



SNG MARIBOR

**DRAMA
OPERA
BALETT
MARIBOR**
SLOVENSKO NARODNO GLEDALIŠČE
SLOVENE NATIONAL THEATRE

Towards sustainable theatre productions: “Sustainable, or sustainability-oriented, artistic and creative practises and their limit(ation)s”

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WORKSHOP CONTENT

As part of the second professional-artistic workshop, our team working on the STAGES project identified the need to critically examine and reassess the challenges surrounding sustainable theatre productions. A central issue that emerged was the concept of sustainable—or more precisely, sustainability-oriented—artistic and creative practices, which are an indispensable component of all art forms, not just performing arts and theatre.

In the context of Slovenian theatre practice, deeply embedded in the geopolitical framework of European theatre and its evolution—particularly the tradition of theatre poetics and aesthetics shaped by the concept of Regietheater (director’s theatre) as a hallmark of uni-

que and innovative stage productions—we engaged with professional and artistic interlocutors to identify and precisely define key differences in the conditions for fostering sustainability-oriented creative and artistic practices. This examination focused on the contrast between institutional theatre, such as the Slovenian National Theatre Maribor, and the so-called independent theatre scene or non-institutional theatre, which often faces significant disadvantages in terms of financial support by the state and accessibility.

At the workshop coordinated by Benjamin Virč—a musicologist, librettist, dramaturg, translation studies expert, and writer—we focused on exploring three key questions within the context of examining the potential and boundaries of sustainability:

- “How can sustainable principles inspire innovative approaches to set and costume design?”
- “What are the challenges and opportunities in incorporating sustainability into the creative process without compromising artistic integrity?”
- “How can digital technologies (e.g., virtual sets, holograms, projections) contribute to more sustainable theatrical practices?”

A special thematic focus arose from the observed issue of the gradual alienation of young people from theatre as their “art form of choice”. In this regard, the 2013 Eurobarometer survey *Cultural Access and Participation*[1] highlights a critical problem: the potential aesthetic reception of theatre productions labelled as sustainable by diverse target audiences. There is a concern that such productions could be perceived—by a statistically significant portion of the audience—as aesthetically inferior or “artistically devalued”. Similarly, some theatre creators fear that addressing environmental and related issues tied to contemporary consumer lifestyles might fall on deaf ears or even elicit negative responses from audiences who may view these topics as unsuitable, or at least unconventional for artistic exploration.

As Virč emphasized, achieving the “ideal balance” of all aspects of sustainability within the realm of theatre is an exceptionally complex and delicate process, primarily dictated by the legislative framework of the state, the European Union, and the policies of the local community where a theatre operates. For instance, while it is commendable that the state has recognized the importance of energy renovation for an aging theatre building, the local government’s inaction regarding a green transition in Maribor—particularly in mobility, infrastructure, and accessibility to shared resources—is deeply concerning.

[1] The findings of the study reveal a general decline in cultural participation among Europeans, both as performers and spectators. Over the past year, only 38% actively engaged in cultural activities such as singing, dancing, or photography. In terms of “passive” participation, the percentage of those who rate their cultural involvement as high or very high has dropped to 18%, compared to 21% in 2007. The main reasons for not engaging in cultural activities include lack of time (44% cite this as the reason for not reading a book), lack of interest (50% say this is why they haven’t attended a ballet, dance performance, or opera), lack of financial resources (25% attribute this to skipping concerts), and lack of options (an average of 10%).

In socio-cultural contexts where progress on environmental issues and the green transition remains too slow, the active involvement of civil society and bold initiatives from theatre leadership become essential. These efforts must prioritize implementing sustainable practices across various domains of human activity while safeguarding artistic freedom and fostering creativity and innovation. As Belgian linguist and theorist Roland Mortier observed, artistic freedom—along with the innovation it inherently inspires—has been a central aesthetic tenet of modernism, profoundly shaping European art in the 20th century. Yet, the principle of innovation can sometimes ideologically conflict with the concept of “recyclable art”, which derives its sustainability from reusability, whether as fragments or in its entirety.

*In response to the coordinator’s inquiry about how sustainability-oriented technologies might reshape creative practices in theatre, Matic Kašnik, set designer and technical manager of SNG Maribor, referenced Peter Brook’s visionary ideas in *The Empty Space*. Brook observed that one of the great freedoms of Elizabethan theatre lay in its absence of elaborate scenery (Brook, 1968: 86)—a principle that resonates with the aspirations of sustainable theatre.*

Kašnik underscored the importance of evaluating the long-term effects—both positive and negative—when adopting new technologies in theatre. While modern innovations like holograms or projected static and dynamic images offer creative possibilities, they remain heavily dependent on electricity. As such, the sustainability and renewability of the energy sources powering these technologies must also be a critical consideration.

Among the most notable positive implementations of modern technologies in theatre is the replacement of older, energy-inefficient incandescent bulbs with LED lighting. This not only reduces energy consumption but also allows for more nuanced manipulation of theatrical lighting, enhancing creative possibilities while promoting sustainability.

When implementing modern technological innovations—generally less energy-intensive—careful attention must be paid to the energy production and consumption cycle. Reduced energy use is, incidentally, one of the core indicators of (post)industrial development for an economically independent entity, typically a state, and its commitment to sustainable development. It is crucial to consider how the energy powering electric vehicles and bicycles is produced. While such technologies can significantly reduce harmful emissions and particulate matter in the short term, they may also create anomalies in the energy supply chain of a country.

Similarly, introducing technological innovations into theatre practices must be approached thoughtfully and holistically. Theatre operates within a delicate socio-economic “ecosystem” with specific dynamics and needs. Among these, the highest levels of contingency lie in the innovative artistic expression—which may not always align with sustainability—and its potential (negative) reception by audiences.

In examining how sustainable principles can inspire innovation in set and costume design, choreographer Lara Ekar Grlj and costume designers Suzana Rengeo and Ana Janc provided diverse yet harmonious insights. Drawing on her extensive experience as head of the tailoring department at SNG Maribor, Rengeo highlighted the critical role of establishing a comprehensive wardrobe archive (commonly known as a fundus) with meticulously digitized and transparent records of costumes and accessories. Such a system would not only align with the theatre's sustainability development plan, grounded in self-assessment, but also optimize resource use by minimizing the need for new purchases. Moreover, it would empower the theatre to manage its collection more flexibly, facilitating costume lending to other artistic organizations and individuals alike.

Costume designer Ana Janc highlighted the chronic underfunding of non-institutional theatre productions in Slovenia from the perspective of an independent costume creator. While this financial constraint often poses challenges, it has also driven many creators to seek inventive solutions and adopt “out-of-the-box” thinking to achieve the desired outcomes with minimal resources. Janc emphasized that current university curricula for aspiring costume designers devote insufficient attention to sustainability-oriented artistic practices, particularly the search for alternative and creative solutions when financial or material resources for costume production are limited.

As a practical response to such challenges, freelance costume designers often establish and maintain their own costume collections. These archives typically consist of second-hand garments or reworked and newly adapted pieces, offering a resourceful way to meet production demands sustainably and cost-effectively.

As noted by leading researchers examining the relationship between environmental factors, such as energy consumption, and the development of economies and societies, a more comprehensive analysis could include variables like carbon emissions, ecological footprints, and social equity. This would provide a more holistic understanding of the “energy–environment–development” nexus (Gahlot & Garg, 2024). The study by Gahlot and Garg emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary research and coordinated policy efforts to address the complex interconnections between macroeconomic factors, energy usage, and sustainable development. Similarly, the issue of implementing sustainable or sustainability-oriented artistic and creative practices in theatre exhibits a comparable level of complexity, requiring an integrated and interdisciplinary approach that accommodates the needs of multiple stakeholders—fundors and sponsors of artistic programs, artists (both creators and performers), and, most importantly, the audience, the ultimate recipient and consumer of cultural content.

As audience preferences increasingly reflect the influence of arbitrary trends shaped by new technologies like social media and entertainment platforms, society must evolve to cultivate informed and conscientious users—or “prosumers” (Toffler, 1980), as conceptualized in decades of scholarly discourse. The development of a critical mass of

prosumers—audiences both critically aware and attuned to environmental issues—is essential for sustainable theatre to achieve its objectives and build a dedicated following. Realizing this vision demands active collaboration across global stakeholders: cooperation between nations to harmonize environmental policies, educational systems that nurture critical thinking, and the independent efforts of artistic institutions and creators to champion sustainable practices.

Benjamin Virc

LITERATURE AND SOURCES

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE ARTISTS:

LARA EKAR GRLJ

Lara Ekar Grlj graduated in 2021 from the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, with a thesis titled *Dance as an Ever-Emerging Gestalt* (supervised by Prof. Sebastian Vörös). She previously completed the Conservatory for Music and Ballet (ballet program) and Gimnazija Kranj before continuing her ballet journey with Balletto di Verona. She began ballet training in Kranj and later attended the Lower Ballet School in Ljubljana, followed by the Secondary Ballet School at the Conservatory for Music and Ballet, where she studied alongside her high school education. She graduated with honours from both programs. During her training, she participated in numerous projects, including state celebrations, performances with SNG Opera and Ballet Ljubljana (*Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker*, *Cinderella*, *Giselle*), and collaborations with the Slovenian Ballet Dancers' Association, RTV Slovenia, Ljubljana Festival, and Plesni Teater Ljubljana (Ljubljana Dance Theatre). She also worked with renowned choreographers such as James Amar, Miha Krušič, Kjara Starič, and the Barcelona group La Fura dels Baus. Lara performed in the RTV Slovenia production of *The Firebird* and contributed as a dancer and choreographer to the dance film *Sreča* (Happiness).

In 2018, she joined Balletto di Verona, performing in productions like The Nutcracker, Sleeping Beauty, and Masquerade, and was part of the ensemble for two seasons. She further honed her skills through seminars in Zagreb, Dubrovnik, Dublin, and Berlin, earning a scholarship as a promising young artist. At international workshops, she collaborated with esteemed figures, including Maša Kolar, Jewgenij Zakharchenko, Leonard Jakovina, and Anne Maher.

MATIC KAŠNIK

Matic Kašnik, a Slovenian set designer, began his journey in architecture at the University of Maribor, where he actively participated in diverse architectural and site-specific projects. Remarkably, even as a student, he and his colleagues were honoured with Slovenia's highest architectural accolade, the Plečnik Medal. Drawn to the world of theatre, he joined the Slovenian National Theatre Maribor, where he gained invaluable experience assisting acclaimed set designers such as Sven Jonke (Studio NUMEN for Use), Juan Guillermo Nova, Nicolas Boni, and Rok Predin. Transitioning to independent work, Kašnik has since designed sets for drama, opera, and ballet, collaborating with celebrated artists like Edward Clug, Valentina Turcu, Pier Francesco Maestrini, Nataša Matjašec Rošker, Mateja Kokol, and Gaj Žmavc. Known for his contemporary, minimalist designs that balance functionality with striking aesthetics, he has established himself as a prominent figure in the field. In addition to his creative endeavours, he serves as the technical manager of Slovenia's largest drama theatre festival.

SUZANA RENGEO

Suzana Rengeo holds a degree in Garment Design and Modelling. She completed her secondary education at the Textile School in Murska Sobota, continued her studies at the two-year modelling school in Maribor, and graduated from the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Maribor. Her career includes roles at the Mura clothing factory in Murska Sobota, Nes Ptuj, and Clar Maribor, before joining the Slovenian National Theatre Maribor. She also runs her own clothing brand, Clothes With Style. Suzana designs costumes for opera and drama productions and occasionally works in film costume design.

ANA JANC

Ana Janc graduated from the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering in Ljubljana, specializing in Textile and Clothing Design, and continued her studies in Stage Design at the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film, and Television. In 2020, she earned a master's degree in Costume Design under the mentorship of Prof. Janja Korun. During her studies, she worked on theater productions featured at the Maribor Theatre Festival, including Children of the Sun, which toured festivals across Europe and won the Grand Prix for Best Performance at FIST in Belgrade. She also contributed to student films such as Otava, shortlisted for the 2021 Student Academy Awards and awarded the university's Prešeren Prize for Costume Design, and Nobody Said I Have to Love You, selected for Cinéfondation at Cannes. Since graduating, Ana has designed costumes for numerous notable productions, including Symposium and Emigrants at SNG Drama Ljubljana,

Orwell's Farm at SNG Maribor, Pasji sin at SNG Drama, and Antigone at SNG Nova Gorica. Her work has been featured in prestigious festivals, including the competitive program of the 57th Maribor Theatre Festival. As an assistant, she has collaborated with acclaimed costume designers such as Alan Hranitelj, Ana Savić Gecan, and Belinda Radulović.

MOJCA KOLAR

Mojca Kolar is a theatre producer, translator, and language consultant. She studied philosophy and translation at the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor. During her studies, she gained valuable experience as an assistant language consultant at the Slovenian National Theatre Maribor, later taking on independent roles in productions such as Tisti občutek padanja, Fant, dekle in gospod, Mica pri babici, Titanik, and Učene žene. Since 2013, she has served as a theatre producer for the Maribor Theatre Festival (Festival Borštnikovo srečanje), Slovenia's premier national theatre festival. In addition, she moderates discussions and organizes cultural events, with a focus on theatre.

ŠPELA LEŠNIK

Špela Lešnik holds a bachelor's degree in economics and began her career at the Slovenian National Theatre Maribor while still studying at the Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Maribor. After graduating in 2011, she worked in marketing before transitioning to the role of producer for the Maribor Theatre Festival. Since 2014, she has been a producer at SNG Drama, actively contributing to a range of Slovenian and international co-productions. She was recently promoted to the role of Drama Programme Manager.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE SCIENTISTS:

BENJAMIN VIRČ

Benjamin Virč is a distinguished musicologist, translator, theatre scholar, critic, and researcher. He studied music education and musicology at the University of Ljubljana, where he began his career as a columnist and critic specializing in opera and classical music. Since 2004, he has contributed essays, reviews, and articles to numerous publications, including the newspaper Večer. In 2007, he participated in the German Music Culture in Eastern Europe project and graduated summa cum laude, subsequently pursuing postgraduate studies in philosophy and visual culture. Currently, he is finalizing his doctoral dissertation in musicology at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. From 2009 to 2012, he collaborated with the Maribor Opera House as an editor, dramaturg, and translator, while also serving as the founding editor of the music magazine Glasna. His scholarly work includes publications in Musicological Annual and De musica disserenda, along with a chapter in the monograph History of Slovenian Literary Translation (2023). An accomplished translator, Virč has adapted numerous opera libretti into Slovenian, including Wagner's Das Rheingold (2017) and Sollima's Il libro della giungla (2023). He has also co-created innovative performances such as La bella Opera and Guernica Continuum.

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UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS) LINKED TO THE WORKSHOP

