

Jovana Babović,  
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (USA)

UDK 94:316.722(497.11)''192/193''  
316.334.56:39(497.11)''192/193''

## Re-Contextualizing Entertainment in Interwar Culture in Belgrade

*Abstract: Entertainment complicated the cultural hierarchy in interwar Belgrade that privileged the arts and national culture. While cultural elites and state agencies were invested in preserving their own salience in the capital, entertainment was becoming more popular among the growing urban classes. Entertainment, particularly trends from abroad, changed not only how Belgraders participated in the city, but also how they defined culture.*

Key words: entertainment, popular culture, urban life, 1920s 1930s, Belgrade

### Introduction

In a 1920 letter to the Minister of Education, the Belgrade branch of the Association of Yugoslav Musicians proposed an amendment to the state taxation of culture. The president of the Association complained that “artists who, without question, have a high and lengthy education” should not be burdened with the same tax as entertainments such as cinemas, circuses, horse racing, and panoramas. The president distinguished “learned” musicians as the “pioneers of humanity’s social beauties” who harbor an elevated cultural value that is formative for both the development of a national consciousness and the moral integrity necessary for the education of the public. On these grounds, the president believed that “serious” musicians were entitled to an exemption from the general 10% cultural tax. Yet, the Association’s principal qualm was not about taxation at all, but rather about the state’s equalization of classically trained musicians with performers who rouse only “fun and pleasure” among the viewing public. The president was subjective, but not original, in his judgment that, unlike the arts, entertainment was “shallow, suspicious, and often absolutely useless,” and motivated by a “greedy drive for money.” It was

in society's best interest, the president of the Association argued, to increase the tax on entertainment in the same proportion as it is reduced for the arts.<sup>1</sup>

The Association's proposal lies at the heart of interwar cultural politics. The state and professional associations were invested in locating the arts and entertainment on opposite ends of the interwar cultural hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> While the arts were celebrated for their moral superiority, rewarded with state financial patronage, and endowed with social legitimacy by the upper classes, entertainment was pronounced to be immoral, commercial, and culturally bankrupt. As Lawrence Levine shows, historiography has reproduced the hierarchy of the period; most scholars equate culture with the arts – from theater and ballet, to the applied arts and literature – and sideline popular culture as everything that the arts are not.<sup>3</sup> However, a focus on popular culture, like entertainment, contributes to our understanding of the 1920s and 1930s in Belgrade in three critical ways. First, it de-emphasizes the importance of the arts for everyday residents and re-contextualizes the role of popular culture in the development of urban life. Second, this focus shifts the historical lens from the state and the nation onto the city, thus giving us an alternative analytical approach to exploring social, cultural, and, even political encounters in interwar Yugoslavia. Finally, the study of entertainment opens a new perspective for discussing the relationship between local and global spaces and prompts us to understand Belgrade on a larger network of cities and cultures.

In this paper, I first define urban entertainment as a form of popular culture in interwar Belgrade by considering repertoires, performers, and audiences. I discuss entertainment through the category of consumption and interpret fun as a complication to cultural politics in the city. Then, I discuss domestic and foreign entertainments, highlighting what made them different yet inextricably tied to one another. Finally, I propose five reasons why foreign entertainment was popular in the Yugoslav capital between the two wars, while arguing that it was not consumed at the expense of domestic performers, the arts, or national consciousness. Ultimately, I show that urban entertainment narrowed the gap between the local and global and came to serve as a new reference point for defining culture in interwar Belgrade.

---

<sup>1</sup> Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ), Ministarstva prosvete (66), F620, j. 5-82-2.

<sup>2</sup> Other categories – mass culture, low culture, sub-culture – carry slightly different signifiers and make somewhat different arguments about historic, political, and economic power relations of culture within society, and further confound the dialectics of defining popular culture.

<sup>3</sup> Levine, Lawrence, *High Brow/Low Brow: The Emergence of a Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Cambridge 1998.

## Defining Entertainment in the Context of Interwar Culture

Urban entertainment in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Belgrade was limited in style, catered primarily to men and the rising bourgeoisie, and played a static role in the city's cultural politics. Scholars have examined the city's hotels and kafanas, inheritances from the Ottoman period initially intended for travelers and later reformed as a part of urban leisure. Divna Djurić-Zamolo argues that both hotels and kafanas transformed into spaces of business and entertainment, consequently shifting ideas about private affairs and public pleasures. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the number of hotels and kafanas multiplied, as did the variety of urban fun they hosted, such as film screenings, dancing, billiards, and singing troupes.<sup>4</sup> One of the few entertainments of prewar Belgrade whose name has not faded from historical memory is Brana Cvetković's Orfeum, often described as a "funny stage," and almost entirely written and performed by Cvetković in various kafanas.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, historian Dubravka Stojanović argues that the kafana was a site of modernity in the prewar period because it facilitated encounters across social classes, with far-away places, and with new cultural genres (film, panorama). Stojanović is also among the few scholars who devote attention to other types of prewar entertainment such as circuses and vaudeville. Although she uncovers a similar language of resistance from the conservative national press that we see in the interwar period, urban entertainment was not yet the prominent actor in cultural politics that it would become after the First World War.<sup>6</sup>

Interwar entertainment greatly diversified from the narrow offerings of makeshift kafana stages, circuses, and Orpheum theaters; not only that, but there was simply more of it in the city after the war. By the interwar period, Branov Orfeum was dismissed as "old fashioned" and lacking in references to the city's "colorful political world."<sup>7</sup> Although Cvetković was among several prewar writers like Branislav Nušić, Vladimir Velkmar Janković, and Čiča Ilija whose dramas continued to be staged in the interwar period, he was wedged between a larger repertoire of domestic and translated authors, singers, dancers, and performers. Relative to Branov Orfeum, new stages were praised for their quick action, sharper dialogue, soulful jokes, and plentiful allusions to everyday life.<sup>8</sup> Andrew Horrall suggests that this transformation reflects the topicality of new entertainments; spectators came to expect leisure to be

<sup>4</sup> Djurić-Zamolo, Divna, *Hoteli i kafane XIX veka u Beogradu*, Beograd 1988, str. 170–179.

<sup>5</sup> Knežev, Dimitrije M. *Beograd naše mladosti, 1918–1941*, Beograd 2001, str. 170–172. (Knežev, D., *Beograd naše mladosti...*)

<sup>6</sup> Stojanović, Dubravka, *Kaldrma i asfalt. Urbanizacija i evropeizacija Beograda, 1880–1914*, Beograd 2008, str. 265, 307–308.

<sup>7</sup> "Deram bije Terazije.' Pozorište 'Borov park,'" *Novosti*, 17. avgust 1928, str. 3.

<sup>8</sup> "Deram bije Terazije.' Pozorište 'Borov park,'" *Novosti*, 17. avgust 1928, str. 3.

“hectic” and quick to change, like the city itself.<sup>9</sup> Most urban observers celebrated the endless renditions of the Foxtrot, One-step, Shimmy, and the Tango as “a completely normal occurrence that must be accommodated.”<sup>10</sup> New technology facilitated entertainment’s diversification: lights and electricity made it more spectacular on the whole; newspapers and magazines printed with greater frequency, larger circulations, and more current news, trends, and fashions; and the cheaper production of images, musical scores, and novels extended the boundaries of urban entertainment into the home and complicated notions of public and private.<sup>11</sup>

Most entertainment that was consumed and produced in the Yugoslav capital in the interwar years echoed foreign styles and practices. The prewar years boasted local singers, magicians, comedians, and a small number of travelling circuses, panoramas, and foreign performers, but the increase in quantity and variety was accompanied by the strengthening connection of the city to the global network of entertainment. A quick glance at the popular presses echoes the tapestry that Nathan Wood describes in his study of early twentieth century Cracow: snippets of sensations from across the world, translated short stories, and photographs of foreign film stars. In Belgrade, the most prominent foreign cultural presence was felt in the form of metropolitan trends from France, Germany, America, and Britain. A January 1927 issue of *Ilustrovani list* featured a fashion column signed “from Paris,” a photograph of an ailing Japanese czar, and a fashionable image of three women jumping in mid-air in San Francisco. Articles were sometimes simply reprinted, at other times re-contextualized, and occasionally imitated – but always placed alongside local cultural coverage – mirroring what Beatriz Sarlo terms “peripheral modernity” or a space of “cultural mixing.” Wood identifies this metropolitan relativity as the “inter-urban matrix” that allowed local readers a common ground to understand stories and sensations from cities like Paris and Berlin.<sup>12</sup>

Variety and quantity were defining characteristics of urban entertainment in interwar Belgrade, but so was monotony. Although it may seem counterintuitive that monotony contributed to the newness of interwar entertainment, it was exactly the global homogenization of popular culture between the wars that set it apart from its

<sup>9</sup> Horrall, Andrew, *Popular culture in London c. 1890–1918: The transformation of entertainment*, Manchester 2001, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> “Koje moderne igre osvajaju u Beogradu?” *Comœdia*, 17. decembar 1923, str. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Residents who did not or could not directly participate in urban entertainment could read about, hear it, and see it for a remarkably low price. And, as Lauren Rabinovitz argues, technology played a particularly important role in making urban entertainments more accessible to those living outside the city. See Rabinovitz, Lauren, *Electric Dreamland: Amusement Parks, Movies, and American Modernity*, New York 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Wood, Nathaniel, “Urban Self-Identification in East Central Europe Before the Great War: The Case of Cracow, in *East Central Europe/ECE*, 33, 2006, p. 17. (Wood, N., “Urban Self-Identification...”)

prewar variant. In a developing capitalist society, entertainment became a market commodity, and, in efforts to garner audiences, proprietors and performers teetered between presenting entertainments as both novel and familiar. The commodification of culture was hotly debated by elites, who dismissed new popular trends as “the public’s love of novelty,” in the case of talkies,<sup>13</sup> and “an epidemic, a mass psychic disturbance” that had “infected” the urban residents regardless of age, sex, and class, in the case of jazz.<sup>14</sup> Peter Fritzsche imagines this as a “falsified urban reality,” while Walter Benjamin terms it a cyclical encounter with “always the same, never the new.”<sup>15</sup> Popular presses advertised a revolving cast of “new” dances that were slight variations on the “old” dances. Fashions were always billed as “the latest trends from Paris,” even when these trends had changed little in several years. And, describing the new program at the variety stage *Kasina*, a character in Boško Tokin’s modernist novel *Terazije* snidely commented that “in any case, the program is always new,” before detailing the content of the “stereotypical” bill.<sup>16</sup> Georg Simmel argues that the desire for variety often results in nervous exhaustion or a blasé outlook, while monotony produces repetition, boredom, and the desensitization of the audiences to the constant state of newness.

Urban entertainment between the wars was also defined by its transcendence of class, gender, and age; although these boundaries continued to persist, the urban classes had unprecedented access to entertainment in interwar Belgrade. Like in other industrializing cities, Belgrade’s labor force expanded after the First World War and, with it, leisure came to signify the choice and autonomy brought by a paycheck. This is clear in the shift to more inclusive patronage of what had once been the province of male poets and intellectuals in the nineteenth century bohemian quarter Skadarlija or of men in the city’s kafanas. For instance, students stretched their limited income and lingered in the infamous hotel Moskva with a single cup of black coffee all night, while a 1928 newspaper article described the variety show crowd ranging from “trendy” and “fashionable” to the “highlanders” and youth from different Yugoslav regions.<sup>17</sup> Almost all entertainments – from magazines to dance clubs – catered more and more to women as active and independent audience members.<sup>18</sup> And the presses

<sup>13</sup> “Naši muzičari govore o ton-filmu. Razgovor našeg saradnika sa g. g. Stašom Viničkim i Stevanom Hristićem,” *Ilustrovani list nedelja*, 2. februar 1930, str. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Jovanović, Kosta M., “Bolest igranja. Ludilo igranje nekada i sad,” *Novosti*, 10. februar 1929, str. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Fritzsche, Peter, *Reading Berlin 1900*, Cambridge 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Tokin, Boško, *Terazije. Roman posleratnog Beograda*. Beograd 1932, str. 18. (Tokin, B., *Terazije...*)

<sup>17</sup> “‘Đeram bije Terazije.’ Pozorište ‘Borov park,’” *Novosti*, 17. avgust 1928, str. 3.

<sup>18</sup> The proliferation of women’s magazines in interwar Yugoslavia is a testament that women were becoming consumers – and agents – of the presses, culture, and urban identity. Marina Vujnovic argues that women’s magazines shaped women into consumers and citizens. See: Vujnovic, Marina, *Forging*

frequently reported that provincial visitors easily navigated Belgrade's entertainment establishments.<sup>19</sup>

While taste, price, and style preserved some social boundaries, Belgrade's entertainment was hypothetically accessible to anyone with a bit of disposable income; as one interwar resident remembered, "there was a good time [to be had] for anyone's pocketbook."<sup>20</sup> Interwar Belgraders were gradually developing a consumer consciousness and they practiced consumption as a tool of social democratization – to access urban spaces, to subvert social hierarchies, and to experience pleasure. Belgrade's cultural elites rejected the consumption of culture on the grounds that it commercialized the arts and stripped culture of authenticity. The real offender, however, was the loss of clear and visible markers of class, gender, and age. For example, Bojana Popović shows how bourgeois residents feared that affordable fashions would eliminate the distinction between "moral" and "immoral" women, underlining the concern that an upper class woman would be indistinguishable from a house servant on the street.<sup>21</sup> In other words, because the consumption of entertainment was less contingent on class, age, and gender, it gave urban residents the ability to undermine these social categories.

Moreover, consumption of entertainment was a form of urban participation: it lent spectators the agency to interpret both the entertainment and the city. Peter Fritzsche argues that individuals inserted themselves into text as they read the urban presses, a mechanism by which spectators become commodified objects of sensationalism themselves. Urban audiences thus exerted power over the production and distribution of entertainment. James Nott, for example, shows that the gramophone and relatively cheap mass-produced recordings increased residents' access – and choice – to music.<sup>22</sup> And Vanessa Schwartz argues that the consumption of "spectacular realities" gave way to a democratized culture that opened *flânerie* to the wide spectrum of heterogeneous urban classes unified by their experiences of the city. As Marina Vujnovic shows in the case of a women's magazine in Zagreb, popular culture was a platform for the development of the modern female consumer – a citizen of the *bubikopf* nation.<sup>23</sup>

Interwar popular presses, as well as managers of most entertainment venues, were similarly invested in forming a unified consumer market at the urban level. Most newspapers and magazines, even ones that were distributed nationally, spoke

---

*the Bubikopf Nation: Journalism, Gender, and Modernity in Interwar Yugoslavia*, New York 2009, p. 132. (Vujnovic, M., *Forging the Bubikopf Nation...*)

<sup>19</sup> "Oduševljenje i nesadanjije Beogradu petorice džuveč-kardaša," *Novosti*, 23. septembar 1928, str. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Knežev, D., *Beograd naše mladosti ...*, str. 106.

<sup>21</sup> Popović, Bojana, *Moda u Beogradu, 1918-1941*, Beograd 2000, str. 56.

<sup>22</sup> Nott, James J., *Music for the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain*, Oxford 2002, p. 40–48.

<sup>23</sup> Vujnovic, M., *Forging the Bubikopf Nation...*

directly to the urban reader and imparted instructions for city living, developed a collective urban voice, and nurtured associations with the European and American metropolis. In this way, entertainment shaped an urban audience, rather than a national one.<sup>24</sup> The newspaper *Beogradske novosti*, for instance, ran a regular column titled “Modern Belgrade Woman” that instructed readers how to decorate their sitting rooms stylishly, what types of entertainments to discuss among friends, and how to dress.<sup>25</sup> *Novosti* devoted its regular column “Life in Belgrade” to reports about the newest urban venues and codifying appropriate patron behavior at cabarets, theaters, and bars. *Nedeljne ilustracije* offered “scenes from Belgrade streets” and informed readers how to behave at outdoor cafés,<sup>26</sup> while another paper encouraged Belgraders to patronize fairs and bazaars as their urban predecessors had done.<sup>27</sup> Scholars of Eastern Europe have noted that the “shared experience of urban life transcended the political and even to some extent the ethnic and linguistic boundaries which divided the region.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, as Nathan Wood shows, the popular presses found a common ground when they addressed readers collectively as urbanites.<sup>29</sup>

Most importantly, entertainment challenged the definition of culture. While the rhetoric of interwar cultural politics can be traced to the mid- to late-nineteenth century,<sup>30</sup> the consuming power of urban spectators changed the dynamics of this drama in the 1920s and 1930s. Interwar entertainment disputed the exclusivity of the arts and the exclusion of national culture by extending the ability to consume to everyone. It did not aim to enlighten or educate, but appealed, rather, only to fickle tastes of the public and the allure of metropolitan spectacle from abroad. However, when we fine-tune our ears to hear the voices of interwar urban residents, we find that the popular culture was not consumed at the expense of the arts or national culture. Instead, while the elites and conservatives scoffed at the popularity of urban entertainment and faulted it for the falling patronage of “legitimate” culture, the arts and national culture were often integrated into popular repertoires. In a collection of memories about the interwar city, Slavoljub Živanović wrote that “Belgrade accepted

<sup>24</sup> The case of Yugoslavia is complex because the state was fragmented politically, economically, and socially and Belgrade contended with competing urban markets in major Zagreb, Sarajevo, and Ljubljana – most with developed prewar legacies – came to reinforce internal fragmentation.

<sup>25</sup> Mir-Jam, “Savremena Beogradjanka,” *Beogradske novosti*, 11. januar 1924, str. 5.

<sup>26</sup> “Scene sa beogradskih ulica,” *Nedeljne ilustracije*, 12. juli 1938, str. 20–21.

<sup>27</sup> “Slike sa vašara. Proletnja atrakcija beogradjana,” *Panorama*, 18. maj 1935, str. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Gee, Malcolm, Tim Kirk, and Jill Steward, eds., *The City in Central Europe: Culture and Society from 1800 to the Present*, Brookfield 1999, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Wood, N., “Urban Self-Identification...”

<sup>30</sup> Theater scholar Igor Mrduljaš argues that the fissure of Zagreb’s cultural scene between arts and entertainment had already formed in the mid-nineteenth century. Mrduljaš identifies the institutionalized distinction between *polašćeno* and *nepolašćeno* as the critical cultural breaking point that pitted “legitimate” theater as educational against fun. See: Igor Mrduljaš, *Zagrebački kabaret. Slika jednog rubnog kazališta*, Zagreb 1984, str. 8. (Mrduljaš, I., *Zagrebački kabaret...*)

new western styles, but ... kept up its old habits;” he remembered that dance parties began with tambourine orchestras performing folk styles and then transitioned into a series of waltzes, while modern dances concluded the evening.<sup>31</sup>

### **Domestic and Foreign Entertainers in Interwar Belgrade**

The growing presence of entertainment carved out a permanent space for popular culture on the interwar cultural spectrum, legitimizing local performers to lobby for the establishment of professional associations, unions, and collectives. The Association of Yugoslav Performers was founded in 1923, the placement agencies Jugoras and State-Endorsed Yugoslav Agency for the Arts (Povlašćena Jugoslovenska Umetnička Agencija) specialized in entertainment bookings, and the Collective of Yugoslav Artists, Craftsmen, and Amateurs (Samopomoć) became an informal organizational platform for performers in Belgrade in the early 1930s. Membership was usually limited to Yugoslav citizens and was intended to bolster employment, protect labor rights, and offer disability and retirement support. Contrary to the prevailing mood of economic protectionism, the organizations sometimes petitioned for the eligibility of foreign members in the hopes that it would buffer the job prospects of local performers.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Natalija Đorđević proposed to open a placement agency specifically catering to foreign performers in Belgrade in 1935.<sup>33</sup> Although the Ministry of Education usually dismissed these types of requests, local performers generally welcomed the incorporation of foreigners among their troupes, programs, and tours. While some domestic performers did express grievances with competition from abroad, these complaints were vocalized in correspondences with state agencies and professional organizations. The outspoken magician Sreten Obradović, for example, petitioned a Czech competitor’s show in Belgrade in a letter to the Minister of Education; yet, Obradović was well aware that the growing social legitimization of entertainment – and his ability to have a voice – was largely indebted to the professionalization of entertainment industry and the strengthening of the urban market, both related to the influx of foreign performers into Yugoslavia.

<sup>31</sup> Živanović, Slavoljub, “Zabave u dokolini,” u: *Beograd u sećanjima 1919–1929*, urednik Milan Bošković, Beograd 1980, str. 266. (Živanović, S., “Zabave u dokolini”... )

<sup>32</sup> AJ, 66, F411. The president of the Association of Performers, Milan Amanović argued that foreign performers are often necessary to complete certain bills and effectively aid in placing domestic workers. It is likely that Amanović was implicitly petitioning for his own troupe, the Amano, that advertised diverse amusement like “stomach speech,” manipulation, and illusions (AJ, 66, F411, j. 122-93/31).

<sup>33</sup> AJ, 66, F411.



Although entertainment was unburdened by the constraints levied on the arts and national culture – it often required no formal training, it did not imply a certain class membership, and it did not demand national allegiance – the local community remained relatively small. In the Minister of Education’s files of work permit approvals for domestic entertainers, we see a spectrum of performers aging from late teens to late sixties, and showcasing the body as wrestlers, acrobats, or athletes, promising wit as comedians, actors, and impersonators, appealing to the imagination as magicians, illusionists, and hypnotists, and offering curiosities as animal tamers, panorama operators, and oddities. The majority of Yugoslav performers were men, commonly prewar holdovers. Some, like Miloš Radojković who was best known for his “stomach speech” and imitations of animal sounds, continued to stage prewar routines until the Second World War, garnering ridicule and decreasing attendance.<sup>34</sup> Others, like Sreten Obradović, greatly expanded their prewar repertoires and pushed the envelope with performances that became more and more fantastic. Younger local performers – again, mostly men – gravitated toward similar magic and comedy routines, as if oblivious to the popularity of jazz, cinema, and the variety stage among Belgraders. As one reporter bemoaned in the late 1920s, “witty and well-designed revues, intertwined jokes, and topical allusions are simply not available here; apart from a few attempts, we can say it’s non-existent.”<sup>35</sup>

Few local women worked as entertainers in interwar Belgrade, and even fewer were registered with the authorities. In the files of the Minister of Education, smatterings of permits were issued to female troupe directors like Milica de Corffu who led Sansusi, spouses of male performers like Jelena Obradović, or owners of marionette theaters like Antonia Valter. Evidence suggests that most local female performers, however, evaded the process of annual registration for a performer’s permit for social and administrative reasons, preferring instead to be registered as waitresses or hostesses. Although paternalistic laws were in place to regulate the labor of female employees in bars, cabarets, and variety theaters, employers were known to manipulate these laws by hiring women as “servers” so that they could work later into the night, lodge at the establishment where they were employed, and socialize with the guests. Contemporary newspapers gave a glimpse of local women’s participation on Belgrade’s entertainment circuit. Sofka Nikolić, for example, was an infamous singer of *sevdah* music who performed across Belgrade’s *kafanas*, often with her husband Paja. Although she is nowhere found in the state’s archives, newspapers doted on Sofka and compared her fame in Skadarlija to that of Josephine Baker in Montmartre, despite the fact that Sofka was known strictly as a sort of folk

---

<sup>34</sup> AJ, 66, F2343.

<sup>35</sup> “‘Đeram bije Terazije.’ Pozorište ‘Borov park,’” *Novosti*, 17. avgust 1928, str. 3.

singer rather than a risqué performer.<sup>36</sup> Through press accounts, we also learn that Sofka and Paja were Roma musicians, or at least they billed themselves as Roma,<sup>37</sup> and that this community (virtually invisible in official records) had a presence in Belgrade's entertainment. In fact, newspaper accounts are especially instrumental for highlighting Roma musicians and female kafana singers like Sofka, Božana, and Cica who were relatively few but nonetheless a lively component of the city's entertainment circuit.<sup>38</sup>

In Belgrade's small and generally older community of performers (both men and women), there was also considerable overlap between those who hosted, staged, and performed shows. For example, Ilija Đorđević was an entertainer showcasing anatomical curiosities in the early 1920s,<sup>39</sup> but transitioned to managing the variety theaters Vračar, Kasina, and Palas in the 1930s.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, records show that Karlo Steiner worked as a "universal performer" through his late teens and twenties and turned to managing entertainment establishments like Ruski Car, Ritz Bar, and Luksor in the 1930s.<sup>41</sup> Local entertainers conspicuously reappeared on the boards of performers' professional associations, unions, and collectives; Sreten Obradović, for instance, served as the president of the Association of Performers in the late 1930s, while interwar comedian Milan Šaler was the vice-president. Of the city's illustrated or entertainment presses in the interwar period, more than half – including *Ilustrovani list*, *Comœdia*, and *Reč i slika* – were owned (and sometimes edited) by Ivan Zrnić, while his wife Jelena edited *Žena i svet* until the magazine was bought out by another publisher in 1930.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast, a remarkably different cast of performers and genres characterized foreign entertainment that reached Belgrade between the two wars. The Minister of Internal Affairs began keeping detailed records of touring foreign performers in the second part of the 1930s, thus allowing us to glean their demographics during this period. Most strikingly, two thirds of foreign entertainers who worked in Yugoslavia were women. Moreover, more than half of all performers were between the ages of 18 and 24, although young children and sexagenarians were also counted among those that toured with family troupes. Forty-five percent were registered as dancers,

<sup>36</sup> "Vokalni megdan između Sofke i Božane," *Novosti*, 27 maj 1928, str. 2. Another article reports that Josephine Baker made time to pay homage to the local star during her visit to Belgrade. We learn that Baker listened to Sofka perform with a Roma orchestra, and that the two became friendly over a serving of čevapi with onions ("Kažnjeni demonstranti protiv Džozefine Beker," *Politika*, 12. april 1929, str. 9.).

<sup>37</sup> Paunović, Siniša, "Pevači i muzičari," u: *Beograd u sećanjima, 1930-1941*, urednik Milan Bošković, Beograd 1983, str. 80–88.

<sup>38</sup> "Kroz noćni Beograd..." *Ilustrovani list nedelja*, 12. januar 1930, str. ii, 25.

<sup>39</sup> AJ, 66, F411.

<sup>40</sup> AJ, Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova (14), F41-55.

<sup>41</sup> AJ, 14, F54, j. 198.

<sup>42</sup> AJ, Poslanstvo Kraljevine Jugoslavije u Mađarskoj – Budimpešta (396), F20.

ten percent were acrobats, three percent were singers, and thirty-seven reported their specialty simply as “performer,” suggesting that their skills were versatile depending on demand. Of almost a thousand entertainers’ records, there were four times as many singers as magicians, ten times more actors than illusionists, and significantly more wrestlers than animal trainers.<sup>43</sup> Other sources confirm that a similar trend existed in the earlier part of the interwar years. A March 1922 program at variety stage Kasina advertised a *mélange* of dancing skits that were staged by young female performers: “international dances,” “Slavic dances,” “Mexican tarantella dances,” “waltzes,” and “Polish folk dances.”<sup>44</sup> Although these women might not have been Slavic, Mexican, Polish, or any other identity suggested by their billing, they were almost certainly not Yugoslav.

Newspaper illustrations, cinema, and fashion from the 1920s and 1930s reflect an overrepresentation of youthful female bodies. Belgrade’s popular presses liberally reprinted photographs from foreign beaches, salons, and leisure retreats and inserted commentary that appropriated them for the local audiences. A caption to a photograph of three scantily clad women jumping in mid-air reads:

In this time of jazz and Charleston, all variety stages advertise the ‘original’ Charleston. However, all those ‘original’ Charlestons are imitations or the creations of those who dance it. And so, these three sisters (all performers who dance together, and there are rarely more than three – are always sisters, even when one is Spanish and the other Hungarian) have their own special Charleston that has helped them win over San Francisco.<sup>45</sup>

The three women pictured likely never performed in the Yugoslav capital, and they may not have even been variety stage performers, but the caption of the local paper shows the degree to which foreign trends permeated local readers and won over Belgrade, too.

### **Why Were Foreign Entertainments Popular in Belgrade?**

After the First World War, trends from abroad – reprinted stories and images in the presses, imported recordings and scores, touring dancers and singers, and adaptations of fashions – flooded Belgrade; they were attractive to the urban classes for five reasons. First, socio-economic hierarchies of local society were not embedded in foreign popular culture. Due to the relatively cheap admission price of variety shows

---

<sup>43</sup> AJ, 14, F43-55.

<sup>44</sup> *Novosti*, 3. mart 1922.

<sup>45</sup> *Ilustrovani list*, 7. januar 1929, str. 11.

and cinemas, the easy accessibility of illustrated newspapers and magazines, and the available reproductions of music and fashion, entertainment was within reach for most urban consumers with a bit of disposable income, rather than an exclusive haunt of upper classes, men, or bohemians. Foreign entertainment defied the class-based script of cultural patronage and enabled Belgraders to encounter one another at the movies, in the cabaret, or at the newsstand regardless of their class, gender, or age; in the words of cabaret scholar Igor Mrduljaš, entertainment became “the meeting point of urban residents.”<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, entertainment overcame the language barriers that would have been paramount for a drama at the National Theater or the intricacies of editorials in *Politika*. In most cases – like the image of the three “sisters” above, as well as silent films, jazz, or dance – entertainment was an easily transportable global commodity on the local market because it prioritized sight, sound, and physical experience rather than language. Foreign entertainment thus served as a shared platform of global urbanity for Serbo-Croatian speakers, but also Yugoslavs and non-Yugoslavs who did not speak the state language but found themselves in the capital. Although translations of fiction, plays, and film were common, urban consumers were disciplined to see, hear, and experience foreign entertainment through their senses.

According to historian Ranka Gašić, the availability of popular culture in Belgrade was roughly aligned with political alliances: in the 1920s, women’s fashion followed Parisian trends while men’s was akin to London ones, literature was Russian or French, and film, dance, and comics arrived from the United States. Around the same time, the cultural critic Boško Tokin caricatured variety entertainers at Kasina as “Hungarians, Germans, and Czechs [who] dance under Spanish, French, and English stage names.”<sup>47</sup> Gašić suggests that French influence was significantly demoted after the 1934 assassination of King Alexander in Marseilles, and replaced by stronger German presence on Belgrade’s cultural scene.<sup>48</sup> This point is well-illustrated by the Belgrade Fair Exhibition Grounds that privileged Italian, Romanian, Czechoslovak, German, Hungarian, and Turkish pavilions in 1937, showcasing cars and fashion as well as ideology. Around the same time, that stringent politics wielded by the Third Reich against “degenerate” culture brought a surge of Jewish German, Austrian, and Czech revue dancers and singers to Belgrade in the second part of the 1930s.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Mrduljaš, I., *Zagrebački kabaret...*, str. 154.

<sup>47</sup> Tokin, B., *Terazije...*, str. 19–20.

<sup>48</sup> Gašić, Ranka, *Beograd u hodu ka Evropi. Kulturni uticaj Britanije i Nemačke na beogradsku elitu 1918–1941*, Beograd 2005, str. 131.

<sup>49</sup> This could have hardly been an intended exertion of cultural influence. According to the records of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 61% of all foreign performers who entered Yugoslavia after 1935 held citizenship from one of these three states. This statistic breaks down to 15% Austrian, 21% Czech, and 25% German. At the same time, only 2% were British and even less French.

However, the third appeal of foreign entertainment in Belgrade was linked to the complexity of consumption and taste that often trumped politics. According to Simon Frith, taste depends on availability but it is also irrational and competitive.<sup>50</sup> That is to say that the certain popular culture may have arrived in Belgrade on political grounds, but politics alone did not dictate its consumption. For example, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Hungarian entertainers were numerous in archival records and in urban mythologies at the same time that Yugoslavia's neighbors were contesting the state's borders. The model of cultural consumption along political lines is complicated further by the Hungarian performer Miss Arizona who was revered for her interpretation of the Sevillian-cum-Parisian José Padilla's "La Violettera" in the early 1920s. Although it was no secret that Miss Arizona was Hungarian, this did not deter her popularity in the capital. Instead, Miss Arizona was celebrated for bringing a troupe of "beautiful women who performed the [French] can-can" to Belgrade, just as her husband Maestro Rožnyai and son Hercules were embraced whenever they made on-stage cameos. In other words, Miss Arizona's ethno-national identity was of lesser significance than the global association of the entertainment she brought to the city. The performer was said to have "wildly excited the 'fashionable' Belgrade public" once she appeared in the city with a tour of Europe, America, and parts of Africa behind her.<sup>51</sup> And a 1924 article in *Comœdia* suggested that "La Violettera" is "the most modern and most popular song in the world... it's sung on all continents and in all the large European centers."<sup>52</sup>

Somewhat related, the fourth appeal of foreign entertainment in Belgrade was its association with the European metropolis. Remembering nighttime entertainment at the bar Ruska Lira, interwar resident Slavoljub Živanović suggested that most female performers were Austrian or Hungarian, but later reasserted that the dancers served as links to Vienna and Budapest.<sup>53</sup> Andrew Horrall explains how "the myriad performers, who converged in London, brought 'foreign' influences, idioms and ideas with them. These new perspectives on popular culture were adapted before London, in her role as an imperial capital, broadcast performances around the world."<sup>54</sup> In other words, the heterogeneous identities of performers who arrived in London were consolidated into a single one when they toured elsewhere, including in Belgrade: that of a Londoner. While large urban centers were privileged in their ability to import, repackage, and export entertainment, there was very little entertainment being produced in the Yugoslav capital that went on to be consumed in foreign cities. Instead, Belgrade's

<sup>50</sup> Frith, Simon, "Entertainment," in *Mass Media and Society*, eds. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, London 1996, p. 174.

<sup>51</sup> Tokin, B., *Terazije ...*, str. 19–20.

<sup>52</sup> "Kako je postala pesma *La Violettera*," *Comœdia*, 1. decembar 1924, str. 30–31.

<sup>53</sup> Živanović, S, "Zabave u dokolici"... , str. 270.

<sup>54</sup> Horrall, Andrew, *Popular culture in London c. 1890-1918: The transformation of entertainment*. Manchester 2001, p. 1.

urban classes looked to emulate the big city and welcomed foreign entertainment as a testament of their membership on the “inter-urban matrix.”

Finally, the liminality of foreign performers – their ability to be simultaneously strange and familiar to the Belgrade audience – constitutes the fifth appeal of entertainment from abroad. The foreignness of the performers positioned them far enough from Yugoslavs to transgress local norms – such as performing semi-nude in a cabaret – without posing a serious threat to morality. This is particularly remarkable in the case of female entertainers; at a time when Yugoslav women were just beginning to join the nighttime audiences and few worked as entertainers, Josephine Baker, and many like her, was welcomed in sold out theaters. Foreignness enabled entertainment in Belgrade to act as “a marketplace of meaning where a fine balance between the exotic and the familiar promised both fame and revenue.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, local audiences were free to consume entertainment that transgressed patriarchal social norms because the foreignness of the performers made them unaccountable to the same standards as Yugoslavs. Marline Otte argues that the distance between the audience and the entertainer narrowed in the early twentieth century Germany, creating a space where both parties could breach social and cultural boundaries. In Otte’s study, it was Jewish performers who challenge the bounds of traditional spectatorship; in Belgrade, foreigners pushed the envelope of audience respectability.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Urban entertainment in the interwar period changed the way Belgraders experienced the city by challenging the juxtaposition of the arts and entertainment as well as the mutual exclusion of domestic and foreign popular culture. Its appeal and popularity as an accessible form of culture was fundamental to the restructuring of hierarchies maintained by cultural elites and the state, and replacing entertainment as a legitimate platform for urban participation across class, gender, ethnicity, language, and age. Entertainment was not only relevant but also critical in interwar cultural politics and it helps us understand Belgrade in the global context, rather than only that of a state or a region. It is through popular culture and entertainment that we see Belgrade not as the precarious capital of an East European state, but rather as an active – and necessary – agent on the global cultural network.

---

<sup>55</sup> Otte, Marline, *Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment, 1890-1933*, Cambridge 2006, p. 8–9. (Otte, M., *Jewish Identities...*)

<sup>56</sup> Otte, M., *Jewish Identities...*

## Резиме

Јована Бабовић

### Забавни живот у контексту међуратне културе у Београду

Забавни живот у међуратном Београду представљао је популарну културу градске средине. Најснажније се осећао у граду и мада није био приступачан искључиво грађанима, био је упадљив печат доживљаја урбане средине за Београђане и за оне који су кроз њега пролазили. У двадесетим и тридесетим годинама 20. века Београђанима су имали могућност да уживају у забавном животу другачијем од онога који се у другим градским срединама могао видети: био је богатији и разноврснији, приступачан ширим градским слојевима становништва, а публика је све чешће у њему и сама учествовала. Најзначајнија промена у забавном животу након Првог светског рата било је укључивање страних утицаја. Тако су се у новинама појављивали текстови и фотографије страних аутора, у продавницама су се куповале плоче стране музике, инострани певачи и плесачи наступали су на београдским бинама, а у изложима се могла видети одећа у складу са страном модом. Утицај иностраног забавног живота је не само доприносио променама у домаћем забавном животу већ и у културном животу југословенске престонице у целини. У току међуратних година забавни живот изменио је предратну културну хијерархију тиме што је, заправо, постао нова референтна тачка културе. У овом раду се најпре излажу одлике забавног живота у двадесетим и тридесетим годинама 20. века и тумаче разлози уочљиве појаве популарне стране културе у Југославији. Потом, разматра се веза између иностране и домаће забавне културе и наглашава да европски и амерички утицај није угрозио ни „народну“ ни „озбиљну“ културу, већ да је омогућио већем броју грађана (посебно женама, сиромашним Београђанима и деци) да потпуније доживе ток градског – и светског – живота.