

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

I Have Something to Do with It
Social Responsibility and Participation
at the Csokonai National Theatre in Debrecen

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1. Topic of the Dissertation and Objectives

My research focuses on social responsibility in municipal theatres and various forms of participation realised through cultural mediation and arts-based engagement. Until now, the social responsibility of state-funded municipal theatres has not been a major concern of studies in the field. One reason for that is that public social responsibility (PSR) is a relatively new area of inquiry within research on social responsibility; another reason is that theatres, by virtue of their core mission, are often regarded as “already” performing socially responsible work. For this reason, neither researchers nor institutions have typically formulated an explicit demand to examine such activities.

Yet, as public institutions, municipal theatres also need to respond more consciously to societal changes such as: (1) the ageing of regular theatre-going audiences; (2) shifts in young people’s patterns of cultural consumption and expectations; (3) the consequences of climate change; (4) the impact of an uncertain economic environment; and (5) growing employee awareness regarding ethics and fairness. These are precisely the domains in which a municipal theatre can articulate and implement its social responsibility. One possible good practice is to integrate participatory theatre forms and cultural mediation into the municipal theatre’s offer. In doing so, the institution takes on activities that, beyond the mediation of high art, can secure access to theatre experiences for broader segments of society and can contribute to addressing the challenges listed above.

In the field of social responsibility, institutions in both the private and the public sector take on tasks that go beyond their core activities and serve the well-being of society. The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which for decades has been an integral part of the social and economic sciences and especially of management literature, has entered public awareness. Research and theoretical debates in this area are not closed; on the contrary, the number of CSR-related concepts, theoretical models and

abbreviations continues to grow, and social responsibility can increasingly be observed across several domains of the public sector as well.

Integrating cultural mediation, theatre-in-education (or participatory) performances, community theatre projects and other applied theatre forms into theatrical operations makes it possible for municipal theatres to reach people who, due to their socio-cultural status, do not actually visit the city theatre. Beyond having a direct impact on the lives of residents, such programmes broaden audience profile and create situations in which participants can voice their opinions and share their thoughts. If we change the perspective and ask how “the people” affect the theatre – to what extent the ideas of those whom the theatre imagines as its target audience shape the institution, and how often and in what forms citizens and civic ideology appear on stage – we find that the opportunities to do so are extremely limited.

The object of my research is to explore the internal functioning and system of the Csokonai National Theatre in Debrecen and to analyse the theatre’s education unit, the Csokonai Youth Programme (CSIP). I examine whether it is truly possible to open up and democratise the theatre; to secure the fundamental cultural right that theatre should be accessible to everyone regardless of age, gender, race or social status; and how artistic processes in the theatre can be affected by the city’s residents and how their thoughts – or they themselves – may appear on stage. To investigate this, my dissertation seeks to answer the following questions:

- How can theatre-in-education and theatre pedagogy programmes, which ensure genuine participation, model the social responsibility of a regional municipal theatre, and can they support the democratisation of access to culture?
- What does the idea of the “people’s theatre” mean in a Hungarian regional municipal theatre in the 21st century? Does CSIP manage to realise the ideal of the people’s theatre at the Csokonai Theatre?

- Where, how and what do theatre in education and theatre pedagogy mediate in an urban theatre? In what ways and in which domains does a cultural mediation workshop reshape the operation of a municipal theatre?

2. Methods Applied

To answer these questions, my empirical investigation primarily relies on the research practices of the social sciences, which in several respects intersect with methods from cultural and media studies as well as educational research. From the perspective of theatre studies, the project can be described as a mixed-method reception study involving qualitative and quantitative methods; from a social-science viewpoint, it is mostly an interpretive field study based on case studies, which also involved quantitative data analysis based on a questionnaire survey. The interpretive approach as defined by Clifford Geertz applies qualitative methods and asks what meanings participants attribute to their actions. Because participatory theatre condenses actions and events, it provides an excellent field for interpretive research.

My empirical research conducted in Debrecen and Hajdú-Bihar County took place between September 2020 and December 2025; however, due to pandemic-related shutdowns, it ultimately covers the school years and theatrical seasons 2022/23, 2023/24 and 2024/25.

During this period, I observed approximately 80 complex classroom performances delivered to primary and secondary school classes while 250 questionnaires were completed by participating young people and 12 focus-group discussions were conducted. In addition, for three seasons now I have taken part in community theatre projects lasting several months each, which resulted in three community theatrical productions created with the participation of three groups of different composition. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers who regularly invited CSIP programmes

to their classrooms as well as with actors participating in the programme and with the theatre staff.

When defining my research methods, the aim was to examine the impact of CSIP on the Csokonai Theatre's operation from as many angles and viewpoints as possible, and to explore the impact of theatre-in-education programmes on participants. I sought to uncover at least three different perspectives for each research question, and then drew conclusions by comparing the information derived from different data sources. The methods applied were as follows:

- A Likert-scale questionnaire for students
- Focus-group discussions with students
- Semi-structured interviews with teachers, actors and theatre staff
- Institutional observation

In much of my research I worked in a creator-participant-observer position: I appeared as a performer or as a drama-teacher facilitator in several classroom performances, while I took the role of an external observer in other classroom performances. As an employee of the Csokonai Theatre, I observed and analysed the institution's operation from within, which enabled me to examine processes that are not always accessible to an external researcher. This greatly supported the detailed mapping of institutional operation and its documentation as an organisational case study.

As a creator-participant-observer, I analysed CSIP programmes from a perspective that allowed me to describe aspects such as the moral and ethical issues of personal storytelling, the programme's socio-political dimensions, and questions of personal involvement. Research conducted from an internal position offers an insight that no other methodology can provide; on the other hand, it increases the possibility of the researcher's emotional involvement biasing interpretation, which places a major responsibility on the researcher. During my research, in classroom performances I played together with the actors as an actor-drama teacher and was present as a

participant-observer, while other members of the group (beyond my actor colleagues) did not know that I was conducting research. In other forms of the research (focus groups, questionnaires, interviews) I made it clear to the group being examined that I was in a researcher role; nevertheless, there were certain situations – especially during focus group processes – in which my role was not fully clear, because only minutes earlier I had still been part of the group in the classroom as an actor–drama teacher, and then I questioned them as a researcher.

3. Results

Through the work of a cultural mediation workshop operating within a regional municipal theatre, I outline the concept of participation in publicly funded urban municipal theatres and their possibilities of taking social responsibility.

In the theoretical chapters of the dissertation, my point of departure is the conceptual framing of the “people’s theatre” (népszínház). I illustrate the history of the emergence and institutionalisation of the people’s-theatre idea through French and Hungarian examples. The people’s-theatre idea is deeply rooted in French theatre culture; in Hungary, Zoltán Várkonyi made a major attempt at its adoption. The concept remains an important element of French cultural policy today and has also had an outstanding impact on Hungarian theatre history; many regional municipal theatres in Hungary still define themselves as people’s theatres. Based on an analysis of theatre-directors’ application dossiers from the last decade (mostly from regional municipal theatres), I conclude that the term “people’s theatre” is used in these documents in an unreflective and insufficiently delineated manner.

Using international and Hungarian examples, I describe the ethos of the people’s theatre, with an emphasis on the theatre’s role as a people’s forum and as an agent improving cultural access for residents living in the theatre’s catchment area. This is pursued, on the one hand, by opening the theatre

building to audiences and citizens and turning it into a genuine meeting place and forum; and, on the other hand, by creating opportunities for citizens to think together, through cultural mediation, about relevant human, moral and social issues that concern them; where their ideas may reach the stage within the framework of community theatre projects. Applied theatre programmes that encourage and ensure participation are a good way of achieving these aims, and they can be integrated into the operational framework of a regional municipal theatre.

To explore the topic, in addition to defining the people's theatre concept, it is essential to theorise cultural mediation and theatre-in-education activities, review theoretical definitions and examine their applicability. Following the classification of French cultural scholar Jean Caune, theatre pedagogy and theatre-in-education activities can be categorised as artistic and aesthetic mediation. I examine Caune's theses on artistic and cultural mediation in a Hungarian context. Building on the work of Ádám Cziboly and Ádám Bethlenfalvy, I then review theatre-in-education activities in the context of Hungarian municipal theatre, alongside formal and artistic dimensions, and compare the findings of a nationwide 2023 theatre-in-education data collection survey with the activities of the Csokonai Youth Programme. This classification may contribute to differentiating the results of the 2023 survey carried out by the Theatre Pedagogy and Theatre Sociology Research Group of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, with regard to theatre-in-education activities in municipal theatres. In spite of the fact that regional municipal theatres are now beginning to stage other types of cultural mediation alongside repertory productions, a complex programme that includes multiple activities currently only exists in six regional municipal theatres, even if – unlike in the case of independent companies – their stable budgets would make this possible. Exploring the reasons for this is a valid research focus but goes beyond the scope of my dissertation.

The third tier of my theoretical research examines the possibilities and practices of social responsibility in the context of municipal theatres.

Agreeing with Jon Hawkes's contention that alongside the economic, social and ecological pillars, culture is the fourth pillar of sustainability, I surveyed areas in which this idea appears. Social responsibility implemented in theatres differs from CSR programmes in the corporate sector in that public institutions undertake sustainable-development activities beyond their legally prescribed obligations. Activities within the PSR framework are carried out voluntarily, out of a sense of responsibility towards society, motivated by moral or ethical reasons. In regional municipal theatres, public social responsibility launching and operating a theatre-in-education programme that supports participation and encourages cultural equality constitute. Integrating such programmes into the tightly regulated, hierarchical order of municipal theatres is not impossible: they can be operated sustainably with low budgets to generate real social impact. However, launching a youth programme that takes young people seriously often does not fit into the artistic policy of regional municipal theatres. Municipal theatres work under intense schedules: to deliver the expected ten to fifteen premieres per season and the accompanying number of performances, they must function within tight rehearsal and performance routines.

Therefore, for a regional municipal theatre in Hungary today to undertake launching such a programme, it requires a committed theatre ideal that goes beyond the traditional people's-theatre vision: one that makes the theatre accessible and visible to city residents and accepts the possibility and risk of creating productions that can contribute to social change.

In the second part of the dissertation, through the operation of the Csokonai Youth Programme, I analyse the results and impacts achieved within municipal theatres. The Csokonai National Theatre in Debrecen – one of Hungary's largest regional municipal theatres – launched its youth programme, CSIP, in 2014. It offers artistic and pedagogical activities for residents of the city and county in which the public, as active participants, can think together and create together with the theatre's artists. The institution's primary goal was to initiate dialogue, especially with young

people: to enable them to connect to productions in the theatre's repertoire not only as viewers but also through play and conversation, and to bring theatre to settlements from which travelling to the theatre building in Debrecen is difficult. The theatre seeks to open its intellectual and physical spaces to provide room for shared thinking. It understands theatre as a forum: a space that makes room for connections, that does not exclude or privilege but builds community. Today CSIP welcomes participants with a very broad programme structure, yet every programme element shares the characteristic that it offers an active participant role instead of a traditional spectator role.

My main question concerns the social impact made by participatory theatre programmes and how these can be demonstrated in the most credible, precise and well-founded manner, also based on my own experience. Social impact measurement records the change an organisation can achieve among its stakeholders. In such an investigation it is essential to be clear about where one aims to go, what change they wish to achieve, and through what steps they may reach that change. If the steps required to achieve the impact are known, measurement can begin. In my research, I measured impact through students' questionnaires, focus-group discussions, semi-structured interviews with actors and teachers involved in CSIP, an analysis of CSIP's complex classroom theatre-in-education performances (TIE) and community theatre projects, and an examination of the theatre's operation. The findings confirmed the hypotheses formulated at the start of the research, namely:

- Participatory theatre-in-education and theatre pedagogy programmes can be operated sustainably, with a low carbon footprint, and in an economical manner.
- These programmes affect all employees of the theatre and support ethical and equality-based institutional operation.
- After participating, participants' ideas about changes in the theatre and the programmes create the possibility that people who otherwise do not attend the theatre will visit the theatre.
- These programmes generate real and measurable social impact.

Data from the questionnaire survey conducted with young people confirmed the hypothesis that participatory theatre programmes change participants' conceptions of theatre, while the analysis of community theatre programmes clearly showed that these activities create opportunities for theatres to address audiences who are not traditionally theatre-goers. In the dissertation I analyse three complex classroom theatre-in-education performances by CSIP. These performances are typically realised for one class community, often in the students' own classroom. The fabric of the theatrical performance is interrupted at several points by open-ended interactions, where participants can reflect on what they have seen with the help of various drama-pedagogical tools. The topics usually focus on human and social issues relevant to young people and are often based on drama texts from world literature.

The creation process of these performances and CSIP's democratic way of working can establish an ethical and trusting atmosphere within the theatre in which actors feel they can speak up and stand up for themselves and, I hope, will be less willing to accept creative processes built on hierarchy and power. I do not claim that these activities transform the long-established operational mechanisms of a regional municipal theatre in their entirety, but they certainly have an impact on the institution and those who work there by presenting a model of a creative process based on equality and attentiveness and by creating opportunities to articulate and voice opinions.

The analyses presented in the dissertation support the claim that theatre-in-education and theatre pedagogy programmes contribute to municipal theatres' social responsibility by creating the possibility of genuine participation, and the theatre, by touring these programmes, can support the democratisation of access to culture.

My research may contribute to updating the concept of the people's theatre for today's Hungarian municipal theatres. The concept may not be definable

in a single fixed way, but by taking into account the mechanisms revealed by my research, it is possible to delineate a conceptual framework and fill it with new meaning. Based on my findings, I argue that participation and social responsibility constitute a new direction for the people's theatre.

Every theatre director is confronted with questions such as: What kinds, what forms of performance are audiences interested in? What do people buy tickets for? What can the actor, playwright or director offer them? How and in what form should new texts be created? We live in an era in which municipal theatres face serious challenges in attracting audiences. It is therefore indispensable to rethink, among other things, the questions above and to find answers that are sufficiently compelling for potential spectators to visit the theatre.

To revive, actualise and bring up to date the theatre dispositif today it is unavoidable that creators and theatre leaders acknowledge and take heed of the opinions of the stakeholders: spectators, residents and citizens. Just as in other walks of life, in the fields of culture and the arts active participation is increasingly becoming a key democratic value. This is supported by the following facts: CSIP's Kőztér programme is filled within one to two weeks after its announcement; and the classroom theatre-in-education performances we offer have had a waiting list one and a half to two times the available capacity for years.

The ideal of the people's theatre is constructed by institutions and through the credos and concepts of directors. If an urban municipal theatre truly wishes to act upon this vision, it must, in a sense, "become civic": accept and awaken civic self-awareness, get to know the residents of its city by creating dialogue and space for them on stage, and bring theatre to those for whom it is not accessible, so that the ideal of the people's theatre may live on through the communities formed in and by the theatre itself.

Agreeing with Christian Schiaretti's observation that the people's theatre is

above all an artistic project, I argue that CSIP's programme offer realises the ideal of the people's theatre. If theatre leaders take this into account and rethink the programmes and activities that can be realised within theatres accordingly, any municipal theatre can develop a social responsibility strategy centred on participation and theatre in education, thereby contributing to a more sustainable future and becoming a genuine people's theatre.

Through my work I also aim to contribute to the inevitable renewal of municipal theatres, as they take stock of such issues in society as affect their daily operation, too, such as labour shortages, the impact of digital media on cultural consumption, and ethical questions raised by the #MeToo movement. In the appendix of the dissertation there is a carbon footprint calculation table in which, based on concrete data, I compare the carbon footprint of producing and presenting theatre-in-education performances with that of studio-stage productions. The data clearly show that theatre-in-education performances can significantly contribute to a more sustainable operation of the theatre. I am convinced that with little financial investment – but with much greater awareness – regulating operational processes and introducing new protocols can create a more sustainable, more economical and more ethical people's theatre.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

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