The Fragile Stage: Public Service in Theatre as a Track to "The Good Life"

Jan Motal
Theatre Faculty, Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Brno, Czech Republic

Abstract: This article explores the concept of public service and public interest. Drawing on the philosophies of Martha Nussbaum, Virginia Held, and Nancy Fraser, the presented text contests traditional political-economic and cultivation theories that emphasize efficiency, performance, and perfection. Instead, it posits an approach that integrates human vulnerability as a valuable aspect of the "good life," thereby fostering a richer understanding of public interest. It criticises the exclusive and perfection-focused narratives, proposing inclusive "counterpublics" that recognize and value diverse community interests. The 2018 performance of Frljić's "Our Violence, Your Violence" in Brno, CZ provides a tangible illustration of these concepts, showcasing how theatre can function as a democratic platform for dialogue or fail in this mission due to paternalism. The article concludes with a call to reimagine public service in theatre to encourage democratic decision-making, appreciate human vulnerabilities, and foster dialogue and inclusion.

Keywords:
public service, public interest, theatre, Czech theatre, economic crisis, good life, counterpublics, democratic dialogue, inclusion

Introduction

In the face of recurrent economic crises, Czech theatre has repeatedly invoked the concept of public service to articulate its demands. This rallying cry echoed during the 2008 transformation of Prague municipally funded public theatres[1] and resonated more recently in 2020, amidst the closures precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[2] Public service, previously a concern for established theatres, became a crucial issue for independent theatres surviving on minimal grants. One salient example is Štěpán Kubišta, the head of the Jatka78 theatre (70% of its income comes from admission fees and it can hardly be understood as a public theatre), who described his theatre as "a public service institution that does not perform theatre only when it is profitable."[3]

Similar traces can be found in 2023 when Divadelní noviny (the sole Czech newspaper focusing on theatre whilst at the same time being fully dependent on state subsidies) asked eminent cultural figures to testify about the newspaper's fulfilment of its "public service."[4] This was in response to a cut in their funding, justified by an alleged decline in quality and problematic management. Several figures from the arts offered heartfelt support, emphasizing the value of public service.

These examples demonstrate the recurring invocation of "public service" by theatre artists and cultural publicists, often to advocate for state support, even when the term is not explicitly used. Their arguments implicitly convey what "public service" typically signifies in the Czech Republic: the necessity of state-funded arts in order to sustain a cultural society and preserve the national spirit.

Yet, the concept of public service remains vague, mainly aligning with an administrative notion where subsidized theatres are deemed public services. This administrative perspective often intertwines with a normative view rooted in national revivalist sentiments, underlining the indispensability of culture and art for national survival.

Such a blend of descriptive and normative public service notions, lacking a deeper philosophical foundation, results in significant theoretical and practical dilemmas. On the one hand, the subsidized theatres feel compelled to meet public demands. On the other, artists who view their work as a public service (even if their institutions are not established by the state or a municipality) seek financial support. In

---

1 GRÁFOVÁ, J. Divadla bojují s radním: Máme být veřejnou službou [The theatres are fighting with the council: We're supposed to be a public service]. In *Aktuálně.cz*, 11 March 2008. [online]. [cit. 30 June 2023]. Available at: https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/umeni/divadla-bojuji-s-radnim-mame-byt-verejnou-sluzbou/r~i:article:523704/. The first transformation of Prague's theatres took place in 2002; this was the planned second wave, which ultimately did not happen. Since then there has been discussion about further transformation, but without concrete political steps.

2 #kulturajenarod – RESTART. Činohra ND [#cultureisthenation – RESTART. Nation Theatre Drama]. In *YouTube*, 23 April 2020. [online]. [cit. 30 June 2023]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_m6Ldeb478.

3 Jatka78 obnoví sezónu 27. května kabaretem POT a LESK v režii Rosti Nováka a Víta Neznala. [Jatka78 will renew its season on 27 May with the cabaret POT and LESK directed by Rosta Novák and Vit Neznal]. In *I-divadlo.cz*, 19 May. 5. 2020. [online]. [cit. 2 July 2023]. Available at: https://www.i-divadlo.cz/zpravy/jatka78-obnovi-sezonu-27-kvetna-kabaretem-pot-a-lesk-v-rezii-rosti-novaka-a-vita-neznala.

4 See https://www.divadelni-noviny.cz/hazard-nebo-verejna-sluzba-no-00.

neoliberalism, the concept of public service, tightly interwoven with the Keynesian view of the state's role in an industrial Fordist economy, has transformed into an instrument for economic, political, and aesthetic struggle.

This essay intends to elucidate this fluid concept, provide it with a theoretical footing within the spectrum of possible meanings, and propose the interpretation most beneficial for today's neoliberal world. Building on an inductive description of prevalent concepts, it ultimately advances a normative deductive argument. Considering the human fragility and vulnerability described in Martha C. Nussbaum's notion of "the good life" of vulnerable beings, it contends that art and theatre are uniquely poised to reflect these aspects. Through the lens of Nancy Fraser's theory, it underscores the need to reformulate the public sphere to integrate the counterpublics presently excluded. It is in this space that theatre, as a democratizing force, can truly perform a public service – providing a voice to conflicts without succumbing to hegemonies of taste, but rather fostering dialogue rooted in shared vulnerability.

Bridging the Gap

While the role of theatre as a public service is frequently discussed in times of crisis, academic exploration of this area remains scarce. As Robert B. Shimko and Sara Freeman claim in their introduction to one of the first attempts to fill this research gap, "(...) theatre studies [are] lacking in concentrated scholarly forays into present discourse on publics, their formation, and their functioning."[5] Recently, however, we have seen changes in this trend, particularly in studies about public theatres and the value they generate,[6] criticism of public administration,[7] and historical perspective.[8]

Despite these developments, the studies often overlook the possibility of defining public service as an artistic normative theory, generally depending on concepts from public sphere theory or public administration theory. The two-volume publication by Ilaria Riccioni[9] is a valuable contribution to this field, examining the interconnections between theatre, politics, and the public sphere. It presents Teatro Stabile as a form "(...) of social resistance, civil organization, and the construction of collective meanings."[10] Nevertheless, this work still lacks a clear theoretical framework that articulates what public service means for artists.

Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett point out that the debate around the social or public value of arts usually pivots on government funding, which consequently

5 SHIMKO, R. B. – FREEMAN, S. Theatre, Performance, and the Public Sphere. In *Public Theatres and Theatre Publics* (ed. by Robert B. Shimko, S. Freeman). Newcastle upon Tyne : Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, p. 1.

6 BOŽOVIĆ, K. M. Public theatre's social role and its audience. In *Teme*, 2021, Vol. 45, Issue 1, pp. 213–229.

7 COSTIN, G. Theatre as a Public Service: Tendencies and Relevance. In *Colocvii teatrale*, 2022, Vol. 1, pp. 217–228.

8 BEUSHAUSEN, K. *Theatre and the English Public from Reformation to Revolution*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2018.

9 RICCIONI, I. (ed.). *Theatre(s) and Public Sphere in Global and Digital Society: Volume 1: Theoretical Explorations.* Leiden – Boston : Brill, 2023; RICCIONI, I. (ed.). *Theatre(s) and Public Sphere in Global and Digital Society: Volume 2: Case Studies.* Leiden – Boston : Brill, 2023.

10 RICCIONI, I. *Theatre(s) and Public Sphere in Global and Digital Society: Volume 1*, p. viii.

skews the discourse towards quantifiable "impacts" of the arts, leaving many assumptions unexamined.[11] Such focus has reduced the quality of theatre service to mere quantitative indicators.

The current discussion often sidesteps a fundamental issue: in a "postmodern" cultural context with pluralised authority, there is no unified understanding of the role of art and its social function.[12] Thus, any debate on theatre as a public service must move beyond the idea of arts as synonymous with European high culture, given this concept is no longer universally shared or hegemonic.

Surprisingly, theatre managers often assign the highest importance to the seemingly paradoxical function of "nurturing and developing audience."[13] This represents a highly conservative, paternalistic view of the arts as a form of "social pedagogy" and is not a public service in its true sense as it disregards the public's needs. Therefore, before we attempt to define public service, it is necessary to critically examine this paternalistic approach and its relationship with economic efficiency from the perspective of political economy.

The Economic Benefits

The paternalistic stance aligns with Keynesian views that emphasize state subsidies for artists as providers of the public good of high culture, as asserted by John Maynard Keynes ("We can help [the artist] best, perhaps, by promoting an atmosphere of open-handedness, of liberality, of candour, of toleration, of experiment, of optimism, which expects to find some things good."[14]) Such sentiment still resonates among modern artists advocating for unconditional support for artists. An example of such approach would for instance be the Czech "degrowth" campaign.[15]

Despite this "unconditional" ethos, the long-term expectation for successful theatres is to repay public loans, indicating anticipation of economically reportable success, as Keynes proposed. This view survives in public policies focused on demonstrating value for money, even if not through immediate profit. Keynes himself considered the support of "future winners" to be desirable, i.e., to choose a support that will in the long run bring a response from society in the form of economically reportable success.[16] This perspective aligns with the supply-side political economy that prevailed in Western countries before neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s.

---

11 BELFIORE, E. – BENNETT, O. Rethinking the Social Impacts of the Arts. In *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 2007, Vol. 13, Issue 2, p. 135.

12 Ibid., p. 136.

13 BOŽOVIĆ, K. M. Public theatre's social role and its audience, p. 225.

14 MOGGRIDGE, D. E. Keynes, the Arts, and the State. In *History of Political Economy*, 2005, Vol. 37, Issue 3, p. 544.

15 Otevřený dopis ministru kultury ve věci udržitelnosti a nerůstu v kultuře [Open Letter to the Minister of Culture on Sustainability and Non-Growth in Culture]. In *Artalk*, 23 March 2022. [online]. [cit. 2 July 2023]. Available at: https://artalk.cz/2022/03/23/otevreny-dopis-ministru-kultury-ve-veci-udrzitelnosti-a-nerustu-v-kulture/.

16 MOGGRIDGE, D. E. Keynes, the Arts, and the State, p. 553.

In contrast, classical capitalism, as suggested by Adam Smith's political economy, opposed state support for the arts. This view is not a dismissal of the arts as a public good; Smith considered them crucial for counteracting the dehumanization by industrial labour.[17] However, he believed that the state was not able to provide sufficient freedom due to its propensity towards despotism. The classical liberal view, underpinned by David Hume's empirical philosophy of taste, argues that people's taste are formed through exposure to diverse artistic experiences: "The people are capable of judging (or at least they can learn to judge) what artistic diversions and amusements they prefer; and if these things are offered by private entrepreneurs, the people will express their judgments through the market."[18]

Neoliberalism in the 1970s revived this perspective, propagating the "laissez-faire" ideal and cutting the public support of arts. Emphasizing market orientation, it reshaped art support from a public service to a market-driven model. As cultural analyst Jim McGuigan points out, this led to "cool capitalism," where art's value was linked more with market success than cultural significance.[19] But this shift was made possible because the Keynesian model also understood art in economic terms – it was only the nature of the economy that changed, moving from an industrial model to a post-Fordist one.

In both Keynesian and classical economic theories, the artist maintains autonomy, but their value is intrinsically tied to their long-term economic viability. The central debate revolves around whether the state should predict future artistic value ("taste") or if it should be left to spontaneous personal preferences – which could be quite reductive. Thus, the evolving narrative of artistic value is inherently tied to its long-term economic feasibility, regardless of whether it is rooted in Keynesian or (neo)liberal thought. This underlying unity brings the necessity for a redefined concept of public service in the arts to the forefront, a concept that is not solely dependent on financial viability.

The Elites: Theatre as "Bildung"

Having explored the economic underpinnings of public service in the arts sector, it is imperative to delve into its historical and sociocultural roots, particularly the significant influence of the bourgeoisie class of the mid-eighteenth century that shaped the concept of public theatre.

As a concept, public theatre is inherently connected with the bourgeois class. In Germany, in the mid-eighteenth century, the bourgeoisie gained sufficient self-confidence as their wealth and power increased. As the members of the emerging class did hardly want to join the aristocratic cultural world; merchants and civil servants with their business and administrative skills aimed to establish their own theatre,

17 MARCHI, N. De – GREENE, J. A. Adam Smith and Private Provisions of the Arts. In *History of Political Economy*, 2005, Vol. 37, Issue 3, pp. 431–454.

18 Ibid., p. 439.

19 MCGUIGAN, J. *Cool Capitalism.* London – New York : PlutoPress, 2009.

profoundly expressing the ethos of a new, bourgeois era.[20] Naturally, these efforts had a nationalistic goal, as the German language (being the language of the emerging class) was not yet established as an artistic instrument.

The bourgeoisie was also dedicated to the new philosophical ethos of the Enlightenment with its anthropology of perfection and progress. The vision of "Bildung," an individuation process, was in accord with the aspirations of the new, liberal class. The German project of the national theatre, as it was embodied in (hardly successful) Hamburgische Entreprise and other later attempts to put it into practice, was comprised of all these ingredients – national revival, individualism, personal development, progressivism, and business.

According to Jürgen Habermas,[21] the bourgeoisie created a public sphere, separating private interests from state affairs, thus giving birth to public interest. The public theatre served as a representation of this bourgeois political strategy – a precursor to bourgeois democracy based on collective bargaining on public issues (die Öffentlichkeit – the public – etymologically comes from the word "offen," meaning "open"). This is also why the Hamburg National Theatre was run by a public consortium to rely on independence from the state through funding by the bourgeoisie. The theatre, especially in the early days of the establishment of the bourgeois class, was an instrument of intellectual and political unification.[22]

This resulted in the concept of theatre as a cultural mission, as propounded by Schiller, Goethe, and Wagner. The public theatre's ideal was to not only make art publicly accessible but also to "cultivate" the public. The audience, through exposure to the theatre, was expected to become more enlightened and virtuous. The idea of the public was thus linked to the idea of taste in the form of Enlightenment ideals supplemented by nationalist notions of statehood.[23] The theatre was a school with a public mission to "turn angry and wild men into human beings, citizens, friends and patriots," as Madame Löwen declared at the opening of the National Theatre in Hamburg on 22 April 1767.[24]

Hence, the theatre was seen as a moral institution, whose public service was to refine the public into an ideal citizen, capable of participating in discussions of politics and economics. However, this concept of the public failed to include those who did not conform to the prevailing bourgeois "common sense," as pointed out by Nancy Fraser in her critique of Habermas's concept of the public sphere.

Subsequent critiques, pinpointing the bourgeois art's narcissistic tendency to eschew social issues, were in essence challenging the intrinsic "public service" purpose of such art. This purpose was conceived as a tool for transforming people into ideal citizens capable of reasoned political and economic discourse, and its

20 WILLIAMS, S. – HAMBURGER, M. *A History of German Theatre*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 66.

21 HABERMAS, J. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.* Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 1989.

22 WILLIAMS, S. – HAMBURGER, M. *A History of German Theatre*, p. 226.

23 Ibid., 371.

24 Ibid.

inherently patriarchal nature sidelined women or people from colonies, categorizing them as emotional and unreliable. Frazer has shown that it is this normalization of taste that makes it impossible for the concept of the public to include those who either cannot, will not, or will not acquiesce to the prevailing bourgeois "common sense."[25] This paternalistic notion of public service can therefore hardly be credible today.

The People: Theatre Democracy

The German model of public service, with its elitist and paternalistic tenor, prioritizes audience cultivation for nationalistic goals. In stark contrast, the French concept of "public service" represents a distinct political model, reflecting the theatre's role as a battleground for class conflict and a medium for public expression. A recent issue of Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre (2022) was dedicated to the exploration of the public service idea in French theatre, revealing not only its long history (dating back to Denis Diderot) but even its geographical context (left bank and right bank in Paris).[26]

The democratization and reduced state interference in theatre, predating the French Revolution, contributed to a surge in theatre activities and its popularity. The "parterre", frequented by lower social classes, transformed into a hotbed of animated interaction and anticipation of revolutionary events. Here, instead of a cultural mission, the theatre played a revolutionary role, spurring public self-awareness and politicization amid the vibrant chaos, despite the old regime's efforts to rein it in.[27]

French theatre, particularly during the French Revolution, distinctly demonstrated public power. Here, it was the audience who openly critiqued and disrupted theatrical productions, thereby exerting their influence through the medium of artistic representation. This could be seen as an alternative way for the public to exercise political power that they might not otherwise wield. As noted by Susan Maslan, the post-revolutionary era saw the role of theatre evolve further. Radical politicians pushed against "theatricality" as mere imitation. They aimed to metamorphose politics into a fully transparent "theatre," where every aspect of decision-making would be visible to the public eye, a concept that morphed into surveillance within the domestic sphere.[28]

The ideal of theatre as a public service returned in a different form after the Second World War, especially with the wave of nationalisation and left-wing political efforts of La Resistance, which aimed to economically reconstruct and strengthen public interest and welfare.

---

25 FRASER, N. Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. In *Social Text*, 1990, Vol. 25, Issue 26, pp. 56–80.

26 GOETSCHEL, P. Public/privé, Rive droite/Rive gauche – Les lignes de partage de la scène parisienne et nationale au second XXe siècle. In *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*, 2002, Vol. 292, Issue 1.

27 RAVEL, J. S. *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680–1791.* Cornell University Press, 1999.

28 MASLAN, S. *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy, and the French Revolution.* Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

Probably the most significant (and explicitly named) model of theatre as a public service was Jean Vilar's reform of the Théâtre National Populaire. This institution, which had already emerged in 1920 as part of a popular (or even populist) artistic movement that sought to spread theatre to the social and geographical periphery, was guided by the ideas of its founder Firmin Gémier as an open, popular theatre, accessible to all social classes. The aim was to unite a socially and regionally divided nation, to place the workers and the bourgeoisie side by side. As a director, Gémier sought to stage the classics (especially Shakespeare) in a way that spoke to the illiterate peasantry. Jean Vilar defined public service theatre as one that does not exclude – just as "gas, water, electricity" should be the property of the people, accessible and providing civic dignity.[29]

The post-war nationalisation movement in France, deeply influenced by the National Council of Resistance, aimed to reclaim important industries and the "fruits of common labour" for the nation. The intent was not only to facilitate democratic control over these enterprises but also to encourage the formation of work councils. A parallel was drawn between the theatre and the state, viewing artists in a role similar to civil servants.

Jeanne Laurent[30] emphasized that maintaining a balance between independence and accountability was the responsibility of the artist. While endorsing the principle of politics and arts as distinct domains, she believed that state intervention was necessary if the artist did not meet their obligations. Notably, Laurent held a strict view towards those receiving state support, arguing against any complacency on their part.

Theatre decentralisation sought to provide creative freedom, but it also demanded a commitment to democratic management in the public sector. Jean Vilar, taking the public service notion further, viewed the TNP as a civic theatre – one that is dedicated to the public rather than reflecting political ideologies like Piscator's and Brecht's models. As Laurent Fleury observes, Vilar prioritized public accessibility to theatre rather than personal ambitions.[31]

However, this approach raised an interesting conflict. A democratizing artistic ethos was oddly mixed with servility to state power, creating tension within this theatre model. This tension shall persist, as seen in the Czech Republic, until we manage to disentangle the concept of democracy from the state. As Robert Abirached has noted, in France, this tension shifted towards artistic independence because of the revolutionary years of late 1960s.[32] More precisely, a schism developed between public service and its personalized application, a distortion that, according to Abirached, led to the celebritization of theatre leaders and the growth of their self-confidence. The servant became the boss, the animator became the creator.

---

29 FLEURY, L. *Le TNP de Vilar.* Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007, pp. 93–110.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., pp. 109–110.

32 ABIRACHED, R. Théâtre, service public: Genèse d'une notion fluctuante. In *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*, 2022, Vol. 292, p. 12.

This disconnection from the original ethos of public service means that the "commitment" that Vilar kept talking about become abstract and lost its concrete relation to the democratic body, to society in all its class diversity. Such a distortion is threatened, among other things, if there is a crisis of political representation (i.e., democratic deficit) and atrophy or even absence of the democratic institutions governing the theatre. In addition to the ethos of public service, then, it is necessary to consider the organisation and management of theatres that must reflect this ethos – by involving different social classes in decisions about the operation and life of the theatre.

The Public to Serve

We have seen that the idea of public service takes different forms depending on whether it is seen in terms of political economy and the benefits it offers to society, as an expression of the normative ideal of cultivating the human personality, or of democratizing forces. This diversity of different conceptions should not confuse us – it is not at all specific to theatre or conceptions of public service in the arts. If we move away from the specific problem of the place of artistic creation in the contemporary political-economic complex, we can pose the question as follows: how does public service express the public interest?

The concept of public interest is isomorphic to public service – it is similarly vague, yet widely used not only in public administration but also, for example, in the media/journalism. Expropriation, interference with personal rights, publication of classified information is all defended in the public interest.

As stated by Glendon A. Schubert, the public interest is a highly unreliable concept, because: "(...) (1) it has not agreed upon meaning; (2) most of those who use the concept leave it undefined and amorphous; and (3) those who do attempt to define it are in basic disagreement, not only as to what should be the substantive content of the concept, but also as to whether it is possible to postulate any substantive content for it."[33]

Other authors, such as Frank Sorauf, Anthony Downs, and Richard E. Flathman, have noted the variety of uses of the term from different perspectives, the latter of which is used to express approval or disapproval of a particular public policy.[34]

In her comprehensive study of the public interest, Virginia Held points out the fact that while academically it is an overly fluid, almost untrustworthy concept, it hardly means that it lacks pragmatic relevance.[35] In social reality it is used and has a normative value. For the purposes of the following argument, let it be given: suppose that public service is an expression of the public interest in the work of an institution or a professional in relation to society, to which it provides some socially recognised good (such as health, art or education).

---

33 SCHUBERT, G. A. The Theory of Public Interest. In *Political Research, Organization and Design*, 1958, Vol. 1, Issue 5, p. 34.

34 HELD, V. *The Public Interest and Individual Interests.* New York : Basic Books, 1970, pp. 2–3.

35 Ibid., p. 9–11.

The key question then is: how to discern what kind of this good is in the public interest? How should it be provided, how can it be discerned as fulfilling its social role, and how can its contribution to the social good (summum bonum) be determined? How does this good contribute to "la bonne vie," the idea of a common, proper, and nourishing good?

"La Bonne Vie"

It is the notion of "good life" that I propose to use to address the definition of public service. Let us, therefore, start from the idea that every society desires the "good life," a happy, flourishing, and satisfying way of life. "La vie bonne" is a human norm that has objective parameters – it expresses intrinsically good behaviour and the desire to develop human capacities. This way, it differs from personal, private ideas of what is good. In our case, it differs not only from the private interests of the members of the audience, who judge the theatre's activity as "good" or "socially damaging," but also from the private, e.g. aesthetic ideals of the artists. This can be vividly shown in the case of the controversial performance of Oliver Frljić's *Our Violence, Your Violence* in Brno, 2018, where there was a clash between those who saw the production as a disruption of their idea of the good life, and artists who, on the contrary, saw the artwork as supporting it.

"La vie bonne" is a category that transcends the individual, intuitive notion of the "good" that society needs to fulfil a desired state, and thus has a universalizing normative character (though perhaps not universal, since each society may have this "good" defined differently). This good life is based on what man as a being needs and means one's fulfilment; but at the same time, it cannot be achieved in solitude and is characterized by mutuality. This reciprocity, which Aristotle referred to as philia, makes humans vulnerable; other obstacles to achieving the good life may be catastrophes, social or biological constraints, etc. The ideal of the "good life" is an articulation of species identity, since every natural being desires some "good life," but each desires a different one according to its constitution or the possibilities that arise from it.[36]

Martha Nussbaum, using Greek tragedies as a backdrop, argues that the concept of "the good life" necessarily includes human fragility and emotionality. The chase for perfection is futile, but health, imagination, and thought can guide us closer to it. Any "good life"-oriented definition of public interest must, therefore, acknowledge the objective, attainable goal while respecting our inherent human frailty and fallibility. Nussbaum encapsulates this with the idea that in poetic expression the "(...) part of the peculiar beauty of human excellence just is its vulnerability."[37]

---

36 NUSSBAUM, M. C. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy.* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 376.

37 Ibid., p. 2.

Nussbaum's analysis of *Antigone* reveals that human vulnerability guides moral decisions, often shaping the delicate balance between progress and piety. This ancient drama offers a more profound perspective on the fragility of human judgment on "good" action than a lawmaker who prioritizes societal security.[38] A conception of the "good life" that embraces human vulnerability thus proves more realistic and reflexive than the approaches dismissing this essential human trait. Nussbaum implies that under suitable conditions, theatre — capable of portraying human vulnerability as an inherent, valuable human aspect — can indeed promote the "good life," unlike conventional legal or economic discourse.

However, utilitarian, or liberal individual relativism critics would argue for focusing on augmenting the common good via aggregated perfections, aligning it with prior economic theories. They advocate societal strengthening through recognized qualities, reflecting traditional political-economic theories' view of the arts. Based on my research, this is also the prevalent public service argument in the Czech Republic.

Ignoring moral relativism's stance (contradicting the notion of "la bonne vie" and public service), another counterargument posits human vulnerability as a threat to the attainment of desired perfection, modelled on universal norms. This mindset is deeply rooted in the German Romantic-Classical concept of personal development (Bildung) aiming for human development and perfection. Although the Goethean conception of "Bildung" acknowledges human vulnerability as a reflective moment for individuation, it still contradicts my "good life" notion on several fronts. Firstly, it asserts a universal normative ideal for a good life. Secondly, it perceives vulnerabilities as obstacles to overcome, supporting a progressive idea of eradicating weaknesses (e.g., in the Burschenschaft movement). Lastly, this universal ideal of perfection has a nationalistic aspect, advocating societal unity based on national ideals — evident in both German and Czech milieus (being the reason d'être of the National Theatre). This nationalistic leaning is inherently exclusionary, both discursively and socially, aligning with the bourgeois ideal of public sphere and excluding those unable to achieve it.

In the former, as Nancy Frazer argues, it is directly linked to the bourgeois ideal of a public sphere constructed around a shared "taste," an ideal of perfection of knowledge, behaviour, and knowledge ("the cultivated man").[39] It excludes all those who are unable (by virtue of their personal and social vulnerabilities) to achieve this ideal – typically the lower classes, migrants, and women. The second level of this exclusion is direct physical exclusion, in the extreme form of ethnic displacement, as we have seen repeatedly in the twentieth century and unfortunately continue to see even today.

Aligning these thoughts with Virginia Held's public interest analysis, two contradicting public interest approaches emerge. One is an aggregative concept aligning

38 Ibid., p. 74.

39 FRASER, N. Rethinking the Public Sphere, pp. 63–64.

with economic, utilitarian rationality and neoliberal "laissez-faire" ideologies. The other expresses a universal idea like national self-determination or personal perfection. The former allows human flaws and vulnerabilities to be suppressed by performance, while the latter does so through a consensual ideal. Held labels these as preponderance theories and unitary conceptions and elaborates on their shortcomings. She also suggests that the public interest cannot originate from the political system – it needs a shared ethical system for individuals to fairly evaluate conflicting claims.[40]

Navigating the Conflict

My understanding of public interest aligns closely with the third category identified by Held in her analysis, which is the public interest as a common interest. Nevertheless, the challenge lies in the discovery of a "shared minimum" that excludes no group, evidenced in the struggles between railway unions and employers, for instance. Held asserts that we should not overinflate the common interest in conflict situations, as it might not be attainable.[41]

Frazer offers an interesting solution with her counterpublics concept. If the definition of public interest demands a shared ethical system, then, in line with Nussbaum's analysis, it must acknowledge our shared human vulnerability and imperfection.

Frazer proposes that communal interests should be voiced in parallel discursive arenas, allowing for the sharing of experiences, negotiation of common interests, and collective identification. Thus, even vulnerable minorities, often excluded from the majority, create their own "publics" that can then engage in dialogue. This necessitates the dismantling of dominant narratives and requires inclusivity, recognition of differences, and structural changes for equality and participation.

Public service, in real terms, needs to transcend political-economic and paternalistic conceptions to become democratic, incorporating decision-making mechanisms that facilitate even those usually excluded from the public sphere to influence "taste." The public, following Ernest Laclau's term, becomes an "empty signifier,"[42] favouring collective negotiation over consensus, without strictly separating the public from the private. This ideal includes people commonly disparaged as "populists," "desolates" (the Czech mainstream term for those who spread disinformation), or "the uneducated" as part of the public, considering their vulnerabilities.

This approach aligns with the French notion of theatre as a public service, which does not aim to erase conflicts through general taste or cultivation but rather integrate them as part of the artistic event. This resonates with the concept of "the good life," where value conflicts are seen as enriching civic life.[43] Thus, a polis should not

---

40 HELD, V. *The Public Interest and Individual Interests*, p. 190.

41 Ibid., pp. 124–127.

42 LACLAU, E. Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics? In *Deconstruction: A Reader* (ed. by M. McQuillan). Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2001, pp. 36–46.

43 NUSSBAUM, M. C. The Fragility of Goodness, p. 353.

strive for unity per se (as Plato's ideal) but embrace the plurality of separate parts (in the spirit of Aristotle).[44]

The 2018 performance of Frljić's *Our Violence, Your Violence* in Brno, is an example where the presence of people from the populist "Decent People" movement or Catholic conservatives in the audience can be seen as positive as it marked the entry of specific counterpublics into a traditionally homogenized audience. The public service question transforms into whether the theatre could effectively organize and manage this encounter. The encounter's potential for joint negotiation was briefly unlocked when a section of the audience began dancing to the music played by the theatre technicians. However, the opportunity was squandered as the theatre employees and artists insisted on continuing with the show, and members of the counterpublic were escorted out. The paternalistic, "cultivating" concept of public service ultimately prevailed, and the opportunity for dialogue was lost. Hence, the theatre's structure, unfortunately, served to homogenize the public instead of fostering dialogue.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to demonstrate not only the fluidity of theatre as a public service but also the potential to critically examine its various forms and identify a strategy that acknowledges both current socio-economic circumstances and critical reflections on the past. If we are to truly consider theatre a public service, it necessitates an ethical commitment – or "a state of mind," as Vilar put it. This would reposition the artist as an animator rather than a creator, whose role is to facilitate an event that bridges class and geographical divides and exposes diverse counterpublics to a potentially conflictual, but free and open dialogue for defining common interests. The democratic essence of such a "public service theatre" lies not in cultivating the spectator but in carving out a space for community realization.

Gustav Landauer, the anarchist and dramaturge of Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, presented a fitting metaphor for this in a 1917 poll about the future of German theatre in the magazine Masken.[45] He argued that the theatre's future was to be in, for, and of the people. Like a railway, it would connect people, serving as a unifying centre between the city and the country. It was to echo the "spirit of joy of the working people" after the war and become a venue for continuous popular celebration, an embodiment of the common efforts of humanity.

I am drawn to this metaphor as it aptly encapsulates the public service ethos

44 Ibid. Or see Aristotle's *Politics*, 1261a4 : "Yet it is clear that if the process of unification advances beyond a certain point, the city will not be a city at all for a state essentially consists of a multitude of persons, and if its unification is carried beyond a certain point, city will be reduced to family and family to individual, for we should pronounce the family to be a more complete unity than the city, and the single person than the family; so that even if any lawgiver were able to unify the state, he must not do so, for he will destroy it in the process. And not only does a city consist of a multitude of human beings, it consists of human beings differing in kind. A collection of persons all alike does not constitute a state." (Cf. ARISTOTLE. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 21, translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA – London : Harvard University Press – William Heinemann Ltd., 1932, pp. 71–72).

45 LANDAUER, G. Die Zukunft der deutschen Bühne. In *Masken*, 1917–1918, Vol. 13, Issue 1, s. 207.

I have presented in this article. The management of such a theatre must not be driven by personal artistic ambitions but by the intent to create or unlock spaces for encounters that can disrupt the societal and geographical segregation of the population. Only then can it link counterpublics in order to formulate the idea of "good life," rather than merely reflecting the views of the creators back to the audience.

I have left the organizational aspect untouched (i.e., how such a theatre should be run). However, it is evident from the discussion that its management ought to be democratic and inclusive, integrating diverse voices from society. This remains an urgent matter, especially as public service is increasingly perceived as an economic or legal concept, thereby diminishing its democratic potential.[46]

LITERATURE

#kulturajenarod – RESTART. Činohra ND [#cultureisthenation – RESTART. Nation Theatre Drama]. *YouTube*, 23 April 2020. [online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_m6Ldeb478.

ABIRACHED, Robert. Théâtre, service public: Genèse d'une notion fluctuante. In *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*, 2022, Vol. 292. ISSN 2550-8148.

ARISTOTLE. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 21: Politics.* Translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA – London : Harvard University Press – William Heinemann Ltd., 1959. 264 p.

BELFIORE, Eleonora – BENNETT, Oliver. Rethinking the Social Impacts of the Arts. In *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 2007, Vol. 13, Issue 2, pp. 135–151. ISSN 1477-2833. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/10286630701342741.

BEUSHAUSEN, Katrin. *Theatre and the English Public from Reformation to Revolution*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2018. 310 p. ISBN 9781316850411.

BOŽOVIĆ, Ksenija Marković. Public theatre's social role and its audience. In *Teme*, 2021, Vol. 45, Issue 1, pp. 213–229. ISSN 1820-7804. DOI: https://doi.org/10.22190/TEME190702012M.

COSTIN, George. Theatre as a Public Service: Tendencies and Relevance. In *Colocvii teatrale*, 2022, Vol. 1, pp. 217–228. ISSN 1584-4927.

FLEURY, Laurent. *Le TNP de Vilar*. Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007. 280 p. ISBN 9782753503243.

FRASER, Nancy. Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. In *Social Text*, 1990, Vol. 25, Issue 26, pp. 56–80. ISSN 0164-2472. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307%2F466240.

GOETSCHEL, Pascale. Public/privé, Rive droite/Rive gauche – Les lignes de partage de la scène parisienne et nationale au second XXe siècle. In *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*, 2002, Vol. 292, Issue 1. ISSN 2550-8148.

GRÁFOVÁ, Jitka. Divadla bojují s radním: Máme být veřejnou službou [The theatres are fighting with the council: We're supposed to be a public service]. In *Aktuálně.cz*, 11 March 2008. [online]. Available at: https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/umeni/divadla-bojuji-s-radnim-mame-byt-verejnou-sluzbou/r~i:article:523704/.

HABERMAS, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 1989. 328 p. ISBN 978-0-262-58108-0.

46 The author would like to thank Klára Škrobánková for proofreading.

HELD, Virginia. *The Public Interest and Individual Interests.* New York : Basic Books, 1970. 248 p.

Jatka78 obnoví sezónu 27. května kabaretem POT a LESK v režii Rosti Nováka a Víta Neznala. [Jatka78 will renew its season on 27 May with the cabaret POT and LESK directed by Rosta Novák and Vit Neznal] In *I-divadlo.cz,* 19 May 2020. [online]. Available at: https://www.i-divadlo.cz/zpravy/jatka78-obnovi-sezonu-27-kvetna-kabaretem-pot-a-lesk-v-rezii-rosti-novaka-a-vita-neznala.

LACLAU, Ernesto. Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics? In *Deconstruction: A Reader*. Ed. by Martin McQuillan. Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2001, pp. 36–46. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474470919. 596 p.

LANDAUER, Gustav. Die Zukunft der deutschen Bühne. In *Masken*, 1917–1918, Vol. 13, Issue 1, p. 207.

MARCHI, Neil De –GREENE, Jonathan A. Adam Smith and Private Provisions of the Arts. In *History of Political Economy*, 2005, Vol. 37, Issue 3, pp. 431–454. ISSN 0018-2702.

MASLAN, Susan. *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy, and the French Revolution*. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. ISBN 978-1-4214-1694-6. 288 p.

MCGUIGAN, Jim. *Cool Capitalism.* London – New York : PlutoPress, 2009. 288 p. ISBN 978 0 7453 2640 5.

MOGGRIDGE, D. E. Keynes, the Arts, and the State. In *History of Political Economy*, 2005, Vol. 37, Issue 3, pp. 535–555. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/00182702-37-3-535.

NUSSBAUM, Martha C. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy.* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2001. 592 p. ISBN 0-521-79472-2.

Otevřený dopis ministru kultury ve věci udržitelnosti a nerůstu v kultuře [Open Letter to the Minister of Culture on Sustainability and Non-Growth in Culture]. In *Artalk*, 23. 3. 2022. [online]. Available at: https://artalk.cz/2022/03/23/otevreny-dopis-ministru-kultury-ve-veci-udrzitelnosti-a-nerustu-v-kulture/.

RAVEL, Jeffrey S. *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680–1791*. Cornell University Press, 1999. 272 p. ISBN 9781501724626.

RICCIONI, Ilaria (ed.). *Theatre(s) and Public Sphere in Global and Digital Society: Volume 1: Theoretical Explorations.* Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2023. 215 p. ISBN 978-90-04-52654-9.

RICCIONI, Ilaria (ed.). *Theatre(s) and Public Sphere in Global and Digital Society: Volume 2: Case Studies*. Leiden – Boston : Brill, 2023. 230 p. ISBN 978-90-04-52616-7.

SCHUBERT, Glendon A. The Theory of Public Interest. In *Political Research, Organization and Design*, 1958, Vol. 1, Issue 5, pp. 34–36.

SHIMKO, Robert B., and FREEMAN, Sara. Theatre, Performance, and the Public Sphere. In *Public Theatres and Theatre Publics*. Ed. by Robert B. Shimko and Sara Freeman. Newcastle upon Tyne : Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. 230 p. ISBN 978-1443837842.

WILLIAMS, Simon, and HAMBURGER, Maik. *A History of German Theatre.* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2008. 464 p. ISBN 978-0-521-83369-1.

Jan Motal
Divadelní fakulta Janáčkovy akademie múzických umění
Mozartova 1
662 15 Brno
Czech Republic
e-mail: motal@jamu.cz
ORCID: 0000-0001-6124-6686