

Apropos Prohlis: A participatory art project in the Run-Up to Dresden as the European Capital of Culture 2025

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Abstract:

Dresden is well-known for its rich cultural heritage, with beautiful baroque architecture in the center of the city and an ample variety of prestigious cultural institutions building on this heritage. In the past few years, however, the city has drawn public attention mostly for quite different reasons and with a predominantly negative angle. This has been caused by its socio-cultural right-wing populist movement PEGIDA – the so-called ‘Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West.’ Evidently, Dresden’s culture is full of contrasts, with different lines of conflict seeming to converge in this city. It is situated to the east within Germany but in the middle of Europe, right at the border between the former communist East and the capitalist West, proud of the past but disappointed of the present and afraid of the future. This is the background Dresden built into its bid for the ‘European Capital of Culture’ (ECOC) in 2025. This article documents a participatory theatre project as one part of the run-up to this bid, showing how the city of Dresden is reacting to contemporary socio-political challenges by actively involving citizens in the bidding process – including those who usually disapprove of arts and culture as being ‘elitist’ – and by offering innovative forms of political and civic participation. Through this example, it is argued, participatory theatre projects can be seen to be particularly suitable material in seeking to address the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, requirements of an ECOC application.

Keywords: European Capital of Culture, Community Theatre, Participatory Theatre, Dresden

Introduction

In the year 2025, Europe will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the ‘European Capital of Culture’ award. Initiated with a strong focus on economic objectives and a quite conventional understanding of the term ‘culture’, the criteria for a successful bid have changed throughout the years. Today, the focus lies more on social objectives like urban regeneration. Dresden – a major city in the east of Germany – bid to be ECOC in 2025. With a rich cultural heritage, especially in architecture and visual arts, Dresden satisfies the ‘old’ criteria for an ECOC. In addition, Dresden is facing severe social challenges, stemming from the transition from communism to capitalism (cf. Berend & Bugaric 2015, Singelmann 2011) and from a specific political culture that, since 2014, has produced the right-wing populist movement PEGIDA and witnessed significant electoral successes for right-wing populist parties such as ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ (AfD). Against this background, this article raises questions about the ways in which actions to address the conflicts mentioned above can be addressed in the framework of the contemporary criteria of a successful bid for ECOC. We ask whether small scale participatory theatre projects could deal with political and societal disengagement and the frustrations rooted in the fundamental changes that have taken place since 1989.

Background

Dresden is the capital of Saxony, a federal state situated in the east of Germany. As a part of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), Dresden is situated in the heart of Europe, but at the same time at the border between the former communist East – with neighbors like Czech Republic and Poland – on the one side and the capitalist West on the other. It is also because of this unique location that Dresden builds on a colorful past and a rich cultural heritage. It is known worldwide for its Baroque architecture, which attracts millions of tourists to visit the city from all over the world every year. Dresden – the only city in eastern Germany with a ‘University of Excellence’ – is also a highly attractive place for international students, researchers, and professionals, hosting a range of high-tech companies and the industrial association ‘Silicon Saxony’.

However, Dresden has a dark side as well. Since the early 2000s, Dresden has gained questionable fame for hosting the biggest Neo-Nazi rallies in Europe, held annually to commemorate the allied bombardments on February 13, 1945. Additionally, in October 2014, a right-wing populist movement called PEGIDA – the ‘Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West’ – formed and it has gathered every week since then to demonstrate against immigration (Schielicke & Hoffmann 2017). This right-wing ideology has also found its way into the German political party system with the PEGIDA-aligned

populist party 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD) becoming the strongest political party in Saxony after the federal elections in 2017.

In many regards, Dresden is comparable to other cities from the former communist East, more so than to those from the West. These eastern cities have been connected throughout recent history, even after the wall dividing Germany came down in 1989. In the aftermath of the peaceful revolution of 1989, Dresden – like every other city in East Germany – was turned upside down, economically, politically, and socially. Although the new system was established and stabilized comparably quickly, socio-cultural differences from the cities of western Germany are still evident in Dresden. Given that Dresden claims to be an open-minded, international city, the share of foreigners and people with a migration background is surprisingly low (11.3 percent) compared to cities of a similar size in western Germany (Stadt Dresden 2018). Reviewing the shortlist of Polish cities in the ECOC-bidding process, Tölle (2016) stated that 'the problem for Polish cities claiming to be transnational in the sense of being multiethnic, tolerant and open is the fact that they simply have an overwhelmingly Polish and Roman Catholic population' (p. 381). The same holds true for Dresden.

But, unlike cities further east, Dresden did not suffer the same degree of financial hardship (cf. Hudec & Džupka 2016: 534). Even though Dresden belongs to one of the more prosperous regions in the East – without public debts, with a low unemployment rate, etc. – a mounting share of Dresden's residents complain that their problems go unheard, and that their heritage and cultural identity have been betrayed. These complaints are increasingly reflected in a deep distrust of the established political system and its actors. In a representative telephone survey among Dresden citizens in February 2016, 29 percent indicated a fear of their culture becoming marginalized. Every third respondent (31%) was afraid of changes in the Dresden cityscape. The citizens of Dresden are traditionally very proud of their city, especially having in mind its cultural heritage. However, since the turn of the century, this pride has been joined to laments over increasing deprivation and marginalization, including the notion that the former GDR was being overrun by West Germany without citizens from the former GDR having had any say over their own fate.

This is the context in which the former mayor of the City of Dresden suggested to the city council to have Dresden apply for the title 'European Capital of Culture 2025'.

European Capital of Culture

The 'European Capital of Culture' (ECOC) program started in 1985 with Athens as the first 'City of Culture' (Nechita 2015: 103, Liu 2014: 499). Since then the focus of the award changed fundamentally. To understand these changes it is essential to understand the manifold challenges of a successful bid in the run-up to becoming a ECOC. In the beginning, the program seemed to be 'inspired by a top-down entrepreneurial vision' (Tursie 2015: 74), with a strong focus on economic objectives. Activities regarding ECOC were mainly directed at the city centers (not the suburban areas), with an emphasis on big events – 'one-shots' (Prior & Blessi 2012: 79) created and realized mainly for tourists.

Just a few years after the first award had been granted, criticism arose because of the narrow focus on economic growth, since the award was intended also to bring Europeans together and to advertise the different cultures of Europe. A second but no less important point of criticism was that all efforts associated with the ECOC competition seemed not to be made primarily for the inhabitants of the cities, and even to be made without these inhabitants having any say in the process of preparing the bids. It was feared that the economic growth model 'centralizes rather than distributes assumed development benefits and creates competition not collaboration' and that it may therefore 'reinforce social inequalities' (Jancovich & Hansen 2018: 174).

In reaction to this critique, the overarching objective of the program was changed a few years later. The entrepreneurial model was replaced, in stages, by a 'progressive or capability strategy' (Tursie 2015: 76): 'Progressive cultural strategies seek to obtain a raised, bottom-up, access and participation of citizens to culture, the support of local cultural production, and they also seek to enhance the community identity and to revitalize the disadvantaged areas.' (Tursie 2015: 76) Eventually, the ECOC became a 'regeneration tool itself [...] ECOC is today about cities reinventing their identities, re-narrating their history in a European context' (Tursie 2015: 71, cf. O'Callaghan 2012: 186, Žilič-Fišer & Erjavec 2017: 581, Tölle 2016: 376).

Having started with expectations towards economic benefits, today the bidding process is accompanied by aspirations that it will lead to the enhancement of a city's image as well as to urban revitalization (Liu 2014: 499). With this programmatic shift, the ECOC program 'has evolved significantly from a celebration of the arts in a city to a major driver for the raising of the awareness and the role of culture in the life of cities to the contribution to citizens' well-being.' (Nechita 2015: 103)

Glasgow – ECOC 1990 – is a paradigmatic example of a 'shift in the type of city given the ECOC award' (Kinsella, NicGhabhann & Ryan 2017: 237). Glasgow's concept of 'culture-led transformation' saw a 'dramatic transformation of Glasgow's image, from being perceived as a violent post-industrial city into being celebrated as a creative cultural and leisure center and one of the most vibrant cities in the UK' (Liu 2014: 504) and it became a role model (the 'Glasgow model') for subsequent bids (Hudec & Džupka 2016: 532).

But the ECOC legislative framework was again modified in 2014. The goals for the period from 2020 to 2033 will be twofold – to 'highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures [European Dimension]' but also to make the 'long-term cultural and social development of the city' (Tursie 2015: 77) an integral part of the ECOC activities (cf. Žilic-Fiser & Erjavec 2017: 581).

After three decades of the awards, a successful ECOC 'has come to be viewed as a multi-dimensional action that should incorporate economic and cultural objectives, should represent both local cultural heritage and European identities, and should stage an international arts event while simultaneously advancing the local cultural sector and social inclusion objective' (O'Callaghan 2012: 186, cf. Žilic-Fiser & Erjavec 2017: 583). Obviously it is difficult to meet all these requirements equally. Addressing cultural, social, and economic

development simultaneously on regional, transnational, and international (European) levels is nigh on impossible and may lead to additional conflicts – for example, between the needs of the local population and the expectations of tourists (Jancovich & Hansen 2018: 184). Therefore, it is essential to set clear priorities for the bid. According to an analysis of 11 pre-selection reports of the ECOC Selection Panel, ‘the engagement of community should be considered as a top priority [for a successful bid]’ (Nechita 2015: 115). Engagement of community entails, first, to incorporate inhabitants of the cities into the bidding process (Nechita 2015:113), and second, to empower the socially and/or economically marginalized who usually do not participate in arts and culture for different reasons (Hudson, Sandberg & Schmauch 2017: 1539). To take the local population into account, with a special emphasis on the deprived, may have two effects – regeneration of the city (Liu 2014) and participation of the population (Zilic-Fiser & Erjavec 2017) beyond the bidding process.

Urban regeneration has been a keyword since the successful bid of Glasgow in 1990 (Nechita 2015: 104). ‘Regeneration can be defined as the transformation of a community or place towards long-term improvements to local quality of life, including economic, social and environmental needs [...]’ (Liu 2014: 506) Cities like Glasgow, suffering from economic decline, are not the kinds of cities that first come to mind in the ECOC context. But with the programmatic shift in the ECOC program, cities like Glasgow have been given the chance to become ECOC precisely because they are not ‘natural born’ cities of cultural heritage like Athens or Florence (Liu 2014, Hudson, Sandberg & Schmauch 2017).

Umeå is another example of how desirable effects may emerge as a result of the bidding process – in the case of Umeå, particularly regarding enhanced participation. Participation is woven into the DNA of democracies and draws on a wide range of possibilities for citizens to take part in the development of a country, a region, or even a local community. Besides conventional forms of participation such as voting, Chou, Gagnon, and Pruitt (2015) identify the relevance of unconventional forms of political participation, especially artistic forms, for thriving democracies. They argue that these forms are particularly suitable in that they ‘spark imagination, creativity and engagement to produce a more complete version of ourselves and our communities’ (Chou et al. 2015: 609) in order to address social-economic inequalities (Hudson et al. 2017: 1540). Moreover, such formats may be particularly well designed for addressing the multiple political, social, and cultural objectives of the ECOC, with a special focus on the local community and the socially or economically deprived areas of a city. A well-established format in this regard is the so-called ‘Participatory Theatre’.

Participatory Theatre

There are many terms used in the field to signify the incorporation of a community in general, or the audience in particular, into the creation of a play. They all have in common that they provide a supplement or a complement to traditional theatre by focusing on engagement and participation of persons other than professionals (actors, directors, dramaturges etc.) in all steps of the creation of a play. ‘Applied Theatre’ incorporates all

forms of theatre addressing educational, social or political issues (Ryan & Flinders 2018). 'Community Theatre' incorporates all forms of theatre related to a specific community. The term encompasses amateur theatre with a more or less fixed ensemble as well as more volatile and temporary projects (cf. Kramer 2005), such as the project featured in this case study. Participatory theatre – in our view – is located in the overlap of community and applied theatre. It deals with social and political problems, incorporates ordinary citizens from a specific community for a certain timeframe and encourages audience to be active within the play.

The most prominent and often cited example of participatory theatre is the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' by Augusto Boal, which is inspired – like other forms of participatory theatre – by the 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' by Paulo Freire (Boal, Spinu & Thorau 2004, Sloman 2011: 43, Singhal 2004: 140). In its origins, it was more a movement than a technique, aiming to be a 'vehicle of participatory social change' (Singhal 2004: 145). Central to the concept of the participatory theatre is the 'Spect-Actor', that is, an 'activated spectator, the audience member who takes part in the action' (Singhal 2004: 145). Participatory theatre combines traditional theatre, focused on a unidirectional transmission of messages, with the possibility for the audience to take part actively in the play and/or change the course of the play by interventions and comments (cf. Sloman 2011: 43ff.). The concept is based on the idea of ordinary people becoming involved in theatre on every production level, from scripting the play and setting up characters and the stage through to the incorporation of audience reactions in the planning of future performances. Thereby, spect-actors are enabled to tell *their* stories, to share *their* memories, and to reflect on the stories and memories of others.

The fields of application are manifold in Participatory Theatre. The concept was used in practice-based learning environments for young people and community workers in the UK (Kumrai, Chauhan & Hoy 2011: 517), in work with deprived young women in London (Preston 2011: 251) and with marginalized adolescents in Freetown, Sierra Leone (Enria 2016), to name but a few examples. The objectives of such projects are similarly manifold. Participatory theatre has been applied in order to disseminate knowledge in low-literacy countries (McGillion & McKinnon 2014: 503), to advocate healthy sexual behavior among young people in Canada (Ponzetti, Selman, Munro, Esmail, Adams 2009), to understand the needs of caregivers for persons with dementia (Quinlan & Duggleby 2009), to explore issues of race, identity, and belonging in multi-ethnic communities (Sonn, Quayle, Belanji & Baker 2015), to empower refugees in Berlin (Smet, De Haene, Rousseau & Stalpaert 2018), and to capture the community narratives in a council housing estate in the Midlands in England (Jones, Hall, Thomson, Barrett & Hanby 2013).

This article focuses on two aspects of participatory theatre. First, the way projects may use these techniques to raise knowledge of, and awareness of, social and/or political issues. These types of projects go beyond participatory theatre in its original sense, as they often do not first and foremost aim at drawing on the experiences and circumstances of individuals. They rather initiate a top-down process that is not part of the traditional

conceptualization of participatory theatre (cf. Scharinger 2013). The second group of projects comes closer to the intended spirit of participatory theatre. These projects are less structured, aiming at catching the memories, narratives, and expectations of participants, or at building social relationships between different groups and individuals. In this sense, participatory theatre is also used in 'Action Research' (cf. Quinlan & Duggleby 2009: 207) for capturing knowledge about groups, residential estates, or regions in order to reveal power-relations and simmering conflicts (cf. Enria 2016).

Despite the differences in the setup of these projects, all of the projects using participatory theatre use these tools to improve a given social and/or political situation. Yet, evaluations of participatory theatre projects are scarce (Thompson 2000), so it is often open to interpretation whether an intervention was successful or not. If an evaluation study was carried out, however, the interventions mostly translate into measurable effects. Singhal (2004), for instance, showed that participants in a AIDS-education project in South Africa, which used techniques of participatory theatre, were less susceptible to risky behaviors and felt more empowered in general (Singhal 2004: 155). A comparable project in India showed that participatory theatre projects are helpful means to diminish misconceptions about diseases like AIDS (Singhal 2004: 157). More generally, according to Quinlan and Duggleby (2009), the unique advantage of participatory theatre lies in its technique to break 'isolation experiences by the activators' (Quinlan & Duggleby 2009: 215), leading to more self-esteem and more self-efficacy, both significant foundations for socio-political participation.

The Run-Up to Dresden for ECOC

The situation in Dresden at the time of preparing the bid as outlined at the beginning of the article called for reconciling two narratives: the narrative of Dresden as a proud city with a rich cultural heritage and the narrative of Dresden as a city of increasing social and political tensions. When the city council confirmed by its vote in 2016 that Dresden should apply for the ECOC title in 2025, the 'Kulturhauptstadtbüro' – the office in charge of preparing the bid – began its work with a clear focus on incorporating the citizens of Dresden from day one. To this end, a first step was to get an impression of what it was that Dresden residents deemed important with respect to the bid, particularly regarding four specific questions. The first question ('What is culture?') dealt with different understandings and conceptions of culture. What does the ordinary citizen of Dresden associate with 'culture'? High-class events like operas in the Semperoper, or even contemporary art exhibitions like 'Ostrale', or subversive street art? The second question addressed the perceived strengths of Dresden ('What are Dresden's strengths that should be pointed out in the bid?') and the third aimed to cover its perceived weaknesses ('What are Dresden's weaknesses that should be overcome?'). The fourth question was an open one, aiming to elicit further ideas for the bid. Postcards with the four questions were distributed all over the city. The Kulturhauptstadtbüro received six hundred postcards with more than two thousand answers. A qualitative analysis of the answers revealed three main topics as major causes of

concerns for Dresden citizens: 1) local identity and natural resources, 2) social cohesion, and 3) future visions of a city undergoing change.

In a second step, the city advertised bids for local micro-projects. The title of the program was '2025 Euros for 2025,' meaning that anyone could apply for 2,025 Euros of funding to deliver a cultural project. The criteria for awarding the grant were: 1) dealing with one of the three aforementioned topics, 2) including a European perspective, 3) employing creative and innovative features, and 4) outlining the project's potentials for future development and sustainability. More than sixty applications were handed in by diverse groups and individuals. The proposed projects covered all artistic genres, from painting to writing and dance. They mostly focused on participatory formats. For example, the writing workshop 'Tell me the truth' intended to bring the inhabitants of the city and newcomers together through their personal stories. In another project a dance teacher, working with young nonprofessional dancers, proposed to attend summer parties in the neighborhood and teach different traditional European dances to the party guests. Because of the diversity, creativity, and quality of the suggested projects, the bid office decided to support thirteen projects instead of the ten projects initially scheduled.

The Project 'Apropos Prohlis'

Among these micro-projects, one project stands out for a number of reasons – the participatory theatre project called „Apropos Prohlis'. Prohlis is a suburban area of Dresden with a complex social structure: a high number of immigrants living together with unemployed and elderly people. In its current shape, it is reminiscent of other European cities with problematic suburban areas. In the past, however, Prohlis was considered one of the best areas with the highest living standards in Dresden, thanks to its comparatively modern buildings, with bathrooms in each apartment and central heating systems. Young families were once eager to get an apartment when the housing area was new. After the peaceful revolution in 1989, the situation changed. Young people left the area and moved closer to the center of the city, with its renovated old buildings. The formerly highly coveted area became a sink estate. The elderly were left behind when the young families moved to more attractive places in the city, and the high rate of public housing in Prohlis led to an increasing share of immigrants and unemployed citizens. Even though these developments can be observed throughout Europe (and beyond), the extent to which the situation in eastern Germany is closely comparable to the situation in western Europe is still under debate (Grossmann, Kabisch & Kabisch 2017), although this is beyond the remit of this article.

Today, Prohlis has the highest unemployment rate in Dresden. While the average unemployment rate in Dresden is about seven percent, in Prohlis every fifth resident (17%) is unemployed (Stadt Dresden 2015). The share of immigrants and foreigners, at 18 percent, is also above the average (11%), though it is not the highest rate in Dresden (Stadt Dresden 2018). In the last federal elections in 2017, Prohlis had one of the lowest turnout rates, but

its support for the right-wing populist party 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD) was among the highest (Stadt Dresden 2017).

This was the stage at which the Societaetstheater – a small local theatre in Dresden – supported by two experienced directors from Hamburg and Munich, Harald Fuhrmann and Christiane Wiegand, implemented its so-called 'Table-Theatre' project. Adapting techniques from participatory theatre in the Boalian tradition, the aim of the project was to gather the stories of the old and new inhabitants of Prohlis, from the people themselves, to capture their hopes, issues, and expectations. The project was divided into different phases. In the first phase, the directors interviewed citizens of Prohlis from different social classes, with different professional backgrounds and different life experiences. They asked for their stories, for recollections about their past, but also about their future hopes and expectations: How do I want to live? What have I experienced? What can I do for Prohlis?

On the basis of the material from these interviews, the directors developed short scenes for the 'Table-Theatre'. Table-Theatre describes a technique whereby actors and audiences gather around a table. A short scene is portrayed and concludes with questions that are directed at the audience. In this way, the audience is invited to comment and share their views on the portrayed sequences during the performance. In an iterative process, the comments are incorporated into the final version of the play. This technique aims to promote a dialogue between different people. 'The dialogue should encourage [people] to question [their] own prejudices, to recognize other perspectives, and to develop ideas for future living in the area' (Fuhrman & Wiegand 2017).

Taken all together, the directors developed six different plays. In one of the plays, the 'Robin Hood of Prohlis' kidnapped a politician and confronted him with the people in Prohlis. 'In this play, the problems of Prohlis are directly addressed. The politicians try to deny their own responsibilities or make the Prohlis residents responsible for their problems. The play encourages the audience to think about both perspectives and to take a stand on them' (Fuhrman & Wiegand 2017). In another play, two 'Hochhauspuppen' [puppets impersonating housing blocks] talk to each other about their inhabitants, eventually taking a closer look at Mrs. Hempel. She has lived in the building for a long time and now relies on 'Hartz IV' [welfare for those who have been unemployed for more than 12 to 18 months]. One day, she gets a visit from some bureaucrats from the 'Jobcenter' [a German welfare office]. They tell Mrs. Hempel that she has to move to a smaller apartment. This is devastating news. She has lived in the apartment for many years and invested a lot of money and time to make it her home. The core question of the play was how to handle cases like these, recognizing that there is often a thin line between benevolence and bureaucracy (Fuhrman & Wiegand 2017).

'Apropos Prohlis' operated with techniques from Augusto Boal's 'Forum Theatre,' a 'theatrical game in which a problem is shown in an unsolved form to which the audience is invited to suggest, and act out, solutions' (Singhal 2004: 148) and from 'Invisible Theatre' (cf. Boal, Spinu & Thorau 2004), 'a rehearsed sequence of events that is enacted in a public,

non-theatrical space with the explicit goal of capturing the attention of onlookers who do not know they are watching a planned performance' (Singhal 2004: 149).

The team, consisting of directors, actors, puppeteers and the production management, stayed in Prohlis for nine weeks. In sum, they realized 40 Table-Theatre performances for the six plays. Between one and 60 people participated in each performance. Altogether, about 500 people came to visit the plays. The performances took place at 18 different places in Prohlis, including youth clubs, retirement homes and churches, but also in public spaces like inner courtyards. The project closed with a 'Theater-Spektakel', with twelve performances in different places on two days in April 2018.

In its aims and settings, this project resembles projects in other suburban areas like the one documented by Jones, Hall, Thomson, Barrett and Hanby (2013), a cooperation between scientists and artists in a participatory theatre project in a council house area in the Midlands in England (Jones et al. 2013: 118). This project also had two stages, starting with interviews and networking activities in the area. Despite the fact that 'Apropos Prohlis' was a German project, there are some further analogies to the project documented by Jones et al. in 2013, especially with regards to the initial phase of the project. What Jones et al. stated for the council house project in England is almost identical to the experiences that the team in Prohlis made: 'Older residents showed pride in a past where a buoyant community was established through collective solidarity. This contrasted with the estate as a place in the present day, presented by the residents themselves as well as by professionals working in the community, where the dominant discourse was that of deficit – of resources, of skills, and of participation. [...] The modern suburb which had offered such a bright future to their parents two decades previously proved unsustainable for many of the children [...]' (Jones, Hall, Thomson, Barrett & Hanby 2013: 121).

It appeared not only that the problems of suburban areas of European cities are similar, but that the interventions to deal with the issues are too. Participatory theatre projects like 'Apropos Prohlis' seem to provide a way to offer citizens a creative and public space for their experiences and perspectives and to give voice to the usually unheard and untold stories. The participants of 'Apropos Prohlis' appreciated the opportunity to tell their stories and to give a different view on the 'sink estate' of Prohlis. In the course of the project, the participants voiced more and more expectations and wishes concerning the future of their area.

The challenge for the project leaders and the Kulturhauptstadtbüro is now to find ways to transfer the outcomes of the project into political action. Without this transmission, participatory theatre is in danger of remaining a kind of therapy instead of providing real-world empowerment for citizens. If this were to be the case, it could be that boomerang-effects may occur when participants notice that their work for the project trickles away without any effect. A proper evaluation is needed to ascertain whether the projects caused sustainable changes in individual participation, e.g. by participants engaging in other projects and initiatives in Prohlis, beyond implementation of the results of the project into direct political action.

With this in mind, in the further course of the project – and the bidding process of Dresden as a whole – a systematic evaluation of the projects is required to measure the success and the sustainability of the interventions (Nechita 2015: 114). To this end, the focus of such an evaluation should not solely focus on the outcome but also on the process itself (Thompson 2000). To capture this, an adequate evaluation of participatory theatre projects should best combine a variety of methods, such as participatory observations focusing on the process (cf. Smet, De Haene, Rousseau & Stalpaert 2018), semi-structured or standardized interviews addressing the experiences of project leaders and participants (cf. Jones et al. 2013), and representative panel surveys among the population to track changes in public opinion over time.

Conclusions

The requirements for the ‘European Capital of Culture’ have changed over the years. Starting with a clear focus on economic objectives, the aims shifted step by step towards incorporating, if not emphasizing, social and eventually political goals. To address these aims at the local, regional, national, and European level is challenging. In an analysis of eleven pre-selection reports of the ECOC Selection Panel, Nechita (2015) points to regeneration and participation as crucial points in applications for the title. Since participation is essential for regeneration but conventional forms of participation have been on the decline in the past decades, Chou et al. (2016) suggested the need to take a closer look at alternative and artistic forms of participation. Participatory theatre – understood as an umbrella term for theatre which incorporates not only amateurs but the ordinary citizen within the production of a play, encompassing their experiences and perspectives – appears to be appropriate to meet several requirements of a successful application for the ECOC title. It reaches out to those who are usually uninterested in, if not excluded from, traditional cultural offerings as well as conventional forms of political participation. Even though these small-scale projects are made for small, local communities and will never reach a mass audience (Chou, Gagnon & Pruitt 2015: 619), efforts taken will prove worthwhile because it promises an effective means to address those who are usually uninterested in common forms of participation (Jancovich & Hansen 2018: 180-181). Notwithstanding this, participatory theatre cannot solve the problem of participation on its own. It should be accompanied by other measures for empowerment.

This article documented a setup for a participatory theatre project in a suburban area of Dresden. Despite the economic success of the city, its citizens struggle with the legacy of the past 25 years of transformation. The participatory theatre project was implemented in one of the ‘sink estates’ in Dresden, with high rates of unemployment and substantial support for right-wing populist parties. The experiences from the project show similarities to other participatory projects, indicating the potential of participatory theatre to enhance citizens’ self-esteem and self-efficacy. However, a more systematic evaluation of interventions like this is needed to test their specific effects and sustainability. In the case of the bid of Dresden for ECOC it would be of particular interest to identify how projects like

‘Apropos Prohlis’ work within the framework of other projects, and how sustainable they will be in the period after a successful or unsuccessful bid.

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