

Amateur Acts: Why Amateur Theatre Matters

Call for Papers

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Amateur theatre matters – for individuals, communities, nations, the professional arts and for the creative industries. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, for example, amateur theatre played an important part in the development of concepts like education, citizenship and subjectivity as an expression for the emerging bourgeois society. In the wake of the French revolution, some amateur theatre groups were formed as small democratic societies, others offered an alternative stage for marginalised women dramatists and in some cases the amateur craft became a legitimate way to improve morality and literacy. At the same time, many European countries reveal an extensive exchange between professional and amateur stages. Our research highlights that studying the archives and practices of amateur theatre – both historical and contemporary – not only entails a revision of our theatrical, social and cultural histories, but also enhances our understanding of today's society.

Until recently, amateur theatre was largely ignored by researchers. However, in the twenty-first century it is receiving increasing scholarly attention. A number of important publications have opened a field contributing to an amateur turn that offers new perspectives on non-professional theatre practices



for aesthetic, social and political analysis (Cochrane 2001, Mervant-Roux 2004, Holdsworth/Milling/Nicholson 2017, Schmidt 2020 etc.). There have been several research projects dedicated to the subject of amateur theatre, including the 'Missing (Theatre) Histories', which considered experimental amateur theatre practices in Hungary in the 1960s-80s, 'Théâtres de société' investigating amateur theatre in France and Switzerland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 'Fremde spielen' exploring contemporary amateur theatricals in a German context, and a project examining amateur theatre in small European nations.

Despite this abundance of activity, much of the research on amateur theatre has been advanced within specific national contexts. In 2022, the European Research Council (ERC) challenged this model by funding the project 'Performing Citizenship: Social and Political Agency in Non-Professional Theatre Practice in Germany, France, Britain, Sweden and Switzerland (1780-1850)'. This project has sought to work transnationally to understand how amateur theatre developed across Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, using its five countries as case studies.



The 'Amateur Acts' conference evolves from the 'Performing Citizenship' project to ask why amateur theatre has mattered to individuals and societies across Europe, its colonies and its migrant communities, both in the past and today. We are interested to receive proposals that discuss any aspect of amateur theatre from any period of time, with a focus on the European context. Questions of interest include (but are not limited to):

Value:

- What are the social benefits of amateur theatre practices on and off stage?
- What position do amateur theatre organisations have in narratives on cultural and personal value?
- How does amateur theatre relate to issues of gender, class, race, sexuality, disability?
- How does amateur theatre contribute to our cultural memory? What are the material traces, archives and histories of amateur theatre?

Practices:

- Why do people engage in amateur theatre?
- What examples of acts of resistance, resilience, empowerment, experimentation, innovation, ritual and tradition can be found in amateur theatre?
- What influences amateur theatre practice: for example, acting styles, design choices, scenography, costume and repertoire selection?
- What is amateur theatre's relationship to industries and creative practices including music-making, dance, painting, technologies, the media, and professional theatre?

Ecologies:

- How do economics, legal matters and organisational structures impact amateur theatre?
- What social, political, cultural, economic factors impact the position of amateur theatre within specific communities, nations, regions?
- How has amateur theatre been utilised to develop and affirm national identities and to support colonial agendas?
- Where do we find examples of transnational/transcultural amateur theatre practices?

We will be delighted to receive proposals for 20-minute conference papers or other in-person formats (such as provocations or performance lectures). Please send a 200-word (max.) abstract and a 100-word (max.) bio to: **performingcitizenship@lmu.de** by **30 October 2024**. After the event, a selection of papers will be published in an edited collection. The conference will include a formal launch of the project's 'Amateur Theatre Wiki' and participants will be asked to join our first wiki edit-a-thon.



1. The amateur actor Robert Coates (1772-1848) caricatured by Thomas Tegg performing in The Fair Penitent in London in 1813. Metropolitan Museum of Art. CC0, <https://w.wiki/6sT2w>

2. Performance in a peasant theatre in Düsseldorf around 1870. Oil painting by Albert Kindler. Theatre Collection of Cologne University, Public domain via Wikimedia Commons, <https://w.wiki/6ynx>

3. Independent Order of Good Templars amateur theatre course in Vilhelmina, Sweden, 1952. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.



Find out more about our the 'Performing Citizenship' project and conference:
<https://www.p-citizens.gwi.uni-muenchen.de>