

Roundtable on Theatre Financing

The roundtable, organized on 26th February 2019 by the International Theatre Institute Hungarian Centre, focused on highlighting the similarities and differences between the theatre systems in three similar-sized countries yet from very different corners of Europe: Estonia, Ireland and Hungary. Centralized or decentralized? Looked after or overlooked theatre? Two countries with two completely different subsidy systems. Venue: Mozsár Café, Budapest.

Moderator: Attila Szabó, acting director of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute

Participants:

Katre Väli, advisor at the Estonian Ministry of Culture, project leader to numerous theatre projects for the Estonian Theatre Agency. She graduated from theatre at Tartu University, the most important theatre university in Estonia and has an MA in cultural semiotics. She has been working in the Ministry for three years.

Joshua Edelman, senior Lecturer in Drama and Contemporary Performance at the Manchester Metropolitan University, his research focuses on the theatre as a social practice, particularly dialogue with the fields of politics and religion, co-founder of the IFTR performance religion and spirituality working group, co-author of the Problem of Theatrical Autonomy, co-editor of Performing Religion in Public and founding editor of the journal Performance, Religion and Spirituality, his articles appeared in numerous prestigious journals. Born in America, lived and worked in Manchester, did his PHD research on Ireland and Irish theatre.

Estonia – the theatre system in a nutshell and its challenges

The Estonian Theatre Agency is a partner institution with the Ministry that works with international projects, gathers theatre statistics, deals with the promotion of Estonian dramaturgy, organizes play competitions and deals with copyright issues. The Estonian theatres can apply for copyright in a central institution, not separately. Consequently, the Theatre Agency works as a best partner in the Ministry in the theatre field.

Estonia, a culture-loving nation, is among the top 5 culture consumers in the EU. With a population of 1.3 million (about one million Estonian-speaking, the rest of the population has Russian as mother tongue) it registers about 1.1 million theatre visits per year, according to the statistics of the Estonian Theatre Agency. With 3.5 million museum visits, this sphere is also booming, next to about 2 million concert visits and 4 million book copies sold.

The Ministry of Culture is the smallest ministry in Estonia. It consists of the Department of Arts, where we can find the performing art and theatre, the smallest part of the Ministry, with only one person employed – the speaker – Katre Väli working there. Cultural Heritage, which includes museums, heritage conservation, libraries and folk culture, Cultural Diversity, dealing with all the aspects of integration in different programmes for ethnic groups living in Estonia and Sports are also a part of the Ministry of Culture.

Theatre is one of the best funded fields of art next to the music sector and receives about 15% of the budget of the whole Ministry. That is due to the fact that Estonia has a lot of state-supported big theatre houses and they pay for the wages of all the cultural workers, and it has been the aim of Ministry to raise the minimum wages of all these workers in the field. Salaries have been risen 4 years ago from an average of 700 euros to 1300 euros, which is a very substantial raise. The cultural minister has a social democratic background, so it was ranked highly among their policies. Estonia was facing new elections in March 2019. In the country there is also a very strong rise of the conservative party with very different understanding of the cultural system in Estonia.

Estonia has one public institution, the National Opera, which is funded by the government directly, so it is working in a completely different system, similar to the National Public Broadcasting and a handful of other state institutions. The Network of seven 'Foundations', which are state-funded institutions, 3 in the capital, 4 outside Tallinn, 1 is for Russian speaking theatre, 1 for the children, one is a big drama theatre, and – in the second largest town, Tartu – there is also a three-genre theatre besides the National Opera which also programmes operettas and ballet shows. So, the network coverage is very good in terms of regional accessibility that is an important notion in Estonia.

Tallinn has 400 thousand inhabitants, Tartu 100 thousand, the other towns are at about 30 thousand and even less, so to have seven venues is both a challenge for the theatre and the state supporting system. There are only 2 municipal theatres, one in Tallinn, the capital, and one on the largest island, on the island Saaremaa, to give an opportunity of the people living on the island to also have access to theatre. And Estonia also has a booming field of different private institutions, repertoire theatres, touring companies, or cultural centres, which only accept different performances there. Some of them are internationally very active, some of them focus on children's theatre. What Estonia doesn't really have is circus, which is a very small sector with no proper facility. They have some professionals trained in Finland and a few children's acrobatic schools.

Priorities and principles

Firstly, aiming for various target groups is important, the foundations' in different towns try to have at least one youth performance on their repertory, one classical performance, something for a more alternative taste and one for the older generation also. They have about 10 performances per year, one performance for each target group. Regional accessibility is another priority. Estonia also has a specific programme called "Theatre to the countryside", due to support smaller private companies, so that they would even go to the even smaller places to give performances.

Also, it has a subsection, called "Children to the theatre", giving support to schools who want to organize trips e.g. to the capital to visit some performances or children's theatres go to a school, or smaller places. Internationalisation is important. They have a specific program for supporting international theatre festivals in Estonia, to enhance cooperation with other countries. The Estonian dramaturgy is also a priority but a difficult field to promote, Estonia is not well-known in dramaturgy, they have nothing to put against to English or Swedish dramaturgy, which are very popular, but they try to achieve to have Estonian plays staged at least in Estonia. They organize play competitions and educate their playwrights.

When the Ministry gathers for deciding on the founding, they use several criteria. They look at the *artistic level*, which is a very difficult subject to measure. There are people from the Ministry and also experts. Of course, there is always a heated debate about the results. The committee also considers the *regional coverage*, how much the theatre goes outside their house, how *influential* they are in the theatre field,

how *realistic* their budget plans are, and whether they do any additional programmes (youth programmes, educational programmes, cooperation with other theatres).

The Financing System

A base support is given by the ministry each year based on theatres' repertory plans, budget plans and estimated audience numbers, together with a development plan detailing the institution's aims. Subsidy terms are renewed every four years.

Additionally there is also a Cultural Endowment, which works similarly to an arts council in most of the countries. This body gives out subsidies 4 times a year, a specific sector of which is responsible for theatre, with a budget of about 1.8 million euros a year. Their main aim is to support separate theatre projects, project-based performances, actors' self-education abroad and some other educational programmes. In Estonia the system is very balanced, you can get base support from the government, and if you are a "lonely doer" you can still have the chance to get a fund. What is specific in Estonia is that the local government, the municipalities don't really give much funds, so it is a very state-based financing for the theatre sector.

Municipalities do support smaller events or amateur projects which take place in their region, but it isn't really a very specific supporting system. Another small programme which comes from the gambling tax money (also the cultural endowment money comes from the alcohol and gambling taxes, so all culture is based on the bad habits of some people). This supports very regional events for small children or youth. Also, EU funds and other coproduction options can be available. In the base foundations, they give full support for all their maintenance costs and all the wages, which means about 1300 workers that are state workers in this sense. This includes both the ballet group and orchestras.

Problems and numbers

The Estonian theatre system is very state-centred, as opposed to places where municipalities subsidise the theatres. The municipalities mostly support their amateur groups and school theatre and cultural houses.

Not every theatre gives the statistics for their theatre as not all get the subsidy, but for the subsidized theatre institutions it is compulsory to give statistics. According to these numbers, there has been a huge growth in the number of performances and premieres (204 a year), the theatre visits (1.2 million in 2017/from 1 million in 2011), the average ticket cost is 11 euros (without taxes), you can get an opera ticket mostly for 40 euros, the average ticket would be 16-17 euros. The whole ticket revenue per year is about 11 million.

2017 was a very specific year because Estonia had huge investments in 4 of the state theatres. Besides the statistics, they do an additional survey to get information about their audience, a state-wide cultural consumption survey, where people are called and asked different questions, e.g. how often do they go to theatre, cinema, why and how accessible all that is. They also conduct different research projects in the creative management field, because most of the private theatre makers can be seen as part of that sector and the state monitors how they are and how much revenue they get. They also have from recent years one survey about the age of the audience and who makes up this 1 million theatre visits, but that survey is not so regular. From the more specific questionnaire, there was one question on the reason of going to theatre with the frequent answer: "somebody asked me along".

Statistics available at statistika.teater.ee.

Changes to the legislation

In Estonia there is a specific law regulating the sector, called Performing Arts Institutions Act, as opposed to music and film, which do not. Some of the theatre people strongly believe that that's why theatre is so well funded. Some questions are being changed constantly, the most difficult questions are the problems with having equality between the private sector and the foundations, which are already set, and they get a larger sum.

It is harder and harder to say what is the definition of a performing arts institution (opera, one-man show, it should all fit). Working relations are difficult to define as well (who is a theatre worker, how wide and flexible this can be), also on the committee who decides on the budget and how long-term should budget periods be, the field would like them to be longer. Also, setting the connection between the Ministry of Culture Budget and the Cultural Endowment in order to omit double financing. And, how to be flexible in a very changing field. Also, the endless problem, that money is never enough.

Ireland and theatre financing through the years

Ireland is a small country, half of the population of Hungary, with a tension of Dublin, as the centre and capital of Ireland and the rest of the country. Its cultural expenses cover 0,2% of the GDP. As a comparison, this is 1,0% in Estonia and 0,8% in Hungary. Ireland is considered a cultural mecca of Europe, still it is very meagrely founded, the Irish artists often go abroad and become famous outside the country, Ireland having culture at their top of the export list.

There is a state body dealing with the fund, the Art's Council Support State body, it is set up by law, though it does have some legal autonomy (the minister cannot tell them what to do). The council funds all Irish theatre except of amateur work and the very-very few commercial companies that exist. In the last decades all theatre in the country used to depend on Arts Council for support, even those few that could manage to get say 30 % of their income from the box office. As the amount of money they give out is very low, the subsidized work is being highly contested. In the last decade, since the financial crash, quite a few companies have been basically shut down by the council by having their funding withdrawn. There has been a severe dip after the economic crash in 2008, of which the country, frankly, still hasn't recovered from. As early as 1996 the whole arts council founding was less than 30 million euros a year.

In the 'bad old years' – the 1980's – arts founding was completely disorganized. Artists often went into the office of a rich man, telling a sad story, asking for some money and getting some pulled out of a drawer. The 1990's neoliberal policy aimed to change the situations and Ireland started booming, had well-educated people, low taxes, so from the poorest country it became one of the richest countries in Europe. Culture did have a role in that, especially as a munition for foreign policy. A formal plan was made, with maps, productions, companies, but the plan was not made real.

However, later, theatre companies started to receive a grant with applications, renewed them, regularly founded applications, renewed them every 3 years, but there was never enough money, especially for the non-Dublin companies, and the founding was often based on personal connections.

No criteria

When it comes to founding and the question of excellence, there was no clear criteria, just a model, that is not so meaningful and hard to understand, with the subsidies having no real reasoning in the sense of artistic level. There were some vague terms like excellence, for instance, but these criteria were simply not clear. The opacity of the criteria seemed to serve everybody's interest. The sector was weary to ask for

transparency because of the fear that the criteria could be imposed on them by the Arts Council, which they would then have to follow. The funding system was based on relationships and established norms, and that was able to persist under the veneer of a neo-liberal language that the state was learning through its dealings with the EU and the multinationals.

The theatre system in Ireland

The Irish system is particular in the sense that theatre companies are all private, not run by the state, even the state theatre companies, only 4 have their own buildings, all actors are hired on project basis, of course some have their favourites, only the artistic director is hired, one associate and a part-time administrator. If a company lose their grant, they simply go bankrupt, as all the big companies have no means of transitioning from one leader to the next, though there are official boards, usually incorporate bodies, the 4-5 big companies, the national theatre has a bit more structure but those are the exceptions.

There is a separation between theatre companies and their venues, as those venues are usually publicly owned, often founded by a town or country or local authority, sometimes with some support from the local government, while the venues have a larger numbers of staff, technicians, programmers and they would host a variety of works, stand-up comedy, pop music, folk music, etc. In recent years some have their own production but the more common is that the theatre company finds a venue to host their production. However, you can get support from the venue, free rehearsal space, technical help, office resources, marketing, etc. As the venues become more important there is a decentralisation of arts culture in Ireland, there are venues and networks of venues working together even in less populated areas supporter by the government, businesses or local donors, they can facilitate work, even if the Arts Council doesn't want it to happen.

Replacing state founding

New partnerships start to emerge especially as the Arts Council started to drop. With tourist projects, educational projects, social welfare agencies, schools, international co-producers and international festivals, starting to fill that gap that the Arts Council is leaving behind. It is now easier to escape the pull of the Council and it will be even easier in the future. Sociologically speaking the problem with theatre is that it is so very social, it involves a lot of people and those people need to get paid. Consequently, theatre has a very hard time in serving pure artistic aims, it is always bound up in social relationships, politics, economics and other cultural-social patterns.

The solution sometimes is for not getting funds is that people don't get paid, funny, but it is sadly what often happens in Ireland. So companies and arts groups hustle. There is a great tradition of this hustle in the Irish arts, not only theatre. This wider, improvised network of support – family, friends, corporate businesses, little loopholes in the law – probably support the arts far more than the actual arts council. Some actors claimed to be unemployed collect social welfare as being more generous than getting an actor's salary.

One of the other things is making the money from television voiceovers and film work, so they can do the work they love for peanuts. Some companies tailor their programming to serve the educational community development needs, in order to access different streams of funding: for instance there is a company that specifically works on the border with Northern Ireland for peace building work. Or Ireland's only Shakespeare company only does works that are on the national curriculum, to guarantee themselves five full houses a week of school kids. Site specific companies would work with heritage sites to bring tourists

into lesser known but interesting building and thus get a free venue out of it. There was this brilliantly naughty scheme in the eighties, which tells you something about the thinking of Irish theatre makers, where most Irish theatre companies registered themselves as 'job training schemes', and all of their performers were technically apprentices. And the government had a scheme there: if you brought in apprentices, the government would pay their salaries plus a little bit extra for administration. Before it got shut down – since the scheme was never designed for this purpose – it led to the production of very nice shows with a big cast, since the more the apprentices, the more overhead you would get to pay for everything else. Now that none of that can happen playwrights write plays for one or two actors.

When the criteria are opaque it is not like there are some secret criteria that nobody would tell, actually they don't have any. They do the best they can. They talk about who they know. They feel very bound by their relationships, tradition, precedents. They have so little money and there is so much political pressure that they can't push too much one way or the other. The system is very hard to change, as it is based on connections. The Council is using their money not only in the means of founding but in the means of valorisation, of saying "Good job" "Bad job". Using small cuts as transmitting a symbolic message to "Shape up!" but the theatre companies don't really respond to these cuts according to the statistics.

Statistics

In Ireland there are no regular, real statistics on theatre, but according to some numbers there are more female viewers and the tickets are around 10-15 euros. The less educated have a kind of class-consciousness and think that theatre is not a place they are welcome. Some productions opt for more accessible topics to reach a broader social spectrum, for instance having folk music, Irish dance, circus, festivals etc. But audiences remain opaque compared to other countries. The picture from 2010, mostly true for today, is that there are five big subsidized theatres, "the big five", with one being the National Theatre, getting the biggest subsidy. Also, there are the major regionals and 16 independent companies in Dublin. There are some problems with distance and regional accessibility and isolation.