

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMATEUR THEATRES  
IN SLOVENIAN TERRITORY FROM THE MID-19TH  
TO THE MID-20TH CENTURY  
In the Midst of Cultural and Political Challenges

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Amateur theatres were one of Slovenia's most developed forms of amateur cultural activities from the end of the 19th to the end of the 20th century. Several participants felt that the Slovenian network of amateur theatres was the most developed in the world. Although their assessments were based on personal experience and cannot be confirmed by concrete data, they confirm that this cultural activity was widespread and exceedingly diverse. It flourished in larger cities, where several amateur theatres often competed with each other, as well as in smaller towns, far removed from the urban centres. As the activity substantially impacted a broader circle of people, politicians of various ideological-political orientations saw it as an opportunity to establish another communication channel with the people. This often led to divisions between the leaders of the associations of cultural societies, who also saw cultural creativity as a means of politicisation, and the cultural workers in the field, who were more concerned with cultural objectives, relaxed socialising with like-minded people, and entertaining participants and visitors.

In the second half of the 1950s, amateur theatre activity underwent a deep crisis due to the changed rhythm of life. One of the consequences was that the political elite suddenly showed less interest in it than before. The time of writing guidelines, publishing lists of recommended works, or politicians committed to strict ideological principles in the management forums of cultural organisations was over. The mass participation that had hitherto graced one of Slovenia's most widespread forms of amateur cultural creativity came to an end.

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Historiography on the development of theatres and theatre activity is often limited to the work of professional theatres, which also applies to the fundamental

studies on the early decades of Slovenian theatre.<sup>1</sup> However, this should certainly be supplemented by examining the development of non-professional, amateur theatre groups, as most people first encountered the performing arts by watching performances by local amateur societies. Because theatre history devotes too little space to this, it is also difficult to compare developments between different nations or countries. The Slovenian case can serve as an example of development in a small nation, which only began to build its cultural identity and infrastructure more strongly in the second half of the 19th century. The development of amateur theatre activity is a good indicator of rapid cultural progress in a small nation, the strengthening of the material foundations for amateur cultural activity, several decades of attempts to subordinate cultural activity to the political and ideological principles of political elites, and the responses of cultural creators to the changing state frameworks and political trends to which this nation was subjected.

### **The beginnings of amateur theatre creativity before 1918**

Over the centuries, cultural creativity in the territory of today's Slovenia developed under the Central European cultural influences. From the Baroque onwards, theatre activity was influenced by the German (Austrian) and Italian milieus. As theatre boomed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, influences from more distant cultural horizons also started spreading. They depended on the political orientation of the elites in the territory of today's Slovenia, which were divided by national, linguistic, and ideological-political differences. The influences of other Slavic nations also strengthened, first the Czech, then, at the turn of the 20th century, the South Slavic, followed by the Russian and, after World War I, the Soviet. The theatre historian Cesare Molinari points out that during the political maelstrom of the 20th century, the theatres of the German and Russian (Soviet) spheres, which strongly influenced the cultural scene in the territory of today's Slovenia, became a means of political struggle.<sup>2</sup> He searches for the roots of theatre developments marked by political events already in the period before World War I. In the case of smaller nations such as Slovenians, where, at that time, theatre activity had not yet become as prominent as in the larger countries, it is necessary to also underline the national struggles between the nations of the Habsburg Monarchy, apart from their ideological and political differences. Some of these nations had already developed their theatre activity, while for others, including Slovenians, theatre was just starting to gain importance.

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1 MORAVEC. *Slovensko gledališče Cankarjeve dobe : (1892–1918)*. Ljubljana 1974; MORAVEC. *Slovensko gledališče od vojne do vojne: (1918–1941)*. Ljubljana 1980.

2 MOLINARI. *Istorija pozorišta*. Beograd 1982, pp. 303-308.

The focus on researching professional theatre groups in the larger cities, which is more common in the history of theatre art, overlooks the factors that were equally or even more relevant for the cultural development of smaller nations in ethnically mixed territories. In the territory of today's Slovenia, for example, German and Italian theatre groups, but not yet any Slovenian ones, were active or had guest performances already in the first half of the 19th century. The first attempt at establishing a permanent Slovenian theatre occurred during the 1848 revolution. However, with its decline, the idea of a Slovenian theatre faded for another two decades.<sup>3</sup> Following these short-lived endeavours to organise a Slovenian-language theatre ensemble, Slovenians achieved more lasting results only after the 1860s, as the political circumstances in the Habsburg Monarchy changed.

As the permanent Slovenian theatres in the larger cities (Ljubljana, Trieste, Maribor) gradually strengthened, many amateur theatre groups were also founded in smaller towns and started gaining a visible role in the cultural and ideological-political sphere. By fostering creativity in the Slovenian language, theatre activity was not only a means of national emancipation but also of the cultural struggle between the clericalists and liberals. Dozens of amateur theatres introduced many more Slovenians to this art genre than the professional ones, which were inaccessible to the vast majority of the population. In this respect, amateur theatres often served their organisers as another means of rallying the masses and spreading their own worldviews. This was especially true in the rural areas under strong Catholic influence, where the worldview revolved around religious dogma and the staging of ideologically appropriate plays was seen as just another form of disciplining the faithful. As industrialisation in Slovenian territory lagged behind that of the more developed Austrian and Czech provinces of the Monarchy, different worldviews only gradually gained ground alongside the prevailing conservative Catholic traditionalism.

The legal framework for the functioning of the rather diverse groups in terms of their capabilities, size, and importance was laid down with the legislation adopted in Austria in the middle of the 19th century. The so-called *Theater-Ordnung* represented the basic legislative act in the Austrian Empire (and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire). It was issued on 25 November 1850 by the Austrian Minister of the Interior, Alexander Bach. It also applied to amateur cultural societies established under the new legislation on societies as of the 1860s. Theatre performances could take place in designated buildings, while societies had to obtain prior permission from the local authorities to organise

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3 MARIN. Prva zamisel o slovenskem poklicnem gledališču. In BOGOVIČ and PUŠIČ, eds. *O nevzvišenem v gledališču*. Ljubljana 1997, pp. 11-30.

events in other venues. Every theatre work was subject to censorship and could not be staged without the required certificate. The state leadership also reserved the right for the competent authorities to revoke permits that had already been issued at any time for reasons of public order. Amateur theatres were allowed to perform theatre works that had already been staged in the central provincial theatre without seeking special permission, as this implied that the work had already been approved by the relevant censorship authority. Both fines and imprisonment were provided for censorship principle breaches.<sup>4</sup>

Slovenians did not unanimously support the development of theatre activity. In 1899, when the Provincial Assembly debated, as heatedly as usual, whether the province should financially support the activities of the Slovenian and German theatres in Ljubljana, Prince-Bishop Anton Bonaventura Jeglič unreservedly stated that he did not support either theatre because they overstepped the boundaries of God's commandments. Furthermore, "*they are also dangerous as they can encourage the audience, especially the youth, to overstep the boundaries of natural law*". Therefore, the issue that the Bishop of Ljubljana raised regarding the theatre activities was the following: "*The question is whether it is really the duty of the nation to support that which is sinful, against God's commandments?*"<sup>5</sup>

Apparently, certain other Catholic leaders shared the conviction that theatres in themselves actually had no cultural significance whatsoever. From the political viewpoint, for them, the problem had arisen with the expansion of liberal freedoms, already signalled by the greater freedom of association allowed by the relevant legislation on cultural societies, and the increase in the general level of culture due to the rapid development of literacy after the school reform of the late 1860s. With the exacerbation of the cultural struggle between the clericals and the liberals, the political divisions were reflected in the cultural scene, followed by decades of the rapidly expanding activities of various societies.

Slovenian amateur theatre groups could find instructions in a book titled *Priročna knjiga za gledališke diletante* (A Handbook for Theatre Amateurs), written by Josip Nolli, an actor, director, singer, and one of the founders of the Dramatic Society in Ljubljana, which developed into a professional Slovenian theatre in Ljubljana over the next several decades. Nolli published this booklet in 1868 as part of the so-called *Slovenska Talija* (Slovenian Thalia) collection, which included theatre works or short scenes that were uncomplicated and therefore popular also among amateur cultural societies. He also listed approximately 150

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4 LUKAN, Gledališče in disciplina In BOGOVIČ and PUŠIČ, eds. *O nevzvišenem v gledališču*. Ljubljana 1997, pp. 109-110.

5 Quoted by: MATIČ. "Gledališča kot taka po svojem postanku nimajo kulturnega pomena". In *Zgodovina za vse*, 1995, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 19.

titles of theatre works written or translated into Slovenian while pointing out that only about a third of them had been printed in book form. He added a list of 29 cities and towns where, to his knowledge, some theatre performances in the Slovenian language had already been staged.<sup>6</sup>

During the separation of spirits into the liberal and clericalist camps at the end of the 19th century, most Slovenian non-political cultural associations in the larger cities sided with the liberal camp. This was also true of the dramatic societies, which therefore represented a thorn in the side of the Catholic zealots. As a counterbalance, the latter started establishing their own associations, leading to vibrant cultural creativity in both the urban and rural areas at the turn of the 20th century. In the cities, various societies, which generally belonged to the bourgeois cultural model, were responsible for strengthening amateur theatre activity. In addition to a small number of dramatic societies, theatre activities were also pursued by specific theatre sections of various reading societies and clubs, the *Sokol* gymnastic societies, and other societies, usually described in the literature as liberal, although their liberalism was often limited to opposing the clericalist zeal. On the other hand, the 1st Slovenian Catholic Convention in 1892 encouraged the establishment of Catholic non-political societies, which started multiplying rapidly in the following years in working-class centres and smaller towns. At the convention of Slovenian Catholic non-political societies in 1902, the *Slovenska krščansko-socialna zveza* (Slovenian Christian-Social Union) became the central association of all Catholic educational societies. It initially incorporated 78 societies and grew by more than twenty societies a year during the following two years.<sup>7</sup> The leaderships of the societies were usually closely associated with parish priests, who were involved in organising or at least supervising the activities of the Catholic societies. The societies were led by individuals affiliated with the local church and often used church-owned premises for their activities. As the central organisation, the Slovenian Christian-Social Union gathered information on the activities of Catholic societies through a network of parishes and deaneries, while the Bishop of Ljubljana attended the ceremonial meetings of the central organisation whenever possible.

Liberal societies tended to use works from the Slovenian Thalia collection, published by the Dramatic Society in Ljubljana from 1867. By 1895, sixty volumes were published in this collection, and each volume could contain several scenes from plays. Most frequently, the plays were translated or adapted from the Czech originals (e.g. three works by Gustav Pflieger-Moravský, two by Václav Kliment Klicpera and František Ferdinand Šamberk, etc.) as well as

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6 NOLLI. *Priročna knjiga za glediške diletante, posebno za ravnatelje igrokazov ter prijatelje slovenske dramatike sploh*. Ljubljana 1868, pp. 163-172.

7 ERJAVEC. *Zgodovina katoliškega gibanja na Slovenskem*. Ljubljana 1928, pp. 154-156.

from German and some other languages, while a few of them were also original Slovenian works. They were simple comedies featuring a small cast and often portrayed the complications that precede an engagement or a wedding, usually with a happy ending. Meanwhile, the Catholic societies, brought together in the Slovenian Christian Social Union, preferred the works from the *Zbirka ljudskih iger* (Folk Play Collection), which the Catholic cultural organisation started publishing in 1900. Apart from the contents already known from the Slovenian Thalia collection, this collection was even more explicit in its black-and-white distinction between good and bad character traits and the rewarding of goodness. It also included several works with biblical content (e.g. *Zadnje ure poganstva v Rimu* / The Last Hours of Paganism in Rome, *Sveta Neža* / Saint Agnes, etc.). Some collections with fewer volumes were also issued by the printing houses in Trieste or Gorizia. The scarce data on the activities of the amateur stages in the territory of today's Slovenia at the beginning of the 20th century reveal that the repertoire of the increasingly numerous events of amateur cultural societies mainly included the titles from the abovementioned collections. Meanwhile, only slightly larger stages could afford to perform plays from other repertoires, including those that had already been staged in the central theatres in the provincial capitals and thus did not require new staging permits.<sup>8</sup>

In larger cities, amateur theatres leaned towards the bourgeois culture model and were primarily intended to entertain the wealthier bourgeoisie. In Celje and Ptuj, the societies and performances were divided along the national lines, so they were either German or Slovenian. The (Slovenian) Reading Society in Kranj was less successful, as even as late as 1889, its management was preoccupied with the shortage of actors and plays. Thus, it only staged a few one-act plays a year, while the performances were merely a diversion at various festivities, New Year's Eve celebrations, and other parties intended solely for its members. The first performance for a broader audience was a farce staged as late as January 1905, which represented "*the first folk performance accessible to all classes, including non-members. It was a complete success, and the venue was sold out. From that day on, folk plays were constantly included in the repertoire*".<sup>9</sup>

In smaller towns, the ideological division between the Catholic and liberal sides among Slovenians was more pronounced. Mengeš is one of the smaller towns that kept an excellent record of its cultural societies' activities in the past. The *Bralno društvo* (Reading Society) staged its first play in 1887, followed by several more plays based on the Slovenian Thalia collection. Meanwhile,

8 GABRIČ, Družbena in družabna vloga gledališke dejavnosti na Slovenskem v 20. stoletju. In SUŠEC; MICHELI; LUKAN and ŠORLI, eds. *Dinamika sprememb v slovenskem gledališču 20. stoletja*. Ljubljana 2010, pp. 28-34.

9 FUGINA. *Narodna čitalnica v Kranju: 1863–1933*. Kranj 1933, p. 38.

from 1902 onwards, the *Katoliško slovensko izobraževalno društvo* (Catholic Slovenian Educational Society) of Mengeš, founded in 1897, regularly staged plays based on the works from the Folk Play Collection. Already the first play – a musical farce titled *Herod the Farmer* – was from this collection, followed by numerous comedies, farces, and other performances with a Catholic emphasis, which often did not even name an author or only mentioned the author of the adaptation. The programme also included the Slovenian small stage “classics” from the Slovenian Thalia collection and some occasional works, for example a play about Andreas Hofer, the heroic leader of the rebellious Tyroleans, staged on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the French occupation of a part of the territory of today’s Slovenia in 1909 and published a year earlier by the *Katoliška bukvarna* publishing house.<sup>10</sup>

A few other examples attest to the fact that Catholic societies were more careful about the conceptually correct selection of works with religious themes, which they published in the Folk Play Collection or in other editions published by the Catholic press called *Katoliška bukvarna*. For example, three decades of rich cultural activity in the parish of Reteče began with the appointment of a new parish priest, Janez Meršolj, in 1908. He was an excellent organiser. One of his first ideas was to found the *Katoliško prosvetno društvo* (Catholic Educational Society) with a theatre section as one of its most vital parts. He took over the direction himself. His wish was to stage plays in order to “*show the villagers the life of the Holy Family, the saints, and the good people from everyday life and bring it closer to them*”.<sup>11</sup>

By analysing these activities, it is possible to conclude that the more liberal-oriented societies, which more often based their programme on the Slovenian Thalia collection of the Dramatic Society of Ljubljana or the *Talija* (Thalia) collection published in Gorizia, prevailed in the larger towns. Meanwhile, the societies affiliated with the Slovenian Christian Social Union relied more heavily on the Folk Play Collection. Had the smaller towns joined forces, they could have organised a superior theatre group. However, high-quality cultural content was not the primary goal of the societies’ activities in the circumstances of the raging cultural struggle. In the larger towns boasting superior amateur stages, the pattern from the central cultural centres repeated: going to the theatre self-evidently implied or demonstrated one’s adherence to the bourgeois cultural model and revealed one’s cultural preference. In the case of the Catholic societies in the rural parts, the demonstration of one’s adherence was even more prominent, except that in this case, it was a matter of belonging to a culture

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10 STRAŽAR. *Mengeš in Trzin skozi čas*. Mengeš; Trzin 1993, pp. 285-290.

11 HOSTNIK; IGLIČAR and RANT. *Kulturna dejavnost na Godešiču v 20. stoletju*. Godešič 2006, p. 12.

based on Christian morality and the Catholic value system to which everything else, including cultural activities, was subordinated. In this regard, it was not only crucial to attract as many people as possible to the theatre performances: it was also vital that as many people as possible participated in the activity itself, took part in the play and its preparation, and thus formed a group of like-minded individuals, preferably under the spiritual guidance of a Catholic priest.

Therefore, this division did not only result in the fragmentation of power but also in competitiveness that sometimes led to a completely unproductive bashing of the opponent while occasionally also resulting in healthy competition and a more diverse cultural offer. It is impossible to find any information about the number of societies in the Slovenian territory – whether of the liberal, Catholic, or developing socialist orientation – that were involved in theatre activities before World War I. One of the few concrete sources from the period before World War I indicates that in 1914, 121 theatre stages operated more or less successfully in Carniola in the framework of the Slovenian Christian-Social Union.<sup>12</sup>

### **The rise of amateur theatre creativity in the interwar period**

The first decade after the end of World War I is considered the first “mobilisation culmination” of cultural amateurism in Slovenia. However, after the introduction of the dictatorship in 1929 and the abolishment of political parties and certain associations, this swift expansion came to a standstill. From 1929 to 1933, Catholic and socialist societies were banned. However, when the Slovenian Catholic Party joined the government coalition at the end of the 1930s, the left-leaning societies were particularly adversely affected. The conditions for amateur theatres kept improving thanks to many new cultural centres in smaller towns. In some cases, the competing societies shared these consensually according to a predetermined schedule, while in others, exclusivity prevailed, and the society that owned the venue prevented or forbade others from performing in its cultural centre. The associations would print brochures for the member societies, which also contained instructions regarding theatre activities. To help the amateur theatre companies, the societies would organise courses for directors, make-up artists, and actors, create collections of plays and lend them to the cultural societies, arrange for new works to be printed, loan costumes or sets for particular historical periods, and facilitate the purchase of spotlights or movable collapsible stages. As a matter of course, professional artists assisted the amateur cultural endeavours. The period after World War I was also characterised by the establishment of numerous centres by the Catholic Educational Society, liberal societies, the *Sokol* gymnastic society, or other societies subscribing to various

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12 ERJAVEC, *Zgodovina katoliškega gibanja na Slovenskem*, pp. 316-317.

ideologies. Compared to the earlier period, the conditions for amateur cultural societies had improved significantly.

On the liberal side, the cultural societies were brought together in the *Zveza kulturnih društev* (Association of Cultural Societies), established in July 1920, which started publishing a collection of plays titled *Oder* (Stage) for small non-professional theatres in 1923.<sup>13</sup> The Association also included the largest and most renowned amateur theatres that also employed a few professional theatre artists, such as the *Šentjakobsko gledališče* theatre in Ljubljana, the Dramatic Society of Celje, and the Dramatic Society of Ptuj. On the Catholic side, the most prominent Slovenian Christian Social Union was renamed *Prosvetna zveza* (Educational Union) in 1923. The latter was more present in the countryside, while its most prominent theatre, called *Ljudski oder*, was located in Ljubljana. Meanwhile, the Marxist-oriented societies were part of the *Svoboda* (Freedom) association. In the second half of the 1920s, under new leadership, the latter revitalised its activities and started focusing on social themes. In 1928, it included 23 drama sections.<sup>14</sup>

The *Ljudski oder* theatre, which revitalised the theatrical scene in Ljubljana as early as 1918, led the amateur theatrical activities within the Catholic Educational Union. Its comprehensive report for the 1928/29 season included the information that 92 drama sections operated in the Educational Union's societies: "*No less than 640 performances were staged on our stages last year. The progress made by the societies in this respect is evidenced by the productions of Shakespeare's plays and by the fact that some societies even staged operas.*"<sup>15</sup> Drama sections were able to borrow several hundred plays from the Educational Union and the *Ljudski oder* theatre, which – apart from the usual editions of the Thalia collection, the *Ljudski oder* theatre, or the Folk Play Collection – included the most recent Slovenian works or translations of foreign works that had lately premiered at the *Narodno gledališče* (National Theatre). Unlike in the Austrian times, they no longer needed prior permission from the censorship office to stage them. The very mention of Shakespeare suggests an improved quality of performances on amateur theatre stages. This was also made possible by Oton Župančič, one of the most renowned Slovenian poets, who started systematically translating Shakespeare's works into Slovenian during the 1920s. The effort to improve the repertoire's quality was also influenced by the translations of other world classics, including the very popular translations of Moliere's comedies that reached Slovenian readers in the middle of the 1920s. However, many Catholic

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13 DOLENC, *Kulturni boj: slovenska kulturna politika v Kraljevini SHS 1918–1929*. Ljubljana 1996, pp. 277-278.

14 DOLENC, *Kulturni boj*, pp. 348-349.

15 *Prosvetna zveza Ljubljana*. Ljubljana, s.d., p. 10.

societies avoided staging the works of the most renowned Slovenian playwright, Ivan Cankar, because of his anti-Church attitude.

The reports of the *Zveza kulturnih društev* (Association of Cultural Societies of Slovenia) are less accurate because the hierarchical link between its member societies was not as tight as in the case of the Catholic societies. In 1930, it was reported that the Association of Cultural Societies of Slovenia in Maribor alone (i.e. half of the Slovenian territory in Yugoslavia) included 72 societies with their own venues and a few more that were equipped with mobile stages: “Each year, the societies organise more than 300 theatre performances. Some towns, villages, and cities have already introduced permanent events during the winter, with some venues even successfully staging operettas and other musical plays.”<sup>16</sup> The Union’s play-lending library featured 264 volumes, some of which contained several shorter works.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the conclusion that at the peak of the amateur cultural creativity in the Slovenian territory at the end of the 1920s, several hundred amateur stages presented more than a thousand performances a year, is not exaggerated. However, we lack more precise data that could be compared over a longer period. Even the most disciplined Catholic Educational Union, within which the *Zveza ljudskih odrov* union was founded, admitted in 1941 that the latter, “unfortunately, was not very successful in practice. The representatives of the Union were not able to expand their activities, and the rural stages were not willing enough to listen and follow the instructions”.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, a noticeable difference existed between the amateur cultural creators, who were more united by the desire to work together, perform, socialise, and have fun, and less by the instructions for theatre groups tailored to the ideological-political wishes of the higher authorities. Many leading politicians or ideologues in the associations’ leaderships believed that the primary function of amateur cultural creativity was political and ideological. The Catholic Educational Union was the most zealous. However, many popular folk stages in the countryside were far removed from the ideal that some of this Union’s leadership, inspired by the medieval Catholic theatre, would have liked to see on theatre stages. In their opinion, the latter “has come, after the Greek theatre, the closest in the entire history of dramatic arts to what it should be: namely, to stage beautiful tales and thus uplift the souls of the spectators and direct them towards the highest spiritual examples – to God himself”.<sup>19</sup>

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16 SKALA. *Zveza kulturnih društev v Mariboru*. In *Prosvetno delo 1925–1930: ob petletnici Zveze kulturnih društev v Mariboru*. Maribor, s. d. (1930), p. 4.

17 *Prosvetno delo 1925–1930: ob petletnici Zveze kulturnih društev v Mariboru*. Maribor, s. d. (1930), pp. 21–29.

18 Ljubljanski “Ljudski oder” oživljen. In *Prosvetni oder*, 1941, No. 8, p. 27.

19 Katoliško gledališče srednjega veka. In *Prosvetni oder*, 1942, No. 2, p. 6.

The role of amateur theatres was perceived quite differently by the professional actors of the national theatres, who were happy to assist them in their endeavours. In 1921, Milan Skrbinšek, who had performed in all the existing Slovenian professional theatres in Trieste, Maribor, and Ljubljana, published a booklet titled *Diletantski oder* (Amateur Stage), containing instructions for amateur theatres and intended to “*elevate our amateur performances from the lowlands of ordinary aimless entertainment to the vicinity of serious art*”.<sup>20</sup> Skrbinšek, who had also been active in the amateur theatre societies in Vienna during his studies there, wrote something else that was later emphasised by other organisers of amateur theatre – namely, that this activity was much more developed in Slovenia than anywhere else in the world: “*In all major towns, we have dramatic societies and drama sections of different organisations that stage performances. Our amateur performances are typical of our nation, which is unparalleled in this respect.*”<sup>21</sup> He was pleased that many societies organised regular performances each season. However, to encourage even better results, his booklet included all kinds of advice – how to choose plays, what to pay special attention to when selecting roles, how to organise rehearsals, and what not to forget during the performances themselves. He also pointed out the suitability of the set design, devoted many pages to theatrical makeup, and added tips on how to overcome the problems that could arise from too small and poorly equipped venues.

Apart from Milan Skrbinšek, many other theatre professionals helped develop amateur theatres. Osip Šest, a director and actor of the central National Theatre in Ljubljana, wrote about how he followed the production process and staging of Oton Župančič’s tragedy *Veronika Deseniška* on one of the amateur stages in Kranj. He praised the diligence of the participants, mentioned the limitations stemming from the very diverse abilities of the amateur actors, was more satisfied with the performance’s “*quite exemplary*” technical equipment, showed more dissatisfaction with the costume design, and mentioned the theatrical makeup as “*something horrible*”, remarking that “*these were not faces, but monstrosities*”. The performance received a solid overall rating, though Šest advised the amateur stages to seek some instruction in the fundamental principles of theatrical makeup. At the end of the review, he stated: “*The amateurs performed ‘Veronika’ six times, proving that insipid farces are not a necessity on amateur stages.*”<sup>22</sup>

*Šentjakobsko gledališče* became synonymous with a thriving and continuously operating amateur theatre. It also featured members of the Ljubljana National Theatre and represented a springboard for many future professional theatre artists. Milan Skrbinšek not only wrote instructions for amateur stages but also

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20 SKRBINŠEK. *Diletantski oder: navodila*. Ljubljana 1921, p. 3.

21 SKRBINŠEK, *Diletantski oder*, p. 4.

22 ŠEST, “Veronika Deseniška” med diletanti. In *Gledališki list Narodnega gledališča v Ljubljani*, 1930–31, No. 10, pp. 3–5.

took over the direction of some of the works staged at the Šentjakobsko gledališče theatre in the 1922/23 season. During the 1927/28 season, subscriptions were introduced for the first time, which was certainly not typical of amateur stages.

Metka Bučar, a member of the Šentjakob Theatre from Ljubljana, which belonged to the liberal Association of Cultural Societies, described how the most ideologically one-sided views influenced amateur theatre. She stated the following about a guest appearance in the small town of Borovnica:

*“The hall is almost empty. Should we cancel the performance?! Then a friendly local told us that the show would definitely be sold out, that we just had to wait for the litanies to come to an end. He remarked that the parish priest kept dragging out the church services on purpose because he did not want his congregation to witness such an ‘indecenty’. So we kept waiting, and at exactly four o’clock, the flock came rushing out of the church and the hall was instantly packed.”<sup>23</sup>*

The abovementioned Catholic Slovenian Educational Society in Mengeš revived the rich tradition after the war, on Christmas Day 1918. In 1921, it staged eight plays, most of which were performed more than just once, and kept on at this rate for the next few years. These plays were comedies with Catholic moral implications, based on the printed works from the Slovenian Thalia and *Ljudski oder* collections. The preserved photographs of the actors from the plays performed in 1927 and 1928 reveal that many people actively participated in the amateur theatre group.<sup>24</sup> For the neighbouring town of Trzin, records of theatre performances can be found dating back to 1923. The repertoire did not include the most commonplace amateur theatre works. The theatre group often staged the works of the popular Slovenian writer Franc Saleški Finžgar, who would also attend these performances in Trzin. It also performed some works from the standard Slovenian drama repertoire, both comedies by the pioneer of Slovenian drama Anton Tomaž Linhart and the play *Miklova Zala* (an adaptation of a short story from the time of the Turkish invasions with a strong national emphasis, which was adapted for theatre in several versions). Nevertheless, less demanding farces and comedies were also staged in Trzin.<sup>25</sup>

The division of the cultural society members or the audience according to their class or ideology was sometimes more and sometimes less pronounced. In the rapidly developing industrial town of Kranj, the theatrical section of the *Narodna čitalnica* reading society was the most successful group. At the beginning of the 1930s, it staged around twenty performances each season.

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23 MEHLE. *80 let Šentjakobskega gledališča: diplomsko delo*. Ljubljana 2001, pp. 9-10.

24 STRAŽAR, Mengeš in Trzin skozi čas, pp. 290-293

25 STRAŽAR, Mengeš in Trzin skozi čas, pp. 340-345.

However, its management noted that the audience still predominantly consisted of a narrow circle of the bourgeoisie, while “*peasants and workers would not attend the Čitalnica performances because they were convinced that they were only intended for the elite*”.<sup>26</sup> Before World War II, three amateur theatres operated successfully in the town: apart from the liberal one at the *Narodna čitalnica* society, also the Catholic *Prosvetni oder* and the socialist *Cankarjev oder*.

From the larger cities, where it had already been firmly established before World War I, the competition between the differently oriented societies spread to smaller towns. In the small town of Železniki, this even led to the same play, Finžgar’s *Divji lovec* (The Wild Hunter), being simultaneously performed on two stages. However, the audience did not seem to care much about the liberal-Catholic differences, as people simply filled the hall where the better show was staged.<sup>27</sup> In the small town of Komenda, the Catholic Educational Society, supported by the local Church dignitaries, was more successful. Meanwhile, they considered the Sokol gymnastic society, led by the school administrator, as just “*a couple of boys who are straying away from their service to God*”. The competition gave rise to a rich cultural offer, though people were most impressed by the successful open-air performances that attracted large audiences, for example, the abovementioned *Miklova Zala* or the dramatisation of the novel *Deseti brat* by the first Slovenian novelist Josip Jurčič.<sup>28</sup> The example of Kostanjevica na Krki reveals how small things enriched the cultural offer in a small town. Their Catholic Slovenian Educational Society staged the classical Catholic theatre repertoire, i.e. Finžgar’s works, *Miklova Zala*, Govekar’s dramatisations of Josip Jurčič’s works, as well as the slightly more challenging works by Molière and Dickens, along with the undemanding comedies and farces. The liberal *Sokol* society was also active in the town, but little is known about its theatre activities. When Jože Gorjup, a student of sculpture and painting, returned to his home town, he gathered students and educated youth from a wider area. In a few years, they staged some of the most challenging Slovenian dramatic works, including several plays by Ivan Cankar and the tragedy *Veronika Deseniška* by Oton Župančič. Even decades later, people from this economically backward rural area still remembered these performances.<sup>29</sup> However, that summer soon ended, as the main organiser of the activities died at the young age of 25.

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26 FUGINA, *Narodna čitalnica v Kranju*, p. 39.

27 KOBLAR. *Moj obračun*. Ljubljana 1976, p. 107.

28 PAVLIČ. Društva, klubi in druga združenja. In ŽEROVNIK, ed. *Občina Komenda: življenje od kamene dobe do danes*. Komenda 2002, pp. 185-186.

29 O gledališki tradiciji v Kostanjevici. In *Gledališki list (Lado Smrekar: Kloštrski žolnir)*. Kostanjevica na Krki 1956, p. 4.

The competition was even stronger in the larger cities, especially the workers' centres, as strong workers' societies also got involved in the usual Catholic-Liberal opposition. The Marxist-oriented *Svoboda* society in Ljubljana was established already during Austrian rule, and the most renowned Slovenian playwright, Ivan Cankar, also participated in the founding of its theatre section. After the war, new workers' societies were created in other industrial and mining centres in the context of the *Svoboda* (Freedom) society. Initially, the programmes of their theatre sections did not differ from those of other amateur theatres. The change of direction came after 1927 when the student Bratko Kreft (later a director, dramaturge, and university professor) began working in the main workers' theatre in Ljubljana, the *Delavski oder* (Workers Stage) theatre. Already the first performances he directed revealed a new programme orientation by highlighting the workers' social problems and the repressive measures taken by the authorities against their actions. More workers started to participate alongside the intellectuals, and mass scenes were introduced into the plays, giving the struggle for workers' rights a new emphasis.<sup>30</sup>

Writer Mira Mihelič, who spent a part of her childhood years in the mining town of Trbovlje, wrote that on the side of the town “*where the church, parish, and the Catholic society were located*”, they performed simple plays based on Catholic moralism. The other end, though, was where “*Cankar was staged in the Worker's Centre /.../, and, of course, where the Trbovlje Sokol society was also based*”.<sup>31</sup>

In some places, the competition was less fierce – for example in Laško, known for its brewery and tourist attractions, where theatre activity flourished within the liberal Sokol society. In the period between the two world wars, they staged around a hundred performances, with a repertoire ranging from high comedy, lighter comedies and plays that included singing, to the less demanding farces – i.e. works that were readily available in bookshops or play-lending libraries at the time. It attracted many people to participate in active amateur theatre work, and a preserved photograph of an operetta by the local composer Radovan Gobec shows that around forty people took part in the event.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the large audiences that followed the successes and failures of local cultural societies, it was therefore important for the societies to ensure considerable membership. In addition to the more challenging works, which required fewer actors, the selection of plays was also dictated by the mass scenes,

30 MILOHNIČ. Delavski oder in amaterski učinek “proletarske igre”. In *Amfiteater: revija za teorijo scenske umetnosti*, 2020, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 19-26.

31 MIHELIČ. *Ure mojih dni: spomini*. Murska Sobota 1985, p. 25.

32 BELEJ. *Kulturna društva v Laškem od konca 19. stoletja dalje: diplomsko delo*. Ljubljana 2009, pp. 54-55.

in which many locals participated as silent extras or uttered just a few lines. The organisers from the ranks of the society or association leadership were probably more satisfied with the performances than the more demanding visitors to the event.

Although many political leaders or ideologues saw amateur theatre activity as just another means of reaching out to the masses, it often followed its own course. In the opinion of many amateur cultural workers, socialising with friends and acquaintances in their spare time and performing in front of local audiences or occasionally at guest appearances at the nearby cultural societies took precedence over listening to the political-ideological guidelines as conceived by the leaderships of the various associations of cultural societies.

### **The revival and decline of amateur stages after World War II**

In August 1946, Bratko Kreft, the aforementioned moderniser of the *Delavski oder* theatre in Ljubljana, commented on the first competition of amateur theatre groups after World War II: “*It is no exaggeration to claim that in Slovenia, more amateur theatre performances are staged than anywhere else.*”<sup>33</sup> Filip Kumbatovič, who was appointed the first rector of the Academy of Dramatic Arts, founded in 1945, felt the same way. He wrote that “*it is a general fact that already before the recent war, Slovenians had boasted the largest number of theatre groups in Europe in relative terms*”, while adding that mass amateur theatre activity flourished again immediately after the end of the war.<sup>34</sup>

However, due to political changes, the development of amateur theatre in the first decade after World War II was quite different from that in the pre-war period. The communist takeover of power also affected the organisation of amateur cultural activities, as the previous Catholic, liberal and Marxist associations of cultural societies were replaced by the *Ljudska prosveta Slovenije* (People’s Education of Slovenia) association, founded in September 1945. Its activities were based on the ideological principles of the Slovenian Liberation Front, led by the Communist Party of Slovenia. The Educational Union in Ljubljana – an association of Catholic cultural societies – also wanted to resume its activities, but the Ministry of the Interior banned it on the grounds that its leadership had collaborated with the occupiers during the war. The societies’ assets were nationalised and made available to the newly established association of cultural societies. As other associations of cultural societies were not allowed to resume their activities, the People’s Education of Slovenia association became the

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33 KREFT, Ob tekmi gledaliških skupin. In *Slovenski poročevalec*, Vol. 7, No. 185, 10 August 1946, p. 4.

34 KALAN, O naših ljudskih odrih. In *Ljudska pravica*, Vol. 6, No. 137, 30 September 1945, p. 7.

monopoly organisation for amateur cultural activities. One of its main tasks was to assist in the development of amateur theatre with the aid of many professional theatre workers who continued to promote the improvement of amateur theatre groups' activities by giving advice and lecturing on directing, make-up, acting, and so on.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, all theatre groups had to gather under the same roof and register as members of the People's Education of Slovenia association (nowadays called *Zveza kulturnih društev* / Association of Cultural Societies of Slovenia). It already boasted more than 850 theatre groups as early as 1945. By 1947, this number increased to more than 900 theatre groups, which staged some 6,000 performances seen by approximately 900,000 spectators. Several theatre groups were also active in smaller towns, while 64 were reportedly active in Ljubljana alone. The management of the People's Education of Slovenia association therefore encouraged the merging of smaller groups into larger theatre ensembles, which would then be able to perform a more demanding repertoire and produce more premieres and performances during seasons.<sup>36</sup> In Kranj, for example, three pre-war societies – the Catholic *Prosvetni oder*, the liberal theatre at the *Narodna čitalnica* society, and the Marxist *Cankarjev oder* – merged to form a new institution, which began the 1945/46 season under the new name of *Mestno gledališče Kranj* (Kranj City Theatre). It was situated in the city's largest hall, which had, before the war, belonged to a Catholic society, whose assets were nationalised after such societies were banned. People sympathetic to the new authorities assumed the society's leadership roles, while the leaders of the dissolved societies were allowed to continue their work as professionals but were not permitted to hold leadership positions within the new cultural framework.<sup>37</sup>

The lists of recommended plays were quite different from the pre-war ones: “*All of the shallow farces so frequently staged in folk theatres in the recent years have been excluded from the list. Plays that are no longer in the spirit of the current times have also been eliminated,*”<sup>38</sup> wrote the management of the monopoly organisation of cultural societies. New works were published in various collections, which ensured that as many Slovenian works as possible were printed. Ivan Cankar in particular gained in popularity, as he had been the target of Catholic censorship until just a few years earlier. The farces and

35 GABRIČ, Slovenska agitpropovska kulturna politika: 1945–1952. In *Borec: revija za zgodovino, literaturo in antropologijo*, 1991, Vol. 43, No. 7-8-9, pp. 518-520, 530-533.

36 GABRIČ, Al prav se piše Županova Micka ali predsednikova hči: amaterski odri na Slovenskem 1945–1955. In *Zgodovina za vse*, 1995, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 38-41

37 GABRIČ, Prešernovo gledališče v Kranju: 1945–1957. In *Dokumenti Slovenskega gledališkega muzeja*, Vol. 37, No. 76/77, pp. 7-10.

38 Quoted by GABRIČ, Al prav se piše Županova Micka ali predsednikova hči, pp. 39-40

folk plays based on Catholic moralism now became the target of censorship that was formally non-existent yet very powerful in practice, behind the scenes. Immediately after the war, there was a rush to reprint the Partisan “*agitke*” written during the war as well as the more recent works by Slovenian authors, which professional theatres also performed at the time. Among foreign dramas, the older pieces were preferred; among the newer ones, the focus was on the contemporary Soviet works; while the attitude towards the modern Western culture was noticeably dismissive. The competitions for new Slovenian works suitable for amateur stages were intended to fill this void and aimed primarily at amateur ensembles that could not tackle more challenging theatre works.

Despite the ideological and political constraints imposed on the amateur artists by the leading communist ideologues, the theatre amateurs’ activities were becoming more and more fruitful. They represented a vital link in the chain of activities aimed at filling people’s leisure time. Many were convinced to start actively participating in theatre activities and even more to attend the performances, which followed one after another on the more advanced amateur stages. Amateur theatres were very competitive in their cultural offering, combining pleasant and beneficial experiences while offering conviviality, relaxation, joy, and culture. However, the criticism expressed by the representatives of the authorities suggested that this activity had by no means fallen to the level of cheap political propaganda.

During the times when everything was measured in terms of competitions and proving the outstanding achievements of recent years, the success of amateur theatres was also measured with competition results and attendance figures. However, with their very selection of plays, the best amateur theatre groups also demonstrated their interest in something more, such as the complexity and quality of the works they performed. The evaluators of amateur theatre groups, who were often theatre professionals, took the fact that even amateurs increasingly often tackled William Shakespeare’s plays successfully as a sign of progress. In the early 1950s, after the Soviet cultural and political model was no longer adhered to, works by contemporary Western authors also started to appear in amateur theatres. The gradual depoliticisation of amateur theatre activity was evident in the fact that calls for competition were no longer accompanied by lists of recommended works and that the selection was therefore left to amateur theatres themselves.

Franc Kimovec – Žiga, the vice president of the People’s Education of Slovenia association, presented in February 1951 the first fairly reliable data on amateur theatre activities. He mentioned that the works of Branislav Nušić (110 performances), Ivan Cankar (41), Molière (40), Josip Jurčič (39), Nikolai Gogol (37), Miško Kranjec (35), and Fran S. Finžgar (31) were the most frequently

performed works on the amateur theatre stages. Much fewer performances of unwanted plays were recorded, such as *Kdo je požigalec* (8 performances), *Pričarani ženin* (8), *Revček Andrejček* (3), *Prisega opolnoči* (3), etc. Kimovec added that these performances were more often staged by groups that were not members of the People's Education of Slovenia association, particularly firefighters' societies, which used them to enrich their festivals. The staging of popular farces and simple comedies was accompanied by the apologies that the societies were using them to fill their constantly empty coffers. The management of the People's Education of Slovenia countered this by citing examples of successful financial balance sheets achieved with quality programmes. In the 1950/51 season, an amateur theatre group from Sv. Jurij pri Celju "*achieved an equal or even greater financial effect by producing Cankar's Kralj na Betajnovi than it was accomplished elsewhere by staging Dve nevesti or Začarani ženin*". From Videm ob Savi, they were delighted to report on their success with *Miklova Zala*, which they performed as many as 14 times: "*The constantly crowded auditorium is simultaneously the most eloquent proof of the quality of the performances. Many people have seen this popular old Slovenian play with interest more than once.*" Their decision to donate all their earnings to the renovation of their local cultural centre was also well received.<sup>39</sup>

To assist amateur theatres, the People's Education of Slovenia established the *Ljudski oder* (People's Stage) – a service that provided theatre plays with direction instructions and equipment for each performance, which theatre companies could borrow at a reasonable price. At the beginning of the 1953/54 season, amateur theatres could choose from 113 titles in the People's Stage library. The People's Stage service offered costumes, weapons, wigs, outfits, and fashion accessories of various styles, and it could also provide theatre equipment or designs on request. The fact that this service operated without any subsidies since 1953 proves that borrowing was so widespread that the fees were sufficient to cover the running costs.

Ten years after the end of the war, the People's Education of Slovenia association prepared a detailed review of post-war cultural activities. Janko Liška, the secretary of the People's Education of Slovenia association, mentioned that the statements, "*despite their incompleteness, actually provide a genuine picture of the post-war repertoire of people's stages*". He listed fourteen works for which more than a hundred performances were recorded, which obviously means this number could have been even greater. These works included the abovementioned authors, such as the Slovenian authors Fran Saleški Finžgar, Ivan Cankar, Anton Tomaž Linhart, Josip Jurčič, as well as *Miklova Zala* adapted

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39 GABRIČ, Al prav se piše Županova Micka ali predsednikova hči, p. 50.

by Fran Žižek, while Matej Bor represented the authors from the Partisan period. Among the foreign authors, Branislav Nušić, Molière, and Carlo Goldoni were the most popular.<sup>40</sup>

In 1953, Darinka Muser, a member of the People's Education of Slovenia leadership in charge of theatre activities, wrote that after attending an international congress of amateur theatre groups, where she had familiarised herself with the situation in some other developed countries, she had become even more convinced that "nowhere is amateur acting as developed as in Slovenia, where it in fact represents a popular activity in every village".<sup>41</sup> In her 1955 analysis, Darinka Muser meticulously examined the state of amateur theatre in Slovenia. Amateur theatre activities at that time reached an unparalleled peak: each year, the performances were attended by more than a million visitors, and more than eighty amateur theatres operated regularly and systematically. This category included theatres that operated throughout the season and produced more than four premieres annually, while some of them also published theatre programme booklets. The situation was better in the industrial centres with prominent stages under the auspices of the workers' *Svoboda* society and worse in the countryside. In the Slovenian Littoral, the effects of the interwar period, when this region had been part of Italy and the fascist terror had been destroying Slovenian culture, were still noticeable. Muser noted a big step forward in comparison with the pre-war period in the rural north-east of Slovenia, in the Prekmurje region. She used the example of the Kočevje region to demonstrate the consequences of closing down a well-functioning theatre. When the prominent local amateur theatre was closed down in 1951 due to the abolishment of its subsidy and the transfer of one of its leading members, the entire region succumbed to a cultural standstill. In general terms, Slovenia's more backward southern half had the smallest number of successful amateur theatres.<sup>42</sup>

The Slovenian statistical service also recorded data on the most fruitful years of Slovenian amateur theatre. At least roughly comparable attendance figures for professional and amateur stages are available for some seasons, revealing that significantly more Slovenians were introduced to theatre creativity on the stages of local amateur societies than in professional theatres. For the first half of the 1950s, 600 to 700 active amateur theatre groups with between 15 and 20 thousand actively involved theatre enthusiasts were recorded. The highest

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40 GABRIČ, Al prav se piše Županova Micka ali predsednikova hči, p. 56.

41 MUSER, Ob sporedih igralskih skupin. In *Socialistična misel*, 1952–53, Vol. 1, No. 10, p. 714.

42 MUSER, Amatersko igranje – deset let po osvoboditvi. In *Ljudska prosveta*, 1955, Vol. 4, No. 8-9, pp. 10-11

attendance was recorded in 1952 when 4,828 performances (recorded, which means there were more) were seen by approximately 1,067,000 visitors.<sup>43</sup> For comparison, in the 1952/53 season, professional and semi-professional theatre performances were attended by around 602,000 spectators.<sup>44</sup>

In her otherwise encouraging analyses of the activities of many Slovenian amateur theatres, Darinka Muser already pointed out that not all indicators were quite as optimistic, though. Already in the following years, she kept underlining in the newsletters of the People's Education of Slovenia that the interest in amateur theatre activities was declining, that the societies were begging for directors and could not find any, and that the interest in participating at the various workshops for theatre amateurs was dwindling. Lifestyle changes led to a rapid decline in the number of amateur cultural societies and theatre groups.

The golden years of cultural amateurism were over. Those who were directly involved could already sense the storm clouds gathering. Janko Krek compared the results of the last two theatre seasons in an outline of the activities of the *Loško gledališče* amateur theatre from Škofja Loka:

*“During the 1952/53 season, we had eight premieres (seven plays and a Veseli večer / Comedy Night), while in the 1953/54 season we had five premieres (four plays and a Literarno-glasbena akademija / Literary and Musical Academy), which means three premieres less.”*

He mentioned that 12,084 people attended the performances of the local amateur theatre in the 1952/53 season, which was an enviable figure for a small town like Škofja Loka. However, Krek was concerned that attendance had more than halved in the two seasons he compared, as only around 5,000 visitors of the *Loško gledališče* theatre were recorded in 1953/54. He saw the loss of audience interest as one of the fundamental reasons for the theatre's decreased activity:

*“It is impossible to perform in front of an empty auditorium, as anyone who has been on stage will admit. Indeed, the void also takes away our actors' will to perform. Thus, our first task should be to attract the audience.”*<sup>45</sup>

The members of the *Kulturno društvo Dušan Jereb* society's amateur theatre in Novo mesto faced a similarly discouraging situation at that time. They won the 1949 state competition with Molière's *Tartuffe*, which attests to their successful work. During its most prolific years in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the theatre annually produced between six and eight premieres and boasted more

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43 JURCA, Slovenska gledališča v preteklih letih. In *Prikazi in študije*, 1957, Vol. 3, No. 5, p. 25.

44 JURCA, Slovenska gledališča v preteklih letih, p. 14.

45 KREK, Par gledaliških problemov. In *Loški razgledi*, 1954, Vol. 1, p. 177.

than fifty members. However, in the middle of the 1950s, the activities took a sharp downturn in the number of premieres, active members, and audience attendance. By the mid-1960s, the theatre had declined to a single premiere yearly. The reasons were pointed out very perceptively by Staša Vovk, one of the most active members of an amateur theatre in Novo mesto. The local authorities' interest in supporting theatre activities was waning, as was the public interest in it. All of this took a toll on even the most enthusiastic members: "*The time came for people to build houses, cottages and vacation homes, buy cars, and put TVs in their living rooms.*"<sup>46</sup>

The cultural societies' monopolistic organisation was initially unable to respond to the new developments. Until the end of the 1950s, the leadership of the *Zveza Svobod in prosvetnih društev Slovenije* association (as the former *Ljudska prosveta Slovenije* / People's Education of Slovenia association was renamed in 1955) still included politicians, some of them also old-school ideologues, who prioritised ideological considerations over the initiatives to introduce more modern forms and focus on the more relaxed and entertaining forms of cultural engagement. The old obstacles that the political ideologues had previously placed in the way of amateur cultural work gradually disappeared. As politicians eventually left the leadership of the Association of Cultural Societies, professionals gained more prominent roles in it. No directives for future work were implemented at the Association's 1960 congress. This was confirmed the following year, as the magazine that had published the instructions for the work of the cultural societies until then ceased to exist. It was the period referred to as the relaxed sixties.<sup>47</sup>

A new method of organising the work of amateur theatre groups was introduced after 1958, when a meeting of the top amateur theatres in Slovenia was held in Velenje for the first time. Theatre groups participated with performances that had earlier been performed locally, and only the highest-ranking societies were invited to the national competition. At the accompanying conferences, the amateur groups received expert advice on what to watch out for in their work and expressed their wishes on how the central association could support them. The meetings gradually lost their competitive edge, but encouraged the exchange of experiences and popularised theatre activities. The *Združenje gledaliških skupin Slovenije* (The Association of Theatre Groups of Slovenia) was established, and the development of youth and children's theatres was encouraged. In 1970, the first meeting of children's and youth theatre groups was organised. Annual meetings

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46 VOVK. Uspešna leta novomeškega gledališča. In GABRIČ, ed. *Oblikovanje kulturnih ustanov in razvoj Novega mesta v kulturno središče Dolenjske*. Novo mesto 2000, p. 130.

47 GABRIČ. *Socialistična kulturna revolucija: slovenska kulturna politika 1953–1962*. Ljubljana 1995, pp. 203–221.

became a regular social event for theatre amateurs, their umbrella organisation, and professional assistants, where they assessed their past achievements and made plans for the future. The top-ranking groups at the Slovenian republic festival were selected for the meetings of the best Yugoslav amateur theatre groups. The very titles of the plays reveal a qualitative leap in their work, as the groups followed the principles established on professional theatre stages. The selection ranged from world classics (Lope de Vega, Marin Držić, Heinrich von Kleist, Federico García Lorca) and classical Slovenian authors to contemporary international (Rene de Obaldia, Felicity Douglas, Alexey Arbuzov) and local literature.<sup>48</sup>

In 1963, the amateur theatre from Novo mesto won the Slovenian contest with *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller and repeated the success at the Yugoslav meeting on the Croatian island of Hvar. Staša Vovk, a long-standing theatre member, recalled: “*There was a lot of enthusiasm in Novo mesto, many pats on the back and kind congratulations, but unfortunately, not much else happened.*”<sup>49</sup> This highlighted the fact that successful work did not necessarily lead to more financial support from the local community.

After 1957, experimental theatres also functioned as amateur theatre groups, presenting modernist and avant-garde works by local and Western authors that struggled to find a place in the repertoires of professional theatres. They were popular among the youth, especially students.<sup>50</sup>

However, nothing could stop the declining interest in amateur cultural activities. New approaches enabled the cultural societies’ organisers to preserve at least the best parts of the amateur culture. Amateur theatre creativity was also marked by a quantitative decline. While in the middle of the 1950s, the attendance at amateur theatre performances still far exceeded that of professional theatres, two decades later, in the 1973/74 season, for which comparable data are available, the situation was completely different. The number of visitors who attended the performances of the 64 amateur theatres (whose numbers had significantly reduced) amounted to substantially less than half of the visitors to the professional theatres’ performances during the same season. The trend would only continue, markedly so after Slovenia’s emancipation and democratisation. Some of the more prominent amateur theatres turned professional, and new non-state theatres emerged, attracting fun-seeking audiences to the theatres with their predominantly lighter programme. Meanwhile, even fewer people than before decided to participate in amateur theatres.<sup>51</sup>

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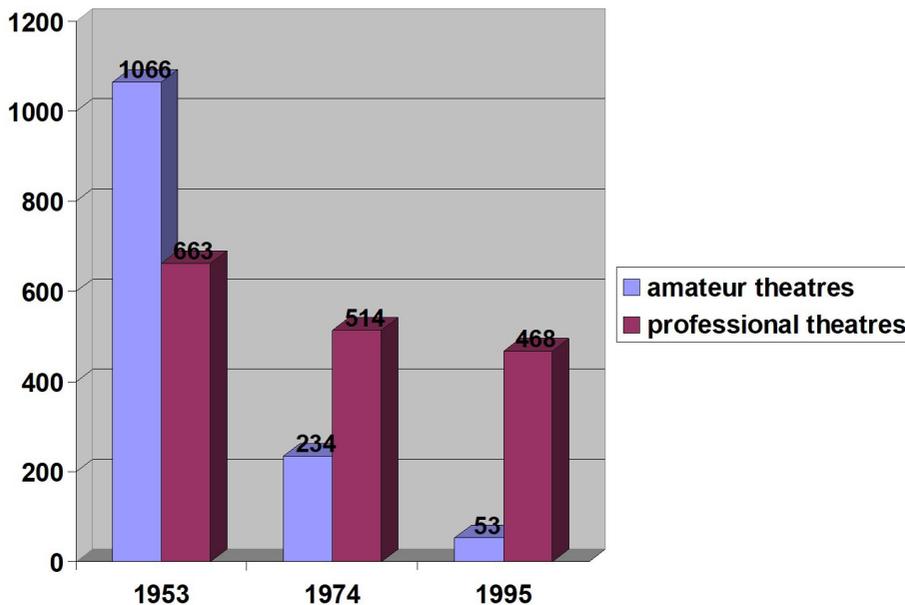
48 *Dvajset revij in srečanj gledaliških skupin Slovenije*. Ljubljana 1977.

49 VOVK, *Uspešna leta novomeškega gledališča*, p. 128.

50 OREL. *Prekinitve s tradicijo v slovenskih uprizoritvenih umetnostih 1966–2006*. Ljubljana 2023.

51 GABRIČ, *Družbena in družabna vloga gledališke dejavnosti na Slovenskem v 20. stoletju*,

**Theatre performance attendance (in thousands)**



**Conclusion**

Amateur theatres were one of Slovenia's most developed forms of amateur cultural activities from the end of the 19th to the end of the 20th century. As the activity substantially impacted a broader circle of people, politicians of various ideological-political orientations saw it as an opportunity to establish another communication channel with the people. This often led to divisions between the leaders of the associations of cultural societies, who also saw cultural creativity as a means of politicisation, and the cultural workers in the field, who were more concerned with cultural objectives, relaxed socialising with like-minded people, and entertaining participants and visitors.

It is possible to identify the desire to politicise the activity in the magazines published by the Catholic, liberal, or Marxist associations of cultural societies before World War II or by the one and only monopolist organisation after the war. This desire was manifested through the speeches of the leading members, often politicians from the political parties that sponsored cultural associations, and in the lists of recommended works. In the case of Catholic societies, the emphasis was on moral and religious components. The organisation of the liberal cultural societies was more relaxed and less subject to directives from above, while,

during the Austrian period, the programme guidelines strongly emphasised the national issue, advocacy of Slovenian identity, and criticism of Germanisation attempts. Meanwhile, in Marxist societies, the emphasis on social issues, the exploitation of the working class, and the promotion of their rights for greater social justice strengthened over the years, especially after mid 20's.

Under the communist regime, the communication channels and attempts at politicisation remained unchanged. However, the crucial difference was that the ruling communists allowed only one association of amateur cultural societies to operate, subject to their political directives. However, the assessments from the field reveal that, like before the war, many amateur theatres gave precedence to their own wishes and ideas. They were not as interested in the ideological-political directives but rather in the benefits offered by the membership in the various associations of cultural societies, such as being able to participate in different courses or borrow suitable costumes, movable stages, or theatre works with instructions for staging them, as well as benefit from guest appearances by professional theatre workers who offered them advice.

In the second half of the 1950s, amateur theatre activity underwent a deep crisis due to the changed rhythm of life. One of the consequences was that the political elite suddenly showed less interest in it than before. The time of writing guidelines, publishing lists of recommended works, or politicians committed to strict ideological principles in the management forums of cultural organisations was over. The mass participation that had hitherto graced one of Slovenia's most widespread forms of amateur cultural creativity came to an end.

However, this does not imply that amateur theatres were losing their significance. The annual meetings of amateur theatre groups – similar to the regular annual gatherings of choirs or brass bands from the same era – demonstrated the resilience and progress of amateur theatres. The simple desire to meet and bring people together overcame the former ideological-political burdens. Children's and youth theatres were regularly revitalised, while experimental stages added more vibrancy and social provocation to theatre creativity. Thus, the previous attempts to use amateur theatre for mass mobilisation and ideological-political goals gradually diminished, while the overall quality of theatre activities improved.

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