

## Baroque

### Online: Streaming of Scenic Art for Educational Purposes During the Corona Crisis.

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#### Abstract:

This paper is devoted to the activities of the Czech professional independent theatre ensemble Geisslers Hofcomoedianten during the coronavirus crisis. It summarises the possibilities and accomplished goals of all pillars of the activity (artistic, scientific, educational) of the above mentioned ensemble, whose dramaturgy has been for almost two decades exclusively connected with sources of inspiration from the Baroque period and its interpretation in the form of purely contemporary approaches in the field of performing arts. The paper also includes the first release of a performance recording titled *In the Blueberry Bushes* (2017), which was inspired by the play *La Mirtilla* (1588), the first surviving pastoral written by a female author – famous actress and writer Isabella Andreini (1562–1604).

**Keywords:** Geisslers Hofcomoedianten, Baroque online, Coronavirus, Covid-19

#### Introduction

In the Czech Republic, contributory organisations, or so called brick and mortar institutions or dependent institutions are those theatres, galleries or other cultural facilities, whose founders are regions, individual cities or the city districts. They are thus, by their nature, part of the state apparatus of culture and their indisputable advantage is that their activities have stable financial support they can rely on in a long term (Bohadlová, 2020).

It is their connection to these permanent state contributions that, in general, obliges them to fulfil clearly formulated activities and set goals. Such obligations of the above mentioned institutions include, of course, the area of creative and artistic outputs and their presentation to the public, the fulfilment of the scientific segment (often embodied in publishing or conference activities, or innovations of the already mentioned segment of artistic creation) and, last but not least, the field of education. It is the last mentioned segment of the area of interest and activities of Czech cultural institutions that has experienced a significant qualitative shift in the last decades of their development. Previously rather additional segment is, quite rightly, slowly but surely becoming an equal partner to all other content that the contributory organisations in the field of culture fulfil by law.

This model of the scope of activities is often taken over and fully performed by independent cultural entities, which thus become a "relaxed" partner of the state also in matters of education of new recipients of artistic creations. Among these entities, we can undoubtedly include the independent professional theatre company Geisslers Hofcomoedianten which fulfils the triad *"art – science – education"* very transparently due to its dramaturgic specialisation in the Baroque period and the associated sources of inspiration.

Although there are a number of differences between the institutional and independent cultural scene, which we find mainly in the level of funding and the associated possibilities to present the results of their work to the public, their efforts more or less pursue the same goals. The recent period of the most significant crisis associated with the global Covid-19 pandemic has revealed another common denominator – absolute dependence on crowd events and on physical contact with the audience. How the representative of the independent scene dealt with the situation is the subject of the following lines of text.

### **1 Geisslers Hofcomoedianten: Two decades of art, science and education**

*"Current interpretation and evaluation of Baroque is based on thorough historical knowledge of its nature and social conditionality, and recognises this artistic style's significant artistic contribution in the history of art"* (Baleka, 1997).

Geisslers Hofcomoedianten is, as already mentioned, an independent professional theatre company that focuses on live, contemporary and, above all, comedy theatre for a wide audience. It is inspired by Baroque culture and its dramaturgy draws from it. However, it does not seek to reconstruct the original Baroque plays. Geisslers Hofcomoedianten approach the original artwork in the spirit of the "New Baroque" and thus give the Baroque heritage a contemporary dimension: they discover timeless themes, forgotten stories, legacies of famous theatre personalities, and parallels between the past and the present.

The ensemble was founded almost twenty years ago at the same time as the *Theatrum Kuks* (2001) festival of Baroque and Baroque-inspired art, which takes place in the East Bohemian village of Kuks, the gem of Czech Baroque and the centre of Baroque culture of European significance. From the very beginning, Geisslers Hofcomoedianten have been creating the backbone of the festival's theatrical dramaturgy and are currently directly involved in the festival's organisation. The portfolio of the ensemble's own festival platforms was expanded in 2010 with the establishment of a summer traveling *Festival of Castle and Cloister Theatres*, during which they commemorate the theatrical history of selected places throughout the Czech Republic (Bohdalová, 2019). Geisslers Hofcomoedianten have so far created over 30 productions,

which they have performed at home and abroad (United States, Poland, Slovakia, Germany, Hungary, France, Monaco, Italy, Russia, etc.). Between 2011 and 2014, the ensemble's stage was in the Prague City Theatres, where it had a regular guest status, and since 2014 it has found home for its productions in the Prague cultural space of Vila Štvanice Theatre, together with the independent ensembles *Tygr v tísní* and *Divadlo Letí*.

The acquisition of a new space and the natural effort to make it accessible to all audience categories resulted in the organisation of the first year of the *Vylomeniny* festival (2015), which is intended for children, pupils, students and their parents. Usually taking place in November, each festival year realised so far was conceived as a thematic event. The chosen theme was then reflected in all forms of artistic performances and educational activities within the festival. The program has always consisted not only of a representative typological range of theatre performances for children and youth, but also of art workshops led by experienced art teachers, or interactive didactic plays, whose concept and artwork were created by the scenographic department of the organising ensemble. Thus, Baroque's own content multidisciplinary takes on real dimensions in Geisslers Hofcomoedianten projects in the second decade of the 21st century. The main activity in the field of dramatic art and stage production is often suitably complemented by exhibitions, art or movement workshops, author readings, etc. Similarly to the *Vylomeniny* festival, purely educational formats of the ensemble's activities appear in other projects, for example, the already mentioned *Theatrum Kuks* festival.

This brief outline of the ensemble's activities in relation to making artistic production of all forms accessible to children and young people can be concluded by mentioning Geisslers Hofcomoedianten's ongoing cooperation with the *Young Audience Club*, for which selected performances of the ensemble have been repeated for several years. The feedback on this cooperation was, for example, that members of the club elected the performance of *Two Comedies Within a Comedy* the best production of the 2015/2016 season (Bohadlová, Hašek, Škvarová, 2018, p. 81).

An unmissable part of the ensemble's activities (which would certainly deserve an independent elaboration) is research in the field of Baroque theatre, which often inspire interdisciplinary and academic projects (e.g. *Špork Festival*, *Andreini Festival*, *Brandl Festival* or the upcoming *Gozzi Festival*). In addition to new productions and events for the general public, the portfolio of realised events of the ensemble often includes discussion and conference meetings, individual publications, new translations of little-known texts, etc. To achieve these purely scientific or artistically innovative outputs, the ensemble had to surround itself by collaborators or cooperating institutions in whose activities Geisslers Hofcomoedianten often participate significantly. We can mention for example the *Rentz Museum of Baroque Printing* in Kuks or the *Jiří Nachlinger Puppet Gallery* and the project *Braun's Sculpture as a Puppet* in the same place.

The extensive activities of the ensemble were merged in 2020 into the *Project #newbaroque*, whose intention is a clearer presentation of the results of two decades of concentrated work, perhaps not only in the content triad briefly outlined above.

### **1.1 Geisslers Hofcomoedianten: Coronavirus Crisis**

The Geisslers Hofcomoedianten ensemble, as well as all Czech cultural institutions of various types and specialisations, was affected by the declaration of a state of emergency and thus the impossibility of operation in the middle of the visitor season. The development of the Coronavirus pandemic indicated a similar step, but all the restrictions imposed so far did not significantly affect the theatre's activities due to the smaller capacity of the auditorium. It was not until March 12, 2020 that all the possibilities of public production were completely stopped. The longest general emergency situation in the Czech Republic lasted sixty-six days and its effect ended on May 17, 2020. Thus, just over two months, none of the activities of the ensemble connected with public production or the organisation of events could be realised. But the slow gradual easing of restrictive measures and the justified fear of the organisers of cultural projects extended the period of apparent inactivity of the ensemble up to three months. Due to the situation, several dozen performances were canceled not only on the home stage of the Vila Štvanice Theatre, but also in cultural facilities throughout the Czech Republic. Last but not least, the pre-planned rehearsal dates of a new production called *LK3P2: The Green Bird* (2020) based on the text of the world-famous Italian playwright Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806) were canceled.

In the first week of the suspension of public life throughout the country, the ensemble's management focused mainly on administrative issues of resolving the whole situation, i.e. canceling contracted performances, returning admission to subscribers, etc. In the next stages of the development of the pandemic, it was more than clear that the length of the state of emergency would not really allow the ensemble to just pause its activities. The standard movement of activity presentation to the world of social networks and digital platforms was a choice as clear as a day. Trying not to lose contact with the audience has become a priority for the next two months. Geisslers Hofcomoedianten is one of those theatre companies whose operation is largely dependent on the permanent audience community. In the two decades of the ensemble's functioning, such a community of spectators and supporters has been built. And the community's connection to the ensemble and its work is all the stronger the more specific is the ensemble's poetics which will never belong to the generally accepted majority metropolitan culture.

As soon as ten days after the declaration of the state of emergency (March 21, 2020), production of *Wallenstein* (2014), the first of the series of recorded theatrical performances, was broadcast in the premiere. It was introduced to the public through the *Culture Lives* project on the MALL.TV platform. Although the established cooperation was satisfactory, an increasing number of streamed performances of other theatres or films and recordings of other cultural institutions did not give the ensemble the opportunity to choose suitable dates and times of broadcasting. Therefore, it was decided to create a custom platform, accessible from the ensemble's website interface. In cooperation with the VIMEO portal, a video projection platform called GHTV (Geisslers Hofcomoedianten Television) was established. As early as the beginning of April, another performance recording was premiered. For two months, "ensemble's television" became one of the main formats of contact with the audience. Performance recordings were always open for streaming for 24 hours on two consecutive dates. The following recordings of productions were one by one published on GHTV:

- *Two Comedies Within a Comedy* (2014), April 4 / April 8, 2020;
- *Don Juan or the Terrible Feast* (2011), April 15 / April 18, 2020;
- *Fitzli Putzli* (2009), April 25 / April 29, 2020;
- *Kisses* (2013), May 6 / May 9, 2020;
- *I am Krabat* (2015), May 16 / May 20, 2020;
- *Hush hush, Nepomuk!* (2007), May 27 / May 30, 2020.

Along with the consistent promotion of the above-mentioned broadcast dates of recordings (Facebook, Instagram, website, mailing lists, etc.), contact with viewers was strengthened by a cycle of so-called antivirus vaccines – a set of seventeen short videos published one by one – that were created mainly by members of the ensemble. Proof of the functionality of electronic communication with the audience of the ensemble can be the active involvement in the Facebook challenge to record a favourite song from the performance *Two Comedies Within a Comedy* called *I Love You*. After its publication, together with instructions making the rules of the rhythm of the song easier, a large number of audio and video recordings were gathered, and a video clip based on those recordings was created with an extraordinary response not only from the immediate circle of Geisslers Hofcomoedianten. The video clip was published at the very end of the state of emergency and, without exaggeration, it can be considered a reward for the cooperation and patience not only of the theatre management and members of the ensemble but especially those who are most concerned – the audience.

In the months in question, the members of the ensemble had the opportunity to focus essentially only on internal projects. The only exception was participation in a project of a completely unique nature, and that was the launch of the production *In the Blueberry Bushes* (2017) as part of the *Art Parking Festival*, which took place on May 1, 2020 just two weeks before the strictest rules of the state of emergency were eased in the Czech Republic. The concept of watching live culture through the car windshield has earned the name "drive in theatre". The opportunity to perform in front of the audience after a break of almost three months was, undoubtedly, a great experience for the performers and their ensembles, although their interaction (similar to streaming through display) was disrupted by the car windshield and instead of applause they were rewarded with a cluster of various tones of car horn hoots from the audience.

As follows from the above, the disruption in operation of the theatrical ensemble consisted mainly in the restriction or impossibility of performing and publishing the results of its work. The educational component was not seriously disrupted due to the timing of the crisis which, fortunately, did not collide with the plans of the Geisslers Hofcomoedianten educational activities. With regard to scientific activities, it can be stated that the time of separation from normal operation and thanks to the generous accessibility of archives and libraries through the opening of digital information resources, the Coronavirus time may have been to some extent beneficial for the preparation of the research. However, it will only be possible to evaluate the result over some time, through the widely socially beneficial activities of a prominent Czech independent theatre ensemble, whose motto of the recent state of emergency of the Coronavirus pandemic in the Czech Republic may be *Baroque Online!*

## **Conclusion**

The independent theatre entity Geisslers Hofcomoedianten coped with the difficult period of the Coronavirus crisis, in the best sense of the word, standardly. The part of the activity that is directly dependent on contact with the audience has logically moved to the platforms of social networks and other digital forms of communication. Statistically, all performances were received by the spectator community of the ensemble not only passively. The community of supporters and loyal viewers also actively participated in the creation of the mentioned "viral song" and heard out requests for financial support, too. Thanks to their help, even the cultural entity of the Geisslers Hofcomoedianten format was able, at least in part, to support its fundamental artists who are existentially dependent on the actual performance of the theatre's role. The progress of the main wave of the pandemic and the freezing of all public life throughout the country fully showed that the community mode of the ensemble is fully functional and is one of its strengths. The theatre ensemble emerged from the new and up to now unknown situation visibly strengthened. For all sections, from artistic through production to technical, this challenging period was a

test of professionalism and functionality of the set competences of individual parts of the entity. The successful completion of said test did not move the ensemble forward but at the same time – and this is important – did not endanger it in any way. The goals accomplished by Geisslers Hofcomoedianten for almost two decades were only temporarily delayed but the sources of inspiration from the Baroque past may have been more carefully considered and planned for the new challenges of the future. Because the creative time gained by the Coronavirus pandemic is probably the only positive aspect of the past period.

## Appendix

Presented paper includes the first release of a performance recording titled *In the Blueberry Bushes* and subtitled *Sylvan Erotic Pantomime* (2017), which was inspired by the play *La Mirtilla* (1588), the first surviving pastoral written by a female author – famous actress and writer Isabella Andreini (1562-1604). It is the third and final part of the dramaturgic cycle *Opus Andreini* (2014-2017) dedicated to the legacy of an important theatrical family of the Baroque period. *In the Blueberry Bushes* recording was chosen because of its stage form which is based on the movement component of the performance with only minimal use of words. The recording with English subtitles is exclusively presented to the participants of the *Art Education in The Time of Coronavirus* conference on the days of its holding (October 12 - 15, 2020). According to the ensemble's recommendation, the live performance is suitable for the age of 15 and above.

Theatre ensemble website: [www.geisslers.cz](http://www.geisslers.cz)

Website of the Vila Štvanice Theatre: [www.vilastvanice.cz](http://www.vilastvanice.cz)

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