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"The Mood in General Was Like at a Football Match": Entertainment and Fun during the People's Liberation Struggle**

IZVLEČEK

»SPLOŠNO VZDUŠJE JE BILO KOT NA NOGOMETNI TEKMI«: ZABAVA IN RAZVEDRILO MED NARODNOOSVOBODILNIM BOJEM

Med narodnoosvobodilnim bojem so umetniki ustvarjali s polno paro, navdih pa so črpali iz vojnih dogodkov in vizije prihodnje socialistične družbe. V prispevku so predstavljeni umetniški in propagandni vidiki medvojnih partizanskih gledališč, pri čemer je v ospredju predvsem Gledališče narodne osvoboditve (Kazalište narodnog oslobođenja, KNO). Namen prispevka je izpostaviti in poudariti pomen, ki so ga ta gledališča pripisovala zabavi pri predstavljanju svojih del jugoslovanskemu občinstvu.

Ključne besede: Gledališče narodne osvoboditve, kulturno-izobraževalno delo, zabava, razvedrilo

ABSTRACT

During the People's Liberation Struggle, the artists created at full steam, drawing inspiration from wartime events and the vision of a future socialist society. This article examines the artistic and propagandistic aspects of the wartime Partisan theatres, focusing mainly on the Theatre

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of the People's Liberation (Kazalište narodnog oslobođenja, KNO). It aims to point out and emphasise the importance of fun in presenting their work to the Yugoslav audiences.

Keywords: Theatre of the People's Liberation, cultural and educational work, entertainment, fun

> After the fiery speeches of the military commander and the political commissar and after [Josip] Cazi's poem … it was time for our skit. Everything was going well, the audience cheered heartily for [Gorky's] combative mother and shouted: 'Down with the gendarmes, down with the oppressors of the people!', and the mood in general was like at a football match.[1]

> While singing Partisan, Slovenian, and Croatian songs, we fraternised and bonded in the awareness that no one could separate us. The memory that is especially pleasant to me was the moment when the local girls brought me their festive embroidered clothes and coarsely knitted [woollen] socks with shoes, and I danced in them at our gathering. That is how we became sisters.[2]

> A Serbian man likes circle dance more than plum brandy. When the circle dance starts … the value of the dancer is evaluated in sort of a mutual flow. Good dancers sense each other, and a special connection is created. They enjoy each other's dance, they outdance each other, a special fire ignites and – it is as if they have been friends for a long time! So, wherever I danced circle dance with the peasants, I became theirs. And they mine.[3]

At the end of May 1943, shortly after establishing the 1st Partisan Corps of Slavonia (eastern Croatia), Duško Brkić sent instructions to all political commissars of its subordinate units. Listing their tasks, all of which were aimed at "destroy[ing] the fascist vermin even more successfully and safely and win[ning] full victory and freedom for our peoples as soon as possible,"[4] Brkić highlighted that attention should be paid to the so-called cultural and educational work. The goal of such work, he wrote, was to enable "cheerfulness, joy, good mood, and cultural elevation of our fighters," explaining that "[o]nly a politically aware, militarily trained, disciplined, merry, and always good-humoured army will be able to withstand all enemy attacks and deliver heavy blows to it on all occasions".[5]

1 Eva Grlić about the atmosphere during the show prepared in Voćin (eastern Croatia) on the International Women's Day 1943. – Eva Grlić, *Sjećanja* (Zagreb: Durieux, 1997), 90.

2 Dancer Marta Paulin – Brina about the visit of the artists of the Slovenian 14th division to the city of Čazma (northern Croatia). Marta Paulin, "Plesna umetnost v partizanih," in Filip Kalan, ed., *Partizanska umetnost* (Ljubljana: Zveza kulturno-prosvetnih organizacij Slovenije, 1975), 23.

3 Vera Crvenčanin about her wartime work as a Party activist among the civilians. – Vera Crvenčanin, *Ima tako ljudi…* (Beograd: Svijet knjige, 2012), 128, 129.

4 "Uputstvo političkog komesara 1. slavonskog korpusa od 25. maja 1943. o najvažnijim zadacima političkih komesara i o pripremi jedinica za pojačana ofanzivna dejstva," in *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o Narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslavenskih Naroda (ZDPNRJN), Volume IX, Book 3* (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1967), 692.

5 Ibidem, 694.

Historically, soldier entertainment has crucially contributed to reducing combat stress and maintaining military morale.[6] During World War II, the warring nations implemented and allowed diverse forms of troop entertainment.[7] This article examines the role of entertainment and fun among the supporters of the People's Liberation Struggle (1941–1945) during World War II.[8] It identifies the key trends of organised entertainment, which constituted a significant component of the cultural and educational work among the Yugoslav Partisans and their followers and supporters, contributing to the remarkable success of the antifascist resistance movement. Firstly, a concerted effort was made to boost the Partisan soldiers' morale and appeal to civilians. This approach fostered a sense of unity between the Partisan military, its noncombatant supporters, and people of all national backgrounds who were undecided regarding their political allegiances.[9] Secondly, the process of developing a widely appealing entertainment system was informed by the political commentary and political vision of the Communist Party. The political commentary on the current political and military circumstances, both local and global, made it possible to channel negative emotions, primarily enmity, toward the Partisan's adversaries. The communist revolutionary political vision, on the other hand, harnessed positive

6 Music and theatre have always been a valued part of the soldiers' experience. – See, for instance: (for World War 1) John Mullen, ed., *Popular Song in the First World War: An International Perspective* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019). Emma Hanna, *Sounds of War: Music in the British Armed Forces During the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). (For World War II) Harlow Robinson, "Composing for Victory: Classical Music," and Robert A. Rothstein, "Homeland, Home Town, and Battlefield: The Popular Song," both in Richard Stites, ed., *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 62–76 and 77–107. Laurel Halladay, "'It Made Them Forget about the War for a Minute': Canadian Army, Navy and Air Force Entertainment Units during the Second World War," *Canadian Military History* 11, No. 4 (Autumn 2002): 20–35, https://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1332&context=cmh. (For the Wars of Yugoslav Succession) Petra Hamer, "Patriotic Songs as a Means of Mobilization in Besieged Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995," *Lied und populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture* 63 (2018): 111–28. Jana Dolečki, Senad Halilbašić, and Stefan Hulfeld, eds., *Theatre in the Context of the Yugoslav Wars* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). In modern warfare, a specific place is occupied by the USA and the leisure culture of its soldiers. See, for instance: Meredith H. Lair, *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism & Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

7 Some state and military authorities have become notorious for tolerating a wide variety of soldiers' behaviour because, among other things, it could be interpreted as morale-boosting. – See, for instance: John Lie, "The State as Pimp: Prostitution and the Patriarchal State in Japan in the 1940s," *The Sociological Quarterly* 38, No. 2 (Spring 1997): 251–63. Jeffrey Burds, "Sexual Violence in Europe in World War II, 1939–1945," *Politics & Society* [special Issue: *Patterns of Wartime Sexual Violence*] 37, No. 1 (March 2009): 35–74. Thomas Kühne, "The Pleasure of Terror: Belonging through Genocide," in Fabrice d'Almeida, Corey Ross, and Pamela Swett, eds., *Pleasure, Power and Everyday Life under National Socialism* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 234–55. Sabine Frühstück, "Sexuality and Sexual Violence," in Michael Geyer and Adam Tooze, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Second World War, Vol. III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 422–46. Mark Edele and Filip Slaveski, "Violence from Below: Explaining Crimes against Civilians across Soviet Space, 1943–1947," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, No. 6 (August 2016): 1010–35. Elissa Mailänder, "Making Sense of a Rape Photograph: Sexual Violence as Social Performance on the Eastern Front, 1939–1944," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, No. 3 (September 2017): 489–520.

8 The People's Liberation Struggle (*Narodnooslobodilačka borba*, NOB) is the name of the armed struggle of the United People's Liberation Front of Yugoslavia and Partisan military units against foreign occupiers, primarily Germany and Italy, and their collaborators in the territory of Yugoslavia during World War II. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička partija Jugoslavije*, KPJ), led by Josip Broz Tito, played the leading role in this armed resistance movement.

9 This included some enemy groups, primarily the members of the Home Guard of the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH), a puppet state of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

emotions, including the hope and desire for peace and a better future. Importantly, the extensive use of entertainment formats that most Partisans and their supporters preferred – simplified characterisation of protagonists, comic content, folkloric musical forms – enabled the dissemination of political commentary and political vision in a way that engendered a sense of cheerfulness and optimism. Finally, insisting on emancipatory and solidarity-based values created an environment where soldiers, noncombatant supporters, and civilians could actively contribute not only to the development of an efficient entertainment system but also to the emergence of a resilient and closely-knit community.

This article focuses primarily on the Theatre of the People's Liberation (*Kazalište narodnog oslobođenja*, KNO) and its wartime activities, which represent the most prominent example of the Partisan cultural and educational work. As theatrologist Maja Hribar-Ožegović noted, it is impossible to discuss theatre activity during the People's Liberation Struggle without examining the work of the first group of professional theatre workers to arrive in the liberated territory.[10] To explore the productive symbiosis between artistic creation and the political prerogatives of the antifascist movement in organising entertaining cultural and educational content,[11] this article particularly centres on the group's first performance, held on the occasion of May Day 1942, as recalled in the memories written and published after the end of the war. Its objective is to elucidate the crucial role that entertainment and fun had for wartime cultural and educational work, entwined with artistic creation and propaganda goals with the help of music, literature, and theatre.

Notably, as leisure organisations, theatrical groups usually focus on "the provisioning of satisfaction, of fun."[12] However, the Theatre of the People's Liberation, just like all other theatre groups operating among the Partisans during World War II, was part of a political and social movement that imposed concrete responsibilities on all cultural and educational personnel. For instance, according to its statute, this theatrical group was primarily expected to "support the People's Liberation Struggle and spread interest in theatre art with its performances, theatre plays, concerts, lectures, contests, organisation of dilettante and travelling groups, publication of brochures, books, theatre newspapers and magazines."[13] In other words, political content for the

10 Maja Hribar-Ožegović, *Kazališna djelatnost u Jugoslaviji za vrijeme NOB-a* (PhD diss., Filozofski fakultet u Zagrebu, 1965), 30, 31.

11 On the relationship between the Partisan art and political propaganda during the People's Liberation Struggle, see, in the context of Slovenia, Miklavž Komelj, *Kako misliti partizansko umetnost?* (Ljubljana: Založba /*cf, 2009). Miklavž Komelj, "Kje so meje, pregrade za partizansko gledališče?," *Dialogi: revija za kulturo in družbo* [special issue: *Gledališče upora*] 51, No. 1–2 (2015): 23–33. Aleš Gabrič, "Upornost in odpornost slovenskega teatra med 2. svetovno vojno," *Dialogi: revija za kulturo in družbo* [special issue: *Gledališče upora*] 51, No. 1–2 (2015): 34–44. In the context of Slovenia and the NDH, see Aldo Milohnić, "O dveh sunkih veselega vetra partizanskega gledališča in o 'veliki uganki partizanske scene'," *Dialogi: revija za kulturo in družbo družbo* [special issue: *Gledališče upora*] 51, No. 1–2 (2015): 57–76. For an interesting discussion on this topic between Komelj and Rastko Močnik with the introduction by Gal Kirn, see: *Slavica Tergestina* [special issue: *The Yugoslav Partisan Art*], 17 (2016): 9–99.

12 Gary Allan Fine, "Mobilizing Fun: Provisioning Resources in Leisure Worlds," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 6, No. 4 (1989), http://www.rpgstudies.net/fine/mobilizing_fun.html.

13 Hribar-Ožegović, *Kazališna djelatnost*, 39.

purpose of propaganda was the fundamental building block of all theatre repertoires during the war.[14]

However, while wartime cultural and educational workers endeavoured to educate and ideologically influence the Partisan soldiers and civilian populations, they also sought to distract, amuse, and motivate them. Indeed, as sociologist Gary Allan Fine observed, organised leisure activities that are not fun and do not generate enjoyment are not likely to attract audiences.[15] Following his and Ugo Corte's considerations about fun, it is understood here as "a collaborative and unscripted sequence of action that produces – and is perceived as producing – joint hedonic satisfaction."[16] It is important to note that fun is not defined by the type of activity that a particular group of people engages in – in addition to all kinds of cultural events, sources about the People's Liberation Struggle, for instance, often mention sports matches[17] – but rather regarding how people behave in situations that can be understood as fun and what impact such situations have on them. In other words, through moments of what Émile Durkheim termed collective effervescence, fun helps create and share positive emotions that, in turn, lead to a greater degree of social integration, affirmation of shared values, and increased empowerment.[18] The following section examines the factors facilitating the development of the institutional network for cultural and educational work. Then, the article turns its attention to the first performance of the Theatre of the People's Liberation and explores how collective effervescence manifested during theatre performances.

Development of the Partisan Theatre

From the beginning of the war, the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, an illegal organisation with a small number of members during the interwar period,[19] faced the issue of attracting supporters. This was a complex, multifac-

14 Already during the war, artists discussed the nature of art in new, revolutionary circumstances and its connection to politics and propaganda. The "Partisan birch" controversy is the best documented such discussion. A detailed analysis of the polemics can be found in Emil Cesar, *Slovenska kultura v obdobju okupacije in Narodnoosvobodilnega boja, od 8. septembra 1943 do 9. maja 1945* (Ljubljana: Svobodna misel, 2007), 240–76.

15 Fine, "Mobilizing Fun."

16 Gary Alan Fine and Ugo Corte, "Group Pleasures: Collaborative Commitments, Shared Narrative, and the Sociology of Fun," *Sociological Theory* 35, No. 1 (2017): 64–86.

17 The "sunny side of fun" can feature a seemingly incalculable amount of group activities, and, importantly, it can also become "dark." According to Gary Allan Fine and Ugo Corte, shared "hedonic cruelty" can culminate in the sensation of collective effervescence, the same as the positive types of having fun. – Gary Alan Fine and Ugo Corte, "Dark Fun: The Cruelties of Hedonic Communities," *Sociological Forum* 37, No. 1 (March 2022): 70–90.

18 As explained in Fine and Corte, "Group Pleasures," 68, 69.

19 In the first elections following the end of World War I, the Communist Party became the third strongest party in the Assembly of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Consequently, in 1920, the government issued the Proclamation (*Obznana*) banning all activities of the Party, and in 1921, the Law on the Protection of the State which criminalised all pro-communist activity. On the eve of World War II, the Party had up to 9,000 members. Additionally, the League of Communist Youth had approximately 17,800 members.

eted process "in which identities, loyalties and roles were often blurred."[20] Notably, entertainment groups of all profiles asserted themselves as a relevant factor in this process from the very beginning of the war.[21] The first groups were primarily made up of amateurs who were active at the local level:

> The actors in these groups were fighters… usually workers or intellectuals, who during the First Yugoslavia acted as active members of progressive [left-oriented, usually communist] workers' or student drama groups… If there were no such comrades in the units, some fighters who watched such performances would look up to their more experienced comrades and, without any background, start similar groups in their units.[22]

The leadership of the Yugoslav Partisan resistance recognised the importance of entertainment and fun for the growth and development of the Partisan movement and successful warfare. Therefore, they encouraged its growth by allocating people and material resources for this purpose, although both were in short supply for most of the war. The organisation and regulation of cultural and educational work proceeded simultaneously with the expansion of military and civilian government institutions of the People's Liberation Struggle. The organisation of everyday life in the so-called Republic of Užice (western Serbia), the first liberated territory in wartime Europe that existed from 24 September to 29 October 1941, represented a vital experience for the resistance movement leadership. During that short period, the city of Užice served not only as a military and administrative centre of the Partisan movement but also as its cultural hub. Several of its prominent participants – Jurica Ribar, Mitra Mitrović, Marijan Stilinović, and Dobrivoje Vidić – then formed the first cultural and artistic unit as a section of the Užice Partisan detachment. Moreover, an art studio was established at the initiative of the Supreme Headquarters.[23] During the existence of the Republic of Užice, theatrical performances, dances, and art exhibitions were held almost every day.[24]

Notably, the "Foča Regulations" – the legal foundation of the People's Liberation Struggle in Yugoslavia – were formulated in the period from the end of January to May 1942, when the centre of the Partisan free territory was the town of Foča (in southeastern Bosnia and Herzegovina). These laws determined the framework for developing all cultural and educational work during the war.[25] Finally, a general politi-

20 See, for instance: Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). Marko Attila Hoare, *The Bosnian Muslims in the Second World War: A History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), quote on p. 64.

21 Of course, they were not always successful. In some villages, only a small number of civilians would attend performances, and they preferred not to socialise after the end of the official part of the program. However, this is not crucial for the upcoming analysis, and this aspect of Partisan cultural-educational work will not be analysed in this article.

22 Joža Gregorin, "O kazališnoj aktivnosti na oslobođenom području," in Duško Roksandić and Slavko Batušić, eds., *Hrvatsko narodno kazalište: zbornik o stogodišnjici (1860-1960)* (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1960), 124.

23 Fabijan Trgo, *Četrdeset prva: ustanak naroda Jugoslavije* (Beograd: Mlado pokoljenje, 1961), 656.

24 For more information about the activities of the cultural and artistic unit in Užice, see: Milutin Čolić, "Umetnici 'od volje' i vojnici revolucije," Vojislav Veljić, "U umetničkoj četi u Užicu," and Milenko Đurić, "Kulturno-umetnička četa u Užicu," all three in Života Marković, ed., *Užička Republika: zapisi i sećanja* (Titovo Užice: Narodni muzej - Muzej ustanka 1941., 1981), 313–17, 318–20, 321–24.

25 Hribar-Ožegović, *Kazališna djelatnost*, 22, 23.

cal representative body of all participants in the People's Liberation Struggle – the Antifascist Council of the People's Liberation of Yugoslavia (*Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije*, AVNOJ) – was founded in Bihać (in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina) in November 1942. Its Executive Board included a propaganda department that provided guidelines for cultural, artistic, and educational activities in the liberated territories throughout Yugoslavia. Importantly, shortly after its establishment, the AVNOJ confirmed the statute and status of the group of actors, whose core consisted of seven professional theatre workers from Zagreb who were the first to cross to the liberated territory and which already had about twenty members at the end of 1942. Following this endorsement, the group officially became the Theatre of the People's Liberation, directly subordinated to the Partisan Supreme Headquarters. Finally, mirroring the structure of the AVNOJ, all subsequently established national antifascist councils formed specialised departments, including those for culture and education.[26]

All in all, for the duration of the People's Liberation Struggle, the cultural and educational work was conducted within the framework of the Partisan military units, in the liberated territories as a part of the activities of the emerging communist authorities and in the antifascist organisations of women and youth. As the armed resistance grew and the network of supporting institutions developed, cultural workers' activities gradually shifted from the military to the executive bodies. This type of wartime work included a broad range of activities, from literacy courses to the organisation of major cultural and artistic events commemorating notable anniversaries, holidays, and political events. In the words of the political commissar of the Fourth Proletarian Brigade, the objective of cultural workers in the army and the emerging government institutions was to create "entertainment as cultured as possible and [cultural and] educational work as entertaining as possible."[27]

For the duration of this process, Partisan cultural workers sought to encourage all participants in the People's Liberation Struggle, both soldiers and civilians, to actively participate in all aspects of the struggle and become "active participants in the cultural and reflective process."[28] Considering the circumstances of Partisan warfare in Yugoslavia, wartime cultural and educational work was far from the systematically cultivated productivity that would have been required for the transformation toward the creation of a communist society. However, during the war, many Partisans and their supporters were encouraged to contribute to these endeavours, whether by attending cultural and educational events or by actively participating in them. For instance, Mato Radulović, the political commissar and leader of the Sixth Proletarian

26 For the example of the State Antifascist Council of the People's Liberation of Croatia, see: Hodimir Sirotković, "Stvaranje federalne Hrvatske u narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 3, No. 2–3 (1971): 15–36. Hodimir Sirotković, "Konstituiranje zemaljskog antifašističkog vijeća narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 5, No. 3 (1973): 37–51.

27 "Izveštaj politodela Četvrte proleterske brigade od 23. avgusta 1942. CK KPJ o celokupnom radu i stanju partijske organizacije u brigade," in *ZDPNRJN, Volume IX, Book 1* (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1961), 488.

28 Gal Kirn, "Was Dancing Possible During the Fascist Occupation of Yugoslavia?," *Apparatus* [special issue: *Yugoslav Performance Art: On the Deferred Production of Knowledge*] 11 (2020): 3.

Division, noted: "At that time, individuals and units competed at who would learn more letters, who would stage more and better performances for the fighters and the locals. The ability of the fighters to quickly compose a commemorative song about Tito, the Party, their [native region] Lika, and their victories was remarkable."[29] The involvement of so many people, encompassing seasoned artists and novices alike, in the cultural and educational activities, coupled with the unwavering encouragement of numerous audiences, generated a unique atmosphere and a vibrant, distinctively Partisan popular culture.

In the context where everyone was a potential artist, the quality of the cultural content they produced varied considerably. When observing the commemoration of the October Revolution in 1943, the Partisan nurse Ina Jun Broda remarked that "the organisers and participants are certainly proud if they reach the level of an average bourgeois school celebration."[30] The postwar commentators on the achievements of the wartime cultural and educational work, scholars and theatre professionals alike, were often much more critical in their assessments.[31] However, in the circumstances of the time, conventional standards held little significance for the Partisan popular culture. Ive Ćaće, a self-taught painter and Partisan cultural worker, noted that regardless of how the wartime cultural content is interpreted – as "[a]ttempts, notes, sketches, or however you like" – it is vital to take into account that "what was created among us was ours – lived, genuine, and, above all, benevolent".[32] In the effort to articulate the ideals of the People's Liberation Struggle, cultural workers mobilised their own enthusiasm and, in the words of the actor Jože Gregorin, theatrical fanaticism and faith in victory.[33] Their performances were often half-rehearsed, rushed, and partially improvised, more of an experiment and a test.[34] Their success could only be evaluated on stage with the help of the applause and cheering of the audience. And sincere applause and hearty cheering, a sure sign of the shared positive energy, were the only thing that mattered.

29 Mato Radulović, "Rad politodjela divizije," in Dragan Grubor, Ante Kovačević, and Josip Barković, eds., *Šesta proleterska divizija* (Zagreb: Epoha, 1964), 529.

30 Ina Jun Broda, "Iz moje 'crne bilježnice': Zapisi iz partizanskih bolnica VIII korpusa, jesen i zima 1943 na otocima srednje Dalmacije," box 7, fund Ina Jun Broda, Arhiv Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti, 40.

31 See, for instance: Nikola Hercigonja and Đorđe Karaklajić, eds., "Predgovor," in *Zbornik partizanskih narodnih napeva* (Beograd: Nolit, 1962), VII–X. Marijan Matković, "Kazalište i dramska književnost u Narodnoj oslobodilačkoj borbi Hrvatske," in Mihailo Apostolski, ed., *Kultura i nauka u Narodnooslobodilačkom ratu i revoluciji, radovi sa naučnog skupa* (Skopje: Savet akademija nauka i umetnosti SFRJ, 1984), 203–17. Notably, the majority of contributions in the edited volume *Kultura i umjetnost u NOB-u i socijalističkoj revoluciji u Hrvatskoj* tackled the issue of the perceived shortcomings of the wartime cultural work: Ivan Jelić, Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin, and Vice Zaninović, eds., *Kultura i umjetnost u NOB-u i socijalističkoj revoluciji u Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Institut za historiju radničkog pokreta Hrvatske, 1975).

32 As cited in Matković, "Kazalište," 215.

33 Gregorin, "O kazališnoj aktivnosti," 125.

34 Vjekoslav Afrić, "Sjećanje na Kazalište narodnog oslobođenja," in *Hrvatsko narodno kazalište*, 114, 115. Braslav Borozan, "Avangardno i inovacije u kazalištu NOB-a," *Dani Hvarskoga kazališta: Građa i rasprave o hrvatskoj književnosti i kazalištu* 10, No. 1 (1983): 41–52.

The Actors Arrive Among the Partisans

In the spring of 1942, the first large group of professional artists crossed over to the liberated territory in central Croatia. In the second half of April, seven members of the State Theatre in Zagreb (then the capital of the Independent State of Croatia) – Vjekoslav Afrić, Ivka and Jože Rutić, Salko Repak, Milan Vujnović, Žorž Skrigin, and Zvonimir Cvija – reached the town of Korenica just south of the Plitvice Lakes. At the time, the Supreme Headquarters of Croatia was located in Korenica, and its members decided to include the newly arrived actors in the ongoing preparations for the celebration of, as they said, the first May Day celebrated in freedom.[35] Shortly before the arrival of the artist group from Zagreb, the local Partisan units had seized a relatively spacious and compact territory centred around the towns of Korenica and Donji Lapac. In April, the Partisan authorities and antifascist organisations jointly organised the forthcoming holiday celebration, encouraging the local population to participate and attend the performances.[36]

The Supreme Headquarters of Croatia likely wanted the theatre performance to convey an appropriate political message. Accordingly, it tasked all seven newcomers with writing one-act drama plays about the Partisan struggle. In addition, perhaps to contribute to their concentration, the artists were accommodated separately. After a couple of days, the leadership received only a single one-act play, a dance choreography, and a humorous report instead of the desired seven one-act plays.[37] It was not what they had "commissioned", but it nevertheless proved to be a good foundation for a successful performance and the group's future repertoire.[38] It is estimated that between five and six thousand people visited the main events of the May Day celebrations in Korenica and Donji Lapac and enjoyed the view of the bonfires, cheered for the presenters of numerous speeches, and watched with pleasure what the newly arrived artists had prepared for them.[39]

Notably, the Theatre of the People's Liberation and all other theatre groups held full-length evening shows. Their programmes became known as "colourful programmes," which Vjekoslav Afrić faithfully described as "a potpourri made of everything and anything, without any order or style, but likeable and easy to accept."[40]

35 Nikola Rubčić, "Zapisi i sjećanja," in Đuro Zatezalo, ed., *Prva godina narodnooslobodilačkog rata na području Karlovca, Korduna, Gline, Like, Gorskog kotara, Pokuplja i Žumberka, Vol. 3* (Karlovac: Historijski arhiv u Karlovcu, 1971), 727.

36 During the coming summer and autumn of that year, the center of military and political Partisan activity in Croatia was located in this territory. During this period, for instance, the branches of the women's organization in the territory of Lika continued to be active among the locals, and their activities included many elements of cultural and educational work. – See: "Skupština žena u Korenici," "Prva okružna konferencija AFŽ za Liku održana 15. rujna 1942. u Šalamuniću," and "Prvi kurs AFŽ u Lici," all three in Marija Šoljan, ed., *Žene Hrvatske u Narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi, tom 1* (Zagreb: Izdanje glavnog odbora Saveza ženskih društava, 1955), 97, 98, 133–36, 136, 137.

37 Žorž Skrigin, *Rat i pozornica* (Beograd: Turistička štampa, 1968), 20.

38 In this article, the group's repertoire is only outlined for the analysis purposes. However, it was broader and more varied.

39 "Proslava Prvog maja u Lici," in *Žene Hrvatske*, 89. Jože Rutić, "Sjećanje na Kazalište narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije," *Kulturni radnik* 7-8 (1952): 327, 328.

40 Vjekoslav Afrić, "Sa Kazalištem narodnog oslobođenja u Bihaću: Po zapisima iz ratnog dnevnika," in Hajro Kapetanović, ed., *Bihaćka republika, knjiga 1: zbornik članaka* (Bihać: Muzej Avnoja i Pounja, 1965), 505.

While even the artists themselves worried about the artistic scope of their wartime cultural work, Afrić conceded that "if we take the reception and enthusiasm of our audience as the measure of our success, then the work of this theatre was a first-class artistic sensation."[41] Their opinion, as already noted, was paramount since the spectators were expected to actively engage in the theatrical performances by loudly and clearly signalling that they understood the content and, whenever possible, that they agreed with it.[42]

The author of the play written for the occasion of May Day 1942, titled Brother Against Brother (*Brat na brata*), was Vjekoslav Afrić. The drama was a literary duel between the Partisans and their enemies – in this instance, the Chetniks. It was one of many such works produced during the war and an agitation piece *par excellence*. The protagonists include two brothers and their mother. After the war breaks out, the elder brother opts to join the Chetniks, while the younger one chooses the Partisans. Upon meeting in their parents' house, the brothers quarrel. As the dispute escalates into a physical confrontation, the mother aids the younger son. The drama reaches its climax when she kills the elder son, thereby avenging the perceived betrayal of her country and its people.

Luka Aparac, the initiator and leading figure of the wartime Slavonian Theatre of the People's Liberation (eastern Croatia), observed that, when watching this play, the audiences were caught "in a unique momentum in which anger supports justice."[43] In other words, this play presented the Partisans in opposition to a local enemy group, thus guiding the audience to align with a specific political position. When the audience members reacted by standing up, shouting, and waving their fists at the representation of the enemy, the actors knew that the play had affected the spectators as they had hoped. Sometimes, plays that embodied enemies had such an emotional effect on individual members of the audience that they wanted to confront the actors portraying Chetnik or Ustasha soldiers. Even though the viewers were reminded it was only acting, there were always individuals who could not tolerate the proximity of actors performing the roles of individuals perceived as traitors.[44] Due to its unambiguous political message and its popularity with the audiences, Brother against Brother was performed not only by the Theatre of the People's Liberation but also as a regular feature of the repertoires of a number of wartime theatre groups throughout Yugoslavia.

Notably, the Theatre of the People's Liberation and other theatres, primarily comprised of actors, endeavoured to prepare and include what they considered "real"

41 Ibid., 511.

42 Sometimes, however, only silence was possible. Actress Mira Banjanin wrote about the performance that the theatrical group of the Second Proletarian Division held for Muslim women in the town of Bijelo Polje (eastern Montenegro). The women watched the performance in absolute silence, and the only sign that they were listening was when, during the recitation of the poem Stojanka, the Mother of Knežopolje (about a mother who lost three sons in the war), "some hands shyly wiped a tear from under the veil." – Mira Banjanin, "S muzikom Druge proleterske divizije od juna 1943. do novembra 1944.," *Mogućnosti* [special issue: *Kultura u NOB-i u Dalmaciji - prilozi, građa, dokumenti*] 28, No. 8–10 (1981): 941.

43 Luka Aparac, "Partizanska kazališta u Slavoniji," *Dani Hvarskoga kazališta: Građa i rasprave o hrvatskoj književnosti i kazalištu* 10, No. 1 (1983): 209.

44 Ibid., 210.

dramas in their repertoires. For example, Filip Kumbatovič Kalan, the director of the Slovenian National Theatre in the Liberated Territory (*Slovensko narodno gledališče na osvobojenem ozemlju*), noticed that professional actors would rather quickly get tired of one-act plays. Soon, any mention of such a play would elicit a strong adverse reaction: "Everyone would go nuts", as the actors perceived such plays as "just a dramatised political hour".[45] That is to say, when discussing their repertoires, the actors often expressed a desire to perform domestic and foreign classics, rather than limit themselves to modest one-act plays, which they saw as dubious in terms of their artistic value. Some amateur theatre groups in the military units aimed to adhere to the same standards. For instance, in December 1943, the political commissar of the Sixth Proletarian Division wrote that each divisional battalion under his command boasted an amateur theatre group capable of presenting several pieces appropriate for the peasant population and written during the war. But, he added, amateur groups directly subordinated to the divisional headquarters could also perform "better" pieces appropriate for the presumedly finer taste of the urban population.[46]

According to the theatrologist Maja Hribar-Ožegović, "Badger in Court" (*Jazavac pred sudom*), written by the Serbian writer Petar Kočić in 1903, was the most popular piece by far. Allegedly inspired by actual events, it recounts the tale of a man who sued a badger for eating all the corn in his field. Feigning a lack of intelligence, the protagonist manages, during his day in court, to ridicule and, using humour, condemn the king and the country's leadership.[47] The topic of the unjust status of the rich and powerful compared to the lower social classes proved attractive to wartime audiences. In addition, it aligned with the general ideological principles of the Communist Party, which the population was gradually getting accustomed to. Therefore, the actors sought to choose plays that would resonate with most Partisan audiences, allowing them to critique the previous social systems, primarily through humour. Certain satirical plays thus appeared in the repertoires of several theatre groups. In addition to Kočić, the most popular were the Serbian playwrights Jovan Sterija Popović and Branimir Nušić, as well as the Russian writers Anton Pavlovich Chekhov and Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol.

While theatrical performances, including short propaganda one-act plays and satires by renowned authors, invited the audience to wave their fists and shout political slogans, thereby expressing their enthusiasm, the comic programme appeared to serve the purpose of allaying fears. For instance, on May Day 1942, Jože Rutić prepared a humorous report – the so-called *vrabac* (sparrow)[48] – about life in the occupied Zagreb, inviting the audience to laugh at the Ustashe. This text, like most similar materials, has not been preserved. However, it is known that it was usually composed of eight- or

45 Filip Kalan, *Veseli veter* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1975), 150.

46 "Izveštaj sekretara divzijskog komiteta 6. divizije od 3. decembra 1943. Centralnom komitetu KPJ," *ZDPNRJN, Volume IX, Book 4*, 589.

47 Hribar-Ožegović, *Kazališna djelatnost*, 115.

48 In some locations, similar music-based news presentations were known as audio weekly or audio news. – See, for instance: Aleksander Valič, Ivanka Mežan, and Zora Konjajev, "V tistih hudih časih je kultura prinašala žarek upanja," *Dialogi: revija za kulturo in družbo* 51, No. 1–2 (2015): 12.

ten-syllable verses that rhymed and were recited with musical accompaniment. *Vrabac* usually recounted the latest novelties and news, both global and local. This type of performance was most probably derived from folk carnival traditions and served best to ridicule one's enemies by dragging them, often caricatured, onto the stage and tearing them down with laughter. In addition, the compilers of the verses for the *vrabac* reports would often make fun of the members of the military or civilian communities to which they were reciting, making the atmosphere at the performance even more jovial, although this was not always viewed favourably by the military and political superiors.[49] To ensure it was up to date, each *vrabac* was written shortly before its presentation. The Slavonian "folk poet" Ljubo Ojdanić claimed that "[i]n half an hour or one hour, one has to write a new report, as without that, there is no [performance]." The reason for this, the poet continued, was that "the report was the programme's crown contribution, [the audiences] looked forward to it and rejoiced [in hearing it]."[50] The audience members would then repeat the funniest and most effective verses among themselves until they, too, forgot them in anticipation of the new edition.

As previously mentioned, the third contribution to the May Day 1942 performance was a ballet. Žorž Skrigin, a ballet dancer and photographer of Russian origin, based his piece on the Ukrainian folklore dance called *hopak*, which he conjured up from memory and the tunes for which he taught to the local accordionist. Remembering this performance, Skrigin wrote that Jože Rutić announced his arrival on stage with the following words: "And now you will see a real Russian Russian (*pravog ruskog Rusa*) from Russia, who will dance a Russian dance for you!"[51] He appeared onstage wearing a red shirt and a fur hat with a five-pointed star "as big as a fist" sewn on it and was greeted by thundering applause. When he started jumping and performing pirouettes – common elements of the *hopak* dance but a complete novelty for the audience – everyone applauded even more enthusiastically, repeatedly exclaiming "Long live the Russian!". Given that the accordionist played his instrument by ear and perhaps got carried away by the audience's delight, he did not stop playing when he was supposed to. He kept repeating the melody, and the audience applauded and cheered while Skrigin danced until he ran out of breath and could not continue.[52] Already at that point, it became obvious that Skrigin's performance would become "the most striking and wildly applauded piece"[53] in the emerging repertoire of the Theatre of the People's Liberation.

Finally, the musical content, which provided the highest level of audience immersion and participation, was perhaps the most popular. An interesting situation regarding the importance of appropriate music selection occurred during the abovementioned

49 For instance: "Izveštaj sekretara partijske organizacije 18. NO brigade od 3. septembra 1943. Centralnom Komitetu KPH," in *ZDPNRJN, Volume IX, Book 4*, 246.

50 Divna Zečević: "Pučke književne tvorevine između umjetnosti i revolucije," in *Kultura i umjetnost u NOB-u*, 204.

51 Skrigin, *Rat i pozornica*, 20.

52 Ibid.

53 Nikola Hercigonja, Untitled text, in Andrija Tomašek, ed., *Muzika i muzičari u NOB, zbornik sjećanja* (Beograd: Savez organizacija kompozitora Jugoslavije etc., 1982), 156.

stay of the Theatre of the People's Liberation in Bihać at the end of 1942. At the event organised on the occasion of the safe passage of the writers Vladimir Nazor and Ivan Goran Kovačić to the liberated territory, the composer Nikola Hercigonja decided to perform Beethoven's Death March from the Op. 26 Piano Sonata. The audience, he recalled, "patiently listened to the first few bars (expecting, I guess, something to happen…)." Then, having lost interest in what they considered a boring musical score, the audience members did not remain decorously quiet. Instead, "there was a murmur, followed by the obligatory cracking of walnuts," which made Hercigonja cut the performance short.[54] On the other hand, nowhere is it recorded that such a thing could happen during the singing of national anthems, domestic and foreign revolutionary and Partisan songs, or folk rhyming couplets, which were, as a rule, scattered throughout the "colourful programmes" of every wartime theatre group. The audience would then merrily sing along at the top of their voices.[55]

Furthermore, whenever possible, the positive mood was extended to the unofficial part of the programme, the afterparty. Although the sources typically refer to afterparties as unofficial, they can be considered regular components of Partisan theatre programmes. They were obligatory for the members of the performing theatre group and any political or military leadership in attendance. For them, at least formally, such occasions provided an opportunity to mingle and interact with the audience members, who, as a rule, expected them. The younger generation was especially eager to attend such events and those who could do so followed theatrical groups on their travels from village to village as far as they could.[56] Their motivation, of course, was not the opportunity to engage in discussions about politics or the war but to enjoy the social aspects of singing, dancing, and socialising in a convivial ambience that such afterparties enabled. As a rule, these events unfolded in a "folklore atmosphere" characterised by circle dances and singing to the accompaniment of an accordion or *gusle* – most notably in the *bećarac*, a rhyming folk couplet – as well as some party games. To echo Mikhail Bakhtin, considered as a whole, the theatrical repertoire – both dramatic and comic programmes, and perhaps most of all the seemingly omnipresent musical component did not further emphasise the already omnipresent destruction and fear. Instead, it conveyed a feeling of shared strength and purpose.[57] Like the theatrical performances, the lively afterparties not only reinforced camaraderie among the participants but also provided a vital sense of normalcy and joy amidst the chaos of war, ultimately strengthening the collective resolve and unity of the Partisan movement.

54 Ibid., 164.

55 Aparac, "Partizanska kazališta," 220. See also: Iva Jelušić, "Warfare with Songbooks," *Connexe* 9 (2023): 158–63, https://oap.unige.ch/journals/connexe/article/view/1400.

56 Vjekoslav Afrić, "Lika i teatar bez kulisa," in *Šesta proleterska divizija*, 540. Duško Vojvodić, *Partizanski kazališni dnevnik: Sjećanja i dokumenti o djelovanju Centralne kazališne družine "August Cesarec" u toku NOR-a* (Zagreb: Radničke novine, 1987), 11.

57 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rableais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 95.

Conclusion

Writing about the work of the Theatre of the People's Liberation in Bihać and its surroundings at the end of 1942, Vjekoslav Afrić and Žorž Skrigin described how the group improved its repertoire. To enhance the artistic quality of the offered content and present to the audiences a compelling and engaging experience, the actors led by Afrić prepared Branimir Nušić's 1923 satire A Suspicious Person (*Sumnjivo lice*, inspired by Gogol's The Government Inspector) in only twelve days.[58] At the same time, Skrigin prepared a new ballet choreography, portraying the eventual triumph of the people over their adversaries, which included composing the music.[59] The group first presented their new programme to the Partisan leadership during the events related to the founding of the AVNOJ and then to the present Partisan units, civilians, the wounded who had sneaked out of the hospital to see them, and some captured Home Guard soldiers.[60]

Despite their mutual differences, the Theatre of the People's Liberation offered the same thing to all their audiences. Upon the exclusion of the Partisan leadership, its performances obviously aimed to inform the spectators about the People's Liberation Struggle and its relevance for the future of Yugoslavia. The popularity of theatrical groups, their official endorsement and encouragement of the cultural and educational efforts, as well as the upsurge of cultural and artistic work as the war progressed attested to the significance of the Partisan approach toward entertainment and fun. It became a "weapon of mass creativity",[61] defying the terrifying reality and enabling dreams of some future freedom that seemed to have already existed in the Partisan units and liberated territories, however ephemeral. First and foremost, the prestige and the accompanying accomplishments of the entertainment groups among the Yugoslav Partisans and their supporters during World War II can be attributed to the deliberate incorporation of a robust political component, both in terms of a current political commentary and in terms of offering an alternative political vision for the future. The intertwining of entertainment with political guidance played a pivotal role not only in "creat[ing] and maintain[ing] the spirit of positive mood and cheerfulness",[62] but also in fostering a cohesive and resilient community willing to fight with everything it had at its disposal.

58 Afrić, "Sa Kazalištem," 510.

59 Žorž Skrigin, "Prva partizanska baletska premijera," in *Bihaćka republika, knjiga 1*, 541, 542.

60 Afrić, "Sa Kazalištem," 500–17.

61 Kirn, "Was Dancing Possible," 3.

62 "Uputstvo pomoćnika političkog komesara glavnog štaba NOV i PO za Crnu Goru i Boku od 16. januara 1944. političkim komesarima podređenih jedinica o organizaciji političkog i kulturnog rada," in *ZDPNRJN, Volume IX, Book 5*, 124.

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"SPLOŠNO VZDUŠJE JE BILO KOT NA NOGOMETNI TEKMI": ZABAVA IN RAZVEDRILO MED NARODNOOSVOBODILNIM BOJEM

POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava ključno vlogo zabave in razvedrila med narodnoosvobodilnim bojem v Jugoslaviji med 2. svetovno vojno. Poudarja, kako so kulturno-izobraževalne dejavnosti, zlasti gledališče, pomembno prispevale k dvigu morale in povezovanju partizanov in civilistov. Gledališče narodne osvoboditve (*Kazalište narodnog oslobođenja*, KNO) je izpostavljeno kot temeljni primer prepletanja umetnosti in propagande, ki je med partizani in njihovimi podporniki spodbujalo občutek skupnosti, neupogljivost in politično zavest.

Vodstvo partizanskega odporniškega gibanja je med vojno prepoznalo pomen kulturnega dela kot sredstva za ohranjanje morale in podpore boju. Gledališča niso bila namenjena le zabavi, ampak so bila tudi pomembno sredstvo političnega izobraževanja

in propagande. Partizanske gledališke skupine so z dramskimi, satiričnimi, glasbenimi in plesnimi predstavami posredovale revolucionarna sporočila, kritizirale sovražnika in vlivale upanje v boljšo prihodnost.

V prispevku je poudarjeno, kako so te predstave nagovarjale tako vojake kot civilno prebivalstvo. Njihova vsebina je pogosto odsevala kruto realnost vojne, vendar je bila predstavljena tako, da je širila kolektivno veselje in optimizem, kar je bilo pomembno zlasti za ohranjanje bojnega duha in povezanosti partizanskega odporniškega gibanja. Gledališke dejavnosti so presegale odrske okvire, saj so se neuradna srečanja izkazala kot pomembna za krepitev družbenih vezi in dajanje občutka normalnosti sredi vojnega kaosa. Na teh dogodkih so se udeleženci lahko sprostili, družili in si obnovili moči, kar je prispevalo k skupni učinkovitosti partizanskega odpora.

Razvedrilne in kulturne dejavnosti med narodnoosvobodilnim bojem torej niso bile namenjene le zabavi, ampak so bile strateškega pomena za odpor. Bile so bistvene za izgradnjo odporne, ideološko predane skupnosti, ki je bila sposobna prenesti vojne tegobe in na koncu doseči svoje cilje.