



*"Culture is a driver and enabler of sustainable development and essential for achieving the 2030 Agenda as it contributes to human and socio-economic development, quality education, social inclusion, sustainable cities, environmental sustainability and peaceful societies."*

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2015

As a theater director and CEO of The Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth (FEP), a manifestation with a long tradition held every August in Bačka Palanka (Serbia), I always posed a question: What does ecological theater mean, and what can it become? What it means to be sustainable, and how can art become more sustainable?

In my ecological mission, I face different challenges and risks. We can say that Serbia has no systemic solutions or proposals for cultural institutions and organizations to be more sustainable. At the same time, we can say that we already have older but progressive ideas and forms. Back in the 90s, these ideas highlighted the meaning and perspective of ecology and sustainability and supported new and brave attempts of young artists to think in the way of ecology.

Today these people are advocates for changing the artistic landscape in a sustainable manner. Even though we do not have programs or enough understanding and support from the government regarding this topic, we have individuals who are making sustainable art in Serbia very visible and important.

In this article, I will present The Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth and a few positive examples of nature and theater coexistence in Serbia.

Looking at **The Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth**, from today's perspective when ecology is the main global topic, we can tell that it didn't happen because it was “trendy” or because of an abundance of funds. It happened because it was truly needed.

The war, hyperinflation, and substantial material loss in ex-Yugoslavia at that time affected people's self-respect and created an atmosphere of fear, weakness, and jeopardy. Two teachers – Ljubica Kovačević and Nada Marinković – understood the needs of children who lived in these surroundings and decided to do something about it. They founded the eco-conscious kindergarten "**Različak**"<sup>1</sup> in Bačka Palanka, Serbia. The Festival was first introduced as an extended kindergarten activity in 1995, on Različak's first anniversary.



*The Founders of The Festival of Ecological Theater for Children and Youth: Ljubica Kovačević, Ruža Helač, Ljubivoje Ršumović, Nada Marinković and Božidar Mandić, 1994, Bačka Palanka, Serbia  
(Photo: Archive)*

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<sup>1</sup>The name “Različak” comes from a wildflower, Brown knapweed. Its literal translation in Serbian is *someone different*. In Serbian cultural heritage, the flower symbolizes bread and survival.

“Različak’s” work methodology was based on an experimental pedagogical approach already used in several other kindergartens abroad. However, their final vision and work method mainly were influenced by "**Sunčani salaš**"<sup>2</sup> and "**Porodica bistrih potoka**",<sup>3</sup> families that nurtured alternative ways of living and child raising.

The encounters with these communes built the foundation for the eco-conscious kindergarten "Različak" and The Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth. The Kindergarten’s main goal was to practice sustainability, primarily in relations between children, parents, and teachers.



*Children learning about the time needed for waste to decompose in the soil, Različak kindergarten, 1996, Bačka Palanka, Serbia  
(Photo: Archive)*

*"I remember our first meetings, where we talked about founding and everyone was exchanging the recipes from basic groceries that were available to us. Back then, all of us who were inexperienced, learned to bake bread."*

Nada Marinković, co-founder of Različak kindergarten

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<sup>2</sup> **Sunčani salaš** (Sunny ranch) was a place where children lived by the standards of anthropopsychic, and were raised by a pedagogue with Waldorf education.

<sup>3</sup> **Porodica bistrih potoka** (Clear water family) is an eco-artistic commune at the bottom of *Rudnik* mountain in the Brezovica village (Serbia). The commune was founded in 1977 by a writer, fine artist and theater director, Božidar Mandić. This commune is one of the pioneers of returning to nature. Its art is alternative, and their way of living is open and committed to survival. The family nurtures elements of soul and humanity.

The people behind Različak bravely decided to respect and appreciate the diversity of each child and parent, and kindergarten activities became our daily bread. The idea of family life in kindergarten meant that it was open to children of all ages. Parents participated in activities such as organizing events, celebrating holidays, practicing joint care of animals, and caring for plants and orchards. They would knead the bread together, prepare and serve snacks and maintain the surroundings keeping it safe and clean. However, it was quickly realized that there were more children than *Različak* could accommodate and even more families who, due to poverty and understandable circumstances, did not have the means to provide for their child to attend kindergarten. After the arrival of the refugee population from war-torn areas, that number became much higher. In 1995, the Festival of Ecological Theater for Children and Youth was born out of the need to have a cultural and ecological program available to everyone in our city.

*" We believed that as a result of exploration of our deepest emotion, art can help children develop a sense of belonging in nature and a notion of responsibility to protect nature."*

Ljubica Kovačević, co-founder of Različak kindergarten



*The 1st Festival of Ecological Theater for Children and Youth, 1995, Bačka Palanka, Serbia  
(Photo: Archive)*

The Festival was designed as a basis for interpreting ecological sustainability through theater. The founders wanted The Festival to present creative performances for children inspired by ecological practices tending to children's needs so that, as they grow, The Festival and its environmental and sustainable mindset become a significant part of children's lives.

*“Today and here, the ecology of the child's spirit should be, above all, an ecology of PEACE. The ecology of the child's spirit is not an ideology; it is not politics, religion, or individual consciousness. The problems of the child's environment are also political. Dealing with it does not necessarily mean politicizing the problems of growing up. What does UNICEF's discovery from 1993 that in the former Yugoslavia, the very concept of childhood has been called into question mean today for understanding the diversity of the child's spirit? In light of the concept of a healthy child's spirit, shouldn't we ask ourselves: Does a child exist in Serbia? That question was most radically posed by Dostoyevsky,*

*connecting the world's salvation with the tears of one child. How many children's tears should be shed, and how many children's lives should be lost to trigger our consciences and responsibilities to start thinking differently about ourselves and the world? At this Festival, Različak kindergarten allowed us to witness and test the meaning of different initiatives, fellowship and human encounters at the social level in the time of evil, the time of death and the destruction of the child's world. Različak marked the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of its existence in the best possible way. By founding the Festival as a kind of artistic movement, it expanded its mission in Bačka Palanka and planet Earth!"*

prof. Dr. Isidor Graorac

on the occasion of the discussion "Ecology of the Spirit and the Destruction of the Child's World"

as part of the 1st Festival of Ecological Theater for Children in 1995



*The 28th Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth, 2022, Bačka Palanka, Serbia  
(Photo: Jovana Semiz)*

Today, 29 years later, some new generations gather every August guided by the same mission. The Festival hosts performances from all over the world based on ecology, the mental health of children and youth, rights of children and youth, treatment of others and different ones. Performances that explore various theatrical forms such as interactive theater, participatory, hybrid, immersive, ambient, digital... Using modern technologies, object theater, and sustainable materials, they are primarily performed outdoors. Entrance to the festival is not paid with money but with recyclable materials. The bicycle is promoted as an ecological means of transport. People and organizations exploring ways of the ecological approach in the theater process and working towards green transformation in the theater are welcome at the Festival. In a city without a theater, for 29 years, The Festival has been the only organization bringing theater and culture closer to the young people of Bačka Palanka, encouraging creativity and love for art. It includes many young people and

children in its activities, not only from Bačka Palanka and surrounding places but also the region.

It became a child's need.



*28th Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth, 2022, Bačka Palanka, Serbia  
(Photo: Jovana Semiz)*

But now, when **sustainability is a global topic**, unfortunately, it brings more quantity but less quality. In the last couple of years, we have been facing the rise of artistic interest in ecology. We attribute it to global funds, who determine the artistic topics. Artists are pushed to sustainability topics even if that is not coming from their personal needs. Because of a lack of information and education about sustainable development in theater, the vast majority use the topic very broadly. Not understanding the greatness, whole meaning, and difficulty of green deliberation.

*"For several years, I was the curator of The Festival of Ecological Theater for Children and Youth (2018-2021) and even if some plays dealt with ecological topics, as a rule, it was always done in a didactic and, very often, patronizing manner. I think that is precisely where the problem lies in approaching such topics. Of course, theater is a space for reflection and awareness of various issues and phenomena, but the way we deal with it as authors, that is, how we address our audience, determines the quality of what we do. Underestimating our audience by lecturing them on specific topics doesn't open up the space for the two-way communication that should be inherent in theater. Thus we lose both the audience and the opportunity to get people thinking about things that may not have been their focus until then. In addition, in approaching any topic, including environmental issues, it is essential to be honest and fair, first of all, with ourselves. The voices and perspectives we choose to tell some stories also talk about how we, as authors,*

*position ourselves in relation to certain phenomena we question through our artistic work and how much we are invited to talk about it."*

Tijana Grumić, playwright



*28th Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth, 2022, Bačka Palanka, Serbia  
(Photo: Jovana Semiz)*

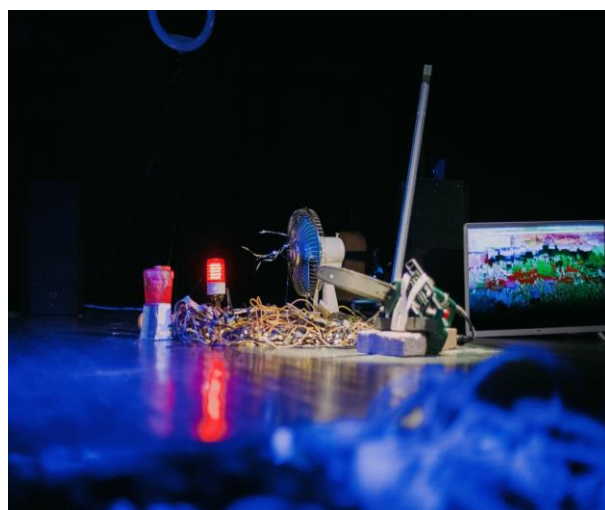
We realize that we need to inspire our surroundings about sustainable theater by going back to our roots and reasons for inventing The Festival of Ecological theater for Children and Youth. **Understanding ecology as the ecology of the spirit and ecology of peace** is a prerequisite for higher quality, broader and more serious creation. This understanding would position sustainability and ecology above established narratives of recycling, garbage collection and dirty cities. This situation imposes the need to inspire and activate artists to think about ecology not only as a topic but also as means of production. However, despite the globally degrading image of ecological theater, we can boast of positive, for now still sketches of individuals but important milestones in the field of environmental creativity in Serbia.





*Theater performance "Do Birds Have The Capacity for Fun" at  
The 28th Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth in 2022  
(Photo: Jovana Semiz)*

When discussing **positive practices in Serbia** created by young, thoughtful and environmentally conscious artists, we must mention the play **"Do Birds Have The Capacity for Fun"** by Tijana Grumić, directed by Nikola Isaković at the Bitez Theater in Belgrade, Serbia. This play, apart from thematically dealing with the issue of ecology, puts only old discarded household appliances on the stage. These robotized household appliances are warm and live characters that create an apocalyptic atmosphere not with their feelings but with their origin. By choosing to tell the story without actors on stage but only with the help of these unique robots, the authors manage to inextricably link the topic to the creation process of this performance through how it expresses itself.



*Theater performance "Do Birds Have The Capacity for Fun"  
at The 28th Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth, 2022, Bačka Palanka, Serbia  
(Photo: Jovana Semiz)*

*"When we do independent and alternative theater productions, we are forced to make shows with what is available, so we use minimalism, recycling, second-hand shopping, etc. When these habits are moved to institutions and used consciously for ecological purposes, not for financial reasons, green production is obtained, and it is not only green in the topic anymore but also in the form.*

*Total design of this performance, done by Jovana Matić and Ema Pavlović, was conceived to use recycled materials and objects that other people have already discarded and that no longer have any other purpose. Given that the show heavily depends on electro-mechanics (which Stevan Golubović is in charge of), we made a deal with the company E-reciklaža to take care of the disposal of electronic waste. They also gave us a crash course on how our materials will one day be recycled."*

Nikola Isaković, theater director



*Theater performance "The Prehistoric Girl" in the National Theatre in Zrenjanin (Serbia), 2022  
(Photo: Pavle Taboroši)*

Most recently, I worked on a puppet show, **"The Prehistoric Girl"**, based on the novel of the same name by Serbian poet Desanka Maksimović, in the National Theater in Zrenjanin, Serbia. As a director of the show, with my team<sup>4</sup> I tried to make the entire work process such that it leaves as few negative consequences as possible on planet Earth. That's why we

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<sup>4</sup> The total design of the show was done by Irina Somborac and the associate for earth architecture was Dragana Kojičić.

looked for the necessary materials mostly in forests, gardens and beaches, not shops and markets. So, for example, the puppets were made from old egg cartons that the entire team of the show collected before and during the process. These cartons were then painted with natural, hand-squeezed pigments from the soil found in various parts of Serbia. Pine cones were used for women's hair, straw and rope were used for Shaman's beard, and for animals' legs we picked branches from various forests and gardens. Finally, for the jute cave of the main protagonist, Gava, where she draws with mud, we spent months examining the proper density, drying speed and the entire preparation process. Water also appears on stage – typical yellow Zrenjanin water – with which we wanted to draw attention to the city's long-standing problem with drinking water. The wooden moving structures representing the lizard (planet Earth) are filled with actual soil that all the other characters walk on. Working with natural materials, we realized that, over time, plastic became closer to us, easier and more accessible, because soil often caused problems, from allergies to dry skin. We have distanced ourselves from nature so much that we've become allergic to it. Therefore, it turns out that to work with ecological materials, you need to have a team ready to overcome these rooted problems, as well as the support of the theater's technical department, whose job is to maintain and nurture these materials regularly.



*Theater performance "The Prehistoric Girl" in the National Theatre in Zrenjanin, Serbia, 2022  
(Photo: Pavle Taboroši)*

Sustainable art can be defined as creativity to find **new ways to make art that can benefit the environment, whether that is by using accessible and natural materials or by inspiring social awareness on pressing issues.** However, when we discuss an ecologically aware work process, it is not enough to only talk about materials, topics and advocacy. It is necessary to talk about relationships between people in the process, time, and the way of communication; in other words, about **the mental health of the working process.**

A panel discussion **Role of theater for children and youth in green thinking** was held at the recently held showcase “**Green philosophy in practice**” organized by the **Green Art Incubator (GAI)**<sup>5</sup> from Belgrade, Serbia. The event was organized in cooperation with Assitej Serbia. The three participants, Tijana Grumić (playwright, based in Serbia), Julia Dina Hesse (dramaturg, director and scholar in TYA, based in Germany) and Emilie Robert (general manager of the Théâtre Massalia in Marseille), in addition to observations about the importance of early education, the motivation of artists to be environmentally conscious, as well as positive examples from their work, pointed out the fact that sustainability in the art should also include **the sustainability of ourselves**.

In the world of hyperproduction, chasing results, awards, and monetary and other benefits, the most important aspect of sustainability and ecology of the spirit is precisely mental health. The physical and psychological well being of the entire team should be obtained with mutual respect and not with placing the product as the only and ultimate success. Putting time in favor and not against the author.

Sustainability in its various aspects will be an essential part of the **Next Generation Residency** that will be organized by Assitej Serbia and the regional platform **From The First Step**<sup>6</sup>. The Next Generation Residency will be the prologue of **Assitej Artistic Gathering** in November of 2023 in Belgrade and Novi Sad, Serbia.

Can artists make a difference in the fight against climate change and environmental degradation? Can artists make a working environment healthier? Working in harmony with the natural world and other people, **15 young artists from all over the world** will search for new ideas, practices and methods of artwork under the essential need for an ecology of peace.

Taking into account the experiences of previous Assitej Artistic Gatherings, and following the idea that artists need an open space and free time to create in peace and without pressure, the next generation residency in Serbia will take place 6 days before the start of the Assitej Artistic Gathering, on the slopes of the Fruška Gora mountain, far away from city distractions. AAG will officially open on November 20, 2023, on the **International Day of Children's Rights**, under the slogan "**Turning point**".

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<sup>5</sup> **Green Art Incubator**, the association from Belgrade, Serbia, is focused through its activities on supporting and empowering organizations and initiatives in the direction of green transformation in the field of arts and culture. Green Art Incubator also made the unique **green manuals** for theater, film and visual arts. Through its various activities, Green Art Incubator advocates for the possibility of an eco-turn of art and cultural institutions and organizations as powerful spaces for *thinking about the climate crisis*.

<sup>6</sup> The Regional Platform **Od malih nog(u)** (From The First Step) is an organization dedicated to the development and affirmation of TYA in the Balkans region.

Let this residency also be a turning point for new artistic practices in the field of creativity for children and young people.

Hopefully, new ideas about ecological theater will develop and inspire new generations of motivators who will understand and spread the theme of sustainability as well as the need for tolerance, equality, solidarity, justice, health, hope, respect and **love for nature, oneself and others.**



*28th Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth, 2022, Bačka Palanka, Serbia  
(Photo: Jovana Semiz)*

**Sonja Petrović** is the theatre director and CEO of The Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth. She is one of the founders of the Regional platform for the development and affirmation of TYA "From the First Step". From 2022 she is a member of the executive board of Assitej Serbia and committed to the Next generation network through working in the networks steering group. Her performances are awarded at various local and regional festivals. She is a Ph.D. student of art.



*(Photo: Tanja Drobnjak)*