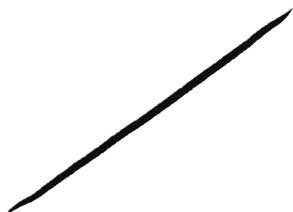


TODAY'S THEATRE CAN RESHAPE TOMORROW'S WORLD: DIALOGUE—*CRISES*, DIRECTED BY ŽIGA DIVJAK

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Abstract: It can be remarked that in the past few years more and more independent theatres around the world are choosing to engage in their productions in debates on climate change, capitalism, and political movements in their home countries, and this can be interpreted as a rise of social activism in theater. Certainly, the interest in contemporary social themes of immediate relevance or activism is a phenomenon already well-established in the European space through documentary or devised theatre, or in the American space through the use of theatre techniques such as Verbatim or Participatory Theatre. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the intentions behind a project that addresses such relevant themes from the perspective of the director or the creative team, especially in the Eastern European region. Therefore, throughout this paper, I will present some relevant productions on these topics and then discuss the performance *Crises* directed by Žiga Divjak at the Mladinsko Theatre in Ljubljana, Slovenia. In order to deepen the understanding of the artistic motivations behind social theater, I also conducted a dialogical interview with the director Žiga Divjak and used it as a research method for my paper.

Keywords: theatre, performance, social theatre, dramaturgy, actor-director relationship, Žiga Divjak.

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Introduction

This paper focuses on understanding and examining in-depth the artistic motivations behind the creative decision to stage a theatre performance that discusses highly relevant contemporary themes such as climate change and capitalism in nowadays' staging—starting from a concrete case, namely the performance *Crises*, directed by Žiga Divjak. In this regard, after attending this performance and engaging in a dialogue with the director about the creative process, the process of working on stage with the actors, and the motivations behind this production, I used the method of interview and dialogue as a research method to deepen this subject and to fully comprehend it.

In order to begin discussing some relevant examples of performances that have brought into focus themes of this kind, both from the Eastern European and Balkan space, it is necessary to have a better understanding of the term *Social Activism* in theatre and its specificities. Furthermore, in order to better comprehend this aspect of contemporary theatre, it is important to briefly take a glimpse back in time to when social theatre—documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, or other similar forms of theatre that address real stories or important social realities using a documentary character and some form of artistic research—first appeared.

From social theatre to social activism in theatre

It is possible to consider a radical change in the way theatre was practiced, starting with the *Agitprop* movements in Russia, Bertolt Brecht's *Epic Theatre*, or Erwin Piscator and his documentary theatre, which were turning points in European theatre that led to a radical change in its paradigm (Innes, 1972, p. 66). Brecht considered both political/social and epic theatre as a theatre that offers enlightenment, knowledge, and clarity. Brecht perceived these elements as crucial contributions to emancipation and aimed to integrate them into his theatre. Through his artistic work, Brecht emphasized the importance of rationality and information. Both Brecht and Piscator explored social relations and aimed to emancipate the suppressed, giving people insight into their own social position and the changing nature of the social weave (Zoob, 2019, p. 181). At this instance, it is worth mentioning the play *Trotz Alledem* directed by Piscator in 1925, an emblematic play that is the basis of what we call today documentary theatre and socially involved theatre. The play was one of the earliest in which real documents, letters, and other such materials were introduced into a theatrical performance (Loup, 1972).

As far back as the period of Brecht and Piscator, the theatre began to take root in society and gradually began to radically change mentalities, influence the audience and stimulate their action and reflection. A similar approach was taken by Arthur Miller in 1930s America, or later by Nola Chilton with her Israeli documentary theatre in the 1950s and 1970s. Likewise, there is Anna Deavere Smith and her Verbatim theatre with its strong social and activist influences and implications, or Peter Brook and his 1966 production *U.S.*—a performance that, for the first time, discussed the Vietnam War and its social implications, in which Brook advocated for a staging of the clash of ideas rather than a propagandistic or political staging, one in which he aimed to protest against what was happening in Vietnam and through which he intended to offer the audience a second perspective (Kustow, 1968, p. 12-14). Needless not to forget Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed, a theatrical genre that was extremely socially involved and that proposed to fundamentally change the spectator and even transform it into a *spectator-actor* (Campbell, 2019). Boal, through the development of forum theatre or legislative theatre, was also attempting to explore various forms or techniques through which he could develop plays based on the proposals and involvement of the audience. All these experiments and attempts of Boal's had as their final goal the double liberation of the oppressed people, which he considered to be the most important starting point for revolutionary action, by moving from the spectator to the *spectator-actor*.

Among all these artists, it is important to underline the documentary character of the theatre and the way it was introduced in the first phase by Piscator. Piscator developed a highly professional theatre, with skilled theatre actors, that aimed to portray on stage international political concerns in an easily accessible manner and through a working-class approach. Its plays have been designed to be a propaganda tool for revolutionary change in the social order (Piscator, 1966). Most of Piscator's experiments and stagings, in addition to their social and documentary character, often involved the dynamiting of conventional theatre forms—the breaking of the theatre of art as we knew it before. He was aiming at a theatre of society, a theatre as a mirror and propaganda, a theatre that was sharp and real—an engine of change and enlightenment through knowledge—which was later promoted by Brecht throughout his theatrical oeuvre.

Bertolt Brecht continued and further elaborated Piscator's approach, theorizing the political aims of theatre as well as implementing the Marxist perspective on theatre: in contrast to the Aristotelian traditional theatre, which aims to portray the world as it is, the Brechtian epic theatre strives to represent the shifting of the world, and the attempt of the world to evolve—in this manner of conceiving and creating theatre, Brecht's approach had an extremely strong observational and social character.

Consequently, it can be remarked that the social function that theatre has had in the last century, the direct involvement of theatre makers in debates on social and political issues, the involvement of the audience as part of the artistic process or the final product, and above all, the inclination towards research and the presentation and representation of immediate reality through their art, all of these were characteristics, succinctly put, of documentary and social theatre that led to a new way of conceiving and crafting theatre.

Notions such as activism, solidarity, and education – vital for humanism – have, for years, been strangled and emptied of meaning by political or ideological factors, so today we should try to rediscover them, reinvent them, reshape them. Without these values, the art of theatre—"the life shared with the living"—cannot exist. (Apostol, 2018, p. 8)

Therefore, it can be remarked that the director Radu Apostol, a promoter of social theatre in Romania, endorses similar principles for his theatrical approach as the majority of the above-mentioned theatre makers. It can be clearly observed how the social character, the educational and activist component underlies the creative methods of these directors and playwrights—and all these specificities underlie social theatre with activist implications.

Today's social theatre with an activist character

Thus, it can be noticed that those generations, previously mentioned, paved the way for current authors who choose to pursue similar directions and who through their art want to achieve a sort of social protest, a sort of activist movement that tends to debate topics such as climate change, capitalism, or other political forms or even the meaning of life in relation to the current society. If in the last decades, most Eastern European productions debated social political issues or issues restricted to their social space, nowadays more and more theatre creators tend to focus on major issues of global concern and tend to have productions that encourage *action*—hence the activist nature that theatre can have.

Therefore, it can be argued that theatre which can be described as a theatre with activist implications is the theatre of *protest* and a theatre that encourages action and immediate change through its inherent essence. In the Eastern European sphere, in recent years, more and more relevant productions have emerged that debate themes such as those mentioned above and that aim to fundamentally change the audience—transforming it from a passive audience into an active and engaged one.

For instance, in the Polish theatre space, a 2020 play called *Martwa natura*, directed by Agnieszka Jakimiak at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw, is an emblematic production that addresses climate change and the misguided political decisions being made in this regard. The nature of the performance itself points towards an activist and extremely powerful theatre as the whole staging is conceived as a funeral table, in memory of the nature around us that has perished. All this staging humanizes nature and buries it alive, urging us to change something in our reality until it's too late (Majewska, 2021).



Martwa natura (2020), directed by Agnieszka Jakimiak
[Powszechny Theatre, Warsaw]. © Magda Hueckel/2020
Source: <https://www.powszechny.com/spektakle/martwa-natura,s1737.html>

A performance from the Romanian theatre scene that brings up the issue of illegal deforestation, which is currently on a large scale in Romania, and which is based on the real story of a forester killed for his attempt to defend the forest against illegal deforestation, is the performance *Verde tăiat*, directed by Adina Lazăr, staged in 2021, in Zalău, Romania, at the Pro Theatre. Although the staging is a classical one, one performed on a conventional stage, the show itself has an extremely moving and cutting discourse, which leads to action and awakening of the audience by appealing to emotions and the illegalities that take place on this theme. In other words, this performance can be read as a protest against illegal deforestation in Romania, one that calls to society for action—saying clearly and loudly: *Not this way!* (Martin, 2021).



Verde tăiat (2020), directed by Adina Lazăr
[Pro Teatru, Zalău] © Adina Nedișan/2021
Source: <https://fnt.ro/2021/verde-taiat-de-alexandra-felseghi/>

Moreover, theatre festivals also propose themes similar to those mentioned above. For example, in 2021, at the Belgrade International Theater Festival (BITEF) in Serbia, the slogan chosen by the organizers was “On the Edge of the Future” and the main theme was climate change. Through this choice, the organizers tried to raise awareness of the global environmental crisis, and the possible cataclysm through the proposed cultural framework.¹ There was also a Schaubune Theatre production from Berlin, directed by Katie Mitchell, called *(Not) the End of the World* presented at *BITEF*. This production was described

¹ <https://festival.bitef.rs/en/about-us/history>, accessed at 13 February 2023.

by critics in Serbia as an extremely powerful and militant production for the protection of the planet, which fought assertively, both through direction as well as staging and dramaturgy, for action on climate change.²

In addition to this, another very important project is the one developed by CEEweb for Biodiversity, an association in Hungary, which tries to bring awareness of climate change and the problems arising from the capitalist social scheme into theatre productions. They collaborate with artists from Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, and Slovakia.³

Most productions of this kind, whether conventional or non-conventional, tend to address similar themes, themes that touch on the most relevant and pressing issues of contemporary society. The majority of artists who tackle these themes, such as the ones mentioned above, also have a very personal point of starting—a framing that then becomes, through their artistry, the statement of the performance they create.

Crises, a particular case of theatre with activist implications

Understanding what socially engaged and activist theatre means, both through examples of productions and through the theories and practices developed by theatre makers, it is essential to turn our attention to a particular production, that is allegedly activist in nature and that, through its message as well as through the nature of its directing, encourages the audience to take action. *Crises*, a performance from the Mladinsko Theatre in Ljubljana, Slovenia, directed by Žiga Divjak, dramaturgy by Goran Injac, is an extremely powerful staging, full of both visual and textual metaphors that bring into question empathy, love, and climate change—all under a direct critique of capitalism. In a way, through this performance, the director has aimed to raise questions about the current political and social systems and to encourage us to think about them and act towards a better and safer future for ourselves, but especially for future generations.

The performance had its premiere on 30.09.2022, in Belgrade, at *BITEFF*, and then entered the official season of Mladinsko Theatre. For more than an hour, all the actors run continuously on stage, and starting from their naked bodies, a symbol of purity at birth and hope, they then choose the archetypes with which they will walk later in life. The whole performance is a conscious run towards a dream, towards salvation, towards something that may never come true. All this running finally ends in disfigurement and hopelessness but is ultimately redeemed through love, action, and empathy towards each other and our planet. The

2 <https://festival.bitef.rs/en/program/not-the-end-of-the-world>, accessed at 13 February 2023.

3 <https://climategame.eu/activities/improvisation-theatre>, accessed at 13 February 2023.

performance itself is a metaphor, a metaphor of running through life that brings into question personal, social, and global crises.

After attending this performance at the *Mladisnko Showcase 2023*, I was intrigued to have a better understanding of this activist trend in theatre and the director's directorial and artistic intentions, thus following the performance I had a dialogue on the subject.



Žiga Divjak, © Jure Eržen/2021.

Source: <https://www.delo.si/sobotna-priloga/za-nas-obstajajo-pravila-in-zakoni-za-njih-pa-ne/>

Žiga Divjak is a young director from Ljubljana, and he is one of Slovenia's most in-demand and highly acclaimed directors. His performances often focus on social injustice or environmental themes. Among the performances he has created was *The Game*, presented in 2020, a performance based on the real stories of refugees and immigrants and their experiences at the borders. This performance talks especially about the lack of empathy the authorities display when it comes to the treatment of immigrants. Žiga additionally received the *Borštnik Award* for directing the play *The Man Who Watched the World* (2017) at the Mladisnko Theatre in Ljubljana.

As soon as it began, the message of this performance was very strong and clear, from the first moment I was able to grasp it, as well as meaning of the play altogether. However, I asked Žiga, what it was about. Maybe the way I interpreted it was different from his intentions. I think that firstly there is a clear discussion about the human condition and capitalism, and secondly, it is a critical debate on the climate change around us. He argued:

I believe we cannot talk about global warming and climate crises without talking about capitalism. They are all interconnected, and I definitely believe that global warming and climate crises are consequences of capitalism and the political and social decisions around us. On top of that, there is this desire to continually grow in every way, to buy and consume more and more, all on a planet that has limited resources and limited possibilities. My starting point from the beginning was that we cannot talk about the climate crisis without bringing capitalism into the discussion. If we want to solve or find real solutions to climate problems, then we must rethink the way the powers of the world decide everything, and the way money moves and decides for us. (Žiga Divjak in Boldea, 2022)

As an actor and playwright, I was working on many projects in the past where the process was more important to me than the final product. Therefore, I was curious to understand what was the process for Žiga. Was it personal, and if so, was it a personal one for everyone? In this regard, he argued that their starting points were different in the beginning, but the whole point of this process was to go into detail on this issue and find something personal in it. All this because of the situation the actors are put in, is running away for more than an hour, this is a metaphor for the things we do anyway in our daily lives—which is in itself a run towards the destruction of the planet. Of course, it is not the action itself of general rushing that kills the earth, but its consequences. We produce more than we need, and we buy and pollute by our haste more than is necessary. The way we are forced to live our lives makes us do this, it is not necessarily our intention. He underlined this combination of hastiness, consumerism, and inattention to our surroundings as an extremely dangerous combination.

Therefore, I was very curious to understand what was the most meaningful thing for him as a director in the whole process. He responded:

I know all the actors very well because we've worked on other projects together, so I enjoyed the process of working with them – it was extremely important to me. The most important parts were when we started to resonate with the theme that I proposed, and we all brought our input to the project. One lesson I learned was to regard the world without tension and with clarity and think about what I have to do to make the world around me better or more responsible. And at the same time to have doubts about life in our times, of course, it's nice to have expensive things and all kinds of objects, but is that the meaning

of life? Somehow, we have to find the beauty of life beyond all this, to find through beauty new ways of living in the future. (Žiga Divjak in Boldea, 2022)

I wanted to understand if he as a director believes that it is important to address themes such as those he has approached throughout his performance in contemporary theatre. He believed and strongly argued that it's important for theatre to bring up real issues that the world is facing today, and even if it can't change them, at least to raise questions and create active and powerful thoughts in the spectator's mind—because they're the ones that can really make a difference.



Crises (2022), directed by Žiga Divjak, dramaturgy by Goran Injac,
[Mladinsko Theatre in Ljubljana, Slovenia] © Matej Povše/2022
Source: <https://mladinsko.com/en/program/150/crises/>

To better understand his intentions, I wanted to know where he drew his inspiration for the creative process of this performance. I know many artists who listen to a record or watch a film and they already know very well what they will do as their next project—but where did his inspiration stem from in this particular case? He argued:

My inspiration came from my own concerns about the subject, of course. But besides all that, the production was focused on the quotes from the books by Jason Hickel, *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*, and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* – and these works have allowed all of us to put the basic ideas

together and make them coherent and reach the audience in a proper dramaturgical form. I also believe that the nature of the devised theatre technique we approached in working on this performance allowed us to inspire each other around this theme. (Žiga Divjak in Boldea, 2022)

When creating a theatre that is militant and activist, and yet full of social or political meaning and implications, is there a consideration of who the intended beneficiary is? What kind of audience am I making this performance for? Does this question exist in the director's mind? On that note, I asked Žiga, if he thought about whom he wanted to present this performance to primarily, or who would be the type of audience that definitely needs to see it. He argued, in the most sincere way, that he didn't want to think of the public in this regard. He didn't want to think about to whom exactly it will change something. He also underlined that he makes performances that are relevant, true, and meaningful to him primarily on a personal level—rather he thinks about what he would like to say through his art and how to do it in a powerful way, to let his creativity come through. Beyond that, as he said before, what's important is that it can be a general performance for any audience of any maturity, and *Crises*, in particular, is a performance that raises questions and makes us aware of the unseen truth around us. "Maybe it's time to stop running before it's too late—before we're forced to stop altogether!", he argues.



Crises (2022), directed by Žiga Divjak, dramaturgy by Goran Injac,
[Mladinsko Theatre in Ljubljana, Slovenia]
© Matej Povše/2022

Source: <https://mladinsko.com/en/program/150/crises/>

Therefore, it is clearly established that the director's intentions were quite clear from the beginning. He emphasized the message of the performance, the theme, and the sub-themes he wanted to address and tried to bring everything to a very personal level for himself, the actors, and the other members of the team. However, the type of audience he created this performance for was not something that was relevant to him, rather he believes that everyone should see and understand these types of issues.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be observed that both the aforementioned productions and *Crises* are based on the desire for change and social action that they bring to the audience—which makes them somewhat socially engaged and above all, a kind of activist productions for the themes they address. However, when we refer to this, we are not necessarily referring to activism in the raw sense of the word, we are arguing about the theme and message they set out to explore in their work and more importantly, the way in which they are presented to the public.

Most performances of this kind choose an abstract or ritualistic aesthetic and tend to take everything towards emotional or physical exhaustion – otherwise a general statement about the contemporary world. Each production, but especially *Crises*, as we understand from our dialogue with the director, aims to raise questions and urge action, rather than provide solutions or answers to the problems it presents.

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3. *Martwa natura* (2020) Directed by Agnieszka Jakimiak [Powszechny Theatre, Warsaw].
4. *Verde tăiat* (2020) Directed by Adina Lazăr [Pro Teatru, Zalău].

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