heritage as 'common property' of the community additionally creates and/or strengthens the common identity in the group in different ways. The creative dimension of heritage is most fully expressed in the context of collective references and memories. Local heritage, which is known to the whole community, thus becomes an inspiration to the creators of vernacular theatre. In this case, on the one hand, heritage contributes to the participation of individuals, which is linked to their local heritage and is therefore close to the members of the local community, while on the other,

since people are most familiar with their heritage, as they grew up and lived with it, it is therefore close to them for materialisation through staging. Collective memory is the carrier of information about seemingly lost and forgotten things, and it is the means by which our personal memories can be placed in the wider context of the community (Brumen 2000: 27). It is precisely the way the creation of vernacular theatre creation allows each individual to join in the preparation of the event – either through their own knowledge or what they can offer. As demonstrated by this research, the environment of a vernacular theatre ensemble is perceived as a place where a person can develop their talents and establish social bonds. Therefore, the group often becomes a place where one's identity, wishes and inner freedom can be found. That is why participants often employ the rhetoric and emotional register of 'family' when they talk about their involvement in vernacular theatre.



Fig. 2. In the creation of performance, performers draw on different areas of heritage, from the material, to the intangible and even the natural. Polhov Gradec, 17. 6. 2018. Photo by Ana Vrtovec Beno

There is no vernacular performance without a supporting community

Vernacular theatre-makers are 'doers' and it is not unusual to find members who have multiple roles in their communities. The specific community of practice, the vernacular theatre community, for example, is brought together by cognate interests, but there is also the implication that these communities of practice have consequences for the wider, often local community.

Vernacular theatre is often defined by its localism and is integral to many local communities. For Lucy Lippard, local is connected to place, shared memories and its future potential: "Inherent in the local is the concept of place – a proportion of land/town/ cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar. Most often place applies to our own 'local' – *entwined with* personal memory, known and unknown histories [...] A layered location replete with human histories and memories. It is about connections, what surrounds it, and what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there." (Lippard 1997: 7) Therefore, both creators and their social groups are motivated by powerful desires grounded in the socially structured experience space and heritage they inhabit.

Vernacular theatre and local community must go hand in hand in conducting an event as most of them are local events. There would be no cases of vernacular theatre if the actors did not have support from the local community. In this specific case I highlight the importance of participation in rural areas, particularly in terms of the development of neighbourhood networks and relationships and cooperation based on personal trust. Different local groups are involved in the preparation and staging of plays. In many cases, vernacular theatre involves the whole community, as different individuals are involved in the preparation itself at different levels, such as the preparation of the space and the accompanying programme. In addition to the theatre group, other associations and organisations are often involved in the preparation, such as the tourist board, the fire brigade, folklore dance and music groups, primary schools, catering and other service providers. The support of the municipality is also important. As the interviewees said, in the local environment, the support of the local church organisation is certainly welcome, whether the content

of the play is sacred or profane. "*It can't be done without cooperation and help,*" they say. As Regina Bendix argues, participation leaves few individuals uninvolved, because the performance of such an act affects the life of the whole community and is also reflected on a daily level (Bendix 1989: 19). The annual rhythm of vernacular performances defines lives, and for those with a long-term commitment to the theatre, working lives are organised around the calendar of performances. As one interviewer said: "*Work in the field and around the house should be taken into account so that it does not coincide with other events, does not coincide with events in the parish or local inn, and that it is organised at an appropriate times and so on.*" The organisers have to coordinate their performances with the other events going on in the local community, for example, it is important to consider the various local holidays and ensure that the event does not coincide with other work done by fellow citizens. Such work is therefore very demanding for the community and presents them with a challenge in terms of not falling apart before the play is performed. Problems can arise in practice for simple reasons that are not obvious to outside observers. On the basis of the research carried out for this study, it is clear that the main problems at the heart of creating a vernacular theatre are money and personal grievances of individuals that divide the local community and the functioning of the theatre group.

As the fieldwork has shown, inter-institutional local cooperation is on the one hand driven by the content of performance that is linked to a common local heritage and is therefore close to the local community, while on the other, the very kind of amateur theatre-making that is found in contemporary vernacular theatre allows each individual to participate in the production of the event – either through their own knowledge or their own offer.

Conclusion

To sum up, in order to understand vernacular theatre, it is important to know that it is a contemporary part of the life of many groups and that the significance and cultural value of making vernacular theatre stretches far beyond what is produced on stage.

Vernacular theatre is a social activity that creates successful communities. Unlike some forms of amateur creativity, theatre-making depends upon collaboration

and regular social interaction. Vernacular theatre companies contribute to defining a sense of place and creating communities – not only through the process of making, but also through their deep-rooted relationships with loyal audiences. It is necessary to recognise the shared knowledge and know-how that amateurs possess, the friendships and informal networks that it inspires, the

ways in which it shapes lives, defines communities and contributes to placemaking. Although it might be a key to the past, vernacular theatre likewise reflects the present culture and thus is also a key to the present. On a daily basis, its characteristics reflect on participants' lives, it affects the life of the entire community and creates a safe place in today's uncertain world.

NOTES:

1. I quote extracts from the interviews to supplement and reinforce the text.
2. The Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television is a member of the University of Ljubljana and is the only higher education institution in Slovenia that offers university-level training for professions in theatre, film, radio and television (<https://www.agrft.uni-lj.si/en>).
3. Many amateur theatre groups work under the Republic of Slovenia Public Fund for Cultural Activities (JSKD, Javni sklad Republike Slovenije za kulturne dejavnosti) which offers expert assistance and (financial) support to domains of amateur culture (theatre, choir singing, wind orchestra, folklore activity, etc.).
4. Individual groups choose to enter theatre competitions (Linhart's Meeting – Festival of Theatre Groups of Slovenia), where they

- are evaluated by a jury. According to research, it is participation in competitions that has a strong influence on more contemporary amateur performances, and many groups are already turning to more challenging, contemporary texts, more complex texts, acting techniques and other performance approaches.
5. *The Škofja Loka Passion Play* is considered the oldest preserved drama text in the Slovene language. The Passion Play takes place in the streets and squares. Individual groups depicting the scenes move forward – partially on foot, partially on carts or horses – through the town centre of Škofja Loka (Škofja Loka Passion Play 2023).
 6. Daniela Stavělová (2023: 24) refers to similar motives and characteristics for participation in folklore ensemble.

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