

*Whether We Like It or Not – About Michael McKinnie’s Theory
of Theatre-Market Interactions*

**Book review: Michael McKinnie, *Theatre in Market Economies*,
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.**



We have a natural resistance to associate theatre in particular and art in general with anything to do with money or finances. For this reason, Michael McKinnie’s book, *Theatre in Market Economies*, is not only hard to pallet, but it seems almost outrageous. The book aims to outline the complex relationships between theatre and finances and how theatre makes use of the best strategies of generating capital, often without even realising it.

As practitioners, especially in Romania, we tend to see theatre as a poor art, as constantly trying to fight the financial system, and it is a subjective truth, rather than an objective one. McKinnie argues that theatre is high-performance financial engine that makes use of the best strategies that our capitalist world has to offer. This theory is broadly outlined in the introduction, and is further illustrated by examples in the following chapters.

Theatre in Market Economies relies on an extensive literature overview, linked to both the cultural and economic domains. In his comments, the author distances himself from Karl Marx's view of Industry as a revelation of humanity's powers achieved through labour, and opts for a more moderate approach, in which theatre is not only a means of producing industrial products, but also a domain in which industrial-type techniques are used, but in which the products are non-replicable. The author relies on theatrical models that function in a mixed way, both on state subvention and on direct revenue from the public. Therefore, theatre is influenced not only by economic factors, but also by political ones, and each functioning solution is, thus, a *spatial fix*, in the sense defined by Bob Jessop. The author's arguments also rely on an extensive critique of the term *creative industries*, as defined in 2018 by the UK's Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport as a sector bridging technological innovation, industry, and consumer culture. The author believes that viewing the art sector as an independent domain is more truthful and would ensure a realistic view on the investments made by the state in cultural goods. Consequently, even though Michael McKinnie's book relies on a broad literature overview, his uniquely moderate approach places him at a notable distance from traditional views on the interaction between culture and economy.

The first chapter, *Industry*, seems the most non-specific, unrelated to certain venues. The author deconstructs the notion that theatre and art are not subject to the normal production process in other industrial areas. We currently see art as producing unique, non-replicable products. Even though it is true that no two performances from the same show are ever truly identical, the aim of theatrical companies is exactly this: create performances that are exactly the same every night. Without this, actors would just stumble upon each other on stage, props would never be positioned where they are

needed and no two lines would fit together. We need only to think of performances that are created and re-created with multiple casts at different venues, such as musicals from Broadway.

In the second chapter, *Productivity*, we learn about the way performance industries have shaped the South Bank region of London. What was a largely undesirable part of the city, is now an enormous cultural hub. We are told the story of the construction of the National Theatre of London and the creation of The Vaults, an alternative performance area in the metro system in the area. The South Bank becomes a home of both tradition theatrical events and highly-experimental ones, both types of shows taking advantage of the unique venues and generating more than revenue. Here culture generates industry, especially for services such as restaurants and boutiques, which greatly benefit from the presence of tourists and other spectators that come here, to a neighbourhood that was not even seen as belonging to Central London.

The third example in Michael McKinnie's book comes from Ireland, and is centred around the Tinderbox production of *Northern Star*, by Stewart Parker, at the First Presbyterian Church in Belfast, in 1998. The show was performed not long after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in Belfast, marking the ceasing of armed conflict in Northern Ireland. It was a tumultuous period in time, when both economic and political tensions were high. *Northern Star*, a play about the Irish revolution, was staged aiming to create cohesion around the new-found peace. Culture was seen a "peace dividend," just like tourism, as a motivation for the cease fire, for making the streets of Belfast safe again and not constantly patrolled by armed British soldiers. *Northern Star* became an event that created social cohesion better than the State and the political community could ever create. Therefore, it was a theatrical success due to its integration in a volatile economic and political environment, using the company's close ties to the community in order to generate a unique, site-specific performance, staged in a relevant space for the conflict and the resolution of the conflict.

The next chapter, *Security*, is centred around the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, which is a theatre venue right on the border between U.S.A. and Canada. Half of the building lies in Derby Line, Vermont, while the other half lies in Stanstead, Quebec. Here we are not being told the story of the

success of a specific show, but the story of how theatre can bridge two countries. Back at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the building was constructed, members from both communities could cross the border with almost no restrictions to work and visit relatives. Nowadays, following the wave of border regulations caused by the 9/11 terror attacks and a long series of border reforms from the 1950's onward, the communities are much more isolated. Despite this, the Haskell Opera House is to this day the only place where you can legally cross the US-Canada border freely, in order to attend events. The Haskell has privileges that no multi-national conglomerate has. This theatre, which has become a tourist attraction, is so important for the local communities that it became an exception in international law and, as such, a place that both defies and defines the flexibility of market economies.

The last chapter of the book, *Confidence*, tells the story of the creation and the aftermath of Danny Boyle's *Isles of Wonder* theatrical production for the 2012 London Olympic Games. At an estimated budget of 27 million pounds, with a cast of over 7.500 people, it is probably the most watched live theatrical performance in British history, with 27,3 million viewers in Britain and 900 million worldwide viewers. The book does not discuss the theatrical qualities of the show, even though it outlines its structure. McKinnie describes the impact of the show, despite it clearly being non-linear and non-traditional. It was a performance that took advantage of the large budgets of Olympic events and of the fact that host countries desperately try to show confidence. It seems that *Isles of Wonder* thrived during one of the most austere budgeting periods of modern times in the U.K.

There is an aspect that is present throughout McKinnie's book and which we find most relevant. He shows that theatre creates a type of monopoly, exactly because theatrical productions are not identical. If you wish to buy a pair of leather shoes, you can choose between multiple items from different brands, because you can compare these items. If you want to buy tickets to a theatrical production, you have little but your personal taste to help you choose between a Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *The Tempest* and an independent production of the same text, or a performance created by Punchdrunk. Therefore, a company has a monopoly on its production, because the said production is unique. Theatre companies do not really compete with each other.

A second key idea is the fact that theatre (especially with site-specific productions), is rent-seeking. Rent-seeking is a phenomenon that describes certain actors on the market that solely own buildings, sites, or equipment and then rent it out. The phenomenon is seen as a type of plague, because it generates no value, it brings no real benefits to the world. Rent-seeking behaviour was part of the reasons for the 2008 market collapse. Theatre creates rent-seeking behaviour because it enables the audience to temporarily inhabit a place that is usually off-limits. But it turns out that theatrical rent-seeking behaviour actually generates value, because it educates and creates culture and because it revitalizes disused or marginalized urban areas.

In conclusion, *Theatre in Market Economies* is a complex book, which outlines ways in which theatre not only survives in a capitalist world, but also thrives in it. It is most useful for cultural managers and researchers in the field. We strongly believe that it is also a book that all practitioners should read, especially in Romania. It is an eye-opening material, that shows us that theatre is not something vague, based on talent and inspiration, but an art form, that is highly organized, anchored in the reality of its days and based on clear principles. McKinnie's book is a lesson of everything that Romanian theatre is not, and of all it should/could be: a domain in which art is truly linked with the social, cultural and economic interests of the community it serves; a relevant means of entertainment and education for those who pay for its existence.

MARIUS-ALEXANDRU TEODORESCU

Ph.D. student at the Faculty of Theatre and Film
teo_mariusalex@yahoo.com

