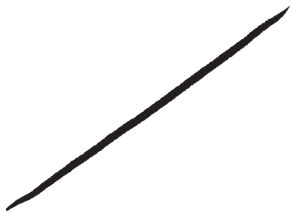


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CHILDREN'S THEATRE FESTIVAL.

A PERSPECTIVE ON GENRE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: As the twentieth century drew to a close, festivals began to take many different forms, each reflecting shifts in society and changes in the management of culture. Some gatherings initially focused narrowly on one type of performance or audience, gradually developing a more defined structure and purpose. One type of festival stood out: those created specifically for young viewers. Their growth mirrored deeper changes in society, such as shifting views of childhood, wider public access, and the increasing importance of festivals in cultural planning. This work examines children's theatre festivals in the context of wider historical and structural developments, exploring how it came into existence, grew and evolved over time. By comparing Romania's example with global patterns, this study demonstrates that these festivals not only showcase art, but also help to shape recognition of the genre, guide audience habits and garner attention for institutions amidst intense competition. The form that children's theatre takes in Romania shifts over time, following worldwide currents, yet always adapting to fit homegrown cultural needs. This leads to the emergence of events with a clearer purpose and more focused expression.

Keywords: Theatre festival, children's theatre festival, performing arts, festival landscape in Romania, indoor/outdoor festival.

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Introduction

The concept of a festival originates from the Latin word *festum*, meaning "celebration" or "feast", and has traditionally been associated with collective rituals, public ceremonies, and intensified communal experiences. From the Dionysian ceremonies of ancient Greece and the entertainments held in Roman amphitheatres, to the pilgrimages, mysteries and carnivals of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, festivals have always served cultural, social and symbolic purposes. As Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese explain, early modern festivals were held "with a frequency and splendour unmatched today" (2018, p. 17), highlighting their important role in creating spectacles in social life.

However, the social and symbolic functions of festivals are not limited to the celebrations themselves. Festivals have also served as tools for organising societies and negotiating their social dynamics and symbolic orders. While their initial basis in community rituals and sacred practices has given way to secularised, institutionalised forms, the modern era has reconfigured communities' communal functions into spaces for civic representation, intercultural exchange and public engagement with institutions and cultural products.

Significant developments within this process occurred in the 20th century, especially after World War II. Festivals became tools for rebuilding societies

and fostering international cooperation. The establishment of pioneering festivals such as the Edinburgh International Festival and the Festival d'Avignon signalled a new approach to creating festivals centred on artistic excellence and strategic cultural framing. The impressive reach and impact of modern festivals demonstrate the extent to which festival culture has become institutionalised as a powerful cultural infrastructure. The Edinburgh Festival attracts almost 400,000 spectators each year, making it one of Europe's largest festivals. The Edinburgh Fringe sells over 850,000 tickets annually, and the Avignon Festival hosts thousands of performances, attracting over 150,000 spectators.

These figures suggest that festivals have become more than temporary celebrations for specific audiences. They have become infrastructures for producing, disseminating, and consuming cultural products. Within this framework, children's theatre festivals can be understood not simply as manifestations of a centuries-old theatrical tradition, but as emerging from a complex process that has transformed the way cultural institutions produce, consume, support and institutionalise children's engagement with theatre and the performing arts.



Avignon Festival (7-26 July 2022)

Image source: <https://www.provenceguide.co.uk/experience/experiences-provence/festival-davignon/>

1. The festival as a tool for socio-cultural reconstruction

It is no coincidence that the Edinburgh Festival and the Avignon Festival are mentioned in numerous statistics and case studies, as they are benchmarks for the public success of an international theatre festival. These two traditional festivals are two of the most important theatre events in Europe and, since their inception in 1947, have represented a unique model that would transform the way we relate to the concept of a *festival*. This is because, beyond the resounding success they have enjoyed for decades, the two festivals share the vision that underpinned their creation. Both were organised immediately after the Second World War, in deeply affected regions (Keil, 2017, p. 22), as an attempt at socio-cultural reconstruction, intended to compensate for the shortcomings of the local offer through an international programme.

The Edinburgh Festival is unique for its Fringe section, the largest of its kind in the world. And the Avignon Festival stands out from the rest for “its ability to adapt to the demands of the public, without compromising on the quality of the performances” (Tomuş, 2013, p. 33).

Later, with the emergence of festivals such as BITEF—Belgrade International Theatre Festival (1967), Santarcangelo dei Teatri (1971), and the Kaaithheater International Biennial of Contemporary Theatre and Dance (1977), which would become an independent artistic centre, we can talk about multicultural and multidisciplinary festivals. With performances that transcend traditional space, these festivals brought into question a new type of discourse on community and performance space (Keil, 2017, pp. 28-29).

In this context, which favoured innovation in unconventional spaces, outdoor performing arts also experienced a significant revitalisation. The festivities in Ghent, Belgium, one of the largest outdoor art and music festivals in Europe (pipeaway.com, 2017), were resumed, and in 1971 the Hat Fair Festival in Winchester, the longest-running annual street theatre festival in the United Kingdom, was launched. In Spain, in 1981, Fira Tarrega was launched, a festival-type show fair that transforms the Barcelona region into the world capital of street theatre for a week. The festival’s success led to a new model being implemented in Catalonia, where the Mostra Igualada Festival (1988) was later launched, an international performance market in the field of children’s theatre. In France, the most important landmarks remain the Eclat Street Theatre Festival, Aurillac (1986) and the Chalon dans la Rue Festival, Chalon-sur-Saone (1987).

2. Children's theatre festival

In the large family of festivals launched in the mid-20th century, many of them also offered related sections, programming outdoor events, concerts, film screenings, conferences, colloquiums, but also activities for young audiences. Thus, festivals in Vienna, Berlin, Aarhus, London, Paris included for the first time shows and workshops dedicated to children in their programmes—a notion that would form the basis for the idea of developing an entire festival around theatre performances and artistic activities for children.

This new concept came against the backdrop of a profound change in the perception of children, their rights, and their needs. Changes in child labour legislation, compulsory schooling, and social policies for the protection of children introduced in the 19th and 20th centuries contributed to an unprecedented transformation. For the first time, “children became economically insignificant but emotionally invaluable,” and childhood was associated with play, education, and progressive preparation for adult life (Heywood, 2017, p. 202). However, it is not only the perception of children that is undergoing a major transformation, but also the perception of the artistic experience itself. During this period, children take their place as theatre spectators and the target audience of such festivals in a world marked by democratised access to culture. A world in which children's theatre is validated for the first time, being recognised as an art form that meets the specific aesthetic, educational and moral needs of young spectators.

2.1. *The first theatre festivals for children*

According to the *International Guide to Theatre, Dance and Folklore Festivals* (Merin, Burdick, 1979), by the end of the 1970s there were already several festivals dedicated to young audiences and specialists involved in the aesthetic education of children and adolescents. Europe in those years was divided into the “communist bloc” and the “Western countries.” The festivals in the East (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania) played more of a representative role, with the mission of presenting to the public the most successful children's theatre productions in the country, and less frequently inviting international shows. Western festivals (France, Denmark, Great Britain) also served as a market or exchange for performances, acting as a link between artists and producers/investors.

An exception in the East was the International Theatre Festival for Children and Youth (Sofia, Bulgaria), which managed to present both performances produced by Bulgarian artists and productions from abroad. At the 1976 edition, in addition to the five Bulgarian theatres invited, 12 theatre companies from 8 countries took part in the festival. In 1979, the ASSITEJ

(International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People) Festival and Congress brought together twelve theatre companies that presented their productions. Among the participants, alongside theatres from the United States, the USSR and Czechoslovakia, was the Ion Creangă Theatre in Bucharest.

The Children's Theatre Festival in Copenhagen, Denmark, was organised with the aim of bringing children's theatre productions to the attention of the public, but also to attract funding for new projects by involving local authorities and various private organisations and companies. The festival also had travelling editions to encourage the development of children's theatre in other Danish cities or regions. At the end of the 1970s, a typical edition included 40 companies and over 130 performances for an audience of 25,000 people.

In France, the guide mentions the International Meeting of Theatres for Children and Young People in Lyon, a festival launched in 1977, in a biannual format, which brought together theatre companies from around the world, professionals and amateurs, with the aim of creating meaningful experiences for young audiences, using theatre as a tool to help children understand the social and cultural reality of the moment.

Also mentioned here are the Children's Art Biennial in Poznan, Poland, a competitive festival that included creations in the field of theatre and audio-visual arts, and the Festival of Theatre Performances for Children and Youth, organised for the first time in 1969 by the Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamţ. It should be noted that the Piatra-Neamţ Festival was initially held every two years, then every four years, and was later cancelled by the authorities. It was only resumed in 1992, with that edition also marking the first time that the programme included performances by artists from other countries, with theatres and theatre companies from Italy, Lithuania, the Republic of Moldova, Hungary, and the United States of America being invited. In Australia, over the course of a decade, three festivals promoting the performing arts for young audiences were launched: The Leap—Sydney, Come out—Adelaide and Round Up—Perth, with a programme that included a multitude of performances and activities created especially for children.

From 1979 to the present day, ASSITEJ, the most authoritative association today, lists on its website over 150 international children's theatre festivals (2022) taking place around the world. It continues to be the main vector for specialists in the field of performing arts for children, generating cultural exchanges, supporting and promoting international productions and festivals—and organising its own events and meetings, which aim to unite the international community of children's theatre (including the ASSITEJ World al Congress and the ASSITEJ International Children's Theatre Festival). The association also promotes many campaigns dedicated to encouraging children

to attend theatre. Among the most successful events, I would like to mention the International Children's Theatre Festival in Vancouver, Canada, Take Off Durham, United Kingdom, offering a quality programme supported by artists from all over the world, with a selection of shows for the whole family, but also for families with school-age children, or groups from schools and kindergartens. For Mostra Igualada, Spain, the aim is to promote Catalan culture internationally to a new level, encouraging artistic creation, production, and exploitation of shows. At the same time, strategic markets contribute to the development of cultural infrastructure and audience development. The Jerusalem Puppet Theatre Festival features, in its two main sections, productions from Israel and productions from the international scene. The festival also presents multidisciplinary outdoor projects, street theatre performances and workshops in unconventional spaces. As far as the Romanian cultural scene is concerned, the post-1989 period brought a major change for children's festivals. The country opened up, and contacts were established with theatres and companies abroad, as well as with specialised international organisations. It was a period of exploration, with festivals searching for their purpose and role in the society in which they were beginning to develop. The following decade saw a unique effervescence, with five major international children's theatre festivals being launched in Romania between 2000 and 2010.

2.2. Children's theatre festival in Romania

For a long time, children's theatre in Romania was known internationally mainly through tours and participation in festivals organised in other countries, but even these activities were sporadic. However, with the arrival of the 1990s, we can talk about an international opening of a completely different scale. As early as 1992, children's theatres launched their first festivals with European aspirations: the Gulliver Theatre in Galați organised the Gulliver Animation Festival, which became international three years later, in 1995, and the Marionette Troupe of the Ioan Slavici Classical Theatre in Arad organised the first edition of the EuroMarionete International Animation Theatre Festival.

The experience of these early projects generates a unique effervescence in the following decade, so that between 2000 and 2010 no fewer than five major international children's theatre festivals are launched. In 2002, the Puck Puppet Theatre in Cluj-Napoca organised the first edition of the International Puck Puppet Theatre Festival, a festival that would carve out a unique identity among animation theatres in Romania, offering the public an international selection with shows produced by renowned artists from the United Kingdom, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia, Spain, Slovenia, Ukraine, Hungary, Canada, and Japan.



Take Off Festival Durham, United Kingdom, 2022

Image source: <https://www.theatrehullabaloo.org.uk/shows/fly/>

In 2005, the first edition of the International Children's Theatre Festival "100, 1,000, 1,000,000 Stories" (FITC) took place, organised by the Ion Creangă Theatre in Bucharest. It was initiated by director Cornel Todea, then manager of the theatre. Conceived as a platform for artistic dialogue, in the context of the theatre's 40th anniversary, the festival marked the launch of the "Early Education. Theatre for 0–3-year-olds" programme, a first in Romania. The festival had a competitive format and a professional jury, and it became one of the most important festivals of its kind in the country and abroad, creating a strong bond between the audience and the artists.



International Children's Theatre Festival

"100, 1,000, 1,000,000 Stories" Ion Creangă Theatre, Bucharest, Romania, 2015

Image source: <https://teatrulioncreanga.ro/eveniment/festivalul-international-de-teatru-pentru-copii-100-1-000-1-000-000-de-povesti/>

Over time, this event has grown in popularity. Participants from many countries and prominent figures from the Romanian theatre scene dedicated to children honoured the event with their presence: Travelling Light Theatre from the United Kingdom, Al Harah Theatre from Israel, Backa Theatre from Sweden, Kashtanka, Ekaterinburg Theatre for Young Spectators, Russia, Cie Balabik Company, France. This festival has also become a place for debate and support for the seminar The Benefits of Cooperation within ASSITEJ—Association Internationale du Théâtre pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse. Some of the most important performances were: *Ușa-Doi clovni cu probleme* (The Door—Two Clowns with Problems), Dance Theatre Hurjaruuth, Finland; *Mignone*, Mr. Pejo's Wandering Dolls Theatre, Russia; *Ba*, Piccoli Principi Theatre Company, Italy, and last but not least, *Albă ca zăpada și cei șapte pitici* (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs), directed by Cornel Todea, Ion Creangă Theatre, Romania.

This festival has gradually become an ambassador for Romanian culture and a necessary tool for the community and the city, addressing all theatre lovers, families and especially children. The target audience is children aged 0 to 12 and their parents, residents of the municipality and culture lovers. The specific objectives of this festival were to promote moral, aesthetic and social values, to encourage and stimulate children's creativity, to familiarise young audiences with performances of all genres and from various areas of the performing arts, and to offer families a high-quality recreational programme. The international dimension added value to the event and helped to increase cultural tourism in Romania.

Also in 2005, the International Animation Theatre Festival "Joy for Children. Collectible Performances" was launched in Bucharest, organised by the Țândărică Animation Theatre. The first edition took the form of a successful micro-season, and the programme was resumed in 2006 with an international selection in the form of a competition with prizes awarded by a specialist jury, in keeping with the festival's mission to promote contemporary trends in visual and animation theatre (Țândărică Animation Theatre, 2012). After ten editions held under this name, the Festival opened its 11th edition as the ImPuls International Festival of Contemporary Animation Theatre.

A year later, in 2006, the Prichindel Puppet Theatre in Alba Iulia organised the first edition of the Theatre Festival "Stories for Children and Adults," a festival that included both shows dedicated to young audiences and shows for adult audiences, as well as a multitude of related activities: conferences, concerts, workshops and exhibitions (2022).

In 2008, a new theatre festival for children was initiated by Olțița Cântec, this time in Iași, where the Luceafărul Theatre for Children and Youth organised the first edition of the International Theatre Festival for Children and Youth,

which would later be renamed the Iași International Theatre Festival for Young Audiences (FITPTI). With a dynamic and varied programme, bringing together theatre performances, animation, dance, video installations, public readings, street theatre and film screenings, the festival invited theatres and companies from Europe, Asia, France, South America and North America to Iași (Luceafărul Theatre for Children and Youth, Iași, 2008).

All these projects have continued to develop, becoming traditional festivals for young and very young audiences. Against the backdrop of these examples of good practice, the years 2010–2020 saw the emergence of a new wave of projects. These include a series of indoor festivals, often on a smaller scale, which illustrate the desire of theatres to align themselves with this international opening. This category includes: the Arcadia Children's Theatre Festival (Regina Maria Theatre, Oradea, 2014), the Cărbuș International Children's Theatre Festival (Brăila Puppet Theatre, 2014), the Arlechino 66—Caravana poveștilor (Arlechino Children's Theatre, Brașov, 2015), the Sibiu Youth Festival (Gong Theatre, Sibiu, 2015) and the International Animation Festival “Sub bagheta lui Merlin” (Children's and Youth Theatre, Timișoara, 2016).

At the same time, having already gained experience in organising a large-scale international (indoor) theatre festival, certain theatres are proposing new models of festivals, in less conventional formats, including outdoor, interactive and multidisciplinary ones. In 2012, the *Țândărică* Animation Theatre organised the first edition of the Summer Theatre, Street and Child Festival, later renamed the Theatre, Street and Child Festival. The festival takes place in an oversized mobile theatre-tent structure (*Țândărică* Travelling Theatre), which allows for a travelling summer programme in the parks of the capital.

In 2014, as director of the Ion Creangă Theatre, I proposed and created the first open-air theatre festival dedicated to the whole family: the “Childhood Memories” Festival. While the pilot edition took place in the courtyard of a museum, the following editions were held in Kiseleff Park and Tineretului Park, in a kaleidoscopic format, with international participation, combining theatre performances, street theatre, fixed or mobile acrobatics, contemporary dance or contemporary circus, as well as performative installations.

While these two festivals take place in parks—the Theatre, Street, Child Festival aims to recreate the conditions of a theatre hall in an open space, and the “Childhood Memories” Festival activates the park in the form of several theatrical areas, connected by various artistic interventions—the third example takes us to the public square. In 2017, the Puck Puppet Theatre launched the WonderPuck Street Festival in Unirii Square and Museum Square in Cluj-Napoca. With a programme that includes performances by international artists from its second

edition (2018) onwards, the festival is the only open-air alternative for children and families in Transylvania (WonderPuck Street Festival, n.d.).

Another relevant example is the Colibri Theatre for Children and Youth in Craiova, whose “Puppets Occupy Street” stands out not only for its longevity but also for the size of its programme. Launched in 2014, “Puppets Occupy Street” is the first animation art festival in Romania held exclusively in unconventional spaces. Organised annually, the festival gained an international dimension from its second edition onwards. Currently, puppets occupy the streets of Craiova in over 400 events per edition, with the support of artists from over fifteen countries (Children’s and Youth Theatre—Colibri, 2018).

3. Festivalisation, cultural policy and the institutional logic of children’s theatre festivals

The increase in theatre festivals during the second half of the twentieth century is often interpreted as an artistic phenomenon. However, it can also be viewed as a consequence of the so-called “festivalisation” of culture, which is a structural change in which festivals become the primary means of cultural production, urban management and institutional visibility. Theorists do not view festivals as one-off celebrations, but as organised events that recur over time and influence artistic production, audiences, and symbolic capital.

In post-war Europe, festivals such as the Edinburgh International Festival and the Festival d’Avignon demonstrated how festivals could serve as platforms for artistic production and tools for cultural policy. This model has since been reproduced and adapted in various forms, ranging from large festivals to small, genre-specific events. The same logic can be applied to children’s theatre festivals.

These can be understood in terms of three intersecting institutional logics: genre legitimisation, audience construction, and urban-cultural positioning.

3.1. Genre legitimisation

For decades, theatre for children was considered to be outside the mainstream of national theatrical traditions. Associated with education rather than art, it was deemed not sophisticated enough to be considered an artistic genre. The emergence of children’s theatre festivals helped to change this perception. Genres that previously had few opportunities to gain recognition now had competitive or curated platforms to showcase their work.

Organisations such as ASSITEJ International played a pivotal role in this transformation by fostering an international dialogue about children’s theatre and establishing professional standards. Children’s theatre festivals therefore serve the

symbolic function of consolidation, establishing theatre for young audiences as a legitimate artistic genre.

3.2. Audience construction and cultural socialisation

Children's theatre festivals can also be viewed as tools for actively developing audiences. In the context of expanding access to culture in late twentieth-century Europe, children emerged as cultural citizens with the right to participate in cultural activities, rather than being seen as passive recipients of educational content. Children's theatre festivals cater to this shift in perception by designing encounters with performance that consider the specific needs of young audiences.

Besides providing meaningful experiences for young attendees, these festivals play an important role in cultivating cultural habits. Exposing children to theatre at an early age can foster a lifelong interest in attending performance events. Festivals therefore play an important role in supporting the institutionalisation of audiences. In this sense, children's theatre festivals can be seen as spaces for cultural socialisation, integrating engagement with artistic events into a broader understanding of participation in cultural activities that contributes to civic engagement.

3.3. Urban positioning and symbolic economy

Children's theatre festivals can also be analysed in terms of their role in urban cultural competitions. In contemporary cultural economies, festivals play a significant part in raising a city's profile, attracting tourists and reinforcing an urban identity. Even when their primary target audience is young viewers, children's theatre festivals contribute to this effort. By projecting an image of inclusivity and commitment to education and creativity, these festivals help build a city's symbolic capital.

In post-communist Romania, for example, the proliferation of children's theatre festivals after 1989 can be understood in relation to processes of institutional restructuring, decentralisation and integration into European cultural policy networks. Festivals provide a platform through which theatres can demonstrate their continued relevance, secure funding and adhere to international standards. Beyond their artistic appeal, these events therefore play an important role in ensuring theatres survive in an increasingly competitive institutional landscape.

4. Analytical implications

Understanding children's theatre festivals through these institutional logics enables analysis to transcend a simple inventory of festivals. These events are hybrid cultural forms that incorporate artistic practice, public policy and economic models. Their emergence reflects broader developments in cultural governance, such as changes in our understanding of childhood and the rise of event-based programming as a dominant cultural model.

Conclusions

Examining children's theatre festivals in Romania reveals a complex process of institutionalisation that goes beyond merely presenting these festivals descriptively. Situated within the dynamics of the festivalisation of culture, these festivals serve not only as sites of artistic production, but also as a cultural policy tool involved in the complex project of legitimising genres, constructing audiences and enriching the symbolic economy of cities.

The boom in children's theatre festivals in Romania after 1990 corresponds with structural changes in Romanian cultural policy, including decentralisation, Europeanisation, diversification of funding sources and growing competition between cultural institutions. Children's theatre festivals represent a hybrid institutional form that consolidates the artistic status of theatre for children, socialises children into cultural consumption and enhances the symbolic capital of the cities that host them. Initially celebrations of theatrical arts, children's play or city development, they have since become a stable network of cultural governance.

The consolidation phase that many Romanian children's theatre festivals have entered confers more firmly defined artistic profiles, sophisticated programming strategies and stable audiences upon them. This marks not only the maturation of the field of children's theatre, but also its incorporation into a competitive events economy. Questions of institutional sustainability, branding strategies and international networking now come to the fore. The integration of Romanian children's theatre festivals into a transnational model demonstrates sensitivity to developments in European cultures and resourcefulness in navigating a changing cultural marketplace.

In its contemporary form, the children's theatre festival can therefore be understood as a space that mediates between aesthetic artistic production and the demands and frameworks of a socio-economic context. It bridges the worlds of art, policy and cultural rights, as well as the struggle for institutional survival. Rather than being viewed as relics of ancient communal celebrations, today's children's theatre festivals can be seen as carefully constructed cultural

instruments that shape artistic hierarchies and audiences and contribute to wider cultural positioning processes in local and global contexts.

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Lucian Ghimiși graduated from I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest, class of Prof. Olga Tudorache. His career began at the Maria Filotti Theatre in Brăila and continued at the George Ciprian Theatre in Buzău. In 2005, he joined the Nottara Theatre team in Bucharest and performed under the direction of Tudor Mărăscu, Claudiu Goga, Răzvan Ioan Dincă, Diana Lupescu, Alice Barb, Anca Maria Colțeanu, Cezar Ghioca and Attila Vizauer. In 2013, he became director of the Ion Creangă Theatre in Bucharest. In 2014, on his initiative, the Amintiri din Copilărie Festival was created. Over the years, he has collaborated with the Romanian Television, hosting successful shows and can be currently seen on stage at the Nottara Theatre in productions like *The Celebration* by Thomas Vinterberg and Mogens Rukov, *Matrimoniale* by Lia Bugnar, *De dor și drag*, *Maria Tănase*, *Umor, amor, fior de dor... în București* (directed by Diana Lupescu) and *Titanic Vals* by Tudor Mușatescu (directed by Dinu Cernescu).