

## **Expanding arts in Balkan countries: building a relationship and enhancing mutual collaboration between different cultures**

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**Abstract:** In this article, we examine, through certain standards set by several institutions and conventions, the potential of performing arts to expand throughout the world, thus to be internationalised. Our effort is to take as example the case of art products and examine their potential to be exported in certain countries, while we consider the qualities which allow them to be diffused abroad. In theory, all world countries could be considered to be destination countries; however, in practice, and based on market research statistics, the number of countries is extremely small. Balkan countries, thanks to their proximity to Greece, but also due to common cultural elements, can easily "import" such products.

It is certainly well known that for decades, and perhaps centuries, many art products have crossed the boundaries of the producing country, daring international leaps (cinema, theatre, and, to a lesser degree, music, dance, and opera). Here it should be emphasised that several such art products have been launched on an international trajectory completely naturally, perhaps because they were extraordinary.

**Keywords:** Theatre, Cinema, Politics, Internationalisation, Coproductions

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### **Introduction**

For many decades, the arts, and mainly the performing ones, have been the reason of a close relationship between distant countries. A cultural nearness is likely to dampen tensions between nations, for the very simple reason that it easily shifts the centre of gravity of a social or economic problem to art. People give their full attention to the cultural point of view, trying to understand the "opposite" side, alternately and sequentially demonstrating hospitality, and approaching art products in a unique and meaningful manner. Conflicts between people, either financial or mainly politico-military, may be reduced to the minimum, thanks to the integration of cultural issues among nations. As we know, performing arts are characterised by a vividness and immediacy in relation to their audience; since Balkan peoples have inherent problems in assimilating individual cultures, these arts may constitute the primary and sole instrument to promote mutual understanding.

A very popular mode of internationalisation in all industries is collaboration (Armstrong & Kotler 2009: 72). Called co-production, this mode includes complete co-productions, where partners in more than one country are committed on both a creative and a financial level, while one of the partners is especially concerned with the investment aspect of the project.

### **Methodology**

During the elaboration of this article, first we examined the role of certain important cultural institutions, such as festivals, in art production. Second, we analysed several of the important treaties and conventions that have been established by European institutions: the European Cultural Convention (by the Council of Europe), the "Eurimages" supporting Fund, "Europuddings", and the "Theatre Presenting Program". Through this analysis, we evaluated the weaknesses and strengths (Montana & Charnov 2009: 185) of these conventions in relation to European art, so as to understand why many cultural products do not have the same impact on national and international markets.

At this point, we were assisted by viewing the case of certain American art products. Each year, many films of inferior quality are exported from the U.S.A. and distributed in countless foreign countries, while there are other products (movies, theatre performances, musical productions) of superior quality which do not manage to be exported more frequently abroad.

By the term "internationalisation" we mean, on the one hand, the effort of transforming a product designed for national consumption into one aimed at an international audience, and on the other, all the practices of diffusion to countries that potentially wish to "consume" it (Pavis 2006: 305). In the case of art, the effort of transforming a "national" product into an "international" one concerns either the package or the content (components) (Armstrong & Kotler 2009: 73).

### **Step 1: agreements between nations**

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, through bilateral and trilateral co-production treaties, a considerable number of films were exported beyond Europe, in countries or territories such as Canada, Latin America, and North Africa. Films produced in this manner can be classified in three types: art films, genre films, and quality entertainment films. They constitute a sliding scale regarding budgets and identifiable national characteristics. One key factor for commercial success, as measured by the widest potential appeal beyond national borders, was having procured funding. The most lucrative European co-productions in the 1950s involved the genres of melodrama and comedy.

The expansion of art cinema in these decades reveals the contradictions inherent in all co-production treaty strategies. Whereas European “quality” filmmaking represented an attempt to fight Hollywood on its own terms (big budgets, star-studded casts, elaborated sets and costumes), art cinema proceeded in the opposite direction, and was connected to a long-standing anti-American sentiment: that the strength of European culture lies in its specific national artistic cultures (Grefe et al. 1991: 26).

With the launch of the Council of Europe’s “Eurimages” cultural support fund, the need for harmonisation has become urgent. Intended to support cinematographic works co-produced by partners established in at least three countries, the Eurimages Fund has led to a substantial increase of multilateral co-production. For instance, Eurimages requires only a ten per cent financial participation by one of the partners, whereas most co-production agreements stipulate a minimum of twenty or even thirty per cent.

Thus, it has become necessary to establish regulations concerning the whole range of European multilateral co-productions, while of course not calling into question the existing bilateral relations (Mallerou 2006: 209). This kind of convention seems to be the most appropriate form of legal instrument for this purpose.

In fact, a European convention has the advantage of providing a common legal basis, governing the multilateral cinema relations of all Union members. By establishing conditions for obtaining co-production status that are applicable to all parties, such a European convention eliminates the drawbacks which would result from many different multilateral intergovernmental agreements. These drawbacks derive from both the disparity of the stipulations laid down by these agreements and the complexity of legal relations among state parties, as several bilateral agreements set different co-production conditions. A single contractual instrument constitutes an important vehicle for the development and promotion of co-productions in Europe and simplifies cinema relations between producing countries. It should be noted that the European Convention on cinema co-production has an extensive geographic field of application, being open to the members of the Council of Europe and other countries which are members of the European cultural convention, as well as to European non-member countries.

Several European states have not yet established mutual co-production agreements. It was considered a good idea to allow bilateral application of the terms of the convention for countries wishing to do so (Armstrong & Kotler 2009: 676). By acceding to the Convention, these states thus enable their producers to be engaged in co-productions with partners from any other state that has ratified Convention.

## **Step 2: co-productions**

“Co-production” is a broad term that may apply to any form of financial, creative, and technical collaboration involved in any product. Co-productions have notable advantages, and throughout art’s recent history, they have proven to be a crucial means of art production in the world. European countries have particularly used co-production as a strategy for art production with relatively high budgets, in order to gain greater access to more markets (Gargalianos 1994: 361). It should be mentioned that, practically, all nations have engaged in co-production of one sort or another. Co-productions thus represent a dominant sector in theatre and film production, to the expense of nationally or locally relevant traditions and cultures.

Four co-production categories have been identified: a) public and private-sector co-productions in a single country, b) public- and private-sector co-productions by different countries, c) private capital from different countries, and d) treaty co-productions (Brunet, 2004). Generally, most films and plays that are considered national co-productions are, in fact, international ones. Several factors have given rise to this type of art making; however, the presence of Hollywood, both as a threat and competitor, and as a facilitator and mutually beneficial collaborator, represents a dominant force throughout the history of co-productions.

In another way, for municipal and state theatres in Europe, some festivals provide a platform to establish a partnership with foreign theatre groups. In the first year, theatres might exchange artistic personnel, while during the second year they might choose to host a guest production by their partner theatre. In the final year, theatres might organise a co-production to be performed in all municipalities or states. The partner theatres are free to organise the details of their working arrangement themselves, committed to their own interests and capacities. The goal is to involve as many members of each theatre in the cooperative venture as possible. Great festivals can also assist in preserving existing partnerships, given that each season partner theatres undertake a new project.

The objectives are to:

1. Encourage co-production between Balkan theatre festivals that offer high visibility and theatre producers who are developing work of exceptional quality.
2. Enhance production value as well as opportunities for new art projects.
3. Enhance the visibility and impact of new works of performing art, both nationally and internationally.
4. Increase national and international touring and co-production opportunities for Balkan theatre companies and artists.
5. Increase audiences for European theatre companies and artists.

The assessment criteria for the festival co-production assistance in Balkan countries are as follows:

1. Artistic interests of the proposed creative team.
2. Impact of the collaboration on the proposed production.
3. Impact of the project on the art of theatre and on theatre artists.
4. Public impact and enhanced visibility gained through the proposed co-production and presentation, including potential future touring or co-production opportunities on a regional, national and international level.
5. Relative importance of the needs identified, given the resources of the co-producing partners and the financial risk involved in the production.
6. Special consideration will be given to projects from small theatre communities such as Albanian and Skopjan.

### **Step 3: choosing languages – translation and interpretation**

It has not proved possible to clearly formalise this requirement on a legal basis, because the language considered as “culturally appropriate” may be defined in several ways. It is generally defined as the language of one of the countries participating in the co-production; however, in a tripartite co-production, if the language used is the one of a co-producer who has only contributed 10% financially (plus has provided neither the director, nor the actors, nor the story-line), this is clearly artificial. Formalising the regulations concerning languages in co-productions may, in these circumstances, encourage the mounting of “ad hoc” co-productions.

In fact, the most suitable original version language seems to be the one called “natural language of the narrative”, that is, the language which the characters would naturally speak according to the screenplay demands (Gargalianos 1994: 369). Defined in this way, the narrative language may be completely unrelated to the financial set-up adopted by the co-production, which means that there can be no legal definition of that version.

### **“Europuddings” by different partners**

By authorising financial co-productions, that is, co-productions without artistic and technical participation by the minor co-producers, the Convention provides a response to traditional co-productions, in which the proportion of contributions by different partners sometimes lead to what has been called “Europuddings”. As the majority partner is allowed to retain full technical and artistic control over the work, this type of co-production fosters the various European countries’ individual cultural identities, thereby fulfilling one of the aims set forth by the Council’s European Cultural Convention.

Many European countries inaugurated treaty co-productions as a means of facing the Hollywood threat head-on. On one hand, the threat was perceived as cultural, and so, several European governments tried to protect national cinematic expression through subsidies for quality or artistic films. On the other hand, the threat was economic, so other subsidies were created to support the commercial side of filmmaking. Co-production treaties between nations were thus established as a way to maintain funding standards in order to qualify for state subsidies, while, at the same time, allowing increased resources and budgets available to cinema production (in order to expand local markets) (Greffé et al. 1991: 25). All treaties specified how funding would be handled, as well as the percentage of actors and technical crew that should be provided from each participating country. In the early 1950s, co-productions treaties became common practice in Europe, aiming at the cultural and commercial needs they were created to serve.

### **Co-productions in cinema and the European Convention**

European cultural cooperation in the field of cinema takes place primarily through co-productions. In these joint efforts to support creation (for a long time exclusively bilateral, although now increasingly multilateral) the rules governing state support for film production are often different. The main objective of each convention is to minimise these differences and harmonise multilateral relations among countries, when they decide to co-produce a film.

Designed to encourage the development of film co-productions in Europe, the Convention aims to simplify the procedures of production, on the basis of criteria established by the Eurimages Fund (a European fund set up within the framework of the Council of Europe in 1988, in order to support co-productions and film

distribution, as well as audiovisual productions). It also constitutes a step forward in lowering the threshold for financial participation in co-productions, by permitting financial co-productions that are based on European identity. This requirement concerning identity is, in some respects, the guiding principle of the Convention, inspired by a versatile, but unified, vision of European film production.

Given that various conventions grant a certain kind of recognition to the co-produced films, the technical and artistic staff must genuinely represent the countries participating in filmmaking. Such participation creates a link between the co-produced work and the countries. It is clear that where the financial participation fails to be proportional to the artistic and technical participation, the competent authorities may either refuse to grant co-production status to the project or withdraw their provisional agreement.

The obligation to use technicians established in the respective countries, ensures that it will not be possible to use workers enjoying a lower degree of protection within the co-production's framework.

Co-productions aim to support the cinema industry in each European country. The development of co-productions is one of the most effective and appropriate instruments for that purpose. The development of traditional or financial co-productions may, in some cases, lead to a lack of balance between a country and one or more partners, over a given period of time. Since in most European countries the cinema industry receives substantial public funding, the countries' concern to preserve their own culture is a legitimate one. Therefore, it was considered necessary to introduce into the agreement's text the concept of an overall balance between countries, which must be applicable to both traditional and financial co-productions. Countries must allow some latitude in the concept of reciprocity, while bearing in mind that co-productions aim at a flexible and open assessment of that principle (Armstrong & Kotler 2009: 687).

#### **Festivals as a main instrument of collaboration between nations**

Festivals must be legally constituted, artistically mandated, independent, non-profit arts organisations, with a track record of presenting professional performances in professional facilities, with professional technical support. Their programming should contain a variety of content that is not otherwise available in the region. Festivals must have a proven ability to pay reasonable fees and support productions with adequate promotion and publicity, as well as demonstrate that they have contributed to companies' touring opportunities. Priority is given to the festivals that work with other presenters on a regional, national and international level, and to those that are involved with their immediate artistic community to increase the development and collaboration opportunities of the companies they present. Priority is also given to festivals that articulate the artistic vision behind their programming choices, as well as their link with the public and the local theatre community.

#### **Diffusion and distribution of theatre and cinema**

A distributor is a person or a company specialising in the diffusion of certain products, from different sources or producers. They are responsible for placing products in markets, as well as for the various distribution costs. A distributor may either work within a national market, or sell products to a set of territories or to all world territories (Brunet 2004).

The skill of a distributor lies in the way he sells the products he represents. The distributor relies on the amount of sales, which, in turn, allows for deductions on promotional expenses. The distributor of a product that seems attractive may offer a guarantee to the producer, or even to his international collaborators, called a "minimum guarantee".

As the distributor represents a set of art products, producers understand that the representations of these products are somewhat diluted (Sandhusen 2009: 783). However, this solution is much less expensive than direct sales, and financial results can be much more advantageous.

A very popular mode of internationalisation in different industries is the «co-production». This mode includes the complete collaboration of partners in more than one country, who are committed to both a creative and a financial level (Armstrong & Kotler 2009: 687).

The financial relationship between partners influences the work environment and success of each alliance. All partners should have the complementary assets that allow possible synergies between them. They should be of similar size, otherwise their objectives may be different and the importance given to different projects may not be compatible.

The concept of packaging in live spectacles is much broader than that of «regular» products. The common commercial products' packaging simply consists of a wrapper (e.g. metal, preserved paper, plastic, etc.); however, in art products, the same notion mainly refers to the reputation of companies or individual artists.

#### **Union of Theatres of Europe (UTE) and European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) as main factors in arts collaboration in Europe**

The Union of Theatres of Europe (UTE) is an alliance of national theatres. It serves to promote European integration through cultural interaction. We know that UTE is an association that promotes intensive international theatre work, with more than ten thousand performances and three million spectators per season; furthermore, it organises festivals, exhibitions, workshops, collaborations with drama schools, colloquia, and co-productions throughout Europe. All these activities have united the thirty four members, currently composed by sixteen European countries, Israel, and Russia.

Besides fostering European integration, another motivation was to fight the perceived threat to European cultural diversity, posed by globalisation.

UTE's mission is to contribute to the reinforcement of the European Union through culture and theatre, to encourage a collective cultural movement that breaks through language barriers, in order to develop an art which is seen as a vector of fraternity among people. UTE promotes productions and co-productions, theatre exchanges and shared experiences, while respecting individual identities and cultures. The sum of these activities is elucidating the objectives of artistic and cultural policies that aim to reinforce artistic cooperation and broader commercial circulation in Europe (Greffé et al. 1991: 90).

UTE represents an "intercultural construction", a union that consists of nineteen national theatres, while remaining a strong institution at the same time. This "intercultural construction" intensively discusses the questions of a European identity and the role of culture in its formation. Its goal is to promote cultural activities across national borders that respect the principles of particular identities, an objective that requires common and continuous research. Its current programme focuses on projects promoting new working methods and brings together experienced theatre creators with enthusiastic newcomers, all this on a long-term scale.

In parallel, the "European Fund for the Balkans" (EFB) is a multi-year joint initiative of European foundations, designed to undertake and support initiatives aimed at bringing Balkans closer to the European Union through grant-giving and operational programs. The EFB is focused on individuals and organisations from Balkan countries.

### **Collaboration through various projects**

Cinema production in Europe is essentially an activity carried out on a national basis. Cultural projects have been presented in each country; each one with its own clearly defined characteristics. The typical Italian, British or French cinema traditions, for example, are readily identifiable.

This situation has led to a basic conception of films targeted at national markets. Indeed, the quality and value of certain productions has resulted in their being more widely distributed. Neo-realism, the great Italian comedies, Nouvelle Vague, and the British Free Cinema, to cite but a few examples, have been hailed far beyond the frontiers of their countries of origin. They were, however, produced principally on national budgets.

In the early years, co-productions certainly helped European cinema survive. However, this kind of production has its limitations and may lead to undesirable side-effects (Mallerou 2006: 192). Since it calls for technical, financial, and artistic participation, it has led to the creation of several artificially conceived works, in which actors and technicians are sometimes chosen more for their national identity, rather than for reasons connected to the coherence of the film.

While appropriate for bilateral relations, co-production agreements have also been used to set up co-productions involving more than two countries. In fact, most agreements explicitly provide that possibility. Bilateral collaborations are not standardised and leave room for disparities, so there is a high risk of one co-producer offering less favourable terms than the others.

### **Conclusion**

There is enormous potential for movies and plays to expand throughout the world, thus to be internationalised. In Balkan countries, the efforts to transform a national art product into one aimed at international markets, and all the practices of diffusion into countries that potentially wish to consume it, have multiplied during the last thirty years. The transformation of a product into "Balkan" involves either the package, or the content (components). In theory, the number of destination countries is relatively limited, and this is either positive or negative for the art product that is going to be sold and "consumed".

In the past thirty years, a large number of agreements have been drawn up between Balkan partners. All types of international co-productions need the establishment of certain conventions between countries, with each of them according very carefully its own national identity to the art products. In this way, art production can take advantage of the benefits granted to national projects, while attracting private or public funds from many countries. It is certain that there needs to be a substantial cultural element in the integration of the Balkan Peninsula, where films and theatre productions play a major and fundamental role in both informing people about cultural diversities and providing authenticity, thus allowing the message of cinema and theatre to be disseminated in all Balkan countries.

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