



## MUSEUM THEATRE AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL: EXAMPLES IN SERBIAN MUSEUMS

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Potrijeno/Accepted

7. 8. 2022

Objavljeno/Published

28. 8. 2022

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**Keywords:**

museum theatre, drama  
play, education, creative  
drama, visitors

**Abstract/Izveček** The paper presents museum theatre as an interpretive tool, its theoretical framework, developmental origins, the use of drama in museums in the 20th and 21st centuries, and its pedagogical outcomes. A section of the paper is dedicated to the use of creative drama in museums and its role as an educational model for working with children and young people. Museum performances created in the last ten years in the Matica Srpska Gallery, the Pavle Beljanski Memorial Collection, the Belgrade City Museum, the Kikinda National Museum, the Museum of Vojvodina, and the House of Jevrem Grujić will be mentioned.

**Ključne besede:**

muzejsko gledališče,  
dramska igra,  
izobraževanje,  
ustvarjalna dramska  
igra, obiskovalci

### Muzejsko gledališče kot izobraževalno orodje: primeri iz muzejev v Srbiji

Prispevek obravnava muzejsko gledališče kot interpretativno orodje, predstavlja teoretični okvir in razvoj muzejskega gledališča, rabo dramske igre v muzejih v 20. in 21. stoletju ter njen vpliv na poučevanje. Posebno pozornost posvečamo rabi ustvarjalne dramske igre v muzejih in njeni izobraževalni vlogi pri delu z otroki in mladimi. Omenjene bodo muzejske predstave v Galeriji Matice srpske, Spominski zbirki Pavla Beljanskega, Muzeju mesta Beograd, Narodnem muzeju Kikinda, Muzeju Vojvodine in Hiši Jevrema Grujića.

**UDK/UDC:**

[069:792]37.01(497.11)

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DOI <https://doi.org/10.18690/rei.15.Spec.Iss.77-91.2022>

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## Introduction

### **A museum as a theatre, an exhibition as a stage**

Museums have a wide range of potential programs for visitors, but exhibitions are the predominant, most important, and strongest medium of direct visual communication between museums and the public. That is why there is a close relationship between the exhibition and the museum audience. Often, the perception of a museum is based on experiences within the museum that are supported by exhibitions. Therefore, the public rightly identifies museums with the content of their exhibitions. Museums have this unique and special method of displaying exhibitions and telling stories through exhibits. An exhibition can be defined as a display of material for the purpose of communication with the audience. The exhibits have different goals. Museums use original objects to inspire or inform, often entertaining the audience by illustrating historical events, as well as technological and artistic achievements. The specific goals of the museum exhibition include the desire to change attitudes, modify behaviour, and spread knowledge.

Exhibitions are increasingly understood as narratives. When a narrative is present at the exhibition, the events that take place there are more narrated than presented. Furthermore, dramatic stories and their protagonists provoke emotion by evoking the empathy of the audience. Multiple dramaturgical techniques are used to achieve these effects, and many theatrical terms are used in connection with exhibitions. Theatre and exhibition design have much in common because they use related techniques. In both places (stage or museum), the function is the same: setting the stage and creating a performance environment. In theatre, objects are only a part of the stage and serve as props on it. Objects are subordinate to the play and the actors. However, exhibitions differ; the performance is subordinate to the objects, which have a leading role on the museum stage. Rarely, almost never, will an actor hold a jug in a theatre play and talk about it, while, on the other hand, in museum theatre, an actor may hold a jug and certainly talk about the time of its creation, application, who the jug belonged to or who used it. We can look at the exhibition as a scene where a long time ago, people made or used the objects that are now on display. These people can be considered real actors who are now absent from the stage. They are either dead or not in the museum (Maure, 1995, p. 162). They exist only in the minds of viewers who imagine their presence.

The designer of the exhibition can present these actors through a character only with the help of a model, photography, painting, etc. And the best way for it to be presented is as drama. The exhibition venue is a stage for typical performances that take place in the museum. Actors on these museum stages have the freedom to shape the setting, have control and power over museum objects, seek inspiration from them, and use them within their roles and planned actions. An exhibition, permanent or temporary, can serve as a stage for a museum drama performance. Its objects, themes and sub-themes, are conducive to dramatic performance because the action takes place in a somewhat original environment that inspires both the creators of the play and the performers.

The basic idea of this paper is grounded in this point of view: why should we learn from statically placed objects in museums situated in glass cases if the same objects (or their replicas) can be used, talked about, clarified and made more understandable? The paper will therefore present the theoretical framework of museum theatre, its development, pedagogical implications, and application in Serbian museums.

### **Museum Theatre: Theory and Development**

Theatre is part of human history and has a long evolution story. It has taken varied forms and can be found in many cultures, but its goal is the same for all of them – to make people think, feel, and learn. In a historical way, museums and historical sites in the United States and Europe have begun to use theatre as a way for visitors to better understand the exhibits, first from the end of the 19th century, then frequently from the early twenties, and finally, from the 1980s to the present. In some institutions, the use of theatre was part of a general educational and interpretive mission, while in others it was performed experimentally and intermittently when needed. So, one could say that the historical development of using theatres in museums has been uneven and has had an oscillating movement (Hughes, 2008, p. 2). The 1960s brought enormous social change, with a revolutionary approach to gender and racial issues. Women, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos influenced the way that history was taught, including the views of those commonly ignored and rejected people: women, children, the enslaved, the poor, and the disenfranchised (Bridal, 2004). Those stories were often personal, emotional, and dramatic.

Historical centres and museums noticed their importance and viewed them as a rich source of information. They recognized a way to attract many visitors. In this way, they helped visitors connect history with their daily lives, giving importance to the household, rural affairs, the common man, woman, and child (Bridal, 2004).

The pioneer of museum theatre, or revived history, is the Skansen open-air museum, founded in 1891 by Arthur Hazelius in Stockholm. According to the museum's website, "Skansen is the world's oldest open-air museum, representing houses and rural estates from all parts of Sweden" (This is Skansen, 2022). The idea was to recreate old living traditions without layers of "museum dust" (Studart, 1995, p. 13). Skansen, therefore, is considered important because of the special museological approach given to the institution by its founder.

Museums have developed their own approaches and new techniques for using drama in their venues. The Science Museum of Minnesota, for instance, experimented with characters using performance-based theatre to present the content of exhibits (e.g., Charles Darwin and his wife discuss the theory of evolution) in the 1970s, becoming an example to many other museums. The use of dramatic techniques in museums has brought new perceptions of the museum experience for visitors, but also for museum staff. This method in museums can solve the problem in an interactive and participatory way because it involves the audience.

In the widest sense, museum theatre is defined as the use of theatrical techniques as a means of mediating knowledge and understanding in the context of the museum environment. It is usually represented by professional actors and/or interpreters in museums or historical sites (Jackson and Kidd, 2008). Dramatic performances in museums can be brief monologues based on historical events or on-site exhibitions. According to Catherine Hughes, one of the most important researchers in this field, museum theatre is defined as a hybrid; it connects two key institutions: museum and theatre (Hughes, 1998, p. 18). Hughes founded the International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTAL) in 1990. Additionally, the term "Museum Theatre" was coined by Tessa Bridal slightly earlier, in 1982. Hughes proposes the following definition of "museum theatre": "the use of drama or dramatic technique within a museum environment or as part of a museum offer to provoke emotional or cognitive examination of visitors related to a museum discipline" (Hughes, 1998, prologue) while, in her book *Exploring Museum Theatre*, Tessa Bridal examines and presents diverse definitions given by different museum directors.

Museum theatre can simply be defined as a specific type of interpretation that uses fictional activities to transmit ideas, facts, and concepts (Fasoi, 2016). Bridal's definition is as follows: "theater can open the senses and touch the heart and mind, challenging the audience's understanding and encouraging them to rethink their ideas." She believes in the educational power of the theatre and suggests that each museum create a museum theatre program, but always in accordance with its needs and resources. Hughes also analyses the challenges that may arise when designing and performing a museum theatre play, pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of each situation. A performer in museum drama takes on the role of a certain character in a certain circumstance to entertain and educate visitors and to help them understand the story first hand.

While museum theatre has been a controversial term since it first appeared and has been a hot academic issue for more than two decades, some support its efficiency and usefulness, while others appreciate its authenticity and trend towards entertainment (Studart, 1995, p. 16). Museum theatre engages the audience on many levels – primarily emotional and intellectual. It can take place in museums, galleries, zoos, botanical gardens, historical sites, libraries, and all those places that deal with the protection, communication, and interpretation of heritage.

### **Forms of museum theatre**

The concept of "theatre in museums" is very broad and includes different types of performance:

1. Storytelling: one of the earliest forms of museum theatre, closely connected with tradition, history, and literature. It means telling a story on a particular topic to visitors of all ages.
2. Monologue: a form in which one actor imitates a real or imaginary person or even several personalities during one play.
3. Historical characters: represent real personalities, their lives, jobs, and the time they lived in. The actors who interpret them often invite the visitors and "pull" them into the performance. This form of museum theatre is also characterized by costumes depicting the period when the action takes place.

4. Participatory and interactive theatre: a type of theatre where the audience participates in the interpretation of the drama. Interactive theatre engages the audience without having them leave their seats. Participatory theatre encourages participation in the play by the audience, which acquires new skills.

5. Controversial topics: exploration of topics on racial, sexual, and religious discrimination, on ethics in medicine, organ transplantation, as well as on environmental destruction and environmental protection.

6. "Fourth Wall": a traditional form of theatre in which the actors present the show by ignoring the audience, pretending that there is a wall between them and the audience (fourth wall).

7. Mimicry: this type of interpretation can be performed in two ways: the first implies the use of mimicry within a play that has no character mimicry; the other one is a performance without voices, with the use of mimicry as a whole (Bridal, 2004).

In addition to these genres, the following should be pointed out: living history, historical re-enactment, or reconstruction. The first one is closely related to the historical context. Living history is defined as "people attempting to simulate life in the past" through interpretation by actors (Studart, 1995, p. 14). Reconstructions of historical events usually reflect the events or history of a certain era and are usually held at or near the site of the original event.

### **The educational role of museum theatre: The impact of drama on children**

Drama in education means the use of theatre specifically designed for presentation in schools where the subject relates directly to topics on the curriculum and/or to the social needs of certain age groups and is related to the interests of those groups (Jackson, 2011). It facilitates understanding, develops and stimulates the imagination and contemplative thinking of the recipient by enabling him/her to perfect certain skills. The importance of drama in education is reflected in the fact that it helps to develop children's thinking and contributes to liberation from the tedious atmosphere of education characterized by repetition and stagnation (Jarrah, 2019, p. 5). It helps to develop their personalities through integration and cooperation with the group. Also, drama serves to identify the ideas and beliefs behind events, as well as their consequences, which leads to new knowledge and decisions.

Methods used in teaching are often based on traditional methods of indoctrination and do not attract enough attention from children, which negatively affects the development of life skills and reflective thinking (Jarrah, 2019, p. 5). The dramatic process is an educational method that improves skills and thinking. Children are always more interested in interactive educational and participatory activities. Therefore, to improve the educational process, the method of drama has been adopted as an innovation in education to facilitate understanding of what is being learned. In this way, children's love for education increases, and they become active members of society. The benefits of drama lie in the following:

- Watching the play helps in understanding events; information is remembered over a long period of time, which significantly affects children and develops their methods of solving problems in a serious, scientific way;
- Drama develops reading skills and corrects pronunciation;
- Drama develops artistic and aesthetic tastes, which results in the development of creative imagination of events;
- Drama provides an atmosphere of friendship among children and between teachers and students, which encourages positive trends;
- Children are under the supervision and guidance of an older person (coordinator of the drama process) who communicates with the other children to play a certain role;
- The use of drama in education is an effective means of acquiring manners and sophisticated forms of behaviour;
- Drama helps children cope with various life situations and develop the ability to deal with them wisely (Jarrah, 2019. p. 7-8)

One of the most important roles of drama in education is to prepare participants for real-life situations through experience, experimentation, and relaxed activity. Drama activities offer a safe environment for participants to speak and act without limitations and inhibitions; to discover their needs, skills, and talents; to learn to find and identify objective truth; to create their own ideas and images of the world and to develop their senses and reflective capacity. Based on the theory of Erving Goffman, who believes it is important to point out the parallels between role-playing on stage and in everyday life, the experience, methods, and techniques of training actors can be adopted and used in education and personality development (Kovács, 2013, p. 18).

Drama in education means the use of “drama as a means of teaching other subject areas”. The educator brings the original materials, leads the study, inspires the children’s imagination, and helps them in dramatic moments pertaining to the topic under consideration (Mages, 2016).

Museum theatre can be a valuable tool in bringing heritage closer to a diverse audience; it can help with interpretation by “offering insight into the social significance of artifacts” and “animating the inanimate” (Kidd, 2007, p. 58). Museum theatre also offers learning potential, especially in terms of providing connections with current social and political realities, as well as in terms of discovering the complexity of the museum narrative and enabling multi-layered interpretations (Jackson and Kidd, 2008).

### **How to create a drama performance with children in a museum**

The process of building a museum play unfolds through drama workshops. The term “drama workshop” is most often related to a group of artists or other participants, young people who, with the help of a leader, examine and acquire knowledge about the world through the process of creative drama. According to Tolga Erdoğan, creative drama is the process of turning imaginative ideas into action and includes movement, rhythm, pantomime, improvisation, character studies, and speech (Erdoğan, 2017). Creative drama uses techniques such as improvisation and role-playing with a group, and it is based on the experiences of group members (Erdoğan, 2017). Participants in a workshop can create and influence the process of staging a play and its outcome. The drama process helps participants to develop creativity, self-confidence, and collegiality, acquire certain skills, and treat each other equally, according to their wishes and potential. During the creation of the play, the participants are given the opportunity to enter someone’s life as part of the action. They are allowed to make mistakes, to learn from them and to improve. Participation in the drama process improves their ability to empathize and helps them understand other people’s abilities and situations from their perspective. The process of creating a play with children should include the following phases:



1. Preparation: The main goals of this phase are to form group dynamics and to prepare the participants for the next step. It mainly includes body activities, so it consists mostly of games. Games serve to get the participants to meet, relax, concentrate, build relationships and create a pleasant atmosphere based on trust. The participants need time and clear instructions to engage effectively in these games. Games that involve nonsense are especially good because they enhance body language and nonverbal communication. It is important for the participants to get to know the workspace as well as its physical limits.
2. Script making process: Museum drama performances are created spontaneously when needed, so there are no prepared scripts. After the preparatory phase, just described, the leader of creative drama informs the participants about the topic to be covered. Most often, these topics are historical events or personalities, their lives, crafts, ways of living in the past, wars and battles. Based on this information, the participants create a scenario. This part is done by the whole group together, or in small groups, and is often preceded by brainstorming. At this creative stage, the most important thing is to ensure the participants stay true to the topics, plot, and characters that were previously generated.
3. Impersonation: In this phase, the subject is formed, and the character is further determined and shaped. Improvisation and role play are most commonly used in this phase. Impersonation, or the phase of “false representation”, sometimes begins with considering the characteristics of the participants and determining the topic. During the improvisation process, participants gain experience in their role, whether individually, in pairs, small groups, or with the whole group and with the leader involved in a role (Erdoğan, 2017).
4. Role assignment: This phase arises spontaneously from the previous one. The participants begin thorough research into the characters and determine the identities that will be presented. Based on the role play and improvisation, the group leader divides the roles. Role assignment, especially when working with younger children, can be demanding, and at times painful, owing to the desire of participants to play a certain role, usually the main role. In such situations, the group leader must be wise and pedagogically minded, and avoid hurting the children’s expectations.

5. Evaluation/discussion: In this phase, participants can evaluate the results of the creative drama process. It implies open dialogue, during which they analyse previous working phases, note corrections, and plan further parts. In the evaluation phase, the participants should be informed that the process is more important than the results. Besides, the skills they acquire and the changes that take place in them are more desirable than the most interesting museum performance. This is the essence of participation.

### **What is happening in Serbian museums?**

#### **Is this a “Museum Theatre Boom”?**

Over the last two decades, museums in Serbia have changed their policies and turned more to the audience and their needs. Communication with the audience has become more layered and freer. In addition to exhibitions and catalogues, museums organize workshops, gatherings, festivals and even drama performances. A few special museum performances will be described in the following part of the paper.

In 2009 the monodrama “A Coffee with Princess Ljubica” was the first dramatic performance created at the Belgrade City Museum, and since then it has been successfully performed in the authentic ambience (divanhana) of The Residence of Princess Ljubica. The play is performed by Natasha Popovska, who is also the author of the script. Visitors can see original objects from the 19th century, listen to the life confession of Princess Ljubica Obrenović, and meet her over coffee and Turkish delight in a striking and interactive way. While sitting in or moving through the rooms of the old residence, where the princess really lived, the actress reveals facts about the most significant events and personalities of her time. After an hour, visitors can ask the actress questions or take a tour of the residence.

In the play “We Are Not Monsters” by The Gallery of Matica Srpska, visitors are guided through the exhibition venue by professional dancers and people with mental disabilities. This is the first example in Serbia and on the wider European scene where artists with and without intellectual disabilities create a relationship between the visitors and the art in the museum (EU in Serbia, We Are Not Monsters - Europe Beyond Access, 2022). At the beginning of the play, the visitors, who are simultaneously participants, have an opportunity to participate in a conversation. The performers use paintings and sculpture, establish relationships with them, and instruct the audience on how to observe them.

The basic premise of the play is the fear and pain of people with disabilities, behind which lies the message of the play: the desire of people with disabilities not to be seen as monsters. This type of play is based on the principles of cooperation, support, care, attention and respect for others. The performers invite the audience (group by group) to follow them. This is followed by a divergence and a quick walk through the gallery, where the visitors can view various group installations and living sculptures that correlate with the exhibited works and with the topic. The finale of the play soon follows in the “ghost room.” The performers are covered with a white cloak, a quiet sound is heard, and the audience, one by one, shyly approaches the “spirit” and listens to his/her confession. The visitor listens to the story of the person hidden under the cloak, what he/she looks like, and what he/she did in the basement (a reference to hiding people with mental problems in basements). The visitor leaves the performance with the distinct impression of having witnessed and participated in something powerful and terrifying.

“In the Mirror of the Muses” is the title of the latest play in the Pavle Beljanski Memorial Collection from Novi Sad. In the play, the participants (high school and university students) discover Pavle Beljanski’s connections with his artist contemporaries and their families. Participants first study the biographies, along with letters that these artists sent to each other, and primarily to Pavle Beljanski, asking him for financial help. The audience participation element is a pre-play that takes place in the gallery venue, which leads the audience to the main performance area. The audience is greeted by the actors who interpret respected and celebrated artists who lived at the same time as Beljanski: Petar Lubarda, Ljubica Cuca Sokić, Desanka Maksimović, Ignjat Job, Milan Konjović, and others. The audience is thus introduced to the story and informed about the characters, while the initial discomfort is eased or eliminated. The correlation between the paintings surrounding the visitors and the displayed actions is interesting. Works from the collection of Pavle Beljanski which were created at the time described in the play are located around the audience. It is so much easier for the visitor to understand the artists and their enthusiasm while creating these works (I want to go to the Theatre, Behind the Mirrors of Art). This example of a museum play communicates with the audience in a very pedagogical way because, playful scenes and actual artwork allow the time and concept of the action to be understood.

The drama performance “Who was Melanija Mela Gajčić?” performed in 2020 at the National Museum of Kikinda is an interactive play. Melanija Gajčić was an important Kikinda woman in the 19th and 20th centuries. She had a turbulent life in which she struggled to regain her lost family fortune. She lived quite freely during that time. In the last years of her life, having achieved her goals, she dedicated herself to God. She built a monastery and donated it to the city of Kikinda. In this play, a group of young museum volunteers (high school pupils and students) revived her character, her relationship with family members, life decisions, dedication to God and her significance as a founder of the Holy Trinity Monastery. The play took place in the historical part of the museum’s permanent exhibition. The participants sought inspiration from the book “Melanija Mela Gajčić”, in the Holy Trinity Monastery and in the museum’s permanent exhibition. After collecting the material, they devised a script and shaped the play. Most of the ensemble had acting roles, while a smaller group oversaw making props, costumes, and technical work. The audience was not static; they moved through the exhibition venue, following the actors and their performance. When asked if this method helped them understand local history, almost all participants confirmed that participatory drama is a great way to learn new information and develop skills (Kiurski, 2020). They especially enjoyed working in groups.

The Museum of Vojvodina steps forward in the interpretation of its heritage by offering a theatre program for children, such as “Doll Talks.” They use the elements of a puppet theatre to make the museum more dynamic and interesting. The first play in this program, “Where did the helmet come from in my grandmother's garden?” (intended for children aged 4 to 8), describes the unusual discovery of ancient helmets from Berkasovo and Bački Jarak, two villages in the Vojvodina region. After the show, children meet with the curator and look at the helmets in the permanent exhibition.

Through the performance “Little Black Dress”, the House of Jevrem Grujić in Belgrade evokes the life of the famous fashion designer Coco Chanel and the Ritz Hotel in Paris, where she lived and died. Two Serbian actresses, Rada Đuričin and Vjera Mujović, play two characters named Coco from different eras: her childhood, love life, struggle, and aspirations. The visitors can be active participants, not just observers. Coco’s life is enacted in an intimate atmosphere for only 30 visitors. At the end of the show, visitors and actors mingle with a glass of champagne (Koko Šanel u Domu Jevrema Grujića, 2020).

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Through a specially created multimedia program called “My Father Vuk Karadžić”, the Museum of Vuk and Dositej conveys interesting facts from the life of Vuk Karadžić, a Serbian language reformer from the 19th century. In the form of a monodrama, actress Ljiljana Jakšić interprets the character of Vuk's daughter, Mina Karadžić. Through the story telling, showing documentary material and family photos, and through music tracks, the actress conjures up the past. At the end of the program, visitors can view the permanent museum exhibition consisting of personal items of Vuk and Mina Karadžić, the family tree, portraits, and photos of the Karadžić family.

## **Conclusion**

The strength of museum theatre lies in its ability to animate lifeless objects and to turn an ordinary visit to the museum into an unforgettable and emotional experience. Museum theatre can stimulate interest and attract the attention of visitors. Watching a theatre play in a museum environment is a surprising, new, and even bizarre experience for most museum visitors because they do not expect a theatre play to await them there. In that sense, museum theatre is a means to increase curiosity. It has the power to attract attention, prevent indifferent passage among the exhibits, and dynamize the exhibition. When it comes to participatory theatre and working with children, as stated in the paper, there are several benefits: speech and creativity development; self-confidence development; group work; and fearlessness. Nevertheless, the greatest benefit of such drama is that it provokes empathy and makes participants (and viewers) connect emotionally with the story of the work of art. Museum theatre, therefore, uses empathy to motivate children towards greater connection with real people, to compare their own experiences, reactions, or quality of life with the those of the characters. When a child plays the role of a certain man or woman, it becomes much clearer to him who that person was, what he did in the past, and how he felt. In that sense, museum theatre enables children to travel to the past and establish an emotional connection with the characters whose lives are being interpreted. When they are emotionally connected to these characters, both actors and visitors become more engaged and feel the importance and uniqueness of a certain work of art, period, or person. In museum theatre, the audience is an important factor. The audience in children's museum performances consists mainly of parents and other family members.

This is another benefit of having a theatre in a museum: a secondary target group. By performing dramatic works in the museum, we gain a new audience that is potentially connected to the people who interpret, which certainly gives us a satisfied audience.

In considering museum theatre in Serbia, the conclusion is that we live in a period of intensive development of this interpretive form. Praise should be given not only to museum workers and their partner organizations (acting schools or theatres) but also to visitors, children, and young people, who, from shy visitors, become serious dramatic performers of their heritage. The large number of performances in museums is probably a consequence of the trend towards opening museums to the public and the tendency for the audience to get involved in museum programs as much and as actively as possible.

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