



Children who grow up in theater know that art is not just an individual whim or an obscure or frivolous segment of reality, they know that art is not separate from life. Such children are empowered to change reality, because they know the secret which is kept from other children - in the imagination, on stage, in the space of freedom: "Everything is allowed."

*Mina Petrić dramaturge on *Bebidron*¹ - dance performance for Babies by choreographer Željka Jakovljević*

Dance for young audiences is a constantly changing, vibrating field that offers the possibility of questioning, examining, researching, and problematizing various social issues. Contemporary dance gives us (the artists) the possibility to constantly develop, changing our point of view on issues like accessibility, togetherness, equality, freedom, sharing space and responsibility, inclusion and full participation in our practices.

In a month in which Assitej Serbia honors its birthday (7th of April) and later the International Day of Dance is celebrated (29th of April), it is the right moment to think and write about dance for children and young audiences in Serbia. Although it has existed for decades, dance as an independent field, as an art separated from the theater, present in the performing arts for children and young people is still understood as new, young, developing, attractive, but often too abstract- just like a teenager, misunderstood young rebel, still emerging and unestablished. At least that's how the performing arts institutions in my environment still understand it. Given that this year at AAG in Novi Sad and Belgrade we are dedicating ourselves to hear the voices of young creators as much as young audiences, here is an opportunity to devote some time to this young art, which is still looking for its place in theater institutions throughout the Balkan region. Here is a

¹ <https://offns.rs/offstage/pozorisni-festivali/crtice-sa-pokretnice/>

short overview on dance for children and young people in Serbia and how it developed in the last two decades.



Dance Museum/ V. Ilioska, K. Poposki, E. Risteska/ mentor Dalija Aćin Thelander, Generator platform, performed by M. Milić, M. Pisić, M. Todorović, J. Rakić/ photo Luka Strika

Among others coreographers from the independent scene in Serbia, whose practice included working for children and with children and young people so far are Nela Antonović, Boris Čakširan, Sanja Krsmanović Tasić, Isidora Stanišić, Dalija Aćin Theleander, Dušan Murić, Saša Asentić, Jovana Rakić, Marko Milić, Milica Pisić, Milena Todorović, Željka Jakovljević.



photo by J. Milenković from the project Little Bali 2022/authors J. Rakić, M. Milić, M. Todorović

Addressing children and respecting their needs and interests, and offering certain positive patterns of behavior but also problematizing the reality in which these children live, directly influence the formation of their personality and critical thinking, thereby increasing the chances that they will grow into responsible citizens who will dare to create a better society.

Socially aware and responsible theater for children and young people, which at the same time has high professional standards, is the only model that interests me personally.

Anja Suša, theater director and artistic director and manager of Little Theatre Duško Radović, Belgrade (2002-2010)

During her management of Little Theatre, Anja Suša defined scene space as a place for "free creation"² which was, for the first time, open to young performing artists of all professions (directors, actors, designers, set designers, costume designers, composers, dancers, choreographers...) and gave a chance (which was unthinkable a few years earlier) to do their first performances exactly the way they want, uncompromisingly and bravely. This was followed by very high-quality cooperation with the most important representatives of the dance scene not only in Belgrade and Serbia, but also in the region.

In that period Little Theater Duško Radović was the place where people coming from the independent performing arts scene in Belgrade were supported to work in the institution for the first time. Thus choreographers such as Dušan Murić, Boris Čakširan and Dalija Aćin started their work for young audience. Anja Suša established an experimental, genuine and progressive way of work in Little Theater which in some way continued after her work as director was done.

Dušan Murić continued his work mostly through workshops and creation processes with children and young people as co authors and performers, collaborating with theater director Petar Pejaković.

Dalija Aćin Thelander developed her own internationally acknowledged artistic practice for children combining participatory dance performance and installation art and continued her collaboration with Little Theater even after both she and Anja moved to Sweden. Her work still is dedicated to participation, inclusion and sensory experience. The audience is invited to engage in a playful and open-ended experience that does not present concrete goals but rather encourages them to explore and discover a new form of being-in-the-world.³

² <http://www.malopozoriste.co.rs/o-nama>

³ <https://www.dalijaacinthelander.com/statement>



Upside Down/ participatory dance performance by Dalija Aćin Thelander, Little Theater Duško Radović, Blgrade 2016/
photo private archive

Fundamental for my motivation to create for the youngest audience is the perception of the child as equal to an adult, worthy of encountering arts in early years. Inspired by the notion of relevance of child experience for our understanding of human condition, my motivation is rooted in the boundless curiosity in unfolding the exploration together with a child, seeing a child as a partner in learning as well as in generating an understanding of meaning and value of artistic experience. My motivation resides in the recognition of the urgency of challenging the perspective of performing arts for the youngest audience within a general artistic and cultural context. I believe that performances for the youngest audience should propose a valuable experience for both child and adult. They should resist the instrumentalisation imposed by traditional ideas of the educational role of theatre for children, decline theatrical conventions, oculoctrism and patriarchal dominance, and deny the concept of ultimate knowledge of the right way of experiencing the world.

Dalija Aćin Thelander, choreographer

Boris Čakširan within ERGstatus dance theater dedicated his practice to collaborating with young people with and without disabilities. Together with Marko Pejović initiated the project Body Frame that started as a search for an answer to the question of whether young people with disabilities can be equal participants in artistic and creative processes. With

that goal, the Group "Let's go..."⁴ wanted to encourage dancers, choreographers and creators with and without disabilities. The initiative continued through various projects that encouraged the cooperation of more marginalized groups (persons with disabilities, veterans of the 1991-1999 wars, members of the LGBT population), from 2008 till 2015. and gathered a number of dancers and future choreographers in programs like workshops, creation of dance performances and film making.



Erg Status archive; U potrazi za čapljinim perjem

During the end of 1990 and early 2000. inclusive dance and performing arts projects and programs for young audiences involving young people with and without disabilities developed and finally became Per.Art organization in Novi Sad. Per.Art⁵ is an organization that has been active in the field of performing arts and inclusion in culture for more than two decades. The organization brings together young people with intellectual disabilities, their parents and family members, professional artists from the field of theater, dance and visual arts, special education teachers, other experts and volunteers.

Seeing the theater as a place where the audience does not have a passive position is the key point of creating the Art and Inclusion program. This is how an inclusive artistic group was formed, which for more than two decades has been realizing theatrical performances and exhibitions that are presented to the public in leading cultural institutions in Novi Sad, as well as in art centers and festivals in the country and abroad. Per.Art carries out its activities through the programs *Art and Inclusion*, a program for creativity and induction of young people with intellectual disabilities, and *Contemporary Dance*, a program of research-artistic dance projects for the development of the contemporary dance and performance scene in Serbia, as well as for international networking. Over the years, with their creativity, hard work and presence on the national and international scene, the members of the organization (artistic director Saša Asentić with collaborators such as Olivera

⁴ <https://hajdeda.org.rs/programi/okvir-tela/>

⁵ <https://portalinvalidnosti.net/2020/10/per-art-stvaranje-zajednicke-istorije/>

Kovačević Crnjanski, Natalija Vladislavljević, Dalibor Šandor, Jelena Stefanoska, Frosina Dimovska, Nataša Murge Savić, Dunja Crnjanski and others) have raised the importance of this organization on an international level, so it represents a positive example of artistic practice and inclusion around the world.



PerArt, Giselle 2022/Jelena Stefanoska/photo by Aleksandra Marković

Another important institution in which some of works of Isidora Stanišić and Dalija Aćin Theleander were shown was Bitef Theater. Also Bitef Festival with its side program Bitef Poliphony, curated by a team of artists and pedagogues, lead by Ljubica Beljanski Ristić was the place to experience dance for young audience.

In the last few years there are artists who became more focused and dedicated to dance for young audiences. They developed their practices while working as part of organizations Station - service for contemporary dance and Praktikabl- platform for contemporary art and culture (Pokretnica collective)

STATION- SERVICE FOR CONTEMPORARY DANCE is an organization founded by all relevant actors of the contemporary dance scene in 2006. with the aim of strengthening, structuring, and making the contemporary dance scene in Serbia visible and recognizable at the local and international level and establish high professional criteria. Station programs were conceived on the basis of a strategic and multi-year plan for the development of the domestic dance scene. From 2019 The station has the status of a representative association in the field of multimedia and digital art. It is a part of several international networks. Since 2008, STANICA has been organizing the KONDENZ Festival of contemporary dance and contemporary performing arts.



Under the Half of a Drop by J. Rakić, M.Milić, M. Pisić and M. Todorović 2021/ photo Luka Strika

GENERATOR was a multi-year collaborative platform dedicated to research and development of new contemporary dance practices for children and young audiences. It was initiated by Dalija Aćin Theleander and Marijana Cvetković in 2013, and gathered related organizations and artists from Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. Through the work of the platform, a number of educational programs, artistic productions, and experiments were created, on which the future of dance creativity for children in this part of Europe is based. The platform focused its activities on activities involving children and young people, education experts, dance pedagogues and artists, all in order to develop a young, new audience for dance. The Generator encouraged the development of innovative art forms of critical review and theoretical reflection of artistic content for children and innovation in art education for young audiences. This initiative contributed to international visibility and strengthening the role of our artists in the international context.

Thanks to the *GENERATOR* initiative, artists like Milica Pisić, Milena Todorović, Marko Milić and Jovana Rakić started their practice for young audience and realized a number of projects and programs for the young people and children such as Training for professionals in creative movement and dance, participatory dance performance for children *Under the Half a Drop* that deals with one girl's biocentric view of her inner world and the one that surrounds her (authors Milica Pisić, Milena Todorović, Marko Milić and Jovana Rakić, stage design with Željka Jakovljević, music Bojan Palikuća), educational program *TEEN GENERATOR* which deals with the development of dance during the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century, *DANCE MUSEUM - project of education and awareness of children and young people about contemporary dance*(realized in smaller communities in Serbia, where children don't have the opportunity to experience dance and theater - Bela Palanka, Kragujevac, Užice, Gornji Milanovac, Sremski Karlovci, Kikinda, but also KLIKER Festival in Varaždin, Kotor Children's Theater Festival. Also project *BELOW THE SURFACE - project of alternative creativity for children*" and project Little Bali which consisted from the series of workshops with kids age 8+.



Bebidron/ Željka Jakovljević/photo by Aleksandra Marković

At the same time dance artists gathered in Pokretnica collective - PRAKTIKABL PLATFORM FOR CONTEMPORARY ART in Novi Sad started working and developing dance practices and performance for children of the youngest age. Performance *Bebidron*, concept and choreography Željka Jakovljević, dancers Jelena Alempijević, Frosina Dimovska, Ina Madžar, music Dunja Crnjanski is a dance performance for the youngest audience - children under three years old. The project also includes their parents or guardians. *Bebidron* deals with the relationship between parents and children in everyday life, daily procedures, routines, basic physical activities.

Dance for children and youth continues to develop, mostly outside institutions, mostly with minimal support at the national level and constant initiative of artists and the desire to collaborate with colleagues and networks from the international scene. However, it seems that the aspirations of the artists who were and currently are active in the independent dance scene in Serbia are focused on exchange, equality, participation and freedom of the child in the performing arts. Hopefully AAG2023 in Serbia will give us the opportunity to exchange with colleagues around the world, as well to interact with each other and the ones who are a part of our community but live and create abroad.

A few absolute truths learned in this year's process:

- in order to grow, plants dance, moving deeper into the ground and up, towards the sun

- painters often dance in order to paint, some so persistently that they have developed a stylistic direction (so-called action painting)

-birds dance when courting each other, spread their wings and tails and jump around each other, and we, humans then record and take pictures of them, make dances inspired by their dance (such as Cendrawasih from Bali)

They all move by agreement, intuition or inspiration, without anyone showing them how to do it. Children should not be shown how to dance, but should be listened to, encouraged, and engaged in dancing with them. The rest will be easy.-

from the page *Muzej Plesa- Jovana Rakić*⁶



Jovana Rakić is a choreographer and dance teacher active on the independent dance scene in Serbia. Since 2014, she has devoted herself to working with children and for children and young people in the context of contemporary dance within the Station- service for contemporary dance and the Pokretnica artistic collective. She is currently a member of the executive board of Assitej Serbia in second mandate .

photo by Jovana Semiz

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/muzejplesa>