**North Macedonia**

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**Abstract: (100 words)**

This chapter will reflect of theatre development in North Macedonia since the country’s independence. In the 1990’s the country experienced significant shift in the nation’s theatre context, as well as in the wider historical and cultural context. Since then, theatre in Macedonia has begun to develop its own clear identity. The first part of this chapter will look at emerging theatre-making practices, that move away from more traditional dynamics of author-director duos. The second part of the chapter will look at the relationship between the established institutional structures and at the development of an independent sector in the country.

**Context: In between East and West**

The Republic of North Macedonia is a relatively small Balkan country (Macedonia covers 25,000 sq. km. and has approximately 2 million inhabitants), whose long and rich cultural history is made up of a vibrant mix of different languages and traditions, such as ethnic Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Vlachs, Roma, and Jewish. Macedonia was recognized as a separate nation state for the first-time following World War II, as part of Yugoslavia’s process of being reconstituted as a federal state. The Yugoslav authorities also promoted the development of the Macedonian ethnic identity and Macedonian language. The Macedonian language was codified in 1944, from the Slavic dialect spoken around Veles. This process is reflected in the aims of the national theatre forefathers (Dimitar Kostarov, Ilija Milcina, Todorka Kondova, etc.) who worked hard to create the infrastructural and pedagogical basis which would allow the development and proper archiving of the nation’s unique theatre history.

When North Macedonia became independent from Yugoslavia on September 8, 1991, this resulted in a significant shift in the nation’s theatre context, as well as in the wider historical and cultural context. The country faced years of embargoes and negation of its national identity; this situation still presents an ongoing barrier to the country’s full integration into the European Union. North Macedonia is part of the political neologism ‘the Western Balkans’, a solution proposed by the EU, as an intention to distance itself from the most problematic part of the Balkans. As stated by Nermina Mujagić, ‘geographically, the Balkans are a part of Europe, but culturally still do not satisfy the criteria, and are thus defined by a new, political coinage, as the Western Balkans’ (2018, 8). However, as the Macedonian theatre and dance scholar Zdravkovska Dzeparovska perceptively notes, ‘Macedonia has never tried to deny its Balkan provenance, instead making use of it especially in art by providing ironic commentary on the stereotypes’ (2020). As noted by theatre historians Ivan Ivanovski and Risto Stefanovski, since 1991 ‘theatre in Macedonia has begun once more to develop its own clear identity’ (2001, 572). The initial transitional period in the 1990s was marked by strong author-director duos (the most prominent being: Ljubisha Georgievski/Jordan Plevnesh and Slobodan Unkovski/Goran Strefanovski) who tried to reimagine Macedonian history, folklore, and tradition on stage. Most of these author-director duos were engaged in pedagogical practice at The Faculty for Dramatic Arts Skopje (FDU) and educated the first generation of Macedonian theatre makers who radically reshaped theatre culture post-independence.

In the last three decades theatre makers in North Macedonia have predominately focused on two issues: reimagining the national identity and exploring the place and role of the country within the European cultural landscape. The first two decades were marked by the majority of theatre makers reflecting on the crisis that emerged due to the embargo from Greece and the civil war in Yugoslavia; these events significantly impacted the country’s social and economic structure. Dramaturgically, the emphasis was on reinventing the existing historical and artistic matrices, specifically through de/construction of traditional folk dramas. The funding of theatres was significantly affected during this transitional period and many institutions suffered infrastructural and organisational neglect. As Jelena Lužina (1999) states, contemporary Macedonian theatre was marked to a significant degree by deep paradoxes that still unfortunately dominate the repertoire of productions today. This is mainly because the majority of theatre institutions are dependent on state support. The funding model creates a level of passivity and dependence on the ruling political party’s will (or whim). The model has been strongly criticised by many theatre makers over the last three decades, but never fully revised.

The period since the independence also saw a significant rise of non-governmental theatre initiatives and the creation of small self-sustainable independent theatre companies. These initiatives have pushed for a stronger presence of ethnic minority communities in predominately Macedonian ethnic institutions. The country also went through rapid development and expansion of both the Turkish and the Albanian Drama Theatre (previously known as Theatre of Minorities), and the formation of independent ethnic minority initiatives, such as Children’s Theatre Centre and Roma Theatre Pralipe that provide both educational and cultural diversity, much lacking and desperately needed in the country.

**Cultures of theatre-making: Reimagining the past. Post-national identity on stage**

In her book *Makedonskata nova drama* (Macedonian new drama, 1996), Jelena Lužina, one of the most productive and thorough scholars of drama in Macedonia, puts in place the foundations for a theoretically precise typology of Macedonian drama and theatrology. Lužina provides a systematization and periodization of dramas published after 1945. She categorizes the dramatic works of Macedonian post-war playwrights in two groups: folk domestic drama and modern drama. She concludes that all the plays created after Kole Cashule’s *Vejka na vetrot* (Twig in the wind, 1957) can then be divided into two large corpuses: dramas with modernist or postmodernist features.

The most prolific modernist playwrights in the country, Goran Stefanovski, with the play *Jane Zadrogaz* (Jane Zadrogaz, 1974), and Rusomir Bogdanovski, with the play *Farsa za Hrabriot Naume* (Farce according to brave Naum, 1969), were the first to start reinventing and reinterpreting the traditional stories and folklore of Macedonia. They set up a path for a new generation of playwrights, such as Dejan Dukovski, Jugoslav Petkovski, and Zanina Mircevska, to return to the work of the initiators of Macedonian dramatic writing from the beginning of the twentieth century like Vasil Iljoski’s *Cest* (Honour,1953) and Vojdan Chernodrinski’s *Makedonska krvava svadba* (Macedonian blood wedding, 1900), and create postmodernist re-readings, deconstructions, and rewritings. Writing about this new generation of playwrights, the author Naum Panovski notes: ‘This young generation is close to its contaminated ground and in their works there is less optimism, fewer utopian images and more postmodern nihilism and cynicism’ (2006, 68).

In the preface to the first English edition of his plays, simply called *Drami* (Plays, 2012), the playwright Dejan Dukovski is described by Lužina as ‘one of the most successful export products’ (2012, 9). Dukovski’s play *Bure Barut* (Powder keg, 1996) has been translated into eighteen languages and performed on thirty-five stages. According to Ivica Baković, Dukovski’s drama *Balkan is not dead ili Magija Edelvajs* (Balkan is not dead or Edelweiss magic, 2001), 2001 makes strong conceptual links between the historical past of the region at the beginning of the twentieth century and the current situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century (2018, 209). Dukovski’s plays were embraced by a new generation of young Macedonian theatre directors and early in his career he established a strong collaboration with the director Aleksandar Popovski. As one of the first theatre directors to emerge in independent Macedonia, trained by Prof. Slobodan Unkovski, Popovski addresses the disillusionment and disappointment that followed the fall of Yugoslavia and the two decades of transition that dramatically changed the region. He has developed a style that marks him as a director who does not want to purely transfer the text to the stage, but approaches it as a plot that he modifies and transposes into visually impressive images. He follows the postmodernist strategy of the text and shapes the scenes as intertextual evocations. Popovski collaborated closely with Dukovski, and he staged a few of his early plays, most prominently *ММЕ koj prv pocna* (Who the fuck started all this?, 1997) in 1997 at the Macedonian National Theatre. The performance won the prize for the best performance at the Macedonian Theatre Festival Vojdan Cernodrinski and at the International Festival in Belgrade, BITEF.

Along with Popovski there emerged a new generation of young Macedonian directors, educated predominantly at FDU-Skopje. FDU-Skopje is the state-funded conservatory which was established in 1969. The school is highly selective, and the majority of the programmes admit only one cohort of students every four years. The curriculum is based on the principle that acting and directing is learned by practice under a professor's supervision in a professional setting. FDU places emphasis on preserving the national theatre and film history and ensuring that tradition is followed and enriched. FDU is home to the Institute of Theatre Studies, which ‘continually and permanently for almost fourteen years collects, archives and digitalizes theatrographical resources, analyses and publishes them according to concrete work projects. Starting from 1999 and up until now, the base is being updated regularly, in order to digitalize the Macedonian theatre tradition’ (Stojanovska, 2013). FDU educated the first generations of independent theatre makers in North Macedonia and they brought a breath of fresh air and experimentation, challenging audience perceptions and expectations over the last thirty years. While they see themselves as part of a wider European tradition, they also playfully challenge the fringe position of the country in the current European political landscape as a bridge between East and West. Notable figures are Dritëro Kasapi, Zoja Buzalkovska, Srdjan Janićijević, Natasha Poplavska, Sinisha Eftimov, Dejan Projkovski, Bojan Trifunovski, and Nela Vitoshevic, among many others.

**Institutional structures: Still in transition. From state funded to a strong independent sector**

Considering that North Macedonia is one of the smallest countries in the Western Balkan region, it has a relatively large number of professional theatre institutions (fourteen) which employ a permanent troupe of actors. The country has also a relatively large number of actors, singers, dancers, and musicians hired on a permanent basis as ‘civil servants’ (approximately five hundred); most of them have been trained to a higher education level, having completed training in a conservatory in the country, region, or internationally. The majority of the theatres are repertory theatres, supported by the Ministry of Culture, and they produce a modest number of shows each year. The country also has an award-winning Teatar za deca i mladinci (Theatre for Young Audiences), that was formed in 1990 by the Government and specialises in theatre for young audiences. There are also a few independent theatre companies that specialise in theatre education and experience for young audiences, like Children’s Theatre Centre (established by Dritëro Kasapi and Refet Abazi), Buden teatar (Awoken theatre, formed by Miljana Lenak) and Senki i oblaci (Shadows and clouds, formed by Krume Stefanovski).

In the last three decades the country has seen a significant rise in independent theatre companies and institutions, which receive limited funding from the Ministry of Culture and sustain themselves through philanthropic funding and/ or international funding grants. Some of the most significant examples are Teatarot na Navigatorot Cvetko (The Theatre of the pilot Cvetko, co-established and co-ran by Slobodan Unkovski and Zoja Buzalkovska) and Wonderland Theatre (established in 2010 by the directors Nela Vitoshevikj and Vasil Hristov). These initiatives are a significant step forward for the future of theatre in North Macedonia and serve as sustainable models that are to a certain degree resistant to interference from corrupt ruling political parties.

#### МОТ (MOT International theatre festival), founded in 1975 by Ljubisha Nikodinovski Bish, played an important part in the ‘new wave’ of theatre making in the last three decades, opening contemporary Macedonian theatre to the outside world. Another very important festival is Skomrahi, a traditional meeting of students from the theatre and film academies of West Balkan countries, as well as several European countries, organized by the Faculty of Dramatic Art. Most recently, the AKTO festival in Bitola, established in 2006 and run by FRU – Faculty of things that can’t be learned, established themselves as provocateurs that actively ask how the country’s theatre needs to be redefined in a new European context. AKTO actively promotes experimentation and inter-disciplinary collaboration, through producing challenging, ambitious political performance interventions. Their co-commissioned piece Ovaa zgrada zboruva (na)vistina (This building talks truly) won the Grand Prize Gold Triga at Prague Queadrennial of Performance Design and Space in 2019.

The theatre in North Macedonia despite multiple challenges imposed by the transitional years since the independence, remains vibrant and diverse. However, crucial for the development of contemporary performing arts is ‘whether these practices can be supported by institutions, and if the old institutional models meet the needs of the scene, or it is necessary to introduce new models, post-institutional solutions/practices’ (Tanurovska-Kjulavkovski, 2016: 244). A new generations of theatre makers, producers and cultural workers are coherently articulating in their work the countries’ recent (and more distant) past in relation to wider European concerns on integration and unity. They are working hard on improving cultural diversity and issues of historical (mis)representation. This will help the cultural sector to move away from abuse of historical facts and intense nationalist rhetoric (Todorov, 2018:65).

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