

## **PRESENTATION OF THE PROJECT *MUSICAL FOR CHILDREN: A FAIRY TALE FROM THE PARK*<sup>1</sup>**

Emilija J. Popović

*Academy of Applied Technical and Preschool Studies Niš, Pirot, Serbia*

Jelena P. Veljković Mekić\*

*Academy of Applied Technical and Preschool Studies Niš, Pirot, Serbia*

Dragana O. Dragutinović

*Academy of Applied Technical and Preschool Studies Niš, Pirot, Serbia*

Bojana N. Nikolić

*Academy of Applied Technical and Preschool Studies Niš, Pirot, Serbia*

**Abstract:** The project named *Let's Improve the Quality of Student Education by Creating Better Conditions for the Implementation of Teaching and Student Learning through the Creation of Musicals for Children – UKO 1* is based on a new paradigm in learning, based on the system: communication, knowledge, and abilities. This project involved the preparation and realization of a drama piece in the genre of musicals intended primarily for children of preschool age, but also for a wider audience. The students got acquainted with different techniques in traditional and new media and recognized their natural potentials and inclinations in different fields of artistic expression within visual and musical arts, dance, literature, and dramatic creativity. The improvement of the teaching process was achieved by the introduction of innovative techniques in individual subjects, the use of professional audio-visual equipment specialized for the development of a multidisciplinary approach in teaching, the development of communication skills and team spirit in students, as well as the promotion of education oriented towards innovation and entrepreneurship. The application of such a multidisciplinary approach and the introduction of innovative methods into the teaching process represent a serious step forward in the field of pedagogical sciences and in the construction of an integrated curriculum that supports the new foundations of the preschool education program.

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**Keywords:** improving the quality of education, musical for children, holistic approach, skills of future educators

## INTRODUCTION

This paper will describe the project *Let's Improve the Quality of Student Education by Creating Better Conditions for the Implementation of Teaching and Student Learning through the Creation of Musicals for Children – UKO 1*, supported and financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. The project was created on a new learning paradigm, based on three terms: *communication*, *knowledge*, and *abilities* and it was realized in 2022 at the Academy of Applied Technical and Preschool Studies in Pirot. First, the project involved the preparation and realization of an original musical theatre stage intended primarily for preschool children, but also for a wider audience. The improvement of the teaching process was achieved by the introduction of innovative techniques in certain subjects and the use of professional audio-visual equipment specialized for the development of a multidisciplinary approach to teaching. Students and professors were engaged in directing work together, worked on making costumes, prepared and decorated the stage space, recorded and processed audio, photo, and video documentation, recorded and audio-processed original songs for children, and created short video forms and different types of animations which were done as regular class activities and extracurricular activities.

## DIRECTING THE CHILDREN'S MUSICAL: *FAIRYTALE FROM THE PARK*

Children's drama play is always observed from the same positions that apply to drama art in general. Just as a child does not represent a diminished human being, there is no diminished art either. "Directing for children means achieving a total artistic, aesthetic and technical creation typical for drama, opera, film, radio or television directing creativity" (Petrović, 1994: 15). The specificity of directing for children is contained in the artistic conditioning of the ideological and aesthetic foundations of creativity for children, in the phenomenon of play, which leads to a distinct dynamic of the dramatic action, rhythm and melody, the poetics of brevity, the simplicity of the subject of the dramatic statement, to more simplified characters, strong contrasts, quick gradations, unusual metaphors, quick turns, i.e. towards elliptical forms of directorial conciseness (see Bojović, 2010; Boškan-Tanurdžić, 2004).

The problems of directing are numerous and very complex. They include the selection of the text, work with the actors, and cooperation with a

scenographer, costume designer, composer, or sound engineer, as well as the question of the audience – as indispensable components of any theater. Professors of literature, foreign languages, visual arts, and music performed the directing duties. Before the work on the musical was initiated, the selected groups of professors and students were chosen for the following tasks: 1. to select the dramatic text, 2. to act, 3. to compose and record the audio-drama, 4. to create costumes and scenography, and 5. to create promotional material.

### ***Selection of a Dramatic Text***

The dramatic text *Fairytale from the Park* by Đurđa Lili, a stage cocktail-fairy tale, seemed very suitable for realization on our open stage in the schoolyard and the number of participants. The basic features of this text, such as the combination of well-known characters from fairy tales, short and concise lines, simple and lively humor fully meet the requirements of the audience for which the play is intended – preschoolers and children of younger school age. It is especially important for the musical that the dramatic text *Fairytale from the Park* contains enough rhyming and rhythmic segments that can be composed and sung.

### ***Working with Actors***

The second phase included the creative work of those who will perform the dramatic event in front of the audience. So, in the second phase, we started working with student actors. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, we were forced to hold the first reading rehearsals through the Teams platform, which meant that we were not able to realize the usual dramatic exercises and games that serve to practice voice and movement (Viktorović, 2004; 2005; Group of Authors, 2012). Initially, it seemed like an aggravating circumstance, but it soon turned out that the physical absence and the absence of facial expressions and gestures, allow one to better hear and notice the shortcomings of intonation, articulation and diction. At the first reading rehearsals, we assigned the roles to the actors. The roles were assigned according to the requirements of the text, on the one hand, and according to the possibilities of the ensemble, on the other. In the original text, the character of Mum does not exist, but the character of Dad is present. Since our Drama Club consisted of only female students, it was decided that the text should undergo this change, which essentially did not affect the lines and plot. The first few rehearsals were organized for text reading, and to checking the accuracy and text shortening. Text processing is sometimes approached already in the first phase, but in this case, it took place simultaneously with the reading rehearsals. Our changes to the *Fairytale from the Park* text were not extensive and did not affect the semantic layer of the

original: only a couple of lines were removed, and some of them were partially reformulated to make it easier and more natural for the actors to achieve the character-actor unity. Also, the Prince utters his lyrics with a French accent, so a few lines in French (in the dialogue between the Prince and the Fairy) have been added, as well as a song in French sung by the Prince. When the entire team that participated in rehearsing the text was satisfied, it was decided to record an audio recording of the play.

### **Music**

The musical *Fairytale from the Park* represents learning through practical work, i.e. mastering the necessary knowledge and skills through the preparation of a musical and stage piece. As the text had already been chosen, the music that had to be composed had to be in harmony with the theme and characters on the one hand, as well as with the psychophysical and musical abilities of the target audience, which is children aged 3–7.

Guided by the musical abilities of the children, we respected the principles of music pedagogy (see Durkovic-Pantelic, 1998; Jović and Đorđević, 2002). The goal was set that the melody should not have a range higher than a fifth, possibly a sixth, to be singable, easy to remember, and in harmony with the character it represents. The tempo of the composition also determined the character for whom the melody was composed. Depending on whether it was an angry witch or a gentle fairy, the melody had to reflect characters' emotional states. Creating the voices in this way, the students easily learnt about the character, major and minor, about tempo, slow and fast, diction and agogics, the relationship of emphasis in speech and music, or the emphasis in the pronunciation of the sung text which emerged as the music was being created. Students encountered the problem of dividing syllables in text and music ("ecological hearing," etc.) when the previous verse had a different number of syllables. Regarding the rhythm, the request was that the rhythm should be adapted to the age group of children, i.e. to be simple and repetitive, so that the children could easily follow the rhythmic motif during the performance.

The singing voice is also an integral part of this joint project. During the work, we set the goal that the voice should be adapted to the character it represents. The students understood their roles and found the appropriate "voice" in representing Gretel, the angry witch, the gentle forest fairy, the prince, and Little Red Riding Hood. In the course of their studies, future pre-school teachers master the necessary knowledge and skills, including playing certain instruments. All the compositions that were created during the work on the musical were played by the students themselves.

## Scenography

The action of the dramatic text that served as inspiration for the musical for children takes place in the park. Since the dramatic text does not specifically imply specific elements of the scenography, the artists had complete creative freedom in creating the park's ambiance. The contemporary character of the text, as well as the characters who build it, contributed to the idea of constructing a non-standard image of the park through the artistic processing of the attributes that make it up. The main task of this approach was the idea to enrich and individualize the image of the objective world through the abolition of standardized frameworks and the release of children's imagination and creativity.

The trees were the supporting element of the image of the park. The structure of the tree is made of corrugated cardboard that is bent into a cone shape (tree trunk) and fixed with polyurethane foam for an organic-shaped base. Tree branches are constructed according to a similar principle of forming a conical shape, only with a smaller diameter and with the addition of transverse "branches." A conscious deviation from naturalism in the depiction of trees is evident. The expected brown color of the tree and the green color of the leaves were replaced by stylized color surfaces that are not related to the apparent reality of a tree. The final appearance of the trees was made by discreet drawing with sprays of different colors, while the chosen colors deliberately deviate from the real coloring of the trees. Tree branches end with flowers instead of leaves.



*Pictures 1 and 2: Appearance of trees and flowers*

Flowers were an essential element of the scenography. By cutting out the outline of the flower from a hard cardboard, two-dimensional flower shapes were made, preparing the shape with white paint to achieve the intensity of the final coloring. The three-dimensional forms of the flowers were made by gluing the petals of multi-colored paper to a circular base, which was later mounted on a rustic stand made of corrugated cardboard. The dimensions of these flowers are in unnatural proportion to the trees: some flowers have a giant shape, which is again in line with the attitude that promotes freedom of experience and creativity. The third form of flowers adorns the ends of tree branches and is made similarly to the three-dimensional giant flowers. The deviation from natural coloring and proportions is motivated by the modern trends that promote the child's individual experience that should not be conditioned by the apparent reality of the object.

### ***A Costume***

The costumes, as well as the scenography, should match the overall visual concept of the performance. An important task in creating a costume is its innovation and relevance. For the actors to feel comfortable and confident and for the recipients to accept the message of the dramatic performance in the right way, it was necessary to design the costumes to be stylistically interesting and of a fashionable cut to match the trends. The modern and simplified costumes were designed with the intention and in an attempt to deviate from the standardized costumes usually worn by actors in children's plays.

The plot of *Fairytale from the Park* takes place in an urban environment, and its actors are partly real people and partly characters from fairy tales. Hansel, Gretel (Ivica and Marica in Serbian) and Mum wear modern clothes like we see every day in our real environment. Marica is an ordinary girl wearing ripped jeans and a printed T-shirt, Ivica is a boy dressed in tracksuits and a collared T-shirt, wearing a cap on his head, and Mom resembles just an ordinary modern mom.

The witch retained the black outfit, which was complemented by an elegant and streamlined cut. Little Red Riding Hood is not dressed up all in red and what defines her is only the red cloak. The forest fairy costume is cut in pastel shades of pink and green matching the fairy's characteristics. It is decorated with flowers and transparent tulle that allows the effect of transparency when one color is covered with another. The prince wears an avant-garde eccentric suit in a combination of red and orange. The wolf costume is made of a simple tunic sewn from artificial fur and a mask made of hard cardboard that he wears on his head.



*Picture 3: Costumed actors on the summer stage*

### ***Project Promotion***

The acquisition of software and digital equipment had an impact on innovating approaches in the teaching process and developing the creative potential of all participants. The students recognized the possibilities of working in a new digital format and the need for further improvement of their digital competencies and creative work in the field of photography, video editing, and the creation of new didactic content, cultural and educational, which would be presented in a wide media space and which would be intended for the youngest audience. An initiative was launched to form a creative media center that would work on the production of such content.

Education oriented towards innovation and entrepreneurship enables better placement on the market and faster access to work. In this process, students got to know their capacities and potentials, as well as the possibilities for starting a private business or engagement in the field of children's education. In the work process, special emphasis was placed on the issue of project management and leadership, in advertising and promoting the project, attracting an audience or users of services, and developing business skills in future work and starting one's own business. Through this project, students also developed their entrepreneurial skills, i.e. how to master the financial elements of preparation and how to plan and organize larger multimedia projects. The specific skills required for design, stage and costume construction, lighting and music, digital imaging and animation can be the basis for further training in various fields and related occupations and jobs. A participation in projects constitutes another necessary competence that will be valued by future employers.

## ***Performance***

The third phase is the assembly of all the components into a whole work of art. It takes place on a stage or space intended for the performance in front of an audience. Only if all three mentioned factors are obtained: stage event, action, and audience, one can speak of a theatrical performance. The audience is therefore a necessary factor: without it, there is no play, just like there is no play without stage events. Every actor knows well that his/her own performance depends on the audience. Actors sometimes feel carried away only when they perform the play and only then do the characters come alive. The performance is not only the action of the stage event on the audience but also the reaction of the audience to that event. Our performance of the musical went as expected. Even though experiencing slight trepidation, the student-actors enjoyed the drama, and after the play they danced, laughed, and socialized with the children spectators.

## **CONCLUSION**

The development of vocational education is an open process within the reform of higher education. The acceptance of the Bologna Declaration in Serbia, more in terms of the organizational and systemic structure, and less in terms of structural changes in the program, while ignoring the humanistic aspects of education and disregarding the needs of students, did not lead to significant results. It was noted that it is necessary to operationalize study programs and subject syllabi that would start from the specific needs and interests of students and that would enable differentiation and individualization in the acquisition of new competencies. This humanistic-developmental approach to learning also implies a holistic approach to the development of a complete personality. Various planning and strategies contribute to this, which implies the active role of students and autonomy in work.

Students got to know different techniques in traditional and new media and recognized their talents and preferences in different fields of artistic expression within visual and musical arts, dance, literature, and dramatic creativity, which enabled them to interact better with children in modern working conditions. They are directed towards cooperation that is established with certain institutions, business entities interested in hiring future educational staff, local self-government bodies and public enterprises in the region and the entire country. One of the goals of the project was to influence the development of students' communication, negotiation, and agreement skills, but also to develop a higher level of empathy and team spirit.



The active involvement of artists and experts from various fields through consultative work and guidance of students and professors led to the improvement of the quality of that part of the teaching process that has a direct role in the creation of musicals for children. The development of future collaborative projects with cultural institutions also means the inclusion of children's musicals, as a special genre, in the permanent repertoire on the big stage in the City of Pirot, guest appearances and participation in international festivals, as well as the initiation of the Small Stage of the Academy. The multidisciplinary approach and the introduction of innovative methods and modern digital tools into the teaching process represent a serious step forward in the field of pedagogical sciences and interdisciplinary methodical procedures in the construction of an integrated curriculum that supports the new preschool curriculum framework.

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