

# **The Role of Amateur Artist Activities in Non-governmental Organisations of the Agrarian Society**

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From the middle of 19th century until the 1950-ies, at the agrarian territories of the country-side, there were several self-organised social associations operating. These organisations had complex functions. They had a significant role in the fields of economy, local public life, and culture. In the public education activity of reading circles and farmer's clubs, in addition to library service and adult education, amateur artistic activity was the most important. For people living far from town or city centres, who were busy with agricultural work the whole day, the cultural programs of associations (theatre performances, performances of choirs, orchestras, and dance ensembles) were the only cultural and entertainment opportunities of high standard. These programs enabled people to spend their spare time in a civilised way. At the same time, they had great impact on the solidarity of the local community, and on strengthening human relationships (Simándi, 1947:750-731; Kovalcsik, 2003:585).

The amateur artistic performances of reading circles and farmer's clubs were regarded to be important social events, and people were generally excited about them. Taking part in theatre performances, in the performances of choirs, orchestras, and dance productions was acknowledged in the agrarian society. An event generally mobilised all the members of the association. Most of the people had appropriate cultural demand, talent, and strong community spirit. Within the frames of reading circles and farmer's clubs, even people agreed to public appearance, who had rather withdrawn from public appearance in other fields. Those who did not take part in the performance, contributed to the organisation of the performance by helping with the arrangements, and ensuring the technical conditions. Cultural programs, however, were meant not only to involve the association's members and their family members, but the whole population of the vicinity was invited (Ambrus, 2001:167; Koszorús, 2001:64).

The associations' amateur artistic productions had a wider impact on changing the cultural habits of people living nearby, and on improving personal and community competencies of people

participating in the events (actors and the audience). Artistic activity greatly affected the improvement of intellectual skills and creativity, the strengthening of learning skills and the focusing of attention, the creation of a problem solving, innovative mindset, and the improvement of the capability to co-operate and to have a tolerant attitude. Active spare time activity had an important recreational function from the point of view of personal development. It released stress occurring in the fields of work, public life, and family relations. It gave opportunity to fulfil creative desires, individual self-realisation, and to gain and feel success (Durkó, 1999:90-93).

Practically, each reading circle and farmer's club had some kind of an amateur artistic activity. At associations with the highest number of members, or where the members or the leaders laid bigger emphasis on it, there were several amateur groups operating: amateur actors, choir, orchestra, and dance ensemble. Participation in amateur artistic activity strengthened the capability to co-operate, and to adapt themselves, gave confident appearance, improved networking and communications skills. It also enabled initiative and entrepreneurship, and strengthened cultural awareness. All the above played an essential role in other fields of life, in the economy, and during public life activities, also from the points of view of successful work and active citizenship (Dombi, 2009:9-10; Olasz, 2011:147).

The cultural activity of reading circles and farmer's clubs had a significant educative and community forming role, too. The association's events played an important role in uniting and mobilising the population. Common appearance, sacrifices, and success experienced jointly strengthened social relations, as well as the identity of the community. Significance of amateur artistic activity was shown by the fact that even during the war reading circles and farmer's clubs had such events, although financial difficulties, authority limitations, and military recruitments highly hampered the associations' life. After World War II, despite severe damage suffered by the country, most of the reading circles and farmer's clubs re-launched their operation by an event, or an amateur artistic performance. This was how reading circles tried to unite and activate the population that withdrew as a result of the war's shocking effect (Bárdos, 2001:89-90; Beck, 1985:248).

Amateur artistic activity played an especially crucial role in the community life of women and the youth. For women and young age groups, among the traditional customs of the agrarian society, there were generally very few opportunities for self-expression, opinion-forming, and public appearance. Until the middle of the 20th century, mainly heads of the family, i.e. adult men had serious influence in economy or public life. The association's events fostered the social integration of women and the youth, so that they could become equal members of the community at least in the field of culture. Homelike

community space offered by reading circles and farmer's clubs, free participation at cultural programs allowed everyone for public appearance, showing their capabilities, increasing their personal contact system, and acquiring new communication routines. Such occasions, especially in more closed village and ranch surroundings, played an outstandingly important role in the youth's making friends, and mating (Piróth, 1999:80-82; Kovalcsik, 2003:585).

Among amateur artistic activities, theatre performances were the most popular ones. Acting out a play ensured an outstanding experience for the participants and it was a memorable, festive event in the life of the entire community, too. In the 1930-ies and 1940-ies, in the rural areas of Hungary, movies became important role-players in mass entertainment. However, even this could not overshadow the popularity of amateur acting (Kovalcsik, 2003:596-597).

When selecting the plays, reading circles and farmer's clubs made efforts to achieve that even the least educated part of the surrounding population could understand and follow the story, but at the same time the performance would be entertaining for people with higher qualification. It was also essential that the play included simple morals strengthening the local community's norms. The plays acted out by the associations included popular dramas on people's life, operas, musical comedies, and more valuable dramas also performed by contemporary professional theatrical companies (Nagy, 1975:399-400).

The associations most frequently performed popular dramas on people's life written by Ede Szigligeti and Ferenc Csepreghy, and the plays written by Géza Gárdonyi, Kálmán Mikszáth, Zsigmond Móricz, Lajos Zilahy. They also performed *The Dumb Night* by Jenő Heltai, *Earthquake* by János Kodolányi or *The Miser* by Molière. In addition to plays, they also acted out short scenes, living pictures, and ballads, too. The performed plays were generally musical plays. In case they were not, performances were made more entertaining by riffs, music and song inserts (Beck, 1985:248; Király, 1997:119).

Cultural authorities made efforts to control plays performed in reading circles and farmer's clubs. At the end of each year, it had to be reported to the local people's education organs (Committee on After School Public Education, then after World War II Inspectorate on Free Education), which plays had been performed by the associations during the year. If there was a less known play, or a play included in a published collection of dramas on people's life, a detailed description of the content had to be attached to the report. If the association wanted to sell tickets to the performance, it required preliminary permit. If the play was published, upon its performance, the permit was issued by the local public administration authority. In case the play was written by an amateur author, the scenario was forwarded by the local people's education organs to and approved by

the department in charge of the Ministry of Religion and Education (Katona, 1941:52).

Performances were scheduled in accordance with the time schedule of farming. Performances were planned to take place during the winter and early spring, when there was less agricultural work. People living in villages or on ranches, most of whom dealt with cultivation, had enough spare time only between November and March to prepare for the theatrical production, to learn the lines, to rehearse, and to arrange technically a performance. Performances were generally scheduled to a holiday (Christmas, New Year's Day, epiphany, 15th March, Easter), or linked to an anniversary or another event of the association. This was the time when the members of the association and the population of the vicinity anyhow gathered. Having a theatrical performance made the festive event even more memorable. At the same time, the players could also see that their enthusiastically prepared performance received appropriate attention. The local (town, county) press generally reported on the reading circles' and farmer's clubs' festivities and artistic performances. In these cases there were lots of visitors at the associations (Bárdos, 2001:90-91).

Most frequently, the associations requested the local teacher to teach and stage the plays. In other cases, it was the priest or some craftsman or farmer who loved reading and had a good sense to acting controlled the rehearsals. Almost every association had someone who had talent and patience higher than the average to solve such tasks. It was generally not difficult to allocate the roles. It was easy to find suitable player to each simplified character in popular dramas on people's life at each association. However, some part of village and farm people had much trouble with learning the lines and acting in front of an audience. People were not happy with acting out a negative character, since they were afraid of facing situations later for long, in which people would be kidding with them in their civil life. In case of lovers in the plays, parents of girls had to be convinced frequently to let their daughters act, because they worried much about their daughters' good reputation (Beck, 1985:399-401; Nagy, 1975:400-401).

The plays generally had lots of role players (20-30 people). This solution allowed for including everybody who wanted to join to take part in the performances. Consequently, on the one part, there was no unnecessary rivalry and envy, while on the other part; even shy people could be involved in the play, in smaller roles, for the sake of friends. Due to the high number of people involved, if someone playing utility dropped out, it did not jeopardise the performance, since it was easy to take over his/her short lines by somebody who knew the play. You could barely find young people in the reading circles and farmer's clubs, who did not act at least in one play. Thus

lots of families became directly affected by the performances, what enhanced interest. As a result, the performance was a common matter for both the association and the local population (Koszorús, 2001:63-64).

There was generally one script available. As no reproduction was possible, each participant put down his or her lines. In the meantime they learnt and interpreted their characters, and they could learn and practise even at home. Preparation usually lasted for 2 weeks (4-6 occasions). It started with the reading of the play, and 2-3 weeks of rehearsals followed. The director often pre-acted the role for the shy ones, showed how the character needed to be acted out in his or her opinion. The rehearsals were generally held from 6-7 p.m. till 10-11 p.m. The role players always made efforts to prepare the best they could, since all the relatives, acquaintances, and the population of the whole vicinity were present at the performance (Nagy, 1975:400-401).

The scenery and the props were generally prepared by the association's joint work. The members who did not want to act in the play also took part in it. Part of the dresses and costumes was borrowed from the acquaintances. If suitable garment was not available, women and girls sewed it skilfully. The props were also collected from the association's members, or if it was necessary, the local smith or wheeler made them. The barber often helped in creating the hairstyle and the make-up. In case of some more important festive performances or plays that were performed several times in a row, it happened that the costumes and the props were taken from a professional fancy dress lender, so that the production was of even higher standard (Juhász, 1978:168).

During the performance, it was generally the director who played the role of the prompter, as he or she knew the play the best. The director usually had a handyman type assistant, who focused on the technical details, locating the scenery and the props, and when the actors need to enter the stage. The dress rehearsal was usually held in the evening before the performance or in the afternoon on the day of the performance. Close relatives were invited to this event, who could watch the play for free, without a ticket. Despite this fact, most of them also participated at the official performance (with tickets). The amateur theatre groups of the reading circles and farmer's clubs often held in-house performances, so called „bonus performances” for free for the schoolchildren of the vicinity. A play was generally performed once or twice. Associations being in good liaison with each other often arranged exchange performances: they mutually performed their productions in the other reading circle or farmer's club. This enabled that theatrical groups could introduce themselves to unknown audiences and the audience could also meet new people and new plays (Nagy, 1975:401-403).

At the performances the audience generally took place on the chairs and benches prepared in the order of their arrival. The first row was reserved for the invited VIP guests (leaders of the town or village, representatives of neighbouring associations etc.). The actors' reward was a dinner that they had together after the performance. If there was a performance, the bar in the association's headquarters was kept closed until the end of the performance. This enabled civilised attitude on behalf of the audience. After the performance, they frequently had a dance event. In most of the places they had a rule: only those could participate at the dance event, who had watched the performance (Greguss, 1997:68).

In several of the reading circles and farmer's clubs, there were choirs, orchestras or dance groups operating. They usually performed at the association's events. Choirs, orchestras and dance ensembles could show their capabilities in front of a broader public. In smaller villages, at central celebrations, and cultural events the singers and musicians of the reading circles and farmers' societies were requested to make an accompanying performance. They had different village or town competitions, and amateur artistic performances annually. The winners' reward was generally to have the opportunity to take part at national festivals. Singing and folk dance were indigenous in reading circles and farmer's clubs. Where there was no permanent ensemble, occasionally the members gathered to play music and sing together. Folk songs and folk music were included in almost every event of the associations. Amateur orchestras, choirs, dance groups were used to perform at the closing exams of people's education courses, reading circle and farmer's club celebrations, anniversaries, and other social gatherings. In addition to folk music programs, they sometimes organised music or song evenings with classics (Stifnérné Szenti, 2000:31-39).

Amateur artistic activity, theatre performances, writer's meetings, folk song and folk dance performances were especially significant in the minorities' life. Community education in minority situation played a crucial role in nurturing their mother tongue and culture, and by involving the youth, it had definite identity preserving function. From among the country territories that were detached after World War I, then detached again after World War II, especially at the Southland, amateur activities in reading circles and farmer's clubs had inherent traditions. Amateur artistic performances were often held in Transylvania and at the Highlands, too, although their organisation was rather linked to the schools or other cultural institutions. The performed plays, the preparation, and the characteristics of the performance were generally the same as in the cases of the associations' performances in Hungary (Faragó, 2007:17-18; Ambrus, 2005:101-102).

Minorities living in Hungary also often had amateur artistic performances. Minority reading circles and farmer's clubs selected plays partially from plays performed also by Hungarian associations. Their scripts were easy to get, and a permit to perform them was obtained quickly. Among German, Southern Slav, Slovak, and Romanian minorities, there were several teachers and priests who wrote plays for amateur actors. A play written on their mother tongue generally went around in almost all associations of the given minority. Reading circles and farmer's clubs lent the script and gave advices to the other association, so that the performances become more successful. In villages and towns/cities with mixed population, the plays written by Hungarian and minority authors were learnt in both languages and were performed both in the language of the minority and in Hungarian on two successive days. This jointly strengthened their own ethnic linguistic and cultural identity, and the awareness of belonging to a broader territorial community (Szinkovics, 1969:13).

The amateur activity, in addition to its cultural and socialising impacts, also incurred important financial aspects. Performances with tickets were significant revenue resources for the association. Plays were sometimes performed in front of a paying audience of 300-400 people. This amounted to a great sum even under low ticket prices. People living in villages and ranches, far from the town's cultural institutions, theatre, movies, were happy to give some money for the opportunity to see a cultural program, theatre performance organised by the reading circles and farmer's clubs, and to get pleasant entertainment. The associations generally used the income from the performances for cultural expenses, preparing a new event or growing the library's collection (Berza, 1954:21; Jobbáné Szabó, 1999:480).

Organising the performances also required a lot of money. Huge financial resources were required by obtaining the necessary permits, the taxes, paying the royalties, duties for bars, police and fire service fees, borrowing equipment and costumes, and providing music. Both the leaders of the reading circles and farmer's clubs and the people's education employees of the towns/cities and counties, who knew the situation very well requested several times that taxes and duties to be paid after amateur artistic activities should be decreased. Performances must not be evaluated in the same way as balls and dance parties, because the purpose of performances was not only entertainment, but also education, acquiring civilised behaviour, and strengthening community feeling (Kecskés, 1947:28-29).

After World War II, simultaneously with the communist appropriation of power, there was higher and higher political pressure put on amateur artistic activity, too. Gradually their independence and the option to choose plays freely terminated. State organs had more and more influence on choosing which plays could be

performed. With an excuse to fight against kitsch, and „cheap middle-class taste”, the authorities restricted the amateur artistic activity in reading circles and farmer’s clubs more and more. They frequently denied permit to performances, what was a great disaster to the associations. One of the most popular community activities that mobilised the most people gradually became abandoned. In addition, reading circles and farmers’ societies lost lots of income, what made their further operation very difficult, too (Köteles, 1990:93).

Reading circles and farmer’s clubs were mostly winded up by 1950 due to political reasons. With this, autonomous artistic activity practically stopped to exist within the agrarian society. Although until that time it played a crucial role in keeping local communities together, and improving the individual and social competences of the association’s members. Artistic performances organised by political organisations (communist party, trade unions) and the new central cultural institutions mostly played propaganda roles. Homelike environment and self-active activity being typical of amateur artistic activity in earlier times totally disappeared. Their place was taken over by central instructions and political mobilisation, but they could not replace former results achieved by the reading circles’ amateur artistic activity (Szuhay, 1994:360-361).

From the middle of the 19th century until the 1950-ies, amateur artistic activity in reading circles and farmer’s clubs played a crucial role within the rural agrarian society, by raising a demand for culture, in getting access to cultural assets, and ensuring opportunity to high standard entertainment, and spending spare time. Due to the associations, even people living far from town/city centres, in suburbs, villages, on ranches could also regularly participate at various cultural events. Performances highly contributed to the improvement of the participants’ capabilities, to the increase of self-reliance in public appearance and verbal self-expression, and to the strengthening of co-operation skills. They had serious impact on forming the audience’s taste and conduct culture, too. Productions created with joint effort and large scale co-operation highly influenced the internal relations of the local community and strengthened their awareness of solidarity.

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