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## Creating a Local Identity through Experiencing Arts\*\*\*

### Abstract

The need to “belong somewhere,” to have ties to the surrounding environment, is one of the basic needs of biological organisms. The most important type of attachment to space is feeling at home and the ability to relate to space. It is associated with creating emotionally anchored territorial ties to a specific geographical location. Feeling a positive emotional attachment to the place can be reinforced through experiences and encounters with the arts. In the present paper, we map the activities of selected artistic actors who actively participate in the living culture and intentionally focus on local and historical themes overlapping with the global social situation. We emphasize the current view of the works of arts, which – being pluralistic – are beneficial for strengthening the residents’ local identity. The local identity is also composed of the community’s fundamental values and ethos, which is non-transferable and represents a true legacy that is passed on and preserved by tradition and recurrent artistic experience.

**Keywords:** local identity, documentary theater, dNO Theater, *Judenrein* (production), collective experience

**Słowa kluczowe:** tożsamość lokalna, teatr dokumentalny, Teatr dNO, *Judenrein* (spektakl), doświadczenie zbiorowe

### Introduction

Emotional ties between a person and space are important in constructing a local identity. Forming a positive connection to the place results in stronger anchoring and experiencing the connection with a place in spatial terms and with the people residing there. A person’s emotional connection to the sur-

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rounding environment assists in the perception of social cohesion. The ability to relate to the place can alleviate the feeling of alienation, social exclusion, and deepening particularism. A strong awareness of social and spatial belonging is manifested in sharing culture, maintaining cultural tradition through passing conventional, and respected meanings to other generations. Experiences with space are culturally and socially conditioned: the perception of space is formed in symbolic communication interactions that residents share; everyday experiences are transferred to cultural memory and shared through stories and narratives.

New concepts of space perception, formed in cultural geography and building upon the knowledge of cultural and social sciences (cultural anthropology, culturology, sociology), have enhanced the reflection on identity. The theory of the so-called actor approach clarifies the establishment of identity as a result of complex interactions, cultural patterns, and leadership. Relating oneself to space is associated with being a community member; it is constantly established as a symbolic “practising” of space (*praxis*). Rituals and activities humanize space. The people’s emotional, social, and cultural ties to the inhabited space are not passed on genetically. They must be established and updated over time, for each generation. Each generation forms a horizon of unique, shared experiences, a jointly generated collective memory of an event, which can subsequently be manifested as shared prejudices and stereotypes. Today, various forms of identity are perceived as cultural and socially conditioned (constructed) complexes within the cultural and social sciences.

The theory of social constructionism is interesting not only for scholars but often, in the reverse order, the actors of cultural and artistic life use it to deconstruct stereotypical images or “forgotten” experiences. They often interpret and analyse the experiences of the past in artistic events and performances. Subsequently, they offer viewers and participants a collective experience aspiring to unveil stereotypes to make visible the consequences of purposeful, and many a time, also manipulated “forgetting” of events, institutions, and values. Therefore, new approaches and initiatives in culture and the arts aim for the human experience that is enriched and expanded through the arts. According to many artists and actors, performing arts provide the broadest possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

## Identity as Specific Collective Experience and Its Construction

Documentary theater approaches are used in performing arts in the many initiatives and movements that derive their activities and goals from the broader context of the so-called democratization of the arts. Arts bring us experience that helps advance our critical cognition (*noéta*); however, since the offered guidance is transformed into an artistic statement, the cognitive process goes

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<sup>1</sup> See E. Kušnířová, *Estetika performatívneho umenia: zložky performancie optikou aktuálnej teórie*, “Slovenské Divadlo” 2023, vol. 74, no. 4, pp. 339-353.

beyond rationality and affects perception associated with understanding. Events from the collective past that are artistically presented or retold as narratives may be subjected to conscious critical reflection, or they may trigger a response in us if we find ourselves in an analogous situation in the future. Innovative approaches in the contemporary arts emphasize participation and the importance of joint experiences that connect and bind participants. The arts perceived as live expressive communication acquires complex functions in the reception that results in an aesthetic experience, yet also affects other areas, mostly social ones. Therefore, many contemporary actors are trying to offer culture and arts as a service from which the whole community can benefit; thus, their activities include making arts accessible and pursuing targeted work with the public, especially with the residents of towns and villages in which cultural actors and organizations operate. Culture and arts are becoming important criteria for the quality of life and can also affect how residents relate to the place.

At the end of the twentieth century, the theoretical reflection on identity and its research were ones of the key areas of interest in the social sciences and humanities. Identity is a term that suggests both separation from and relation to something. The act of relating oneself to something establishes a linkage between an individual's self-understanding, interests, and relationships with others with whom they share geographical, cultural, and social space. The feeling of identity as mutual belonging also includes identification with the values, customs, and image of the group's world.<sup>2</sup> Identifying with the social collective and actively participating in all aspects of civil society requires understanding one's own situation, as well as the events and other actors within the socio-cultural system. Therefore, it should be "rooted" in concrete cultural phenomena, in the ritualized and ordered everyday experience, in the details of social interactions, habits, routines, practical leadership, and cognitive capital.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the importance of residents' cultural and social activities, the conceptualization of the region accounts for the fact that the bond between a person and a place may not always be positive. Space is being constructed and established as an administrative and geographical unit but also as a mental structure. It must be present in the residents' consciousness so that the residents can symbolically unrelate from others ("who we are not"). Recognizing a being different from others is also symbolic relating, based on self-awareness ("who we are"). A culturally and socially delimited region is established mainly through the residents' social actions in everyday cultural activities and the patterns of experiencing everyday life and social experience.<sup>4</sup> A person is born into a geographical environment, but they must integrate, anchor, and take roots in

<sup>2</sup> Z. Slušná, *Living and lived culture as a part of regional identity*, [in:] *Marketing identity: brands we love*, ed. Ľudmila Čábyřová, Trnava 2016, pp. 442–453.

<sup>3</sup> Z. Slušná, *Kultúrna tradícia a kultúrne dedičstvo ako „horúca“ téma*, [in:] *témy v kultúrnej teórii a praxi*, eds. Z. Slušná, S. Chomová, Univerzita Komenského, Bratislava 2015, pp. 339–353.

<sup>4</sup> P. Marek, *Region coby sociální konstrukt a kritická diskuze Paasiho konceptualizace regionální identity*, "Geografia" 2020, vol. 125, no. 1, pp. 47–68.

the cultural and social environment through everyday practices. Cultural geography perceives regional identity as a dynamic phenomenon, the outcome of which involves two interrelated processes: 1. the creation and consolidation of mutual cultural and social ties, which results in 2. the formation of a sense of anchorage in the region as an administrative-geographical unit. One belonging to the group or place is subsequently manifested by the adoption or tolerance of established manners that are not binding, yet they are observed and respected by the community. They include experiences, statements, knowledge, abilities, as well as artifacts (tools and objects) present in oral traditions and speech, interpretive arts, customs, knowledge, and beliefs related to nature and the universe, in skills associated with traditional crafts, and in the peculiarities of shaping the cultural landscape. A living culture is involved in maintaining cultural identity, establishing itself in the practices and activities of people and social groups, such as responses (reactions), adoption, rejection, and engagement. Internally cohesive communities protect and guard their past as one of the important parts of their consciousness of their own uniqueness (identity). The past, held in the memory and recollections of the collective, is not a record of historical events; Jan Assman sees it as a cultural construct created by the community so that the current „version“ of the past is in harmony with the present.<sup>5</sup> For the social community, it is not the important factual events, but the remembered history, which is a reminder, a celebration, that has both normative and formative significance for the collective.

## Identity, Memory, and the Past as Themes for Documentary Theater and Artistic Practice

The cultural map of Slovakia has an important element – initiatives of groups using themes from the past. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, initiatives that deconstructed traditional forms were formed and made visible across arts types. In performing arts, it was possible to observe a tendency to replace artistic fiction with admitted authenticity and documentarity (the so-called third development stage of documentary theater or *new documentary theater*), which is connected with the perception of *the liveliness of culture and arts*. Authentic experience with arts is intensified by the fact that the starting point or basis of the creative act and, consequently, experience proper is experience that can be both temporally and geographically situated and relates to a specific group.

The use of documentary theater approaches is one of the tendencies that appeared at the end of the twentieth century. As this is a relatively strong trend, several Slovak and Czech teatrologists deal with its theoretical reflection<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> J. Assman, *Kultura a paměť. Písmo, vzpomínky a politická identita v rozvinutých kulturách starověku*, Praha 2001.

<sup>6</sup> In Slovakia, they include Dagmar Podmaková, Nadežda Lindovská, Miroslav Ballay, Elena Knopová, Ján Šimko and others.

New arts forms are based on perceiving an artistic creative act as an event that is no longer exceptional, exclusive; on the contrary, it is ordinary, routine, and anchored in the life world of the individual and the group. Therefore, it draws on themes such as identity, collective experience, and memory, as well as local history.

The approaches of documentary theater were implemented into the Slovak theatrical production practice at the end of the twentieth century. After the fall of the communist regime in the 1990s, the theater of post-communist countries reflected the transformation of society and the need for a different way of open social discussion on current problems and issues. In the theatrical production practice, professional theaters began to use documentary material or authentic testimonies of various events. These theatrical documentary practices and methods are still being developed and cultivated.

In Slovakia, some productions have revealed historical moments of the Slovak State period during World War II and also from the times of communism. Anna Grusková's original play "Rabínka" [Female Rabbi] (2012, Slovak National Theater, Bratislava) brought to the stage the story of a Jewish activist from Bratislava, Gisi Fleischammová, who saved Jews from deportations during the Holocaust, and eventually ended up in a concentration camp herself. The play by Rastislav Ballek *Tiso* (2005, Divadlo Aréna Theater, Bratislava) captures the monologically conceived life story of President Jozef Tiso. Along with Viliam Klimáček's play *Dr. Gustáv Husák* (2006, Divadlo Aréna Theater, Bratislava), the two productions are part of the *Divadlo Aréna* Theater's project *Civic Cycle*, in which they present a theatrical reflection on controversial moments in the Slovak history. The original documentary drama *Milada* (2020, Slovak National Theater, Bratislava) presented a publicly known story of Milada Horáková, who fought against the communist tyranny in the 1950s. Viliam Klimáček's play *Hot Summer 68* (2018, GUnaGU Theater, Bratislava) was created as a reminder of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968.

The artistic interpretation of past events represents an integrative manipulation of the social time of present generations. Reflecting on past events is not only important as a flashback, but it also influences the current events and the climate of the public space. Temporally distant events can be updated through specific practices: adapting past facts so that they correlate with the needs and beliefs of the present. The past, kept in the memory and recollections of society, is not a record of historical events; it is a specific selection of information that is important to someone. From these, a shareable area of experiences, expectations, and actions is generated so the community can use it as a "common core", a standard of expectations and a source of trust. Only after being reflected on and subjected to "coding and decoding" with the involvement of culture will real historical phenomena enter human memory. The past subjected to reflection can become part of memory, reminiscences, and records. When constituting nation-states, history and the memory con-

stituted by them became important tools for creating and consolidating collective (national) identity.

For the actors of documentary theater, the past is a source of situations and images that act as a bridge between the present and the staged events, and the tension between them contributes to the dramatic conflict. Even if the starting point of the staged events is authentic historical material, it becomes the basis for a dramatic text or directorial scenes, which often result in a committed civic gesture. According to Miroslav Ballay, this approach is used to thematize events, such as the regional past of the Holocaust, a critical reflection on the events of World War II, as well as the more recent communist or early privatization past.<sup>7</sup>

Rendering a specific historical case on the stage is preceded by research, which, in addition to more traditional historiographic methods also relies on qualitative approaches of social sciences. The *oral history* method makes it possible to “assemble” the events from real people’s memories, with the aim of recalling the atmosphere of the past; the objective amount of truthfulness of the staged information cannot be verified. Documentary theaters use, partially or completely, documentary materials like newspaper articles, archival documents, private correspondence, memoirs, testimonies, interviews with witnesses of an event, or sociological surveys. Some authors of this type of theater emphasize that it is a “theater that is not fiction. Documentary theater must be always based on research and exploration of a topic, event, one’s destiny or situation. It is a specific genre that combines arts with current social analysis.”<sup>8</sup> Documentary theaters also use the verbatim method (verbatim – from “literally” in Latin). It is a method involving writing and then staging the original plays and is implemented through transcripts of real recordings of interviews with respondents. The creative team chooses a topic, creates a framework questionnaire, and asks questions to selected respondents. The transcribed responses can be kept in their original form, thus maintaining authenticity, or it is possible to further modify them.<sup>9</sup>

## Independent Theater dNO and Forms of Theatrical Rendering of Historical Events

Slovak original productions theater also uses the approaches of the so-called documentary theater to uncover the history of regions and local areas. In addition to the independent Pôtoň Theater<sup>10</sup> in Bátorce, a pioneer among in-

<sup>7</sup> M. Ballay, *K niektorým tendenciám oživovania lokálnych dejín v súčasnom slovenskom divadle (marginálne)*, [in:] *Témy na okraji záujmu?*, ed. Karol Mišovic, Bratislava 2021, pp. 10-23.

<sup>8</sup> R. Štorková Maliti, *Čo je verbatim?*, [in:] *Hledání hrdinů každodennosti*, eds. Renáta Štorková Maliti, Tereza Krčálová, Zuzana Králová, Praha 2024, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> Some productions of this theater are based on field research and are driven by an urgent social theme (*Terra Granus* – repatriate exchanges between Czechoslovakia and Hungary, *Psota* [Poorness] – poverty in Slovakia, *Krajina nepokosených luk* [Land of unmowed meadows] – national identity of Slovaks).

*dependent theaters* in using this approach, the independent dNO Theater<sup>11</sup> in Námestovo has also received a positive response from critics and viewers. Its anchorage in the region is articulated through sourcing into the local history, i.e., the tiny history of Orava, when searching the topics for productions. It is an artistic body without a direct founder; it was formed as a platform for drama activities and cooperation between local artists, non-professional actors, and enthusiasts in 2020 under the auspices of the North Wind civic association.

The key figures are Lukáš Kubík, Daniela Kubíková, Ivana Kurčinová, and Dorota Volfová. They created a group that brought together experienced and novice authors from Orava with the ambition to revive the cultural map of the region by presenting local themes with universal relevance. The audience rewarded the offer of the “domestic cultural product” with showing interest; the performances of the theater group are also appreciated outside the Orava region, which until then was dominated by non-professional theater ensembles. The original presentation of local themes is innovative in content and form: the way of work and dramaturgy depends on the social situation, which the authors carefully observe, comment on, and present to the public. Original theatrical production is a means of dealing with complex, often controversial or taboo topics that are inspired by real historical and contemporary characters and situations. The dNO Theater has so far presented six productions: *Judenrein* (2020), *Hra na Boha* (2021), *No Land* (2022), *Oravka* (2023), *Genius Loci N/A* (2023), *Hranica* (2024).

In addition to documentary theater techniques, the theater group from Námestovo also uses other innovative ways in their work. Given the so-called educational turn referring to the linkage between artistic activities and non-formal education as well as to the implementation of *audience development* activities, the actors of the dNO Theater try to continuously work with their audience. Since many of the implemented activities are on the interface of social theater, theater artists positively highlight principles, such as pro-inclusive behaviour and participation. Interconnecting a theatrical experience with a specific place is enhanced not only by the use of locally anchored themes (productions of *No Land*, *Judenrein*) but also by elements of immersive and participatory theater (production of *Genius Loci N/A*), in which viewers cooperate with actors in a non-theatrical space, thus gain a unique theatrical experience. Other means include elements of physical theater, action scenography – the Kubík couple looks for inspiration in a wide range of contemporary arts.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The dNO theater creates a space for cooperation between local non-professional and professional theaters, thus creating a platform for mutual influence, joint artistic development, and, ultimately, a higher quality of the final outcome. The theater has received several awards for its artistic activity, including six prizes from the top show Scenic Harvest and the main prize of the Belopotocký's Mikuláš Festival.

<sup>12</sup> L. Dzadíková, D. Kubíková, L. Kubík, *Vetráme ťažký vzduch a otvárame dvere dokorán, MLOK(i)*, <https://mloki.sk/daniela-kubikova-a-lukas-kubik-vetrame-tazky-vzduch-a-otvarame-dvere-dokoran> (accessed: 15.04.2024).



When using the approaches of documentary theater, the basis of the dNO Theater's productions, their main theme, is a specific historical event. As the authors admit, the goal is not to offer the viewer a historically faithful reconstruction of the staged events, but to confront them with layers of meaning through a theatrical experience. Enriching a story with authentic everyday material can disrupt the original linearity of the plot, but at the same time this original approach adds credibility to the staged story. The Kubík couple stated that during designing, the *libretto* *no* topic, even in real life, exists in isolation, as if in laboratory conditions. The deliberate use of diverse documentary materials, personal testimonies, as well as other sources from the media, pop culture and literature, is supposed to enhance the authenticity of the moment that the viewer experiences together with the theater actors.<sup>13</sup> The leading person for processing documentary material and implementing historical research is Iva Kurčínová; if necessary, experts from the academia are approached. For example, the production of *Hra na Boha* [Playing God] was prepared in co-operation with the philosopher and theologian Lukáš Jeník. The perspective on the theme of losing home in the *NO LAND* production was significantly influenced by discussions with psychologist Eva Naništová. In the production process, Lukáš takes over the baton, sorts the accumulated materials, builds the final shape, and directs the productions.<sup>14</sup>

*Hra na Boha* [Playing God] (premiered in September 2021) reveals the event of a mass murder in Námestovo church in 1960,<sup>15</sup> which shocked Czechoslovakia at that time. The game portrays an individual and society that have appropriated the godly right to decide about life and death. The production uses archival materials from investigative and court files and testimonies. *No Land*<sup>16</sup> (premiered in November 2022) plunges into the bottom of the Orava Dam to tell the stories of people (1953) forced by the government to leave their homes for the sake of the construction of the largest waterworks in Czechoslovakia. The production works with the data and archival material of the resettlement board, testimonies, or valuable research material of the psychologist Dr. Eva Naništová. Throughout the plot, Ján Kovalík Ústianský's poem *Mlyn* [Flourmill] is heard; the flooded area being the author's homeplace. *Oravka* (premiered in May 2023) is a production devoted to the fragile theme of the emancipation of women. The status of women has long been enshrined in laws and international treaties. But, is it also anchored in our heads, habits

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> The murderer Ján J. was an alcoholic, a thief and a rapist. He was sentenced to 2.5 years in prison for attempting to rape a young mother. Shortly after his release from prison on February 26, 1960, he committed an act that ranks among the greatest crimes in Slovak history. During the theft of offerings from the church treasury, he murdered three people, was sentenced to death and on December 20, 1960, he was executed at the age of 21. More in *Hra na Boha* Bulletin.

<sup>16</sup> The waters of the Orava Dam flood the Orava Basin. Half of Námestovo and five other villages disappear under the water. 4000 inhabitants are forced to relocate to various places throughout Czechoslovakia. A grand plan that survived through the war and Námestovo – severely wounded by the war. Has our humanity and identity also ended up under the surface?



and relationships? *Genius Loci N/A* (premiered in September 2023) testifies to the relationship between human actions and the identity of the place, which is personified in the figures oscillating between reality and magic. The theme is presented in an unconventional site-specific project: it starts with a cruise on the Orava Dam and continues with a stroll on the Slanice Island of Arts. The journey reveals the mysterious corners of this place and the history that once gave and took its shape. The last original production of the theater is the play *Hranica [Border]*, which premiered at the cultural festival Slanický ostrov divadla [Slanický Island of Theater] (September 7, 2024). It is an original rendition of historical events associated with the military-diplomatic conflict between Czechoslovakia and Poland in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The borders were also the main theme of this year's festival, with festival director Peter Balcerčík trying to connect current political events with the events of the recent past. Performances and artistic events were designed to communicate the importance of preserving principles and values such as freedom, tolerance, solidarity, understanding, and openness.<sup>17</sup> The dNo Theater in Námestovo is part of this festival and regularly premieres its original productions.

### Judenrein Production, Testimony on Orava Jews

The group's first original performance, *Judenrein*<sup>18</sup> (premiered in September 2020), was created for the Slanický Island of Theater festival. Its actors are prominent figures from Orava who formed the civic association Kult.1629 [Cult.1629].<sup>19</sup> In 2020, both the festival and the dNo Theater opened up the topic of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II and the Holocaust. The performance intended to bring testimonies about Orava Jews. The incentive that made the theaters open up this issue and process the local history of the Jewish community in Námestovo was the damage that an unknown vandal caused by destroying tombstones at the local Jewish cemetery. The libretto for the production is built upon true stories of war heroes and traitors in Námestovo during World War II and involve the life of the local Jewish community. After establishing the Slovak State in March 1939, the Jewish community in Námestovo had 120 members and boasted a 200-year-long history. During World War II, it completely disappeared. One of the two founding actors, Lukáš Kubík, stated that in addition to uncovering the topic of Jews in Námestovo, the performance

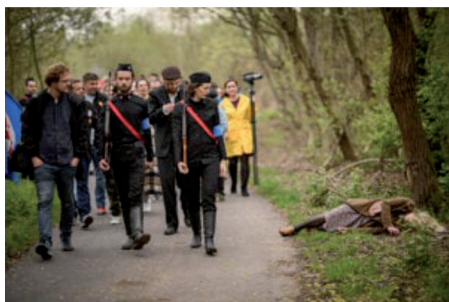
<sup>17</sup> The Slanický Island of Theater festival is organized by a civic association with the eponymous name Slanický ostrov Theater in cooperation with the Orava Gallery in Dolný Kubín and the House of Culture in Námestovo. See more: R. Hadová, *Organizátori prehliadok sú nadšení. Oravskí umelci zbierali jednu cenu za druhou*, <https://myorava.sme.sk/c/23279403/organizatori-prehliadok-su-nadseni-oravski-umelci-zbierali-jednu-cenu-za-druhou.html> (accessed: 15.04.2024).

<sup>18</sup> The word judenrein could be translated as pure from the Jews. Author's team: Lukáš Kubík, Daniela Kubíková, Ivana Kurčinová, Dorota Volfová. Directed by: Lukáš Kubík. Music: Martin Namislovský, Jozef Basár, Adam Rypák, Rado Papán.

<sup>19</sup> See more: Kult. 1629 <https://www.kult1629.sk>.

also wanted to call attention to making history relative and displacing historical facts; it wanted to argue for and against the values of the supremacy of nations, religion, for what is moral and what is not.<sup>20</sup>

The production is not made to be a traditional staged story; rather it allows for a more authentic experience of the events during a two-hour site-specific staged march through the sites of Námestovo. The production began on Hviezdoslavovo námestie square, near a synagogue and Jewish businesses; then, the participants continued toward the church, through the overgrown greenery of the Orava Dam, to meet death and hope at a Jewish cemetery. When passing the locations, the audience finds themselves in the shoes of the participants of death marches and, through the true stories of Námestovo and its surroundings, they can relive and experience the very reality of the war. The dNO Theater prepared its viewers for the unconventional concept on social networks (Facebook dNO. n.d), where they added stories of Jewish families whose lives were at stake every day. The stories used in the preparation of the libretto and supplementary materials were acquired by the theaters through research. Not all stories could be used in the performance, which was also why the authors decided to gradually publish these true stories. They came across several powerful stories with incredible plots, strong potential for reflection, and a legacy for contemporary society. The stories were staged in a non-theatrical space, in the places where they actually took place. The production brought about an unexpected nationwide response in the framework of growing right-wing extremism.<sup>21</sup>



A production of Judenrein

Source: <https://kultura.sme.sk/c/23073136/synagogu-zbombardovali-zidov-vyvrazdili-rabin-sa-vratil-do-namestova-vdaka-ochotnikom.html>

The production was looking for answers the following questions: *Would he dare to hide a pregnant Jewish woman in his home in a town occupied by the*

<sup>20</sup> Podcast. *Ako by ti zmenila život žltá hviezda na hrudi? Námestovský experiment*. <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/823424/ako-by-ti-zmenila-zivot-zlta-hviezda-na-hrudi-namestovskyy-experiment-podcast/> (accessed: 15.04.2024).

<sup>21</sup> Bulletin. dNO (prvé (k)roky divadla, p. 5.

*Nazis? Would he be able to betray the poor family hiding in the forest above the town? Would you resist the pressure to join the Hlinka Guard in the name of building the Slovak State?*<sup>22</sup> The gradual release of stories, which the authors obtained through research, escalated into authentic feelings of anxiety and fear of the reality taking place right before the participants' eyes. One of the stories presented was the fate of the Adamík couple, Vladimír and Jolana, who helped Hedvig and Pavel Knopfmacher to survive during World War II. In 1940, Pavel lost his job as an engineer at the Škoda Works due to his Jewish origin, but he obtained false documents and got a job building the Orava Dam. After the outbreak of the Slovak National Uprising, the German army began hunting Jews. Pavel's supervisor Ing. Stopka helped the Knopfmacher couple find a hiding place in the mountains. The place turned out to be dangerous over time – it was November, winter had begun, they had no shelter or food and had to face wolf attacks. At that time, they turned to family friends – the Adamík family from Námestovo. Vladimír and Jolana Adamík did not hesitate to help. During the night, they prepared a secret room in the cellar where they hid the Knopfmachers. They shared food with them and ordered their children not to tell anyone about the couple hiding in their house. Their determination to help put them in a dangerous situation as Vladimír was an administrative worker, and the Germans often visited their house. Pavel and Heda, hiding under the floor, could not make any movement or make any sound during the German visit. The front and the time of Heda's childbirth were approaching. In April 1945, the Knopfmacher family went to Ružomberok with fake papers, where Hedviga gave birth to a son three days after the end of the war, on May 11, 1945. He was given two names: Vladimír, after his savior, and David as, just like the biblical hero, he "escaped from the lion's den." In 2009, the Adamík couple were awarded the title of *Righteous Among the Nations* in memoriam.<sup>23</sup>

Another story that the production made visible relates to the work of Pastor Edmund Peter Bárdoš, a Catholic priest with Jewish roots, who spent part of his life in concentration camps as a prisoner with number 123635, and after 1951, for a brief period, was a pastor in Námestovo. Edmund Peter Bárdoš converted from Jewish to Catholic faith on February 25, 1939. Later that year, he enrolled in a theological seminary, and in 1944 he was ordained a priest. On the afternoon of December 10, 1944, a German military truck stopped in front of his rectory in Zubrica. Six armed Gestapo officers informed Pastor Bárdoš that he had to go to Trstená just to draw up a protocol, and then he will come back. However, after arriving in Trstená, he was imprisoned without interrogation. His parents were also there, from which he immediately concluded that the reason for his arrest was his Jewish origin. On December 27, after Christmas spent in prison, he was transported together with his parents and 12 other people to a collection camp in Sered'. The priest dressed in a robe did not

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Facebook dNO. n.d., [https://www.facebook.com/dNOdivadlonamestovo/?locale=sk\\_SK](https://www.facebook.com/dNOdivadlonamestovo/?locale=sk_SK) (accessed: 15.04.2024).

avoid mocking insinuations from the Jews. After two weeks, they had to board wagons and after four days the train stopped in Oranienburg. From there, the exhausted prisoners had to trot to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The prisoners stood in the frost for four hours, then their hair was cut short. They were deloused, disinfected, showered, and assigned clothes. Edmund Peter Bárdoš was given the number 123635 with a red triangle designating him as a political prisoner. The priest was transferred to forced labor in Berlin to clean up the ruins of bombed houses. In April 1945, the Allied army approached Berlin. On April 21, more than 45,000 prisoners were sent without food on the death march to the North Sea. Many of them died of exhaustion and hunger or were shot by the Germans if exhaustion made them unable to walk. The march ended on May 2. Poor Edmund Peter Bárdoš returned to Slovakia on June 18, 1945, and he returned to Námestovo in 1951.<sup>24</sup>

For contemporary artistic and cultural actors, the past is not a forgotten story but a complement and development of the themes we live in today. When dealing with themes from local history, they contrast personal vs. political. A common theme is the community and the individual's place in it, the need for listening and interconnection in a polarized society. Actors admit that there is much hatred, division, and judgment in society. Performances are often connected by the idea of finding connections, not triggering and deepening polarization. Many of the young generation of artists and cultural actors perceive arts as a way to creatively and actively influence the events around them. Therefore, the authors did not present the production of *Judenrein* solely as a tragic story about the disappearance of the Jewish community in one town in the Orava region, but as a tragedy of the Slovak majority, which perceived this behaviour (and a large part of it constantly perceives it) as correct, actively supports it or silently observes it. Fortunately, similar historical events carry great moral victories of individuals – heroes who stood on the side of love and life in the era of hatred and death. Lukáš Kubík stated: “it is just a theater, but it gives a much more authentic feeling than when you just watch or read stories about the Holocaust. This is what the death marches during World War II looked like. Making history present also has great messages for future generations.”<sup>25</sup> The librettos of the productions contain collected non-public but true stories of ordinary people (*privatum*) that are confronted with the broader reality of the public and political context in documentary theater. Several factors are involved in strengthening the bond between man and space. If the place is associated with strong personal experiences related to significant events of our life or social or historical events, they participate in establishing the awareness of anchorage to space. Positive integration into space is influenced by culture and cultural symbols, such as traditional elements of culture, monuments or

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Podcast, *Ako by ti zmenila život žltá hviezda na hrudi? Námestovský experiment* [How would a yellow star on your chest change your life? Namestovoš experiment], <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/823424/ako-by-ti-zmenila-zivot-zlta-hviezda-na-hrudi-namestovsky-experiment-podcast/> (accessed 15.04.2024).

objects of artistic and historical value. A similar function of a strong visual milestone that can represent a specific cultural and geographical area (historical-cultural region) in one's consciousness is represented by nature. One of the most important parameters is interactions between people, and in addition to trivial everyday activities, community activities such as festivals, fairs, celebrations and festivities are important.

## Conclusion

By its proposition and theoretical anchorage, the concept of identity refers to creating space as a symbolic and meaningful structure in which the meaning of events and their experiencing is created and established. The need to "belong somewhere," to have ties to the immediate social, cultural, and environmental setting, is one of the most basic human needs. One of the most important types of relationships to space is the feeling of home, one's ability to relate to space. It is linked with the creation of territorial but also emotional ties to a specific geographical location; it does not relate exclusively to the perception of objective parameters of space with just physical or administrative dimensions. In particular, cultural geography perceives space as a socially and culturally established structure, its boundaries are constituted in social practices and through experience with living culture. Local identity is not something that the resident obtains together with the address. It is acquired in interactions, activities, and communication events; an important factor in its creation and subsequent maintenance is not only the culture but also the specific activities of local actors and entities.

Therefore, actors of contemporary theater show great interest in life around them. The theater responds to dynamic socio-political changes that each generation perceives from a different point of view. The theater ensemble dNO, whose work and activities are the subject of the present study, is anchored in the cultural environment of the historical region of Orava. In interviews provided to the media, its actors emphasize that after a long time abroad they decided to return to the region, stereotypically perceived as strongly religious. The past, which is associated with the region and is also contained in the cultural memory of its residents, is *extremely nutritious and stimulating material for artistic work*.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> L. Dzadíková, D. Kubíková, L. Kubík, *Vetráme ťažký vzduch a otvárame dvere dokorán...*

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