

SCENE ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN IN THE SOCIETY OF SPECTACLE: PRAGUE QUADRENNIAL AS A MIRROR OF CONSTANTLY CHANGING WORLD

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Abstract. *Scene design*, as a term, was constructed in Serbia in mid-nineties, to mark the field introduced by Pamela Howard in English language by the word *Scenography*. Under the influence of Prague Quadrennial (PQ), Biennial of Scene Design was established to promote not only set or costume design, but also a wide range of arts and crafts in performing arts. At the same time, a cycle of international conferences entitled *Spectacle – City – Identity* developed the platform for understanding contemporary phenomena in art, culture and society. In past to decades PQ was transformed radically, and new approaches to scene design in global framework become visible and important, especially in education.

Keywords: *Scene architecture, scene design, performing space, scenography, Prague Quadrennial, biennial of scene design, society of spectacle, education, ideology.*

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1. Introduction

I really experienced scene architecture, (without any idea of that term, of course) in 1969, when I, for the first time, visited the *Atelje 212* theatre in Belgrade to see Ragni & Rado's *Hair*. It was already famous, but strange, exotic, even peculiar building erected in 1964 by design of Bojan Stupica. Stupica was an architect by education, but actor, theatre director and manager by personality and professional carrier. As I was born and raised in theatrical family¹, theatre buildings and theatre space in general was my natural environment. *Atelje 212*, nevertheless, came 'from something completely different'. Stupica's creative approach was out of time, without almost any link to prevailing late modern aesthetics. Still, it was essentially scenic, theatrical, and there was no doubt about the purpose of that house – completely opposite to majority of contemporary theatre buildings throughout the world.

At that time, *Atelje 212* was the home of *BITEF – Belgrade International Theatre Festival*, founded in Belgrade in 1967, in the context of bipolar world divided by the *iron curtain*, and with a "mission – to make a hole, or a passage through that almost unbreakable wall" (Dinulović, 2017). Belgrade, by *BITEF*, "became a precious and rare meeting place for artists, professionals, students and audiences coming from all over the world, carrying with them all differences in culture, habits, languages, aesthetical, creative and formal

¹ From my grand-grand father, since the middle 19th Century, all my family members were theatre actors, directors, managers and (or) designers.

orientations, but sharing the reasons for being together, communicating and learning from each other”². As I was “brought up” in the theatre environment strongly influenced by *BITEF*. Of course, I did not belong to the audience of *BITEF* in its early years – I was too young to be privileged and experience performances of Grotowski, Sheckner, Kantor or *Living Theatre*. Still, I had an opportunity to be a silent witness of loud and passionate discussions about the physical or non-verbal theatre, breaking the performing space, nudity on stage, exploiting of different exotic cultural traditions unfamiliar to us, or using abandoned or forgotten non-theatrical places for theatre. Later on, I was old enough to be directly influenced by works of Peter Brook, *Bread & Puppet Theatre*, *La Mamma*, Pina Bausch or *La fura dels Baus*, and, finally, to participate in the actual production of the festival. All of that led me to the point when, educated as an architect and working in the *Atelje 212* as a technical manager, I decided to try and find out what was the essence of the “new theatrical trends”, and why it was so important to me. There was no doubt that essence was important, and exciting, and enlightening – not only for me. One of the major outcomes of *BITEF* was the establishment of over 50 different sites (buildings, environments or public city areas) as more or less regular festival stages. Some of those places started to be popular and frequently used as spaces of commercial spectacle, one became a home for *Bitef Theatre* which developed from the festival and, probably the most important for Belgrade – few were marked by *BITEF* as specific places of theatre and urban memory”³.

Working in *Atelje 212*, I had a privilege to collaborate for a decade with the most prominent Yugoslav set designers – in Serbian language known as *scenographers*.

It seems that Pamela Howard was the first who introduced the term *Scenography* in English language, thus clearly emphasising the belief that the term *Scenography* refers not only to creating decor (*Stage Design* or *Set Design*), but it also includes the reflection, articulation and production of the entire stage layout - visual, but also auditory, tactile, and even addressing the other senses - in a word, an image that belongs to the theatre understood not as *a play for watching* (*Schauspiel*), nor as *a play for hearing* (*Hörspiel*), but as a joined play *omniplay* (*Mitspiel*) (Gavela & Batušić, 1967). *Scenography*, therefore, is consisted out of the architectural stage space (constructed or selected), rearticulation of that space (set design in the narrow sense of the term), and the design and presentation of all other elements of scene design (scenery, props, costumes, light, sound, video projections, special effects...). Above all, the set is filled with the bodies of artists (actors, dancers, extras...), as well as movements of their bodies. *Scenography* is “an elegant synthesis of space, text, research, fine arts, actors, directors and viewers, which contributes to the creation of truly original works”⁴, writes Pamela Howard in her book *What is Scenography?* published simultaneously in London and Belgrade (Hauard & Šentevska, 2002), today one of the fundamental works in the field of theory of scenography and stage space.

Pamela Howard, who was at the time the Course Director for MA *Scenography* at *Central St Martin's College of Art and Design*⁵, one of the best schools of art and design in the world, I happened to meet in the spring of 1996. One could say that our meeting was incidental (at one of the ‘social events’ associated with a meeting of *OISTAT*, “our

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.* See more about the environmental stages of *BITEF* and the Festival itself in the book edited by Radivoje Dinulović and Aleksandar Brkić, *Theatre – Politics – City*, Yustat, Belgrade, 2007.

⁴ Pamela Hauard, *Op. cit.*, pg. 152.

⁵ Pamela Howard ran the Course for MA *Scenography* at the *Central St Martin's College of Art & Design* since 1994 until 1998.

brotherhood of scenographers of the world”⁶), and I must say that the meeting with her and the school that she was affiliated with, had a great effect on everything that happened in Serbia later in the domain of education within the fields of set design and scene design, and in relation to the understanding, interpretation and use of these two terms. After all, that is not our exclusive experience - in a similar way Pamela Howard affected, and still affects scenography as a profession, as an art, and as means of creative thinking in even the most advanced areas of the world.

At that time, *YUSTAT*⁷ was developing very dynamically in our country. The *YUSTAT* organisation was created in the theatre (*Atelje 212*) with the aim to influence, above all, the character and quality of professional theatrical productions - an aspiration that, for the most part, remains only a dream about some different reality (which despite being possible, remains for us unfortunately quite unattainable). The other major endeavour, however - to bring out into the light all those individual and collective contributions that *theatre people* make in the world ‘behind the scenes’, and to show what a stage event is and what it can be, and, consequently, to bring into the light all the places that can be used as a stage – *YUSTAT* has fulfilled in the best of ways.

This was done on two parallel planes, which are often intertwined and pervaded - through the cycle of international symposia titled *Spectacle - City - Identity* and through the *Biennial of Scene Design*, an event that was regularly held in the period between 1996 and 2006 at the *Museum of Applied Arts*, as well as in numerous galleries, theatres and public areas of Belgrade and throughout Serbia. The artists who have exhibited at the *Biennial of Scene Design* have shown that “the theatre can be created wherever a group of people gather in one place, from open air street events, to small rooms in some basements. This use of different spaces brought the theatre and architecture closer together, reduced the need for heavy stage constructions, and once again put the emphasis on actors and their stage costumes that animate the space”⁸. The term *scene design* was then introduced to describe the totality and complexity of that whole process, appearance, profession, art, views of reality and creativity that Pamela Howard called the *scenography*⁹. More broadly, “scene design interconnects set designers, costume designers, theatre technicians and technologists, architects, light and sound designers, as well as critics and scholars, directors and producers, playwrights, and all those whose activities were directed at the area of the stage”¹⁰.

Further study of this concept leads us to the question what is a staged event, and what are all the possible manifestations of staged events, and, consequently, where stages can be found. Outside the theatre, scene design could be defined not only as an ‘extended’ set design, but also as a distinct art form: “A work of art in the field of scene design can also arise from any creative process which includes a scenic way of thinking

⁶ Pamela Howard, *Op. cit.*, Clio, Belgrad, 2002, pg. 7.

⁷ *Yustat* was founded in 1991 as a *Yugoslav society for theatre art and technology*, and it was became the *OISTAT Centre for Yugoslavia* in 1995. The title of the organisation was later changed into *Yugoslav Centre for Scene Arts and Technology*, and than into *YUSTAT Centre*. Today, Serbia is represented in *OISTAT* by the *Centre for Scene Design, Architecture and Technology (SCen)* based at the *Faculty of Technical Sciences* at the *University of Novi Sad*.

⁸ Pamela Hauard, *Op. cit.*, str. 9.

⁹ In serbian language this term has already got its quite clear and unambiguous meaning, and it is not possible to use it in a broader sense of the word.

¹⁰ Tatjana Dadić Dinulović, *Scene Design As Art*, www.intersection.cz – *Scenography Expanding 2: On Artists/Authors*, July 08-10 2010, Belgrade, Serbia

and the use of scenic resources aiming at the creation of a staged event”¹¹. Therefore, if we apply the logic of theatre to other artistic disciplines, scene design can also be viewed as art in itself. Scene design has gained full legitimacy in Serbia first through opening a study course under the same name at the *University of Arts* in Belgrade, then through the introduction of the term at the register of professions, through the introduction into the arts and curatorial practices, and finally through the introduction of this concept into the theory of art and media (Šuvaković, 2005).

As we know, the *Prague Quadrennial* has been the most important place for the exchange of ideas and experiences of set and costume designers from around the world for more than half a century. Founded primarily with the desire to provide a place where the artists from the East and the West could meet, since those kinds of encounters were almost impossible in everyday life at that time, the Quadrennial soon became a major arena for competition between the most prominent theatrical nations, as the main prize of the Prague exhibition, the *Golden triga*, was not awarded to the winning artist, but to the winning national exhibition. Of course, this meant that the setting of the exhibition itself became a work of art often crucially important, and that the production and financial aspects of the exhibition were by no means unimportant and unnoticed, and further that the selection of artistic works became an issue of particular importance – on a national and international level. Along with the development of curatorial practice in contemporary art in general, here the role of *the National Commissioner* changed as well, from a position of a more or less objective selector of already realised artistic works from professional theatre productions, into the position of a creative interpreter of problem issues, and furthermore even into a creating entity.

When we were faced with the task of representing Serbia (for the first time without the frame of the former Yugoslavia) at the *Prague Quadrennial* in 2007¹², we first had to answer the question: what constitutes the production in the field of scene design – in Serbia, and in general. Traditionally, in the category of national exhibitions in Prague until then, only theatre productions prepared in the professional theatres (which are almost all institutions owned by the state or local community) were presented. Also, the Yugoslav and Serbian artists were always presented in Prague in a most conventional possible way - exhibiting original sketches, drawings and, at best, set design models. The experience of the *Biennial of Scene Design* however, clearly spoke of the vast opportunities that artistic practices outside the theatre could bring, and the potentials of exhibiting scene design that significantly exceeded the limitations of the classic gallery approach. In addition, the contemporary history of Serbia brought two decades of extremely dramatic events that took place outside the theatre, outside the arts in the narrow sense of the word, and almost outside the cultural domain commonly understood as a realm of *social superstructure*. In those political developments, often devastating, and always dramatic, which turned all public areas of settlements in Serbia particularly in big cities into stages, scenic resources and the scenic way of thinking were deployed during the nineteen nineties as direct tools of political, ideological, and often existential struggle.

That is why for Serbia's participation in the *Prague Quadrennial* in 2007 the problem theme *Theatre - Politics - City* was formulated, emphasising the triad nature of this relationship, which meant that the object of observation and contemplation was

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² The exhibition was organised by *YUSTAT*, the curator of the exhibition was Radivoje Dinulovic, and the producer was Aleksandar Brkic.

each phenomenon, their mutual relationships, as well as the complex entity that they build together.

Subject of the performance was explored in all three official frameworks (national, student and architectural exhibition), as the architecture and the city on the one side, and stage events and scenic resources on the other, have always been fundamentally defined by the energy and the actions of young people, students above all. For a research arena, i.e. the physical framework for the case study, Belgrade was chosen, as it became synonymous with the public political scene of the nineties.

The national exhibition consisted of an original spatial structure with gripping semantic values as the authorial reply to the topic of the *Quadrennial* and the theme of the presentation of Serbia. At the same time, these settings were a spatial framework in which every day the most important creative personalities, projects and events in the theatre and around the theatre in Serbia were presented. The author of the national exhibition was Branko Pavić, painter and graphic artist, full professor at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Belgrade. Personal artistic activities of professor Pavić, as well as his work with students from different schools, is continually directed towards establishing the unity of performing and visual arts in the specific cultural, social and political context. Pavić was the initiator and a co-author of the project *Lust for life - Workshop 301* that was awarded the *Grand Prix* of the *Second Biennial of Scene Design*.

The exhibition in the selection of student works was created as a specific joint work of art, created from months-long work of hundreds of students aimed at drama, visual arts and applied arts, music, architecture, and all other areas that touch the phenomena of stage and scenic. Students from all faculties and universities in Serbia were invited through public contest to participate in the preparation of this work, which was based on authorial photos placed in an exceptional unique context. The topic for the photographs was *Scene* in the broadest possible sense of the term that can be found, read from or into any kind of space. The idea for this exhibit was based on the work of Bojana Lukić, architect, who won in the year 2000 at the international student competition *Balkan Cities as Stages for the 21st Century*, organized as the part of the *Third Biennial of Scene Design*.

Through exhibiting theatre architecture and technology, Belgrade was represented as a 'city-stage' and as a 'city-scene'. Belgrade festivals and events, above all *BITEF* and *BELEF* (*Belgrade Summer Festival*), that permanently explore potential scene spaces in Belgrade, continuously expanding an already very rich list of permanent, temporary and part-time city stages, are set at the same level as the architectural and technological projects, realizations and interventions through which the scenic qualities of Belgrade houses, buildings and environments were dramatically developed in recent years.

It is clear that „in the past decade the scenographic practice and the scene design have continually wandered off from the theatrical black box towards a hybrid area placed within the points of intersection of the theatre, architecture, exhibitions, visual arts and media”¹³; additionally, that very same area was built through action and interaction, as well as „defined individual and collective behaviour”¹⁴. In light of this, it

¹³ www.intersection.cz – *Scenography Expanding 2: On Artists/Authors, July 08-10 2010, Belgrade, Serbia*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

is entirely natural that the question of „staging the space“¹⁵ becomes the reason for gathering and exchanging opinions by professionals, artists and scholars. All these topics were the subject of thought provoking and immensely interesting discussions that took place during the past year in Riga, Belgrade and Évora, within the scope of the series of symposia named *Scenography Expanding*, where the goal was to establish a theoretical platform for a new evaluation of scenography and scene design as forms of professional activities, as complex structures of distinctive artistic and curatorial practices, and finally, as areas of possible analyses of values in regards to creativity and maybe life in general – areas that could be, not without some certain pretentiousness – nevertheless labelled philosophic or ideological. Besides, during the nineteen sixties Guy Debord has already made it clear in which and what kind of society we live in, therefore nowadays the determination for (not) taking part in creating and consuming of the spectacle, without a doubt, represents an ideological concern.

The *Prague Quadrennial* in 2011 has shown us the course in the development of ideas regarding scenography, scene spaces, theatre and art in general, in various areas, based on diverse traditions, cultural forms, artistic practices, and, what is perhaps most important, based on completely different intentions. There are many reasons, of course, to examine means that are at our disposal at present time for creating and presenting the scenic arts. It is even more important to examine the changed, and at the same time, the continuous nature of theatres and scenic arts. It is an undisputable fact that the theatre of today is closer to technology, architecture and visual arts than ever before. Increasing similarities between the *Quadrennial* in Prague and both *Biennales* in Venice, the architectural and artistic, testify to this fact. Many installations from any of the events could just as easily have switched places. Serbian artistic team at the *PQ* 2011, led by Dorijan Kolundžija¹⁶, “decided to focus on absence, or, at least, on distant presence. He and his work questioned almost all suppositions of the theatre, focusing on apocryphal physical presence of performers, as well as artistic and technical participants, and, of course, the audience. The concept of sharing space-time in virtual reality, emphasised discussions opened earlier about understanding of the real and the constructed as it was deliberated in the cult feature film *Matrix*. Through their work, Kolundžija and his team touched one of many liminal lines of theatre provoking different reactions and re-thinking of various ideas. Besides the technical and aesthetical perfection – it was enough for me to consider *Displacements* as one of the peaks of the *PQ* exhibitions in general”¹⁷. From my point of view, the most important and most influential part of the *PQ* in 2011 programme was the *Intersection* project. The lecture was given to all of us by the leading team of the *Prague Quadrennial* itself, Sodja Lotker as curator and Oren Sagiv as designer, “opening crucial questions of how to interpret, understand, think about, articulate, receive and perceive theatre today – i.e. issues about public and private, social and intimate, physical and psychological, inner and outer communication, theatre and theatricality; or questions about experience and about emotions”¹⁸.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Dorijan Kolundžija (born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, now: Serbia, 1976) was a curator of the national exhibition of Serbia entitled *Displacements*. He curated National Section exhibition with co-curators Ana Adamović and Milica Pekić, Section of Theatre Architecture and Space with Mia David, and Student’s Section with Igor Oršolić. Commissioner of the national exhibition was Radivoje Dinulović.

¹⁷ Radivoje Dinulović, *Op. cit.* (Learning...), p.17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Based on the legacy of the *Intersection* and the *PQ 2011* in general, the *PQ 2015* was expected as a new challenge for all of us, sharing all the doubts and uncertainties about the exhibiting theatre in the context of contemporary artistic and curatorial practices. This time, I had an extreme privilege to be a part of international jury, and, from that position, “I learned:

- What is the power of theatre in contemporary world (from Estonia);
- What else could be theatre architecture (from Slovakia);
- Who is the performer, who is the spectator, what is the essence of performing space and how space interacts in between them (from Finland, in Students Section);
- Why we can (still) use non-theatrical places for performances (from Croatia);
- How and why to provoke and maintain a dialog about theatre, our inner beings and life in general (from Serbia);
- How it is possible to represent the essence of theatre performance using new technologies, new media, and new ways of spatial perception (from Czech Republic – *Golem Cube*, and United Kingdom, in Section of Countries and Regions); and, finally,
- How it is possible to represent the essence of theatre performance without anything but bodies, objects and space (from Latvia, in Section of Countries and Regions).

From the general perspective, there was no doubt that students’ exhibitions at the *PQ 2015*, comparing to those from the Section of Countries and Regions, were more provocative, more innovative, more meaningful and, finally, more important”¹⁹.

Nevertheless, we live “in the society and time in which we have lost a sense of community. Brought up and raised in a system, in which the collective was more important than the personal, the society was above the individual, and big ideas and big plans have outgrown what a single human was able to accomplish, we were faced with fundamental and dramatic changes”²⁰. The key question is still open and will remain so for the time being: not how, but why do we bother with theatre and arts at all? Scene design as a process, means and way of thinking, not only as a professional, or artistic, but foremost as an ideological category, is maybe, no matter how paradoxically it may sound, in the *Society of Spectacle* one of the possible ways towards the individual, internal being.

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¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Radivoje Dinulović, Miljana Zeković & Višnja Žugić: *Tavern Serbia*, The textual explanation of the contest application for the appearance of Serbia at the *Biennale of Architecture* in Venice, Department of Architecture & Urbanism, Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, 2012, pg. 2