

## Theater performances and their accessibility in Slovakia: Insights from the Deaf community

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### Theater performances and their accessibility in Slovakia: Insights from the Deaf community

Theater. Accessibility. Participation. Inclusion. Deaf community. Theater sign language interpreting.

This article examines the accessibility of theater performances for Deaf audiences in Slovakia, with a main focus on the provision of Theater Sign Language Interpreting (TSLI). Drawing on analysis of current access strategies, the authors highlight examples of good practice aligned with more user-centred, inclusive and participatory access-provision models. Based on the results of an exploratory qualitative research interview with the key representative of the Deaf community involved in their development in the country, the main principles within these strategies are identified. Through this exploration, the article advocates for further enhancement of integrated and inclusive access strategies in Slovak theaters and further reveals the characteristics as well as the potential of professional TSLI.

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Existing mapping of sensory accessibility of cultural spaces in Slovakia suggests several examples of good practice, but also many deficiencies. Over the last decade, positive developments in the area of interest for this study have been documented in some national and independent cultural institutions, particularly in the Slovak national gallery and a few museums initiating provision of sensory access in the form of Slovak sign language translation and interpreting (Vojtechovský 2021); the *Nová scéna* (New stage) theater and a few independent theaters developing strategies in theater sign language interpreting (Secarã and Perez 2022; Hefty and Hefty 2022); and two film festivals via subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, Slovak sign language interpreting and Slovak sign language translation (Perez 2023). Identified developments, however, remain rather scarce, mostly tied to individual short-term projects of individual cultural institutions or associations of the target recipients (Secarã and Perez 2022; Verebová 2023). In the case of provision of sensory access to cultural live events in particular, national legislation is almost non-existent, access provision is not regulated and professional access services lack systematic funding support (Perez 2023; Verebová 2023). Turning attention to theater performances, which are the primary focus of this study, provision of access services for audiences with sensory impairments is far from common and in general remains – in a negative sense – rather exclusive. In major productions, access to theater venues for spectators with hearing loss is significantly limited. For spectators with vision impairment, access provision in major Slovak theaters is broadly neglected.

Such a state of affairs is in contradiction with international declarations advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities, as well as with binding EU legislation aiming to ensure more accessible products and services to all. Calling for all countries to take measures to secure the right of access to all aspects of life and society on an equal basis was anchored in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006), building on the principles of non-discrimination and equality of opportunity – including in cultural contexts. Access to culture is also considered an important area to be addressed by the EU Disability Strategy, which aims to move the EU towards participation and inclusion (Pasikowska-Schnass 2019). While the *European Disability Strategy 2010–2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe* (2010) paved the way for accessibility to cultural organizations, activities, events and venues, the *Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030* (2021) aims at granting full access to and participation and inclusion in (among other areas) cultural life. Stemming from legislative and strategic support, as well as advocacy for accessibility to cultural spaces, cultural institutions in some European regions recently not only widely apply a broad scope of access strategies, but – especially in the case of theaters and opera houses – “challenge accessibility” and “experiment with how access could become integrated in the creative process” (Secarã and Perez 2022, para. 2). Such creative integration of access is in good practice designed and performed in cooperation with target communities thanks to which it can lead to a unique inclusive experience for all (Di Giovanni 2022).

Despite our overall observations on accessibility of Slovak theater spaces being rather critical, in the case of accessibility of theater performances to Deaf<sup>1</sup> audiences, at least in some productions, creative, integrated and inclusive access strategies have been previously identified also in Slovakia (Secarã and Perez 2022). The present study aims to introduce these strategies in more detail and provide insight into their initiation, development, specifics and application. Based on research interviews with the key Deaf access coordinator in Slovakia, this study reveals the potential of more inclusive and participatory access models, as well as limitations faced in the Slovak cultural context. The findings point out the potential of more user-centred and integrated access-provision models and advocate for better recognition of professional Theater Sign Language Interpreting (TSLI).

### KEY CONCEPTS

The theoretical framework of the present study is based on proactive and user-centred approaches to accessibility (Greco 2016, 2018), shifting the interpretation of access provision towards inclusive (Di Giovanni 2022; Di Giovanni, Fryer, and Raffi 2023), participatory (Di Giovanni and Raffi 2022; Dangerfield 2023) and integrated (Fryer and Cavallo 2022) access-provision strategies. In the core of these shifts, understanding accessibility as a human right closely relates to interpretation of accessibility as a necessary requirement in general, as argued by Greco (2016). In the case of persons with disabilities, as he explains, “accessibility comes into play not because it is a special human right they possess, but because it demands that they be granted access to some material or immaterial goods” (11) in order to fulfil rights which are universal to all humans.

In the opinion of the authors of this study, such an interpretation is essential in opposing the hegemonic, ableism-rooted approaches to accessibility which in practice sometimes lead to insufficient and inadequate access strategies – not respecting the various abilities of varied audiences and neglecting the artistic value of joint inclusive artistic experiences. In such a traditional view, access services are commonly based on the creator’s knowledge and their interpretation of users’ needs, neglecting the insight, knowledge and participation of users in designing for accessibility (Greco 2018). User-centred approaches on the contrary aim to challenge the creator-user gap, invite users to share their insight and participate in access strategies and access provision (Greco 2018; Di Giovanni 2022). In the creation of inclusive design, access models aim for shared experiences where “different abilities are added value and not barriers” (Di Giovanni 2022, para. 4).

Such accessibility models then indeed call for integrated access strategies as described by Louise Fryer and Amelia Cavallo (2022). Contrary to traditional access-provision models where accessibility is often approached as an add-on at the end of the process, and the external expert is metaphorically expected to “wave their magic wand and solve the access challenges”, Fryer and Cavallo (2022, 80) call for integrating accessibility into the (creative) process through collaboration between (creative) teams, persons responsible for access provision and representatives of target communities from the initiation and planning phase. Elena Di Giovanni and Francesca Raffi

aply describe the movement from traditional access models towards inclusive practices more broadly as “shifting the attention from the barriers to the people” (2022, 169), proactively expanding beyond granting access towards participatory accessibility. In Di Giovanni’s understanding, such a model refers to “the design, creation, revision and consumption of access strategies in an inclusive way” (2018, 158), bringing together audiences with different (dis)abilities in order to create shared access services and a shared artistic experience.

In the present study, the authors aim to examine access strategies applied in Slovak theaters in relation to Deaf audiences. In this respect, it attempts to reveal whether a movement towards more integrated, inclusive and participatory access can be detected, and to what extent and encountering what response. The main focus of the authors lies on the accessibility of theater performances to Deaf spectators specifically in the form of TSLI. Compared to more traditional, neutral conference-style interpreting – which is sometimes used in Slovak theaters – artistic TSLI aims to provide more than “what is said on the stage”. It aims to ensure a theater experience equal to that of a hearing audience and thus bridges the linguistic and cultural differences among audiences resulting in a shared inclusive artistic experience (Gebron 2000; Richardson 2018; Hefty and Hefty 2022). TSLI applies integrated access models and places a focus on artistic expression of the interpreted performance. It is by rule designed and provided with the participation of communities, involving Deaf experts, coordinators, supervisors and actors together with theater sign language interpreters (Hefty and Hefty 2022). Based on perspectives of the key Deaf theater access expert in the country, the study will showcase how TSLI operates and what limits it faces in Slovakia.

## METHODOLOGY

For the presented case study, the authors applied a qualitative research method – an exploratory personal interview conducted with Slovak Deaf community representative and Deaf access coordinator Michal Hefty (2023, pers. comm.). Hefty co-authored the first Slovak (and so far only) TSLI publication (cf. Hefty and Hefty 2022) which provides expert insights and guidance for good TSLI practice.

The primary case study interview design applied the community-engaged research model which is based on collaborative participation of Deaf community in research decision making (Singleton, Jones, and Hanumatha 2017). The design of this study was co-created and verified with members of the Slovak Deaf community in terms of the topical outline, research interest and research subject. Due to the language barrier between the authors of the study and their interviewee, as well as for the purposes of acquiring an approved sound recording of the interview, mutual communication was provided via a sign language interpreter. The interview focused on his insight and perspective as a professional access coordinator, access expert and recognized representative of the community and its culture. Interview questions aimed to gain knowledge on: 1) the accessibility strategies currently applied in Slovak theaters; 2) the perception of accessible performances by the Deaf community; 3) the challenges in access provision in the Slovak theater context.

## FINDINGS

After analysis and interpretation of the transcribed recordings of the semi-structured interview with Michal Hefty, the findings presented below were classified into four categories: 1) the development of and demand for accessible performances by and from the Slovak Deaf community; 2) theater experience and audience preferences; 3) identified challenges of access provision; 4) and key limits to providing professional TSLI in Slovakia.

### **Development of and demand for accessible performances**

There is no detailed list available of all accessible theater performances provided with TSLI, conference-style sign language interpreting or captions in Slovakia. Nevertheless, based on our own mapping via available online resources (e.g. in the news, websites and social media accounts of theaters), the quantity of accessible theatrical performances in Slovakia in general seems to be significantly low. Michal Hefty confirms that “opportunities are very limited. [...] It’s like a drop in the ocean compared to what’s accessible to the hearing” (Hefty 2023, pers. comm.). There are more than 80 theaters in Slovakia of various kinds but only one or two theaters provide approximately one project with TSLI once per year. It is important to point out that the accessible performances take place predominantly in the capital Bratislava, therefore even though the demand for performances with TSLI by the Deaf is increasing, too large a distance demotivates or prevents potential viewers from attending them (Verebová 2024; Hefty 2023, pers. comm.). Despite Hefty’s statement that “the Slovak Deaf are rather passive in their interest towards culture” (2023, pers. comm.), he has also observed a continuous increase in interest for the theater, from an average of four or five when he and his team started providing TSLI to a recent performance “attended by 80 Deaf spectators”.

In terms of providing information about accessible performances, as the Slovak Deaf community is rather close, the information spread fast – nowadays mostly thanks to the Internet in general (Verebová 2024), social media, but also personal communication (Hefty 2023, pers. comm.). Another useful source for spreading information about accessible performances is the *Myslímnovinky* online periodical (cf. e.g. Slezák 2021, 10) published by and for the Slovak Deaf community.

As far as the language of accessible performances is concerned, Hefty (2023, pers. comm.) has so far collaborated only on TSLI provision for performances originally performed in Slovak, as it would be a challenge to work on a foreign-language production. As he says, however, it would indeed be an interesting experience and “the Deaf would certainly gladly accept it”.

### **Challenges of access provision in TSLI**

The research interview with Michal Hefty confirmed the partial results of our ongoing mapping of the accessibility of theater spaces in Slovakia. As identified earlier, from the point of view of theaters in the country, the greatest problem with provision of accessible performances lies in the lack of funding resources (cf. Verebová 2023, 49–50). The only theaters not to have a problem in financing accessible performances

are the larger ones, for example the national theaters (i. e. the only theatres in Slovakia which are funded by the state). The same aspect was pointed out also by this study where it was addressed as one of the crucial issues in this respect. Hefty emphasized that also limited in this context are the grant schemes and funding opportunities for professional TSLI teams and communities. The system of allocation of financial resources for communities is flawed, and the waiting periods for funding approval are long and inflexible.

The research interview also addressed the value of inclusive theater performances in Slovakia. Hefty evaluates that from his access-expert experience, inclusive performances for both the hearing and the Deaf are a very efficient way of raising public awareness about the meaning and significance of performances accessible to all. In relation to funding opportunities, he aptly adds (Hefty 2023, pers. comm.) that inclusive performances also allow for more efficient funding, with more possibilities. In spite of the effectiveness of inclusive performances, however, he points out the challenges in fully inclusive events for varied groups of people with different kinds of needs, mainly related to technical solutions. Examples of good practice in theater spaces in respect to this aspect are, unfortunately, so far non-existent in the country.

### **Key limits of TSLI provision**

In the case of accessibility of theater performances in Slovakia, several issues have been identified, particularly in relation to the provision of access to Deaf spectators via TSLI: 1) limited preparation time leading to compromised quality in cases when an integrated approach is not applied; and 2) the limited number of qualified professional TSLI experts and interpreters in the country.

The surprising reality that Hefty and his team are the only TSLI access professionals in Slovakia (Hefty 2023, pers. comm.) explains the relatively low number (i.e. fewer than 20) of performances provided with this strategy in the domestic cultural space to this day (cf. Hefty and Hefty 2022, 63–74). Some other theater performances provided with conference-style sign language interpreting have already also taken place. At these performances, instead of an integrated approach (cf. Fryer and Cavallo 2022) and TSLI implemented with a focus on the artistic interpreting element, a traditional approach in the form of neutral conference-style sign language interpreting with one interpreter on stage interpreting “what was said on the stage” was employed.

It appears therefore that on the one hand, there are some efforts striving towards providing high-quality accessible performances, on the other there are those that are simply a box-ticking exercise in order to fulfil a requirement to provide accessible performances (Hefty 2023, pers. comm.). The results of such an approach thus might result in interpreting in which “quality, professionalism and preparation were completely absent” (Hefty 2023, pers. comm.). This just highlights the importance of an adequate and responsible approach of both the theater and the access provision coordinator. In addition, TSLI of high quality (and therefore a high-quality accessible theatrical performance or artistic interpreting in general) requires a thorough and appropriate preparation, both of which Hefty (2023, pers. comm.) greatly stressed.

## CONCLUSION

The present article has examined the access strategies applied in Slovak theaters, with the main focus on accessibility of theaters to the Slovak Deaf community. It recognized several deficiencies, specifically in the limited numbers of accessible theater performances in Slovakia as well as insufficient geographical diversity. Furthermore, the study revealed restrictions within funding schemes potentially providing for accessibility – be it to the theaters, professional access teams or target communities. On the other hand, however, as identified by previous research in this context (Secarā and Perez 2022; Verebová 2023), accessibility of theater performances in Slovakia to Deaf audiences is on the increase, specifically thanks to engagement, advocacy and activism by the Slovak Deaf community. In terms of TSLI in particular, it gains positive response for raising cultural awareness, accessibility and inclusive experiences in the context of Slovak theaters (Secarā and Perez 2022) and obtains positive feedback from the community (Verebová 2024). In this respect, in the context of professional TSLI especially, continuous development toward user-centered and integrative access provision can be noted. Due to the drawback of an absent legislative framework and limited resources across the whole country, target viewers cannot fully nor often enjoy their human right to access cultural events.

Despite the increasing interest in and demand for accessible performances, mainly because of the lack of adequate financial support, time, access professionals and qualified TSLI interpreters, theater performances accessible to Deaf spectators remain a rare phenomenon. At this point, this case study provides more knowledge on *what*, *why* and *how* operates in terms of accessibility of the theater performances to Deaf spectators in Slovakia. These findings can serve as a basis for additional investigation aimed at diverse stakeholders (users, professional and non-professional TSLI interpreters, creative team members and other key theater representatives) and diverse audiences (Deaf, hard-of-hearing, hearing), motivating further research on their experience and/or reception.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The uppercase *Deaf* is used to specifically describe the Deaf community and its members actively sharing a sense of community, language (sign language), and a positive affirmation of Deafhood identity and culture, as opposed to lowercase *deaf* which understands deafness as the medical condition of not being able to hear (Vojtechovský 2011).

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