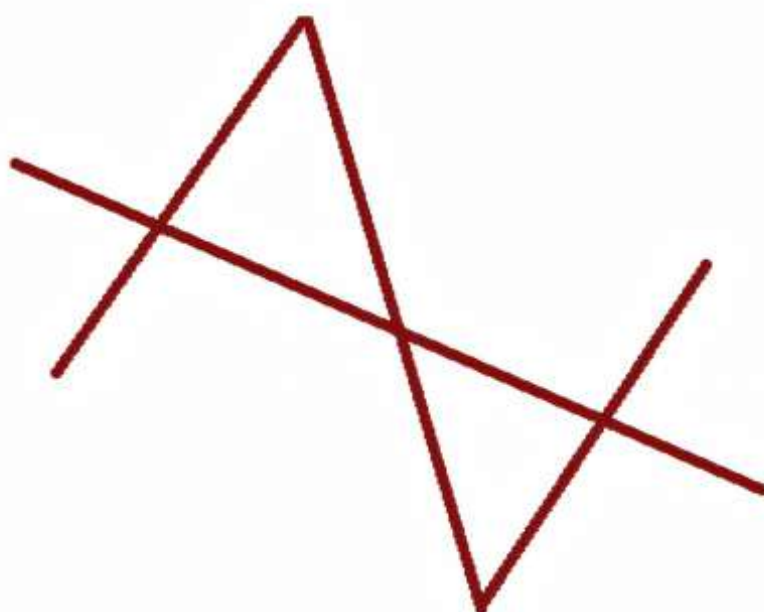


ARS ACADEMICA



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ARS ACADEMICA



Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј“ во Скопје



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Green Transformtion Possibilities, On The Periphery: Policies And Practice In Theatre

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**Jovana Karaulić,
Ksenija Marković Božović**

GREEN TRANSFORMATION POSSIBILITIES ON THE PERIPHERY: POLICIES AND PRACTICE IN THEATRE

.This paper explores the potential of green transformation within a theatre sector, focusing on challenges and opportunities faced by cultural institutions in peripheral regions, particularly on the Balkans. It delves into how these institutions navigate complexities of integrating sustainable practices amidst socio-economic constraints and limited infrastructural support. The study critically examines intersection of cultural policies, sustainable development, and theatre practices within a broader context of global climate crisis, highlighting how these elements interact to shape the capacity of environmental stewardship in arts. Despite growing awareness and initiatives, there remain significant disparities in the implementation of green policies in performing arts across peripheral regions, where resources and support structures are often lacking. Through empirical research conducted in seven theatres in Belgrade, not only does the study analyse current practices, but it also examines the extent to which these practices align with international standards, emphasizing pressing need for a more integrated and context-sensitive approach to sustainability in arts.

Keywords: green transformation, theatre, sustainability, cultural policies, climate crisis

Introduction

Different debates on climate crisis include the past, the present and the future, all the while maintaining a special focus on understanding general actions that affected changing of the ecosystem. Despite the facts presented in numerous public policy documents around the world about impact of society's activities on eco-changes and climate crisis, it seems that there is no appropriate collective social response. Ten priority were outlined, discussed and adopted at the 2019 Climate Action Summit — including the necessity of "addressing the social dimension of climate change", which also refers to a need for greater engagement in humanities as well as creating new platforms to communicate this important issue. The challenge in traditional thinking about climate change is not only related to the significant current and future impacts on nature and society, but also to the fact that until recently "we didn't know how to think and feel about it" (Chaudhuri & Enelow, 2014:viii). This thesis points to a possible understanding of the role of art and culture in the process of bringing the issue of climate change closer to the wider community, through re-designing their own

approaches towards this issue and initiating social dialogue. Additionally, the contemplation of triad of *culture-society-ecology* cannot but refer to the paradigm of *sustainable development*, as contemporary socio-political thought on the interconnectedness of culture and human rights, diversity, sustainability, democracy, and peace advocates for an integration of culture into development strategies and programs, and affirms the idea of culture as a (forth) pillar of sustainable development (Marković 2014: 242–243).

However, while climate change awareness has increased globally and demanded concrete frameworks for action at the cross-sectoral level, this has not been reflected in policy making within cultural sector (Taxopolu, 2023:13). The fact that the field of culture lags behind in addressing these challenges is evidenced by the occurrence of the first meeting ever gathering numerous representatives of culture ministries from around the world only at the end of last year during COP28. This *High Level Ministerial Dialogue For Culture-Based Climate Action* aimed to make a paradigm shift in how climate change is understood: it is not just an environmental, financial and scientific challenge, but a cultural one as well. This meeting and various current initiatives, research and reports indicate a necessity of incorporating culture and arts into a dialogue on the challenges of the climate crisis; however, tangible actions are lacking, and in this regard policies in the performing arts sector are no exception.

Accordingly, the theatre is faced with a task of introducing green policies, which assumes an *eco-shift* in thinking around organization management and individual sectors in the context of sustainable development, and requires gradual alignment of green recommendations with the existing framework of conventional practices (Hasall & Rowan, 2019). This further points to the challenges placed before the theatre as an *agent of positive change*, achieved through action that pertains not only to drawing attention to the current paradigms of the climate crisis through stage narratives, but also to the overall business strategies and organizational culture. Therefore, the imperative of the transition of conventional theatre management processes — redesigning production approaches and modes of operation — becomes one of the underlying components and factors of its *green politicalness*.

Some academics and professionals puts forward that theatre practices need to re-think “how they do what they do” from the perspective not only of reducing their emissions, but also of the theatre’s overall aesthetic and production philosophy, in which every play becomes an “opportunity to self-correct” (Garrett, 2012). This is also in agreement with the thoughts of theorist Dragan Klaić who argues that the role of theatre is to initiate conversation on important issues concerning the community (Klaić, 2016). In the context of green transformations this means that art and culture can and must make a big contribution to increasing the visibility of the ongoing environmental crisis and to call for a collective response from the societies in which they operate. However, the approach to this topic could be quite complicated, which depends on the diversity of contexts - both territorial and cultural. In that regard, while initiatives in the field of performing arts are clearly present in countries of the Global North (America, Canada, Europe with a focus on the United Kingdom and Australia), a distinct disparity in the implementation of green agenda principles is particularly noticeable in countries of the *periphery*. The reasons for this phenomenon are

diverse, but predominantly relate to their objective deficiency in capacity for green transition: underdeveloped *eco* infrastructure (such as waste disposal and recycling systems, railway transport, etc.); insufficient legal responses to ecological sustainability issues (including absence of adequate legislation and support/incentive systems for eco-friendly practices); allocation of resources towards imperative areas and concerns (excluding climate change consequences); public understanding (and functioning) of art field primarily through the lens of aesthetic values; and the continual provision of a “basic minimum” or mere “survival” for programs and organizations (particularly performing arts entities), rather than a directed strategic development aimed at enhancing their overall sustainability, with clearly delineated broader (social) objectives. Incorporating the perspective of the Balkan countries into this theoretical model of an European periphery, becomes evident that the prolonged transitions of the socio-political system, as well as the “transition of public theatres” as a process of adaptation geared towards achieving a balance between the instrumentalization of theatres and fostering excellence in their operations (Marković Božović, 2023: 141), obscure the prospects for green transition within these institutions. Starting from this assumption, the paper explores existing policies and challenges of the eco-turn of theatre as a cultural institution that is “a unique powerful platform for promotion of the climate change crisis” (Chaudhuri & Enelow 2014: 8), and analyse the issue of production models as components and instruments of the politicalness of performing arts (Letunić and Karaulić, 2020) within peripheral context. The contemplation of this is grounded in empirical research of the existing context and practices within seven theatres in Belgrade established by the City Assembly, along with a comparative analysis of recommended practices that within international frameworks are already part of current protocols aligned with the concept of sustainable development.

Challenges of the Performing Art Policies on the Peripheries

Despite various binding documents signed by countries in the Eastern Balkans (the Paris Agreement, the Kyoto Protocol, the Sofia Declaration), the changes in these countries have their visibility and implementation in energy and climate laws, but this is rarely or never transferred to the field of culture, arts and performing arts. The situation is not much better on a broader European scale, thus the research findings of Julie’s Bicycle’s initiative “Culture: The Missing Link” from 2021 indicate that even though 84% of respondents, who were decision-makers in culture from 46 countries, affirmed the relevance of environmental topics to the domain of cultural policy in their countries, only 27% of them are obligated to address them within their activities (Julie’s Bicycle, 2021). These claims are further elaborated by a UNESCO report from 2022. “Reshaping Policies for Creativity” which states that “cultural expressions and creativity are insufficiently mobilized in climate action and that there is a noticeable lack of investment in their role in ecological transition” (Taxopoulou, 2023: 13-14).

Nevertheless, at a global level there are numerous initiatives and resources aimed at the green transformation of theatres, as a response of these organizations to the growing challenges in

the environment - both in terms of reducing harmful effects of their activities and adapting to changed conditions (organizations such as Julie's Bicycle, Creative Carbon Scotland, Broadway Green Alliance, Green Art Incubator at the local level, and an increasing number of theater networks address this issue within their activities - IETM, mitos21, European Theater Convention, etc.). Most of them identify multitude of intersecting goals of this process - mainly oriented towards work procedures and green production, and what precedes this long-term act is a definition of a comprehensive mission of environmental action and its formalization in a form of strategies and an action plan, with an aim “that this action over time becomes rooted in the organizational culture itself and shapes all subsequent decisions and procedures“ (Taxopoulou, 2023: 49).

This process should encompass the involvement of all sectors of the theatre organization, from the early stages to regular progress reporting, with the role of management and organizational leaders being emphasized as crucial. However, considering that the green transformation is significantly influenced by the local socio-economic context, local market and the present legal-regulatory framework, determining the further scope and ambitions of the organization's action plan requires consideration of all these factor, as well as establishing realistic possibilities dependent on the anticipated timeframe, the size, resources and capacities of the organization (Green Art Incubator, 2021; Taxopoulou, 2023). Besides this, organizations need to respect principle of complementarity between capacity building processes within organizations and advocacy processes related to the incorporation of these issues into all official documents at the highest national level of cultural policies. In that sense, as in any other transition of public theatres, and in the case of green transformation also, the application of “two-way adaptation of public city theatre systems” is necessary, namely a “strategic approach that operates both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down,' combining organizational and systemic aspects in addressing the analysed issues” (Marković Božović, 2020: 449).

Analysis of existing documents in the Balkan countries leads to a conclusion that the issue of green transformation is not addressed in strategic documents in the field of culture, while environmental protection occasionally appears as part of the themes addressing sustainable development. On the other hand, it is possible to identify the existence of some initiatives by individual organizations that occasionally emerge to address the climate crisis within their operational procedures and narratives or projects supported by Creative Europe. However, such initiatives largely belong to an independent scene or civil organizations in the performing arts, while public theatres in peripheral European countries hardly respond to this urgent (public) need and/or interest. Considering that the strategy of these institutions is primarily directed by their founders (administrative bodies at local and national levels), confirms the notion that the challenges facing performing arts policies on the peripheries, especially in the Balkans, highlight a significant gap between environmental imperatives and cultural policy agendas. Addressing these challenges necessitates fostering collaboration between policymakers, cultural institutions and grassroots organizations to prioritize environmental sustainability within the performing arts sector and pave the way for a more environmentally conscious cultural ecosystem in the peripheries.

Understanding the significance of green transition in (public) theatres – particularly in countries on the margins of the EU – entails recognizing the broader importance of these institutions in the context of social development. While cultural policies in Western European countries are largely (at least formally) focused on public accountability, i.e., generating public good/value, as a corrective to an exclusive approach to cultural development in societies (Gibson, 2008:6), countries like Serbia are still uncertain in this regard. This is especially true for certain cultural domains such as public theatre, where, on the one hand, due to a historical perpetuation of a “master-servant relationship with funders”, there is a lack of confidence in terms of (self-)maintenance (Holden, 2004: 27), while on the other hand, it is conditioned by extensive adaptation of traditional business models, implementation of contemporary development strategies, and the imperative of diversifying their societal functions, responsibilities towards citizens and realizing their full socio-economic potential. In this regard, although it may initially seem that for theatres facing such challenges, environmental issues appear as somewhat less urgent and significant tasks, on the contrary, they can be a pathway to achieving the aforementioned goals of theatre transformation. Therefore, IETM's *Guide to Climate Justice for Artists and Collaborators*, along with other similar studies and recommendations, identify key areas of potential impact of art and artistic organizations in this context, highlighting that besides environmental concerns, green transformation also achieves broader social goals such as community empowerment and social cohesion, defining fairer procedures and evaluation systems, building a more just society, and creating fairer and more efficient policies.¹

Possibilities of the New Paradigm in an Old Structure: Green Guides and Practices

There is a significant number of green manuals that indicate optional ways for organizations to react in the context of crisis caused by climate change. However, they are primarily tailored to large companies or regional/national administrations. As such, naturally, they do not correspond to cultural organizations - their structure, activities, specific mission, and vision - which is why, since the end of the first decade of this century, there has been an increasingly intense focus on designing studies and publications of this kind specifically aimed at organizations in the fields of culture and arts. The guidelines offered by these manuals lead to a two-way correction of the current mode of operation: adaptation to the consequences of climate change and their mitigation through infrastructural rethinking of facilities, technical capacities, work procedures, organizational cultures, etc. (Marković, Božović and Karaulić, 2022: 84)². Existing recommendations on the topic of green

¹ For instance, climate issues are considered in relation with gender equality concerns, and approaches to "greening" are viewed from the perspective of reducing labour, saving time, and transforming gender roles and relations ("Mainstreaming Gender Considerations in Climate Change Projects", "Gender in the transition to sustainable energy for all: From evidence to inclusive policies", "Toolkit for Gender-Responsive Process to formulate and implement National adaptation plans – supplement to UNFCCC technical guidelines for NAP process").

² There are a large number of guides, projects, platforms (like The Carbon Literacy Project, see more at: <https://carbonliteracy.com>) which focus on responding to the environmental crisis on the imperative of mitigating carbon dioxide emissions and creating greenhouse effect, that is, they aim at educating cultural and

transformation of theatres differ, according to whether they focus on the aspect of adaptation or mitigation; whether they deal with the sustainability of the theatre building, the performance or the organizational culture and procedures; and whether they are thematically oriented towards the ecological turn of a certain segment in theatrical productions and distribution, or in general - the entire process of planning, creating and performing theatrical works. Also, differences arise and from the socio-political context - from the legal regulations and strategies of certain countries in the field of climate change, but also from the current situation regarding the level of emancipation of the community in that sense. The common point of all publications of this type are the views on the reasons for deciding in the direction of green concepts, which can be summarized in five theses on a topic of positive effects of such a business transition - i) the green transformation of theatre business contributes to a better preparedness of the organization for future legal changes; ii) implies savings on a long-term plan; iii) opens up new perspectives in terms of collaborative creativity; iv) affects to create stronger ties between the theatre organization and the community, contributes to a better reputation of the theatre and audience development processes; and v) encourages creativity and innovation.

It is certain that numerous legal changes are ahead of us in the context of achieving an ecologically sustainable way of doing business, which is why it is important that theatres recognize on time the risks that these changes may have on their way of working. At the same time, strategic activities in this direction, such as switching to a mode of reducing energy consumption, reusing and exchanging materials, etc., can lead to significant savings, as well as refocusing from the resources of one organization to the entire system and initiating new forms of cooperation and collaboration. At the same time, the theatre realizes the green transformation of its operations, the role of a mediator in raising awareness and initiating dialogue on the topic of climate crisis (by which people usually do not fundamentally connect), thereby achieving a wider impact - raising its reputation, attracting new talents and strengthening cultural and social capital of the organization. Finally, the climate crisis is not only a challenge that needs to be overcome, but also an exciting creative opportunity (e.g. for the diversification of a theatre's program and its activities, as it is the development of summer season, planning outdoor events, site specific performances etc.). In the discourse of understanding the climate crisis as a creative challenge for the theatre it is important to emphasise that the sustainable creation of the play is not a goal in itself. On the contrary, the introduction of green work concepts does not change the mission and the vision of a theatre, but rather the parameters within which they are realized.

other organizations in this context. On the other hand, publications such as "Adapting our culture: A guide for cultural organizations planning the future of climate change" (Adapting our culture: A toolkit for cultural organizations planning for a climate change) - created through the "Cultural Adaptations" program of the Scottish agency for linking art and sustainable development (Creative Carbon Scotland), funded by the EU program Creative Europe and the Scottish government - which deal with the adaptation of cultural organizations crisis conditions, and by reviewing numerous practical issues in this context.

Green Transformation of a Theatre Field: A Case Study of Belgrade City Theatres

The positive examples of (foreign) theatre organisations that are already advanced in the eco-turn, as well as the recommendations of the analysed toolkits and studies, show that green transformation involves adopting certain practices, which do not disturb the momentum of creativity and innovation, but instead place it in the context of environmentally responsible action. In order to map the possibilities of Belgrade theatres to adopt the principles of green transformation, research was applied in seven theatres whose founder is City Assemble — Atelje 212, Belgrade Drama Theatre, Terazije Theatre, Zvezdara Theatre, Bitef Theatre, Boško Buha Theatre, and Little Theatre Duško Radović. From March to May 2021, by analysing annual reports, statutes, and media archives and using a questionnaire method (filled out by managers and employees in theatres), data was collected on the theatres' experiences and practices in the implementation of green concepts in their everyday work. Furthermore, the research involved a focus group discussion with representatives from these (as well as other Belgrade-based) theatres, in a form of a workshop and roundtable discussion, where the potentials of green transformation of the local theatrical system were deliberated upon. In addition to this, the management practices of the analysed theatres - from the perspective of green transformation, were continuously monitored up to the time of writing this paper, through direct observation (achieved through contact with theatre employees, as well as with the wider professional community), tracking their media releases and overall activities.

The analysis of legislative acts, criteria for allocating funds for co-financing cultural projects, mandatory annual reports to the Founder, as well as decisions makers' statements in public discourse, indicates that cultural policy instruments do not encourage Belgrade public theatres to work in environmentally sustainable ways. This is directly caused by the lack of a green theatre book (at a city or a national level), the absence of green transformation in the general goals of cultural development, insufficient consideration of green criteria when assessing the significance of projects in culture, the lack of systematic research and studies in this context and, the absence of evaluation regarding this issue in assessing the success of theatre operations. The reflection of this is also evident in the everyday environmentally unconscious practices of theatres, as evidenced by findings from field research. They confirm the assumption that, without proper direction from the Founder, the city theatres in Belgrade, for the large part, are not focused on their role and responsibilities in the context of responding to and mitigating the climate crisis.

According to the survey results, theatres in Belgrade do not differ from the established practices of public enterprises in Serbia when it comes to the use of electric and thermal energy. All of them have "EPS Supply" as their electricity supplier, and they are connected to the city district heating system (central heating) for thermal energy usage. Regarding the supply of electric energy, the regulations of the Law on Public Procurement are predominantly cited as the reason for the choice of supplier³. Some respondents also stated

³ The electricity market in Serbia has been liberalized since 2015, with multiple suppliers operating on it for several years. However, EPS (Electric Power Industry of Serbia), whose electricity is generated from non-eco-friendly sources, still supplies around 98% of consumers.

that they have their own boiler rooms for heating purposes, or that individual heating devices are used for additional heating. When it comes to an organizational culture regarding heating/cooling practices (such as not opening windows in air-conditioned rooms, turning off cooling/heating devices when not necessary, etc.), responses suggest that this is more of a matter of personal views rather than a collective response to the need to reduce CO2 emissions.

The use of efficient electrical devices and transitioning to more efficient lightening systems is becoming increasingly common. The same applies to the use of more efficient AV (audio-visual) technology, rechargeable batteries, etc. Some projects even incorporate practices such as online light designing, or design on virtual and digital models, but the motives for this are situated more within the context of applying new technologies and exploring possibilities in that regard, rather than stemming from green initiatives. Similarly, in preparation and staging of performances, the dialogue on green concepts is absent in most theatres, even though there is a notable flexible approach to stage and costume design (which makes them easier to reuse). Taking into account other findings, it seems that this orientation is a consequence of other factors (e.g., financial considerations) rather than the sustainability factor. Supporting this are findings indicating that the use of already existing set elements and costumes (from stock), as well as the procurement of old items from second-hand shops or the stock of other organizations, is extremely prevalent. However, practices such as using materials with environmental certifications and avoiding materials that contribute to emissions (such as polyester and plastic) are absent in most theatres. Additionally, the practice of donating costumes and set elements, or implementing other forms of selling/redistributing these items (to further promote socially responsible behaviour in waste management) is very rare. Furthermore, waste sorting (wood, plastic, metal, textile and glass) is almost non-existent; theatres do not utilize carbon calculators, nor do they keep records of the source and final destination of consumed materials⁴.

⁴ Dominant discussions on sustainability of theatres often relate to the challenge of waste accumulation stemming from discarded parts of costumes, set design, and decor, which need to be disposed of in an environmentally friendly manner and minimized. Solutions in this context can be described by an acronym "reduce, reuse, recycle," operationalized by practice of "material hierarchy" explained in the Green Theatre Book. In the process of creating stage elements, this means that the first step is to design to reduce the required amount of material, then to find already-used components and recycled materials—ideally locally sourced to avoid transportation. If this is not possible, the next option is to choose materials sourced sustainably, with the last resort being materials procured from unsustainable sources harmful to the planet, which must be minimized. Similarly, alternative disposal methods for items no longer needed are hierarchically prioritized. Ideally, they are reused in new productions or donated; if not possible, they are recycled properly. Another crucial aspect of green procedures in the context of production management concerns detailed tracking of the sustainability of used materials, assessing the level of harm posed by theatre production. In this regard, the use of online-available Carbon Calculators is proposed, which calculate emissions produced by a given production based on certain quantitative parameters. Another simpler option is an introduction of a Materials Inventory containing data on what is needed, in what quantity and material, if it is previously used, sourced sustainably, and the mode of transportation used for procurement, as well as future usage, disposal, and transportation plans (e.g., The theatre green book, p. 37, 40).

Understandably, actions in this context would require prior training, but employees in the analysed organizations have almost no experience in environmental protection training. In conversations with them, it appears that the ecological aspect is indeed present in the spectrum of their personal knowledge and interests, but it does not reflect in shaping the practices of the organizations they work for. Moreover, even when there are individual initiatives of this kind, they do not become part of systemic solutions. The same applies to objectively green ways of working that are not consciously and intentionally green, but rather accidentally. So, for example, in planning tours and guest performances, practices such as choosing the shortest routes, organizing multiple performances in several cities per tour, and avoiding transportation with high emissions of greenhouse gases (primarily air transport) are overall present, but this is more a matter of convenience and cost-saving rather than ecological action.

Employees in the marketing departments of the analysed theatres testify that there has been a significant reduction in the use of printed materials in shaping and preparing marketing campaigns. Communication with the audience is predominantly directed towards digital online channels instead of traditional media such as billboards, posters, flyers, printed questionnaires, etc. However, apart from occasional appearances of environmental themes in the narrative of produced plays, they are absent in public discourse centred around the operation and organizational culture of these institutions. Additionally, highlighting environmental orientation in communication with the audience and partners (in contracts, promotional materials, social media, etc.) is expectedly very rare, as well as the theatres' participation in projects promoting green concepts and striving to develop ecological awareness in the community. There are some examples of partnerships with organizations dealing with environmental issues and conservation, but they are usually initiated by a civil sector and often remain in a form of "superficial" collaborations (aiming to provide greater visibility to the invisible eco-sector and to associate subversive "green label" with elite theatre institutions).

Finally, when asked what they consider to be the key challenge in applying green concepts, the theatres stated lack of education and raising awareness of the importance of this issue; lack of funding; discrepancies between the institution's administrative rules and the potential selection of solution; lack of staff to manage activities like donating/recycling ; the necessity of changes to the Law on Public Procurement where the environmental aspect would be set as a requirement; and the lack of incentives for organizations to take environmental action. In addition, the negative conditioning factors that the theatres identified included ongoing infrastructural issues (thermal insulation, faulty boiler rooms, necessity of reconstruction to obtain an energy passport), lack of legal obligation to sort waste, lack of systematic analysis, and lack of projects and partnerships in this context.

Conclusion

Introduction of green philosophies in the production processes of cultural institutions involves a set of activities aimed at thinking about and implementing practices in the context of green transformation in this area. Relying on theoretical views according to which art and culture can make a determining contribution to increasing the present crisis visibility from a perspective of eco-turn of institutions and organisations in the field, the analysis of current practices and strategic recommendations reveals that activities advocated in this context can have long-term positive effects on the overall effectiveness of an organisation. In addition, the organisation's role in this process becomes centred on creating a broader environment for understanding the importance of green transition, and establishing a framework that would enable smooth and efficient green transformation of artistic disciplines and sectors within the field.

In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to consider an open, collaborative approach among organisations in the field, as well as to encourage creator teams to incorporate the principles of green transformation into their creative solutions. The green theatre agenda, therefore, can and should be promoted through artistic practices from a programming and production perspective, as well as through advocacy campaigns that affect the global issue visibility and contribute to networking within the local community by coming together around issues that are important for its future.

However, the success of this process largely depends on the cultural policy that theatres, especially public ones, must adhere to regarding environmental concerns. This is particularly crucial in socio-economic peripheries and transitional societies where intense systemic and structural changes, as well as turbulent political circumstances, make the resilience of theatre institutions an additional, specific issue. In this sense, their green transition (through promoting ecological ideas and, complementarily, adopting environmentally sustainable practices) should be understood, planned and implemented as part of an overall theatre sustainability strategy, especially concerning the sustainability of its social functions. This means that in times of reduction and revision of reasons for public subsidization (programs, projects, institutions, civic activities), the role of theatres as eco-emancipators (which also includes addressing other cross-cutting issues such as inclusion, gender equality, social cohesion, and so on) is one way to confirm and justify their position as “institutions of public interest” acquired during times of different aspirations and possibilities for cultural development. Parallely, cultural policy activities in this direction would define its agenda as aligned with global efforts and aspirations; and potentially steering it towards addressing new overarching and universally relevant themes, providing it with a “break” from identity-related themes and topics of cultural memory (predominant in the past few decades).

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