

Theatre festivals for children and youth as a place of learning



International Children's Theatre Festival Subotica ©Damir Vujković

Theater festivals, members of the ASSITEJ Serbia besides fulfilling their primary role of gathering the most representative plays for children and youth made by local, regional, and world productions, contain various programs for drama education dedicated to the youngest, youngsters, and professionals. Festivals fill the vacuum in Serbia's formal education system by giving kids, teenagers, and professionals knowledge and skills in the theater arts.



Ljubica Beljanski Ristić

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The first festival in the ASSITEJ Serbia group I will write about is Bitef Polyphony. Although it was founded during the 34th International Bitef Festival in 2000 as one of the accompanying programs for theater for children and youth, its methodology and working principles can be traced back to the 1970s. Ljubica Beljanski-Ristić, a drama pedagogue, the symbol of introducing creativity into education, and the creator, founder and editor of Bitef Polyphony, made for children and youths in Belgrade a new place for creativity and drama in education and culture – Škozorište (a combination of the terms *school* and *theater*). In addition to the usual warm-up and communication games, Ljubica introduced games of disguise, enthusiasm, and games that allowed children to open up new spaces of freedom by using their own experiences in a mutual dialogue. Her theatrical approach and method can be called practice-based research. This research approach sparks freedom that allows creative work between artists and non-artists, a joint creative dialogue that rejects the usual hierarchical theatrical relationship.

At the time when Škozorite was created, it was customary to base children's theater on dramatic literature. Škozorište disapproved of such a method and based its performance on workshops and the stories of the kids. They become the main actors of the play, although audience participation was also encouraged. They took situations from everyday life and the world of imagination as a starting point for these performances. Through conversations, play, movement, and various dramatic techniques, they devised scenes that were open to improvisation.¹

¹ Milena Dragičević-Šešić, »Škozorište« – iskustvo kreativnosti, <http://www.republika.co.rs/462-463/35.html>

To advance and confirm drama in education and the arts, CEDEUM (Center for Drama in Education and the Arts) arose from Škozorite in the year 1999. And then Bitef Polyphony was founded in 2000 in cooperation with other partner organizations.

The goal of Ljubica Beljanski-Ristić has been the same throughout the years: to use play as a means of learning and to break away from conventional theatrical forms to promote creativity, playfulness, imagination, and education.

Polyphony (in the meaning: the style of simultaneously combining many parts, each forming an individual melody and harmonizing with each other, which means that the Bitef Polyphony encourages new, innovative approaches and proves that giving space to contemporary practices does not exclude but contributes to the spread of knowledge) brings together youths willing to create theatre for young people from actions, workshops, and their needs. One of the key features of the festival is its focus on interdisciplinary work, bringing together artists from different fields and mediums to create dynamic and engaging performances. From dance and theater to music and visual art, Bitef Polyphony showcases innovative works. In addition to its focus on contemporary art and interdisciplinary works, Bitef Polyphony also has a strong commitment to social justice and activism.

Many of the performances featured in the festival explore issues related to human rights, social inequality, and political activism, highlighting the vital role that art can play in promoting positive change in the world. The theme of the Bitef festival during the first occurrence of Polyphony was *Theater and Evil*, and Bitef Polyphony dealt with the theme of violence through the presentation and evaluation of the program *Art for Social Change – Playing Against Violence*. As the organizers and participants said, the meeting that took place in 2000 was exceptionally meaningful, valuable, and stimulating, a true polyphony of projects, participants, and audience. Polyphony gained significant space in the catalog and sparked noticeable interest among young people, especially the theater community and numerous civil society organizations.²

Since then, the program concept has not changed. Many drama educators, theater experts, and professionals in theater for young audiences have emerged, developed, directed, and still learn at Bitef Polyphony. Therefore, the festival is not just an opportunity to see different performances, but a valuable space for learning and discovering different contemporary theater approaches and tendencies that formal education does not provide. Ljubica Beljanski-Ristić received among others the international lifetime achievement award *Little Prince* from the International Festival of Children's Theater in Subotica for her work, progressive thought, and exceptional contribution to the development of culture and performing arts for children.

The International Children's Theatre Festival in Subotica was founded in 1994 and continuously contributes to the decentralization of theatre. The festival particularly nurtures various forms of puppetry, such as object



² <https://bitefpolifonija.com/O-nama.html>

theatre, and shadow theatre. In this way, it enables the influence of different aesthetics on domestic theatre productions.



*International Forum for Research in Theater Arts for Children & Youth
Photo: Children's Theatre Festival Subotica archive*

Besides presenting some of the highest quality theater for children and youth from around the world every year, the Festival has been organizing the International Forum for Research in Theater Arts for Children and Youth for 14 years, making it a meeting place for researchers from different countries and continents who present their research in the field of TYA, TIE, applied theater, and address problems related to their areas and examples of best practices to overcome obstacles.

The perspectives opened up by the discussions at the Forum are immeasurable, especially considering the participation of artists from different countries and cultures. Thus, European artists came into contact with a completely different directorial expression of puppet theater from the Middle East dictated by their culture. We also got a chance to see significant opportunities offered by a theater in the field of community creation and how the school system could improve the position of drama education.

The FEP – Festival of Ecological Theater in the small town of Bačka Palanka was established a year after the Festival in Subotica, making it likely the first theater festival to be held in a city without a theatrical facility. FEP has created a space for culture, ecology, education, training, and creativity research for children and young people in a city without an institutional theater, cinema, or museum, thus creating conditions for the healthy and spiritual growth of children and youth. *When we say culture, you also mean nature because these two concepts are inseparable.*³ The ecological significance of this festival is not only in the eco-topics it deals with but also in the fact that it takes place in nature, a healthy and eco-friendly environment on the banks of the river Danube.

In addition to decentralization and environmental preservation, a crucial value of FEP is nurturing critical thinking. Therefore, besides a Professional jury, the festival also has a Children's jury that gives an award for the best performance. It consists of children aged 4 to 14 who have an affinity for drama. Children and young people can also participate in a variety of workshops based on theatre education, theater, and environmental activities.



Stage and audience at FEP, Ecological Theater Festival for children and young people _ FEP FB page

³ <https://www.fep.org.rs/o-nama.html>

Another festival that strengthens young artists through its accompanying program and enables their progress when it comes to Theatre for Young Audiences is the Zvezdarište Theatre. The selector and the artistic council shape the selection of performances that address timely issues, including bullying, eating disorders, the environment, and persons with disabilities.



[Zvezdarište Theatre program for emerging artists in TYA](#)

Photo Assitej archive

The festival's initial iteration took place in 2006, and conferences, workshops, and seminars were held to kick off the second edition. Their goal is to expand the understanding of theater, encourage thinking about new theater spaces, explore possible and impossible concepts, and unite different forms of art in various ways, focusing on the youngest theater visitors. The focus of the series of seminars for young professionals created in collaboration with ASSITEJ has been on light, sound, theater production, and cultural management, specificities, and challenges of directing for children's and youth theater. In addition to informal education for artists, the festival also organizes educational activities for children on topics such as recycling, creative writing, theater masks, and costumes.

Finally, the youngest FAS – ASSITEJ Serbia Festival, will have its 5th edition this year. It was founded to stimulate as much diversity as possible, providing support for exploring new forms and expressions, and encouraging the richness of production in professional performing arts for children and youth.



[FAS ASSITEJ Serbia Festival 2022.](#)

ASSITEJ Serbia organizes this festival to promote awareness of the ASSITEJ movement both inside Serbia and abroad as well as to unify and develop the ASSITEJ community. Although FAS is conceived as a showcase of the best national annual productions of ASSITEJ members, this year's fifth edition will also have exceptionally an international-regional character, since it is the host of the ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering, the most important annual gathering of the ASSITEJ community which will be held for the first time since its foundation in this part of the Europe.



Conversations of the members of the Professional Jury and the Pedagogical Jury after the all-day program, 1st FAS, National Theater in Belgrade, 2019. Photo: ASSITEJ Serbia archives

The ASSITEJ festival was initiated in 2015 during the meeting of the then Executive Board, and shaped to the end with the next board members. FAS officially came to life in 2019 with the theme Let's start the story. The success of the first edition showed how much this type of festival is needed and welcomed as a place for conversation and establishing values and a path for further development of the professional Serbian theater and dance scene and culture for children and youth

Two important specificities of the FAS are related to the jury. The festival awards two prizes: the prize for the Best Performance according to the decision of the Expert Jury, and the Award for the Best Performance according to the Pedagogical Jury. The Expert Jury consists of representatives of the authorial team or the acting ensemble of each theater participating in the festival. The number of jury members is proportional to the number of performances in the competition program. Although the festival is competitive and encourages competitiveness, the jury members led by the moderator exchange their impressions every day in a conversation open to the public. By creating the Pedagogical Jury, ASSITEJ expands its activities to empower educators who are an essential part of developing a love for the theatrical arts.

Two more festivals Zlatna Iskra organized by ASSITEJ member Children's and Youth Theater Kragujevac and Novi Sad Theater Games in the Youth Theater Novi Sad are also worth mentioning. The International Puppet Festival Zlatna Iskra developed from the International Puppet Festival of Small Forms (1994), which brought together creators who express the richness of stage creation through puppetry.

The mission of gathering and exchanging experience among puppetry authors is particularly significant, considering there is no formal education for puppet theater in Serbia. The Novi Sad Theater Games share a similar idea, and this year they are being held for the second time. From the first edition, the festival opened up space for the development of critical thinking, where children from the audience have a round table with the authors of the performances, encouraged to ask questions. These conversations were equally useful for the actors because they very rarely have the opportunity to receive criticism and feedback from the target audience of their performance. Additionally, over time, the Youth Theater cultivates and molds its audience in this manner.



Audience at 2nd FAS, Photo: Assitej archive

Maybe it was not the original intention, but all festivals have become, besides a place to watch performances, a place of learning for young professionals who want to work in theatre for children and youth. The accompanying programs and workshops at festivals speak to the children, of course, but I would particularly highlight that they also bring together artists eager to learn and more experienced professionals willing to share their knowledge. This way, the young audience, future theater audience for adult shows, drama pedagogues, artists, and authors are empowered. And not to forget, they have an opportunity to watch performances from abroad.

Increased participation in independent theatrical works, in my opinion, might enhance the festivals. Even if these productions can be found at the majority of festivals and sometimes even win awards, there is still more prospect for knowledge sharing with authors outside of institutions.

In summary, ASSITEJ Serbia theatre festivals provide a platform for creativity, learning, and connection. All of these festivals can help young people and artists develop into confident, engaged, and compassionate individuals who can navigate the challenges of the world around them. They also make a safe and inclusive space for all group range to explore their creativity, learn new things, build social skills, and enjoy themselves.



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