

Remarks on Cultural Policy and Theater Activities in Belgrade 1945 – 1980

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Abstract

In this paper we are going to present some results of a long-term research project on Yugoslav cultural policy and its influence on the development of theater in Belgrade from 1945 to 1980. The observed period can be understood as one era in the political history of Yugoslavia, one in which politicians took direct control of theater life. The paper especially explores the role of state cultural policy in managing theatrical repertoire, with new social and artistic goals established according to political needs, as well as investigates the proportion of political repression of cultural and artistic life in the capital.

Keywords

Cultural Policy, Politics, Theater, Theater Repertoire, Censorship.

In the book *Toward a Definition of Culture*, T.S. Eliot noted that culture attracts a lot of the attention of today's politicians. According to the author, this does not mean that politicians are always cultured people; rather, politicians realize how important culture is for society, so the state is supposed to develop it.

It is important to realize that the cultural policy of a state does not function separately from the state's general policy. Different approaches are also dependant on different economic, cultural, social and others factors of different countries.

Cultural policy as provided by the state is usually understood as the state care of cultural development. There is no doubt that state cultural policy plays a major part in cultural life, creating the conditions of the status of cultural workers and artists. This is achieved in a variety of different ways, from legal regulations to the financial support or the withdrawal of financial support from cultural institutions, projects and artists.

During the observed period (1945-1980), politics greatly influenced cultural activities in Yugoslavia, and thus influenced theater activities. Political aims affected everything theaters did. Belgrade's theaters are an especially interesting institution for researching the context of political activities, for several reasons. Belgrade is the biggest city in the country; it is also the capitol of the country, with the biggest concentration of both theatrical institutions and political power. Just as important, theaters in Belgrade have traditionally been role models for other theaters throughout the country, so it is understood that politicians paid careful attention to the city's theaters.

After the Second World War the country was under a Communist regime, so the Communist Party was a very important factor in the process of decision making. That was a time when both politicians and audiences became very interested in theater performances. In other words, it was a time of the intensive development of theater activities in the whole country.

The Communist Party realized that theater is able to influence people much more than literature, for example. This was not just because very few people were well educated, and there were not too many people able to read and write, but also because theater interprets the written word, and thus has a huge potential to persuade people. As George Bernard Shaw once said, there are 50 ways to say YES, and 500 to say NO, but only one way to write each.

At that time in Belgrade's theaters' repertoires there were, in the first place, domestic dramas that glorified the country's political situation. The problem was that there were not so many dramas with that subject, so many sketches were written with clear divisions between good and evil characters. They were usually about battles either between Partisans and Nazis or about the literally fight between Hitler and Stalin. Scripts that did not conform to this pattern were often rewritten. That way the writers of these dramas were forced to write in the manner of socialist realism, and the quality of the repertoires become quite poor. As a logical consequence of such strong ideological control of drama production, when great novels, poems, etc., were written, one single high quality domestic drama was hard to find.¹

It is hard to find any classic writers in the theaters' repertoires, because the Party was not sure if they were appropriate. Sometimes even Shakespeare was suspicious. Russian authors were the exception. I found it quite interesting that in Serbia, during the period between the end of the war and 1949, in all theaters, there were 8829 performances and 1/3 of them, 3013, were plays written by Soviet authors². This is even more interesting if we consider that the Communist Party during this time was actively seeking more plays from the Soviet Union.

It is more than obvious that priority was given to political aims rather than aesthetic concerns. No wonder, if we remind ourselves that the main positions in theaters, such as general managers, art directors, etc., were given to people who had shown their loyalty to the Party during the war.

At that time there were established Party commissions to control the ideological correctness in cultural and arts production. The main censors were also proven Communists, intellectuals who had joined the war in the very beginning. It is interesting to note that almost all of them were working as journalists.³

Probably the most illustrative example of overreaction in political censorship is the case of the play *Kad su cvetale tikve (When Pumpkins Blossomed)* by Dragoslav Mihailovic. The book was published, and was very popular. There were articles in newspapers about the book, quite affirmative.

But suddenly, when it was supposed to play in theater, the work was immediately censored and suppressed. Even the President of the country criticized the play in a public speech. Just to note, during the observed period there were 25 plays that were censored and removed from the repertoires of Belgrade's theaters.

Most remarkably, there is no evidence of literary censorship whatsoever⁴. It is hard to explain that phenomenon. It usually looked this way: the play was almost ready to be performed. Everything looked fine. Suddenly, rumors started that some politician in a high level position

thought that the play was not ideologically appropriate and so it was not proper for public performance. In the theater a lot of nervousness began, and the mechanism of auto-censorship started to work. In the end, the performance was removed from the repertoire. Once, the performance was censored just because the title could be understood ambiguously.

The most censored dramatic author was Aleksandar Popović. As his whole work was under suspicion, it could be said that there were not only improper plays, but also improper authors.

By suppressing playwrights from repertoires, consequences were spreading not only to authors and their works, but also to the whole theater. This was not just about losing money; it was also about losing enthusiasm for future projects and an atmosphere of anxiety.

The biggest change in the policy of the country, and so in cultural policy, happened in 1948. The country's segregation from the Soviet Union was extraordinarily shown in the repertoire of the theaters. Almost immediately all plays that were written by Soviet authors disappeared and were replaced by works by playwrights from the West.

Additionally, many plays written by domestic authors that were removed during the previous period from the repertoires of Belgrade's theaters as being improper, were being playing again. The same happened to classic dramas. Almost overnight, the repertoire of Belgrade's theaters changed. At the same time Western theaters began coming to Belgrade, and Belgrade's theaters went to festivals in the West.

It is notable to mention that too many Soviet authors in the previous period provoked another extreme during this period. It's not only that it was hard to find any play with a Soviet author in the theaters, but it was hard to find anything at all that came from the Soviet Union, from movies to literature to music.

Surprisingly or not, some plays were still censored, even though they were written by Western authors and Western authors were evaluated as proper during this period. For example, the play of Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, was removed from the repertoire of Belgrade's Dramatic Theater in 1954 because, as it was said, the play was not optimistic enough.

Unexpectedly, the same Beckett drama that was suppressed in one theater, opened the first season of new theater, Atelje 212, just a year later. At that time, other than in France, the play was not on repertoires in theaters anywhere else in the world, so Atelje 212 got avant-garde attributes. From the point of view of the politicians, the country showed to the world that it had a spirit of tolerance through the performances of modern, avant-garde creations.

Another very important theater event was in 1967 when the Belgrade International Theater Festival (BITEF) was established. That was a time of rivalry between the Soviet Union and the USA, so Belgrade was probably the only place in the world where avant-garde drama from all over the world could be seen. The festival was very important for theater workers and audiences. That was their chance to be introduced to the best new tendencies in theater productions. Additionally, that was a big success for foreign policy.

At one moment, politicians realized that theaters are expensive and state budget limited, so they asked for new solutions to the financing of theaters. It seemed to be a good idea to let theaters take care of their own expenses through the market economy. This quite new orientation made theaters pay attention to their audiences, so they came up with hipper productions and began working on marketing. Without a mass audience, theaters could not provide themselves

financial independence. The problem was that hipper productions did not necessarily come with a high level of artistic criteria.

The good thing about the previous period was that theaters didn't have to worry about their income, so some of them put plays on their repertoires that were very experimental, so avant-garde with such high level performances that they were acceptable and understandable only to a very sophisticated audience. In a market economy such performances wouldn't survive.

It is very interesting that during the period of the most repressive state control, when the dramatic art production of Yugoslav authors was aesthetically quite substandard, there was a high level of audience interest in theater. The opposite was true, as well: when state control was slightly more restrained and the quality of drama was much higher, audience attendance in theaters dropped drastically⁵.

In summary, it can be said that theater in Belgrade was very much defined by state cultural policy, as well as that state policy, directly or indirectly, routed theater production through political rather than artistic needs during the observed period. In addition, changes in foreign policy affected the repertoires of theaters in Belgrade literally, so the theater scene during this period was a reliable indicator of political fluctuations in the country.

Direct political control of the theater was especially evident in cases of the implementation of repressive political measures, in the removal from the repertoire of plays deemed politically incorrect, and in politically disqualifying playwrights and theater institutions alike.

Controlling theaters was so easy, because they were financially dependent. They were all budget financed. At the same time, there was internal control, because all important decisions were made in political institutions, from the inauguration of a theater director to the forming of juries and different councils. In that way, politicians had also a major role in the system of awards politics; awards given to artists on the state level were also politically driven.

In other words, politicians were directly engaged in the censorship of theaters' performances or in parts of theaters' performances, that they took full control of all elements of the theater, as well as that strong political repression of theater activities inhibited the quality of theater production during this time.

Even though so much political control occurred during the observed period, there were also some positive things happening in Belgrade's theater life. For example, the establishment of the Yugoslav Drama Theater. This theater was the result of a political project and political decisions, but it assembled the best actors and theater workers in the country and became the most representative theater. Or establishment of the BITEF. In addition, at the end of the observed period there were much more theatrical institutions and manifestations that make theatrical life much better and fuller.

Notes

¹ Selenic, S. 1977. *Antologija savremene srpske drame*, Beograd: SKZ, pp. 17-18.

² Dimić, Lj. 1988. *Agitprop kultura*, Beograd: Rad, p. 180.

³ Marjanović, P. 1985. *Jugoslovenski dramski pisci XX veka*, Novi Sad Akademija umetnosti u Novom Sadu, p.94.

⁴ Radonjić Ras, S. 1996. *Teatar u vremenu*, Novi Sad:Prometej, Sterijino pozorje, pp.45-46.

⁵ Nemanjić, M. 1981. *Filmska i pozorišna publika Beograda*. Beograd: Zavod za proučavanje kulturnog razvitka.