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## THEATRE IN THE CONTEXT OF POVERTY, POVERTY IN THE CONTEXT OF THEATRE.

### The Issue of Poverty and Social Exclusion Demonstrated on Psota [Poverty], Production of Pôtoň Theatre

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**Abstract:** Pôtoň Theatre started out as an amateur ensemble, but over time, it has evolved into an independent professional theatre. Right from the outset, it has been operating in Levice region, in a nationally and denominationally mixed territory, rich in turning points in history and also in constant social changes which have had a profound impact upon the poetics of its theatre professionals and on its crucial themes. The ramifications of various reprisal measures (for instance, the so-called Beneš decrees) and the 20th century transformation processes (new stratification of society and a marked weakening of the farming life or centrally managed industrial life in the region after 1989) have dramatically and permanently changed the fates of the inhabitants of the region and their ordinary lives. Documentary-oriented form of theatre with a distinct social message which is shaped in the process of own field research, has become a unique method of production of Pôtoň Theatre largely thanks to the environment, in which it is based.

**Key words:** Pôtoň Theatre, independent theatre, community theatre, theatre of research, theatre production *Psota* [Poverty], poverty, social exclusion

Ever since it was started in 2000, Pôtoň Theatre has been closely interconnected with southern Slovakia, with Levice region. Creative professionals of the theatre develop their theatre activities in the territory of this region. Currently, Levice region is repeatedly listed in statistical surveys among the regions of Slovakia at risk of poverty<sup>1</sup>, which has had an impact upon the development of Pôtoň Theatre. Its keen interest in documentary type of production with a markedly social message is, logically, an outcome of the receptiveness of its members to the environment in which they are engulfed and shaped. Its operation in marginalised regions, oftentimes affected by deprivation of different kind (material, cultural, and mental) has become its artistic and civil manifesto. Theatre professionals have voluntarily chosen a socially problematic region and population to become their home, which has determined their mission to employ artistic and non-artistic activities in elevating the milieu and to gradually mitigate the above deprivations.

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<sup>1</sup> The risk of poverty follows from the concept of multiple deprivation and from several poverty indicators. It is especially unemployment indicator, the indicator of dwelling standard and of the standard of living, of cultural standard, inclusion into the standard way of life in the region.

### Theatre in the context of poverty

In 2008, Pôtoň Theatre moved from the town of Levice to the community of Bátorovce, which is located 14 kilometres away from the town.<sup>2</sup> At that time, what used to be an amateur theatre, gradually evolved into an independent professional theatre. There were several reasons for moving the theatre to the countryside. The main reason was, metaphorically speaking, to find its own theatrical home. At Bátorovce, the theatre has found its creative shelter and agreeable premises to make the community its permanent home.

The leading personalities of the theatre, dramaturg and playwright Michal Ditte and stage director Iveta Ditte Jurčová, had clear priorities regarding the theatrical space and the setting of their productions. For several years, the theatre had been moving from one location to another and kept renting out provisional premises for rehearsals. Their members moved items to and from leased storage space, while rent went up every year. The middle-sized town of Levice, which boasted a fairly rich tradition of amateur theatres and maintained a distinct and well-established amateur dramatic creation that operated by elementary schools of art, failed to provide theatre professionals with a reliable backup and support. It made no sense to continue giving performances in the houses of culture, in coffee bars or even in the open space of Levice castle without any prospects for focused and continuous work, for the extension of theatre activities and for stable audiences. The theatre and its profile-shaping dramaturg and director working in tandem had to move on.

They did not need the city centre or lucrative premises for the implementation of their ideas. Instead, they needed an auditorium and a stage for rehearsing and for giving performances, and also storage area and office space, good city transport connection or accommodation for actors at time of intensive rehearsals.

A decision was made to map out the territory of Tekov with which they were well acquainted (comprising the town of Levice, where they had lived for some time already, although their home towns were Tekovské Nemce and Trnava). While searching for premises which would fit the needs of their home stage, they visited nearby villages and their one-time functional houses of culture that no longer fulfilled their original purpose and since the 1990s, the buildings have been a financial burden to communities, or gradually falling into disrepair.

Bátorovce was exactly what they were looking for. In 2008, Pôtoň Theatre leased, for a rent-free period of thirty years, an old and dilapidated house of culture from the community. In terms of space, it perfectly suited their needs. The building was erected in the 1950s, on the edge of the village, in a rather grandiose style. The community served as a catchment area and the intention was to turn it into one of the biggest centres of culture in the area. Its floor plan fit theatre needs perfectly. The building housed a big auditorium with a stage and storage area below it, with greenrooms behind the stage, and there was also a big loading ramp to accommodate the needs of guest professional theatres (initially the idea was that the Slovak National Theatre would also come and give guest performances here). In addition, the cellars housed

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<sup>2</sup> The town of Levice ranks eighteenth in terms of size and is the seat of the biggest Slovak district. According to the latest statistical data gathered in the 2011 census, the town had a population of more than 34,800. Within Levice district, Bátorovce is only a small and diverse community with 1,075 inhabitants.



Fieldwork of the research team of Divadlo Pôtoň in Tekovské Lužany, May 2011. Photo of the theatre archives.

other premises that could be put to use, together with the premises up on the first floor that had served as offices and a library earlier on.

However, the building was in a state of disrepair and needed complete revamping. In the 1990s, the roof collapsed under the weight of snow and the interior was exposed to adverse weather effects for a rather long time. The replaced roof and the cellars were not isolated and they were damp. The chill inside the building was only refreshing in the summertime. The building conversion and rehabilitation costs were high<sup>3</sup> and round-year operation of the building was also costly. It was not feasible to cover such costs without external funding, loans and partner agreements with the business community or utility companies. A lot of refurbishing had to be carried out in-house, or with the help of volunteers.

The members and supporters of the theatre community and friends were mobilised to give a helping hand with the clean-up. The improvements to the interior of the building and to the garden which was a component part of the plot, on which the house of culture was built, were made by the theatre community rather than by the inhabitants of Bátovce. In terms of audience figures, the situation was no different. First nights and repeat performances were frequented by audiences from more distant independent cultural centres and by theatre professionals who were familiar with the earlier production of Ditte – Jurčová, who worked in tandem, rather than by the locals. Initially, the awareness of Bátovce community and of nearby villages of the benefits

<sup>3</sup> In the first stage, the theatre used 40,000 Euros of their own funds.

of having an independent theatre was rather poor. It was imperative to convince the closest community that there was a sense of purpose behind the activities that Pôtoň Theatre was prepared to deliver on a reciprocal basis. More time was needed before trust, artistic and cultural activities (The Centre for Arts and Creativity, Pôtoň Theatre), accessible to both the professional artists and the locals, could be established. An important role in bringing people together was played by the commitment of Ditte – Jurčová, who built the theatre programme on three pillars: 1) artistic activity, 2) education activity, 3) connecting the day-to-day operation of the theatre with the everyday life of the community and of its inhabitants (including their problems).

The following statements give a picture of how the management of the theatre coped with the situation and with the running of the theatre: “Stacks of bureaucratic tables for all kind of offices, many hours dedicated to online banking operations, the web site or accounting, to making telephone calls and to writing electronic mail... (...). Besides that, there are more applications for subsidies to be written to ensure project funding; prospective sponsors and advertising partners are called on, as every cent counts.”<sup>4</sup> “Subsidies are a very unreliable source of income for a cultural organisation. We keep working hard on not having to depend on grants. (...) Annual building operating costs (utilities, telecommunication bills, etc.) are 20,000 Euros. The wages of the permanent team have not been included in the amount. If I put on the optimist hat, the building should pay for the expense by short-term leases or by ticket sale. (...) If performances alone were to earn for the operating costs, we would have to play each single day of year for more than 200 viewers per performance, whereby each viewer would have to pay ten euros for the ticket.”<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that ensuring the operation of an independent theatre, no matter how small, is easier said than done. Such an effort is like a vicious circle made up of loans, subsidies, arrears, receivables and, on the other hand, of successful grants or implemented projects, while trying hard not to end up in red figures. If theatre professionals set their heart on the implementation of their artistic programme, they are bound to constantly look for resonating topics and to offer intriguing productions and activities, while keeping up with the usual standard of other cultural institutions.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> -MD-. Bežné dni v kultúrnom centre. In *Culture Attack. Listy o súčasnom umení*, 2015, Vol. 1, Issue 4 – 5, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> -IDJ-. Ditte Michal. Kreativny azyl v Bátovciach. Rozhovor s Michalom Dittom, riaditeľom Divadla Pôtoň v Bátovciach. In *Culture Attack. Listy o súčasnom umení*, 2015, Vol. 1, Issue 1, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> This also entails the capacity to employ artistic, technical and service personnel. However, independent theatres in Slovakia are only capable of operating on an individual project basis, i.e. if funds are raised, collaboration may continue, if not, activities will be streamlined or discontinued. Culture support and subsidising independent theatres is rather non-systemic in Slovakia. Sectoral rhetoric favours borrowed phrases about creative industry or a keener activity of theatre professionals in creative industry. However, system solutions, appropriate tools, funding and a continuous development of socially beneficial programmes or aid in problem-solving are scanty. Oftentimes, independent theatres operate much like the Slovak family which lives on the brink of poverty or very modestly. They economise wherever they can and certain activities, which cannot be paid for or operated, are neglected, or in the worst case, theatres end up indebted. Frustration, giving up artistic ambitions and a collapse are bound to creep in, if this pattern continues for several more years. Theatre makers seek salvation in the commercial sector. The attitude of individual responsibility is prevalent in Slovakia (each person is responsible for his or her own life). Although rhetoric has been converging on the responsibility of the entire society or of the State for inadequate living conditions, the management and solving of crisis situations (of individuals or small institutions and enterprises) continues to remain in their own hands.



Decrepit building of the former agricultural cooperative in Tekovské Lužany. Photo of the theatre archives.

On the other hand, though, the space served its purpose. It enabled Pôtoň Theatre to extend its artistic activities and to seek ways of its versatile use, to develop programmes attractive to both the professional artists and the local community. Soon, its effort was primarily focused on guiding the cultural activities of the independent theatre (as a multi-component platform) to what it should presently deliver to the local and theatre communities: to offer art, entertainment, artistic and broadly conceived learning, and to identify the possibilities for the solving of problems common to Bátorovce community and to other places in Slovakia, to strengthen their involvement in problem-solving.

Currently, the theatre is housed in the premises that have not yet been completely renovated, and it operates as a targeted cultural and creative centre. It offers a variety of programmes and events promoting culture, learning through the arts, education to a civil society and audience research.

Among its core activities is the promotion of contemporary art. In addition to playing its own productions, it invites theatre ensembles which represent contemporary progressive trends in Slovakia and in Europe, to give guest performances. It organises performances and concerts of music bands, stage reading and literary evenings with Slovak authors, exhibitions and presentations of visual artists.

The second priority is the organisation of conferences, workshops, studios, cyclical learning activities with focus on performing arts and an offer of creative residential programmes for a wide range of domestic and international artists. The theatre has also furnished guest rooms and has a fully-equipped kitchenette to accommodate their needs. A library and theatre archives are being set up and there is Internet access in the building. On a reciprocal basis, each resident makes a public



Houses with barbed wire fencing in Tekovské Lužany. Photo of the theatre archives.

presentation in front of an audience of the outputs of his/her creative stay and of the workshops.

The third priority are community-focused activities, oftentimes combined with the above-mentioned artistic activities organised under the umbrella of the theatre. The main objective is to get ordinary people involved in artistic activity, which makes them a component part of the running of the theatre and it helps build a personal relationship with the theatre.

Ever since 2009, when Pôtoň Theatre, The Centre for Arts and Creativity, was officially opened to the public, the interaction has been twofold: of the theatre toward the local community and vice versa, of the local community toward the theatre. The initially mediocre interest of the community and of the local government in the activity of the theatre was gradually changed. However, doubts have remained, along with existential issues and feelings of concern: "It takes a lot of energy to convince the authorities in Bratislava that it is not a shortcoming to have to operate out in the countryside. Next, we have to convince the locals that what we do at Bátorovce is modern dramatic art, it has seen some success and it brings certain benefits to the community. And, last but not least, we have to convince ourselves...we rack our brains trying to figure out if it is worth it. What if it is futile and pointless. However, it is our mission and we must go for it."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> - IDJ-. Ditte Michal. Kreatívny azyl v Bátorovciach. Rozhovor s Michalom Dittom, riaditeľom Divadla Pôtoň v Bátorovciach. In *Culture Attack. Listy o súčasnom umení*, p. 4.

The members of Pôtoň Theatre, which is located in rural backwoods, perceive their theatre as a medium for communicating the pressing issues of art, the world and of an individual who lives in the neighbourhood. They are keen to learn about the neighbourhood and its residents, their problems, standard of living and existential, financial and cultural future – their common future. They are convinced that dramatic creation should be conscious, systemic and committed. It should give an impetus to a proactive and creative search for solutions to the problem situations of modern world. Entering into an open public discourse is viewed as a component part of creation. Dialogue is understood as a two-sided discourse on current and pressing artistic and social issues. These, however, must not remain disconnected from the everyday life of their audiences. What seems to be an individual or local issue at first sight, may turn into a problem for the entire public domain, largely thanks to a deep mutual knowledge. Committed theatre, performed in a rural region, may also have a say in finding solutions through non-political structures. Such an attitude clearly affects the themes transformed in the productions of Pôtoň Theatre.

In the seclusion of a small village, it is social themes that preoccupy theatre professionals most of the time; these keep cropping up with greater insistence than in the anonymous milieu of a big city. They include poverty, negative aspects of migration, urbanisation, moving from rural areas to towns, extremist attitudes of young people, Slovak identity, family identity, and the family as the basis of society functioning, and also perception of beauty, fear of the man of the 21st century, audience reception capacity and perception of the dramatic work.

### Poverty in the context of theatre

Pôtoň Theatre has found its theatre pathway and themes thanks to moving to Bátovce. The production *Terra Granus* (2008) was the first big breakthrough in its creation. It triggered a sequence of productions, which were based on the theatre professionals' own field research and on the collection of authentic material in the region where they lived and worked. The field regional research was combined and subsequently compared against the findings of official sociological and ethnological research and surveys or against various social theories and concepts. The theatre invites experts and activists to collaborate on a thematic area in question. The so-called theatre of research has become the predominant feature of its creation. The following productions have been staged using this method: *Aj tu som doma* [This is Also My Home] (2010), *Respect!* (2011), *Psota* [Poverty] (pre-premiered in 2011, premiered in 2012), *Vertikálna migrácia* [Vertical Migration] (2012), and also an older production *Nevesta hôľ* [The Bride of the Ridge] (2009). Productions that followed after 2012 *Žena ako žena* [A Woman is a Woman] (pre-premiered in 2012, premiered in 2013), *Krajina nepokosených lúk* [A Land of Unscythed Meadows] (2013), and the most recent production *PS Fragile* (2014) helped theatre makers carry out audience research and the research of its response to such issues as national and personal identity, affinity with the unknown and social identity and relationship with the arts.

Another typical feature is collective and authors' creation in a documentary-oriented form of theatre. However, this is not documentary theatre in the proper sense of the word. In Pôtoň Theatre, the stage director enters into a creative dialogue with the actor at the stage of creating the concept and characters of the production and



Dwelling house in Tekovské Lužany, May 2011. Photo of the theatre archives.

together, they seek its expression. Stage director Iveta Ditte Jurčová gives preference to collective creation, in which the director talks to actors and to the dramaturg and presents a theme to them. The production concept is being gradually created (shaped, verified and scrutinised) on the basis of a joint collection, classification and evaluation of authentic (documentary) material from a location thoughtfully chosen by the entire production team. Next, the playwright, who is on the creative team, writes a text/script, while taking account of the requirements of the entire creative team. Theatre professionals refer to this method of work as “a combination of collective creation and a firmly-set dramaturgy”<sup>8</sup>.

Sometimes, this approach to creation is complicated and time-consuming, and it is because Pôtoň Theatre does not have a stable drama ensemble. Initially, the theatre approached actors with whom it wished to collaborate on the basis of their residence and workshop activities in the theatre and also through auditions. However, such collaboration lacked conceptual framework and did not facilitate the creation of stable bonds that are indispensable for the so-called theatre of research. Therefore, they opted for the selection of actors on the basis of previous well-established collaboration. They try to raise their interest and incentivise them by the theme and by a different method of production. “We base ourselves on the conviction that in an independent theatre people must communicate with each other more intensively than in a permanent theatre. Work in this kind of theatre must be based on uncondi-

<sup>8</sup> DITTE JURČOVÁ, Iveta. Herec – hlavný partner pri zrode koncepcie (trzeplivosť, otvorenosť, právo na omyl). Minimum doctoral thesis. Bratislava : Vysoká škola múzických umení v Bratislave, Divadelná fakulta, 2013 [manuscript, unpagged].





Visiting respondent Zuzana K. (Tekovské Lužany, May 2011). To the left stage director Iveta Ditte Jurčová, respondent Zuzana K. carrying a baby in arms. Photo of the theatre archives.

tional trust between the director and the actor. Remuneration cannot be the primary incentive for the actor, but rather meaningful creation.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of creation is found by theatre makers in their own-research theatre, which draws on the methods of documentary creation and on social science disciplines. Thematically, its focus are societal and social issues containing the elements of endangerment and of undesirable changes in Slovak society.

Among productions with documentary focus is *Psota* [Poverty]. Due to the fact that Pôtoň Theatre is purposely based in a small village, outside the country's capital, its members are daily and very intensively exposed to the hardships of the lives of ordinary people. In a smaller community, problems are more poignant, as they concern concrete individuals, families, or even the entire tight-knit community, whose component part are also theatre professionals. Therefore, when things go wrong in personal life, when individuals are confronted with unemployment, social, material and cultural deterioration, with the so-called misfits who live in settlements, the effects will show in a more concentrated form than in urban milieu. Community members, under the action of external forces (political, economic, natural) on the space which determines them (it is their home, a component part of their identity), share a common fate. In a natural way, this binds them together, to a mutual emotional compassion, and urges them to jointly devise new ways of survival.

During the gathering of material to the production *Terra Granus*, whose theme was home, theatre makers visited several areas affected by a high unemployment

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



Visiting respondent Katarína S. (Tekovské Lužany, May 2011). Photo of the theatre archives.

rate and with inhabitants exposed to material, social, and moral deprivation. Among other big themes of Pôtoň Theatre were destitution<sup>10</sup>, poverty, social exclusion and related model behavioural patterns and irreversible processes of deterioration: the decline of individuals, families, of the local community.

### Let's also be concrete in theatre

Despite the fact that poverty, social marginalisation and related deprivations are among the much-debated issues of our time, they are avoided by theatre professionals in Slovakia, and not only by them. Film makers have been much more active. A number of documentary films has been shot, portraying the everyday life of people affected by poverty, or what it is like to live in an area affected by poverty (Robert Kirchhoff, Marko Škop, Jana Pirohová, Marek Poláček, Lucia Nicholsonová, Pavel Vitko, Jozef Štrbák, Ladislav Kaboš, Viera Čechová).

Poverty has been a global issue for a long time. The number of people affected by poverty and social exclusion in the European Union is considerable. At the outset of the new millennium, it was more than 68 million people and the figure has not dropped ever since. In Slovakia, poverty really started to show after 1989. In our

<sup>10</sup> By contrast, poverty has a weaker meaning and refers to a less extreme situation than destitution to which an individual or a social group is exposed. In general, poverty would be the term used in connection with hunger, physical or mental suffering, mind-body damage as a consequence of poverty, or social dependence, etc. Refer to ONDREJKOVIČ, Peter. Chudoba – spoločensky nežiadúci jav. In *Otázky merania chudoby*. Bratislava : Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2004, p. 25.



Michal Ditte: *Psota* [Poverty]. Andrea Sabová (Woman), Marián Viskup (Man). Divadlo Pôtoň, premiered on 24 February 2012. Direction Iveta Ditte Jurčová. Photo of the theatre archives.

country, the phenomenon of the so-called new poverty, or transformation poverty, is a fact of life and it testifies to the inability of individuals to change their style of living and mindsets. Some people failed to adapt to changing circumstances ushered in by transformation, especially to the lifting of certain support schemes guaranteed by the State and by its social policy (for instance, guaranteed jobs, regulated loans, housing, free education and health care), which had a knock-on effect causing the collapse of entire regions.<sup>11</sup> Market economy, the absence of social policy combined with a high unemployment rate and low wages have resulted in a dramatic divide between individuals or entire regions. In contrast to previous periods, the stratification of the population has also affected its belief system.

At the opening conference of The European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010),<sup>12</sup> the sociologist Zuzana Kusá quoted the following statistics in her presentation: Income poverty affects 33% of households in Slovakia with three or more children. Material deprivation affects 28% of households, and 11% of the population live below the poverty line. Poverty is being accepted as a component part of social order.

According to the data of the Statistical Office of the SR and its 2011 Labour Force Sample Survey, the average unemployment rate was reported to be more than 13%. In

<sup>11</sup> The State, through legislation, has facilitated private enterprise, whereby jobs for all are no longer guaranteed and the income of employees is not strictly regulated. Unemployment and poverty are among the most pressing social issues.

<sup>12</sup> The European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion focused on providing decent living conditions to people – money, housing, satisfying basic needs, social integration and means for children.

2011, the total number of persons with an income below the poverty line was also reported to be 13%. Approximately 1,112,200 people were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, which accounts for 20.6% of the total population. However, these figures are not accurate. They are based on surveys and social transfers. Without social transfers, the risk of income poverty would triple.<sup>13</sup> The 2012 shadow report on poverty states that: "Research has demonstrated that if the household income falls below a certain level (this level varies over time and in different contexts), there comes a dramatic change in household style of living: its members cease to fulfil certain social commitments, they ignore their health condition, abandon their habitual diet, and children do not go to school. Rather than making it inactive, the scarcity of resources triggers the spiral of irreversible decline, including disloyalty to social norms."<sup>14</sup>

2010 and 2011 statistics have been deliberately used, to describe the context in which *Psota* [Poverty] was produced and what kind of input data were used by theatre makers. The data are vital to understand the fact that the issue of poverty, even then, had transcended the seemingly regional or local (personal) experience of theatre makers. Moreover, it allows us to gain a twofold insight into the poverty issue: how and with what effects poverty is dealt with in social sciences and in the theatre. The story of poverty, as shown on stage, has the potential to boost a much more powerful emotional effect than statistics or any accurate theory, simply because it is concrete. To spur society to change its attitude to the poor, to alert the general public of the alarming condition of the issue in Slovakia using experiential form are the possibilities in the hands of artistic media and it should be a moral duty of creative professionals to do so. The arts do not empty the contents like ordinary digital media do; on the contrary, they enhance their capacity to resonate in society. Since according to the most recent 2016 statistics, poverty rate in Slovakia has not dropped below 13%, creative professionals should naturally feel committed to bringing the issue up, to alerting to the potentially adverse effects of inaction and to calling to solidarity and increased responsiveness to the issue.

### **"Research carried out with the slippers on"**

"Research carried out with the slippers on" is a phrase used by the members of Pôtoň Theatre. It refers to the initial stage of work on the production concept. In order to cope with this stage, the members of the production team are asked to research available literature sources, to focus on fact-finding and to familiarise themselves with the topic they wish to use as a theme for their production. In addition, the first stage is a good preparation for fieldwork. Should highly delicate issues be addressed, such as the loss of a home or living on the edge of poverty, it is imperative for the theatre makers to be cognizant of various factors that may affect the ultimate form of these phenomena in real-life situations. A thorough preparation "with the slippers on" is a must, because information gathering by interviewing the informers (concrete people affected by poverty) may be accompanied by mistrust. Typically, people would be ashamed of their poverty and they are reluctant to speak about it in public.

<sup>13</sup> *Tieňová správa o chudobe a sociálnom vylúčení v Slovenskej republike*. Bratislava : Slovenská sieť proti chudobe; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung; Sociologický ústav Slovenskej akadémie vied, 2012, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 53.



Michal Ditte: *Psota* [Poverty]. Marián Andrišek (Boy), Henrieta Rabová (Girls). Divadlo Pôtoň, premiered on 24 February 2012. Direction Iveta Ditte Jurčová. Photo of the theatre archives.

Having prior knowledge of the scale of the problem facilitates a smoother run of the interview and moving from general facts to concrete facts or to facts about the individual's personal life.

The production team members familiarised themselves with various poverty concepts: absolute poverty, relative poverty and culture of poverty.<sup>15</sup> There, too, were public debates held on simple questions relating to poverty. The initial ideas of actors were very general and were affected by the most frequently presented rhetoric and the images of poverty as presented by the media. There was a need to get a deeper understanding of the topic. The actors were tasked with the study of as much literature on ethnology and sociology as possible (e.g. Nina Beňová, Gabriela Kiliánová, Roman Džambazovič, Zuzana Kusá) and to conduct their own research of the topic on the Internet. In no time, documentary films, television programmes and advertising (accentuating the difference between scarcity and deprivation) and literary works (*Krotká* [The Meek One] by Dostoyevsky, Kristof's *Veľký zošit* [The Notebook], Sigarev's *Vlčík* [Wolfy]) expanded their sources of inspiration. Next, actors would de-

<sup>15</sup> The Indian economist Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize winner, is a proponent of the concept of absolute poverty, which is understood as a state of extreme deprivation, the consequences being hunger and putting at risk man's life. It is associated with the feeling of shame and, therefore, it must be regarded as an issue of human dignity. Peter Townsend's concept of relative poverty covers both material and social deprivation that excludes the poor from society. The concept of the culture of poverty coined by Oscar Lewis views poverty as a way of life, which is handed down from generation to generation along family lines. He points out that the poor may create a subculture in which poverty as a cultural pattern is handed down from generation to generation. Refer to, for instance, BEŇOVÁ, Nina. Theoretical Concepts of Poverty in Slovak Milieu. In *Slovenský národopis*, 2006, Vol. 54, Issue 2, pp. 145 – 161.



Michal Ditte: *Psota* [Poverty]. Andrea Sabová (Woman), Daniela Gudabová (Butcheress). Divadlo Pôtoň, premiered on 24 February 2012. Direction Iveta Ditte Jurčová. Photo of the theatre archives.

velop etudes on individual sociological concepts (sacred poverty, identity language of poverty, lazy and dangerous poverty, the stigma of moral worthlessness, hidden poverty, insignificant poverty).

The research material of the Ethnological Society of Slovakia which mapped out poverty in the context of social relations in Tekovské Lužany was found very useful. Aside from statistics,<sup>16</sup> the material contained an ethnological evaluation of the situation in the community in 2001 and the transcription of interviews with anonymous informers. Member of the SAS research team Nina Beňová (née Hanuliaková) visited the community one more time, in 2004. The research outputs and transcriptions of interviews with respondents were published in several studies (*Hovorme konkrétne* [Let's Be Concrete!], *Skryté formy vidieckej chudoby*<sup>17</sup> [Hidden Forms of Rural Poverty]). Those etudes that were devised based on this material were much more emotional than previous ones, because concrete images of persons and of their milieu were formed in actors' minds based on the transcription of interviews with informers. During the first stage of work with actors, some 30 etudes were developed, of which none appeared in the production.

<sup>16</sup> According to the research by ethnologist Mgr. Nina Beňová, conducted in 2005, unemployment rate in Tekovské Lužany reached 40%, of 1,300 economically active population only 600 had jobs, and the number of job-seekers per vacancy exceed one hundred. The records of the Employment Office, of 2005, reported that in the community, 62.2% of job-seekers are unemployed long-term.

<sup>17</sup> BEŇOVÁ, Nina. *Hovorme konkrétne*. In *Otázky merania chudoby*. Bratislava : Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2004, pp. 100 – 108.

### Field research

The next stage entailed field research. The producers followed the stranger theory (Georg Simmel) which says that a person would much rather disclose his secret to a stranger than to his neighbour. Pôtoň Theatre professionals targeted their field research on the community of Tekovské Lužany, located a little less than 35 km from Bátovce. They were curious to see the changes in the community since the research conducted by the staff of the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences between 2001 and 2004. They were especially interested in individual fates of people who had been interviewed then and whether they managed to change their adverse situation to the better in the past ten years. Field research used interviews and jotting notes and interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and photographs were also taken. Thanks to the gatekeeper, pensioner Štefan Šebo, the theatre members were able to identify and find all original respondents and to make new interviews with them. In total, there were 15 individual respondents of various age (7 males and 8 females) and a group interview was conducted with social workers in Levice. The surveyed sample included the representatives of non-Roma, Roma and mixed communities with diverse standards of living (mayor, priest, manager of a community centre, former teacher, whereby social workers were included in a separate sample; a young family, multiple children families, a lone female pensioner, a community that lived in groups, a grandmother looking after her children and grandchildren).

Interviews tied into previous research and they moved it forward. The intention was to develop a story of poverty, to get to know the realm of people who lived on the edge of material need and to probe into their everyday worries and into their emotional world. Their inner and outer worlds were to be communicated to the audience. It was not about a mere transposition of unchanged documentary material on stage or finding an emotionally powerful story, as frequently seen in television. Creative professionals of Pôtoň Theatre were convinced that theatre had the capacity to communicate poverty theme in a much more comprehensive and multi-layer fashion than other types of media. Time that passed since the first research had been conducted made it possible to go over the individual stories of respondents (situations in their lives, sudden turns, evolution and a certain irreversible or repeated causality of development and their outlooks on life) and to develop it into a dramatic text and a production.

There was a time when the entire Tekov region, comprising the community of Tekovské Lužany, thrived thanks to agricultural cooperatives and several manufacturers in nearby towns (Levice, Želiezovce, Tlmače). The land there was fertile and people had jobs and the generations that lived here could rest assured that they would earn a living for their children and for themselves. However, transition to a market economy ushered in the decline and winding up of cooperatives. People were laid off and new jobs were difficult to find<sup>18</sup>. The young generation moved out,

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<sup>18</sup> According to the most recent data, the community has a population of 3,000. According to the census, only three Roma declared their Roma nationality. The mayor of the community reckons that some 10 to 15% of the total population are Roma. The inhabitants, though, claim to be either Slovaks or Hungarians. In the past twenty years, the situation has not changed when it comes to social stratification and unemployment rate: roughly 460 inhabitants are eligible for benefits in material need and about 600 inhabitants are unem-



Michal Ditte: *Psota* [Poverty]. Andrea Sabová (Woman), Henrieta Rabová (Girl), Daniela Gudabová (Butcheress), Marián Andříšek (Boy), Marián Viskup (Man). Divadlo Pôtoň, premiered on 24 February 2012. Direction Iveta Ditte Jurčová. Photo of the theatre archives.

in search of better living conditions, leaving behind empty and dilapidated houses in villages full of people on the edge of deprivation. The difference between the middle class and the poor disappeared. The middle class caught up with the poor.<sup>19</sup>

The population structure of the community changed. New migrants (mostly Roma) settled in and for to many it was only a temporary home. The locals referred to them as troublesome incomers. Some of them sold their indebted flats in the town and moved to cheap dilapidated shacks in the village. A local businessman even gave loans to them, but they were unable to financially recover from high interest rates. Criminality was on the rise and incomers unscrupulously looted other people's gardens or unsecured home backyards. The denizens had no other choice but to put up barbed wire fences around their homes and gardens and it was unsafe to walk down certain stretches of the street (the poor, mostly Roma, created clans and they even ripped each other off). The new phenomena of our time, which sprouted in the com-

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ployed. These are not conclusive statistical data, because there is a high number of persons unemployed long-term, who are no longer eligible for benefits and, therefore, they are not recorded in official statistics.

<sup>19</sup> In her field research notes, director Ditte Jurčová described her impressions of the visit as follows: Tekovské Lužany is a big village, with decrepit houses, many houses have barbed wire fences to help people protect their properties. The local pub is in a dilapidated state. It could be turned into a museum. Tables are covered with wipeable tablecloth; bottles of cheapest liquor, one chocolate-box covered in dust and a few cans of spread are displayed behind the bar. The bar top comes with the butcher's block, where salami is sold. It goes without saying that smoking is allowed. Seated at the tables are a few lonesome men, gazing into the void. There is big a plasma TV mounted on the wall, with greyhound racing on. The main street runs seven kilometres long and all buildings on it are in a state of disrepair. Right in the middle, there is a big fountain under construction.





Michal Ditte: *Psota* [Poverty]. Stage design Zuzana Formánková, projection Erik Bartoš. The projection features Rado Ligač (Adam). Divadlo Pôtoň, premiered on 24 February 2012. Direction Iveta Ditte Jurčová. Photo of the theatre archives.

munity as a consequence of changes, were largely negative: thefts, reckless endangerment, usury, matchmaking, prostitution, trafficking in women.

Respondents gave strongly congruent answers. The majority stated that the cause of their bad material situation was that they were unable to find jobs long-term. They complained about the income from State benefits, which was inadequate to support a decent standard of living. Some respondents could not tell what the net income of their household was. In terms of managing household finances, women kept their finances separate from men's. In this respect, women proved to be more viable. By combining various benefits (retirement benefit, maternity benefit, parental allowance, carer's allowance, etc.), they managed to keep multigenerational households running. In a number of them, grandmothers looked after their children and grandchildren and emotional ties were very strong.

Among the biggest problems associated with low income, as indicated by respondents, were poor health condition, inaccessible proper health care, diet and travel, inadequate hygiene, limited chances for the renovation of dwellings, indebtedness. The main problem was impossibility of employment and earning money to provide a better education for their children. Judging by their replies, respondents fell into the so-called poverty trap (a culture of dependence), whose accompanying phenomenon may be the institutionalisation of poverty. Inadequate access to resources (financial, social and cultural) excluded them from the minimum acceptable way of life. Their poverty was manifested as helplessness toward the State and social institutions, as psychological stress and proneness to alcohol abuse. The respondents felt stuck and



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could see no way out of the situation. They kept referring to fortune, fate, belief in God and, without faltering, pointed to the State, which they blamed for their situation. An interesting contrast to their rhetoric was given by the mayor and social workers. They understood the problem as giving up on work habits and that they were not really keen to change their situation. Instead, they were preoccupied with short-term and instantaneous remedy of an urgent situation. They simply got used to a low living standard and their conduct and language were adopted to it accordingly. By shunning socialisation, the rate of a low self-reflection capacity of these people increased and led to the creation of their own myths in which they could survive in comfort.

Put in the words of theatre director Iveta Ditte Jurčová, the production team was most shocked by the fact that the people, who had hoped for a change to the better and tried hard to get through tough times, were found, ten (or five) years on, in a state of disillusionment and utter resignation. On top of that, community representatives, the mayor and the vicar, had no power to change the situation, as they accepted it as an unchangeable fact.

Following the research, producers picked several essential themes for writing a play by Michal Ditte. These themes included materials recovery, mother facing an existential problem, breastfeeding of other people's child, economising, television broadcasting juxtaposed to an impoverished milieu, dehumanisation and even animality, sense of endangerment, breaking-up of families, prostitution as a way out, alcohol abuse as a consequence of psychological humiliation of job-seekers, buying

spoil groceries on credit, unpleasant odours, neglected children bribed with sweets, final solution of poverty. The production team was in agreement that the language of characters should be terse and emotionally unmoved. The production was built on contrast, and rather than portraying an emotional story, it showed characters in everyday rational decision-making situations controlled by the self-preservation instinct of the 21st century.

Two options were deliberated: (1) To portray the struggle of village people to make ends meet, or, the world of extremes, (2) To develop a hypothesis of a world thirty years on, to escalate the poverty issue to the point of maximum intensity. Unaware, theatre professionals contemplated the issues formulated in the monograph *In-Yer-Face Theatre* by Aleks Sierz: "We are human/animal; clean/dirty; healthy/unhealthy; normal/abnormal; good/evil; true/untrue; real/unreal; right/wrong; what should be shown on stage, art or life?"<sup>20</sup>

The final production was a cruel testimony, a story of social, emotional and moral disintegration of an ordinary Slovak family, which, while being formidable, gave hope and raised an urgent need for mutuality and humanity<sup>21</sup>.

The vision of stage designer Zuzana Formánková was that of a giant anthill, a vicious circle, a concentration camp, of a space where a person constantly stockpiles food supplies. The dominating element of *Psota* production was a wall made up of refrigerators that filled in the household interior. Refrigerators epitomised a place where food supplies were hoarded, chill and confinement of space.

The story of what seemed to be a traditional young Slovak family evolves in this space. The plot itself is nothing out of the ordinary, the producers transposed in it the stories and experiences gathered during their field research in Tekovské Lužany. A family of four lives in modest conditions but they are happy. But then father is laid off and mother is pregnant with another child. The family is faced with serious existential issues and the newly-born is taken to a baby-box. Decline and psychological, emotional, material and cultural collapse follows. Debt piles up and threatened by the course of events, mother consents to the proposal of a local procuress to work as a prostitute in Austria. Father takes up drinking, children are raised in the street, their habits are unhealthy and language is coarse. In no time, financial support from mother is discontinued and it is now minor daughter selling her body for money. Hope for change wanes, leaving behind devastated interpersonal relationships and the environment.

The production is emotionally compelling by features which are different from the features of documentary theatre. It poses the essential question of how society tackles poverty issues. A surprising conclusion is due to a change in the perspective which divulges a shocking testimony of the struggle of our contemporaries with the modern world's biggest problems. Similar ways of problem-solving were experienced several times in the 20th century. It is appalling, though, that they again creep into the minds of our contemporaries. The producers were repetitively confronted with the final solution of poverty in their discussions with informers. Sometimes, hopelessness, constant stress, feeling of utter inferiority and social exclusion on grounds of poverty took control over their will to survive.

<sup>20</sup> SIERZ, Aleks. *In-Yer-Face Theatre. British Drama Today*. London : Faber and Faber Limited, 2001, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> For more refer to the programme booklet.

Toward the close of the production *Psota*, the members of a one-time happy family pull together, now bearing resemblance to animals. However, the sole motive is to murder, chop up and eat the raw meat of Mäsiarka [Butcheress] (the local procuress who came to collect the debt). A gesture of defiance is also a gesture of seeming purgation that leads to a complete loss of the human qualities. In parallel, a special report having the form of short clips is running on TV screen: "This is the road to the destruction of us all/We all are responsible for the moral decline of society/We can change it/Give work to those who lost it or are unemployed for long/We must turn these people into human beings again/We must set them free from inhumane living conditions/Let's change landfills to green oases/Let's do it for our children and the generations to come/Their reformation is the only way to success/People without a permanent job, the long-term unemployed, the good-for-nothings, individuals never kept on unemployment records, vagrants and their family members with acquired undesired habits/All inhabitants of illegal settlements/You shall be branded with this mark/Without exception/You shall be wearing it on a clearly visible place on your clothes/You shall report to the competent district authority/You shall follow the instructions of power structures without questioning them/No more than one piece of luggage/25 kilograms per person/Food for three days/Non-disclosure of facts, hiding away or any form of resistance means instantaneous elimination of the person/Work sets you free."<sup>22</sup>

The evacuation of persons marked with a yellow label of a cockroach is monitored and shown live on air as documentary shots. The wall, made up of refrigerators like the elements of a Lego building set, collapses. Mother, father, son and daughter get suffocated. As a sci-fi vision, a town with high-rise buildings is built in the place where they once lived.

The world, as we know it, is dead; God, love, faith and hope are dead. The family is satiated with human blood and meat, its members are emotionless, dirty, rolling on the floor like animals. The capturing of situations, moments and states is very important to the entire production. The collapse of an ordinary Slovak family is a metaphor for the collapse of entire society. The production alerts to the fact that through a cathartic eradication of evil (homicide and eating the body of the Butcheress) only the symptom is fixed, while the root cause of the problem remains. The ultimate solution in the form of disinfection urges the audience to consider the overlap and interplay between theatre and reality. What appears to be a disaster in the production, i.e. an unavoidable denouement and final solution (extermination of misfits and luxurious urbanisation), heralds, in fact, the advent of a growing societal and value crisis in our reality.

The goal pursued in *Psota* production was not documentary theatre, but rather bringing to attention the issue of poverty and its diverse forms and the causal processes that lead to poverty. The goal was to portray the emotional climate and the emotional world of persons affected by poverty, although sometimes they were not aware of it or refused to admit it. This gave the producers leeway to freely work with the gathered material, to fabulate, to complement it with other material (studies, articles, reports, own targeted fiction) and to play with the aesthetics and style of the production.

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<sup>22</sup> DITTE, Michal. *Psota* [script to the production, manuscript], p. 18.

An inter-genre form was produced and inside it, a dialogue was held between the definitions and theoretical concepts of poverty and social exclusion and their actual forms in real-life situations. In parallel, the “space between” emotionless information and immediate experience (the fate of an individual or of the whole family) enabled to thematise the futuristic vision of the end. The final solution of unwanted poverty and of the poor, as portrayed in the production, alerts to the increasingly frequent radical solutions of problem situations by modern society.

Pôtoň Theatre came to understand its mission as one of inviting to a committed dialogue which helps resolve the problems of the people at the grass-roots level. It subscribes to its mission to use in the theatre the language of a cruel metaphor of the collapse of the human world, which is deliberately aestheticised. Its artistic manifesto is based on the community and community activities which reanimate in ostracised persons the feeling that someone cares. And, maybe, it is because its history and the present resemble the struggle with the windmills and the struggle for bare existence is their everyday lot. This explains why Pôtoň Theatre has been lately focusing on poor regions, small villages and on high school youth. Apart from dramatic creation, it offers a variety of educational activities to the community, it gets them involved in cultural programmes and tries to restore the feeling of solidarity and seeks an answer to the question whether theatre today can bring the sense of beauty and the good back to life again.

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**Translated by Mária Švecová**