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**Không gian Kịch nói Sinh viên - The Student Theatre Space:
A Case of Independent Theatre Making
in Việt Nam after Đổi Mới**

Abstract

The Student Theatre Space (KGKNSV-STS) is a decade-long, student-led initiative at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Việt Nam National University, Hồ Chí Minh City (2014–2024). Supported by dedicated students without institutional funding, KGKNSV-STS produces biannual plays, attracting new recruits yearly and fostering a growing campus theatre movement. Through sixteen seasons, KGKNSV-STS has introduced ten original plays, inspiring additional theatre groups at the university. This essay examines how the group sustains its creative momentum amid financial and technical limitations, exploring KGKNSV-STS as a case of post-Đổi Mới cultural agency in Vietnamese theatre. It discusses the project's impact within the socio-political context of communist Việt Nam, which historically emphasizes film and television over narrative theatre.

KEYWORDS: student theatre, cultural agency, post-Đổi Mới, Vietnamese theatre, KGKNSV, STS

Résumé

L'Espace Théâtre Étudiant (KGKNSV-STS) est une initiative dirigée par des étudiants à l'Université des Sciences Sociales et Humaines de l'Université Nationale du Việt Nam, Ville Hồ Chí Minh (2014-2024), qui dure depuis une décennie. Soutenu par des étudiants dévoués sans financement institutionnel, le KGKNSV-STS produit des pièces de théâtre biannuelles, attirant chaque année de nouveaux membres et favorisant un mouvement théâtral croissant sur le campus. Au cours de seize saisons, le KGKNSV-STS a présenté dix pièces originales, inspirant la création d'autres groupes théâtraux à l'université. Cet essai examine comment le groupe maintient son élan créatif malgré des limitations financières et techniques, en explorant le KGKNSV-STS comme un exemple d'agence culturelle post-Đổi Mới dans le théâtre vietnamien. Il discute de l'impact du projet dans le contexte socio-politique du Việt Nam communiste, qui a historiquement privilégié le cinéma et la télévision par rapport au théâtre narratif.

MOTS-CLÉS : théâtre étudiant, agence culturelle, post-Đổi Mới, théâtre vietnamien, KGKNSV, STS

Introduction

Không gian Kịch nói Sinh viên - The Student Theatre Space (KGKNSV-STS) is an ongoing project that has been active for ten years (2014-2024), developed by a dedicated and self-funded group of students from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Việt Nam National University, Hồ Chí Minh City (USSH, VNU-HCM). The project utilizes the university's infrastructure for the production process, rehearsals, and performances, and recruits freshmen on a yearly basis as the primary human resource. Each year, the project stages two productions during the mid-year and end-year seasons. Over the past decade, the project has developed and introduced ten new full-length plays through sixteen seasons. The emergence of KGKNSV-STS has attracted students to the theatrical arts, fostering a campus-wide movement in theatre production. In the last five years, at least three other student theatre groups have formed and independently produced full-length plays at USSH.

This essay aims to analyze how a group of students has managed to sustain their creative drive while navigating financial constraints and a lack of technical support. Utilizing socio-cultural studies and performativity theories as forms of social agency, the paper scrutinizes KGKNSV-STS as a standout case in Vietnamese theatre, particularly in relation to the socialization of theatre post-Đổi Mới, the economic renovation of 1986. Despite maturing within the communist environment of the Việt Nam Student Union (Hội Sinh Viên Việt Nam), the project does not receive financial support from the institution and relies mainly on the audience, primarily students, who purchase tickets at relatively low prices. Post-Đổi Mới, despite significant economic advancements of the country, the arts, particularly narrative theatre, have encountered considerable challenges. The government's focus has been predominantly on film for propaganda purposes, while market investors have shown more interest in other media, such as television, neglecting performing narrative arts. However, the cradle of the KGKNSV-STS is not new to the communist Vietnamese cultural "strategy". The project is based on the human resources of Đội Kịch CKT, a part of Câu lạc bộ Văn nghệ Xung kích CKT (CLB VNKK CKT) which includes three core teams: music, dance, and drama. CLB VNKK CKT makes use of the infrastructure of Hội Sinh Viên Việt Nam, which is a part of Đoàn Thanh niên Cộng sản Hồ Chí Minh (ĐTNCS HCM). The purpose of the team is to work for cultural programs advocated by ĐTNCS HCM and the USSH. Beside this relation, drama clubs in the history of amateur theatre clubs which focus on "kịch nói", Vietnamese definition for straight plays, have a long developing tradition for almost 100 years.

1. The development of straight plays in the post-Đổi Mới era

From the very first small groups of artists who tried to adapt or create plays based on their education about French and European classic theatres (1920), to the club of Tụ Lực Văn Đoàn (1930-1945)¹, then there was the era when “kịch nói” become one of the prominent and professional theatre arts form before 1975 with the burgeoning of many theatre groups, such as Đoàn Kịch Kim Cương. After 1975, there was a fall of mainstream theatre, so students from many universities all have drama clubs. This trend continued beyond 1986; however, a pivotal moment came in August 1997 when the Vietnamese Government issued Resolution No. 90/CP on “Directions and Policies for Socializing Activities in Education, Health, and Culture.” This resolution allowed individuals and organizations to invest in theater, actively encouraging financial contributions from diverse sources². Around the same time, the establishment of the Nhà hát kịch Sân khấu Nhỏ (Small Stage Drama Theatre) in Hồ Chí Minh City - one of the city’s premier black box theaters - marked a significant step, operating under a socialized theater model. While most theaters, including those in the capital city of Hà Nội, remained cautious in adopting this model, the Small Stage Drama Theatre quickly became a phenomenon, drawing nationwide attention and setting a transformative example for theater production in Việt Nam.

Section IV of Resolution No. 90/CP, specifically clauses 2a and 2b, granted autonomy to non-public theaters, including family-run, private, or collective theaters, while also expanding the framework for arts education in theater schools on a cost-sharing basis from students. This form of cultural socialization laid the groundwork for theater arts to develop freely and openly, enabling numerous formally trained artists to come together and present to the public a diverse array of theatrical works, incorporating novel methods and moving beyond the politically charged propagandistic art previously dominant.

In the early stages of this socialized theater model, particularly notable were those emerging in southern Việt Nam, such as the 5B Blackbox Theater in Hồ Chí Minh City,

¹ Leiter, Samuel L., ed. *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre*. Vol. 2. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 761.

² Government of Việt Nam. “Nghị quyết số 90/CP của Chính phủ: NQ phương hướng và chủ trương xã hội hoá các hoạt động giáo dục, y tế, văn hoá” [Resolution on the Orientation and Policy of Socialization of Educational, Healthcare, and Cultural Activities, No. 90/CP], issued on 21 August 21 1997, signed by Phan Văn Khải, accessed 25 October 2024, <https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/?pageid=27160&docid=20040>.

followed by Idécaf, Phú Nhuận, and Hoàng Thái Thanh theaters. These theaters contributed to an unprecedented vibrancy in Việt Nam's theatrical landscape. Theater companies began to operate with financial autonomy, covering production costs primarily through ticket sales, assuming both profit and loss. Performance venues were largely repurposed halls leased from youth or cultural centers, strategically located for public accessibility. However, this approach presented limitations in terms of enhancing the artistic quality of performances. Rented halls were often used for multiple purposes, including daytime events and conferences, requiring theater sets that need to be easily removed and stored. Consequently, socialized theaters' productions often lacked fully invested stage designs; instead, stage designers had to focus on creating lightweight, adaptable scenery to restore the venue to its original state post-performance. As a result, stage settings in Hồ Chí Minh City predominantly used materials like fabric, backdrops, and platforms, rarely incorporating realistic heavy materials or unique designs that serve storytelling and conceptual purposes. Nonetheless, this approach enabled theaters to adopt a rotational schedule, offering audiences a wider selection of plays. For instance, with flexible scenery, a single theatre space could host two productions in close succession, a matinee and an evening show, allowing up to three or four different plays over a weekend. This rotational format has become the primary organizational model for Vietnamese theater, contrasting with some other neighboring countries like Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore, where the theater industry operates on a season-based model similar to Western theater industries.

Regarding scripts, while early in the socialization period, theaters frequently translated and adapted foreign plays, they gradually moved towards original scriptwriting as they established distinct identities and styles. Comparing this with the American theater industry reveals clear distinctions. In the U.S., playwrights produce complete scripts, which are published and protected by distribution companies such as Dramatists, Concord, or Samuel French. These companies, holding a substantial portion of literary script inventory, represent authors in licensing production rights to local theater companies, enabling a single script to be simultaneously staged by multiple theaters in different interpretations. In contrast, Vietnamese theaters in recent years typically write scripts in-house or commission them in the form of outlines or concepts, subsequently developing them into full productions through collaborative rehearsals with directors and actors. Although a few authors, such as Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc or Ngọc Linh, self-publish or integrate their scripts into educational curricula, most plays lack a complete literary script, existing primarily as skeletal outlines and only later refined into

theatrical works during rehearsal process. Consequently, a play lacks an independent literary presence and remains exclusively associated with a single performance company.

5B Theatre is the common name for the Small Stage Theatre of Hồ Chí Minh City, officially founded in 1997. However, its developmental roots trace back to 1984 when it was established as the Experimental Theatre Club at 5B Võ Văn Tần Street, housed within the City Theatre Association. The influence of this experimental theater, rich in innovative potential, showcased the possibility for a small experimental club to transition into a professional production stage. With increased openness and calls for investment from 1997 onward, the 5B stage significantly impacted the growth of other small theater groups across the city. From the core talents of 5B emerged a series of socialized theaters, expanding the reach and diversity of theatrical production. Despite this growth, the initial experimental spirit of the original club was not always maintained and, in fact, largely disappeared over time. The development of non-state socialized theater in Hồ Chí Minh City was a formal acknowledgment of the city's spontaneous theater movement. Though funded privately or through multiple shareholders, the model was ideologically directed from its inception, emphasizing humanistic values, innovative forms, and socially conscious content while operating within a market-driven framework to attract audiences. This environment fostered the flourishing of amateur artistic activities, especially among student groups, marking a significant expansion in Hồ Chí Minh City's cultural landscape.

Specifically, in the case of student theater clubs, while their primary mission is to produce amateur plays that promote state-directed social issues, these clubs simultaneously cultivate a passion for theater and a desire for experimentation reminiscent of the 5B spirit. For instance, CKT Drama Club took over a decade since its founding to produce its first full-length play in 2013, marking an organized effort in both playwriting and performance. This success was later followed by the KGKNSV-STS program, an exemplary model of artistic production that often goes unrecognized within formal academic and professional spheres. This student-led, nonprofit artistic initiative represents a unique type of creative production existing outside the conventional knowledge-power structures of contemporary Việt Nam.

2. From KGKNSV-STS to the student theater movement in Hồ Chí Minh City

Originally established to serve the purposes of a public arts movement and to promote social messages, the model of student arts clubs at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH) largely operates without formal organizational financial support. Most of the funding required for these clubs' activities is sourced through a "self-sufficiency" mechanism sustained by each successive generation of student leaders. Leadership selection for these groups, including the CKT Drama Club, follows the Student Union's rules. While the Student Union only provides legal support to facilitate official permissions for club activities, it does offer some logistical advantages, such as storage for props and rehearsal spaces within university grounds. The CKT Drama Club, although primarily an independent initiative, remains nominally under the Student Union's jurisdiction and therefore requires union approval for projects like KGKNSV-STS to proceed. Consequently, within official Student Union reports, the KGKNSV-STS program is typically cited as an initiative organized by the union. This ambiguous legal framework means that even though KGKNSV-STS is largely financed through personal contributions and voluntary labor from members, it is officially recorded as a union accomplishment. The status of KGKNSV-STS, neither fully amateur nor wholly professional, presents a challenge to the conventional binary classifications typically applied to theater, particularly between "professional" and "amateur" arts. If the project were fully funded and supported as an official initiative, it might be considered "professional"; conversely, if it were an entirely private student-led project, it would certainly be viewed as amateur. However, KGKNSV-STS embodies characteristics of both, representing a unique model of Vietnamese artistic practice in the post-Renovation era. This hybrid existence highlights an alternative economic and social framework for understanding theatrical production beyond the traditional professional-amateur dichotomy.

This situation is not unique to the CKT Drama Club and the KGKNSV-STS program. Following the success of the first full-length performances in 2014-2015 within the KGKNSV-STS initiative, other student theater clubs at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH) also began to emerge and develop, including the Humanistic Journalism Theater, Dramagic Theater, PSM Theater, and the TOP Theater Group, among others. These student theater groups are typically affiliated with specific departments or faculties within the university and operate under a predominantly non-profit model, relying on the voluntary labor

of members and contributions from individuals or sponsoring organizations. For instance, the Humanistic Journalism Theater serves as a practical venue for students in the journalism department, primarily funded through donations, and demonstrates a relatively high level of specialization in production processes. From the KGKNSV-STS program associated with the CKT Drama Club to the formation and growth of other theater groups during the second and third decades of this century, it is evident that the allure of theatrical arts remains robust, as does its feasibility for smaller groups with limited economic potential. The ability to stage full-length plays with original scripts created by students, alongside the inspiration these projects provide to other student groups, indicates a notable level of aesthetic innovation, even when positioned outside traditional criteria for legitimacy within the artistic marketplace. This raises the question: what has underpinned the existence and growth of the KGKNSV-STS initiative, and can it sustain itself when viewed from a longer-term perspective?

3. KGKNSV-STS: the spirit of independence regardless of the scale

According to our experience, one of the most crucial factors contributing to the ten-year longevity of a theater program like KGKNSV-STS is its spirit of independence. Although affiliated with the Student Association, it operates without the pressure of specific directives regarding the content of performances, provided that it does not create political conflicts with the policies of the Communist Party of Việt Nam (at least not explicitly). This allows KGKNSV-STS to engage openly with a diverse range of sociocultural topics relevant to contemporary social life. From a mental perspective, this social life bears some resemblance to the mindset of the artists who established the 5B Theater following the turning point of theater socialization in 1997, as mentioned earlier. Members of the CKT Drama Team are free to experiment with whatever they desire on their journey of exploration, learning, and trial-and-error in theatrical art. Despite receiving support from some established names who once emerged from the 5B stage, the overall journey of KGKNSV-STS remains independent. This issue can be understood in relation to what Pierre Bourdieu has said about the independence of cultural production fields:

“The literary or artistic field is at all times the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically (e.g. ‘bourgeois art’) and the autonomous principle (e.g. ‘art for art’s sake’), which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of

election and success as a sign of compromise. The state of the power relations in this struggle depends on the overall degree of autonomy possessed by the field, that is, the extent to which it manages to impose its own norms and sanctions on the whole set of producers, including those who are closest to the dominant pole of the field of power and therefore most responsive to external demands (i.e. the most heteronomous); this degree of autonomy varies considerably from one period and one national tradition to another, and affects the whole structure of the field.”³

In the context of the opposition and conflict between those pursuing pure artistic prestige (autonomy) and those seeking commercial success (heteronomy), the spirit of independence exhibited by KGKNSV-STS is reflected in the stance of its members, who consistently strive to find a balance between these two extremes. This endeavor signifies a critical engagement with the complexities of the cultural production landscape, wherein the team navigates the tensions inherent in maintaining artistic integrity while also addressing the practicalities of market demands. By negotiating this duality, the members of KGKNSV-STS demonstrate a nuanced understanding of their role within the broader theater ecosystem.

The first point that illustrates the effort to reclaim autonomy for creators is the emphasis on developing the role of playwrights, which can be regarded as a critical aspect in the journey toward fostering the independent spirit of KGKNSV-STS. In the context of a severe shortage of creativity in scriptwriting, exacerbated by years of catering to market tastes following the government’s directives for the socialization of theater, the scarcity of innovative theatrical scripts in Hồ Chí Minh City has become increasingly acute. This issue can be viewed as systemic, stemming from the lack of formal training within the educational process⁴. In contrast, KGKNSV-STS possesses a distinct advantage in terms of **script writing**, largely due to the diverse academic backgrounds of its members, who hail from various departments within the social sciences and humanities. Over the past decade, whether through original works or adaptations, the scripts have predominantly been authored by the members themselves. This practice establishes a foundation for KGKNSV-STS to share similarities with 5B Theatre in curating scripts. Within the student environment, the project appears to revert to the fundamental processes of theater, beginning with self-created scripts grounded in personal life experiences, rather than being swayed by commercial imperatives aimed at ticket sales - a

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 40-41.

⁴ Thanh Hiệp. “Bao Giờ Mới Có Lớp Biên Kịch Sân Khấu?” [When Will There Be a Playwriting Class?], 03 August 2024, accessed 25 October 2024, <https://nld.com.vn/bao-gio-moi-co-lop-bien-kich-san-khau-1962408022005392.htm>.

factor that previously hindered the progressive nature of 5B Theater. Specifically, after a period of operation, the leading figures of this theater eventually branched off to establish their own “socialized” theaters, allowing them to pursue personal creative directions. However, over time, catering to the preferences of a specific audience has gradually imposed limits on the development of scripts for each theater, leading to regressions in both content and staging. Consequently, it can be argued that the non-profit nature of KGKNSV-STS has played a significant role in preserving the project’s independent spirit, creating a form of “resistance” aimed at safeguarding the originality of its narrative creative process.

Next, **the “trial and error” mechanism can be viewed as an expression of autonomy.** This experimental space, which serves as the foundation for diversity in artistic creation, raises questions about the nature of artistic experimentation and the relationship between small experimental models, which are often vulnerable to economic and political pressures, and their potential to unlock innovative discoveries in the arts. Artistic experimentation, in our view, is not only a process of exploring new forms and modes of expression but also a quest to uncover the potential of art without being constrained by any institutionalized knowledge standards. This distinction sets a non-professional club apart from a group of students in a performance discipline who are trained in a formal setting. When students belong to a specific art training institute, they inevitably become part of the selective knowledge dissemination mechanism of that institution. In contrast, the fundamental characteristic of an independent program like KGKNSV-STS lies in its adventurous, unconventional approach, which does not adhere to pre-existing templates.

KGKNSV-STS exhibits the characteristics of a fundamental experimental model with a small scale and limited resources, accompanied by a high degree of flexibility and creative freedom, and it is less subject to commercial pressures as it is oriented as a non-profit project. Building on this foundation, KGKNSV-STS embodies a significant value in artistic experimentation with specific objectives such as exploring and introducing performing arts to students, examining and attempting to change outdated patterns, laying the groundwork for innovation, fostering creative thinking and diversity in the arts, and contributing to the development of theatrical language in Việt Nam. With a modern dramatic art scene that has only recently evolved over the past century, KGKNSV-STS, in the context of the twenty-first century multiculturalism, contributes to cultural diversity in an effort to reflect contemporary trends and creates a space for the distinct voices of a generation of playwrights who lack the foundational support necessary for development in both theory and practice.

After more than a decade of formation and development, despite achieving numerous milestones in its journey of experimentation, KGKNSV-STS continues to confront essential challenges stemming from economic and social pressures. Among these difficulties are the struggle to sustain operations due to a lack of both financial and human resources, limited accessibility to a broad audience, and the pressure of fluctuating tastes resulting from the constantly changing demographics of student audiences each year, which clearly reflect the influence of contemporary popular culture on the new generation. The contrast is evident when comparing the audience of ten years ago, primarily composed of Millennials, with the current audience, which mainly consists of Generation Z. However, in facing the challenge of this shifting audience, KGKNSV-STS can leverage it as an opportunity within its experimental creative framework based on the “trial and error” mechanism.

It is evident that the “trial and error” approach in the arts serves not only as a fundamental method of creation but also as a means to explore and transcend theoretical frameworks, challenging existing boundaries. Members of the KGKNSV-STS project, through their experimental processes, have identified and implemented several new approaches, creating fresh spaces for creativity within the student environment at USSH. In the context of the “socialization” of Vietnamese theatrical arts, this independent pathway has somewhat repositioned the role of spontaneous art as a symbol of freedom, actively shaping social and cultural ideologies for the generation of practitioners who engage in creativity in the most natural manner. Accordingly, the art within the framework of KGKNSV-STS exists as a social practice. Beyond aesthetic goals, the project fosters community among USSH students, facilitating social dialogues through the organically constructed discourses of an emerging intellectual youth. These young artists, often labeled as amateurs, have become agents of societal engagement through their works within KGKNSV-STS, promoting interaction and exploring social issues in an era where such journeys are increasingly individualized due to the influence of “digital modernism”. Moreover, the endeavor to navigate the path for the survival of this spontaneous art form simultaneously acts as a form of resistance, critiquing the political, economic, and cultural norms in Việt Nam since the Đổi Mới reforms, which still grapple with unresolved issues. Specifically, the arts are continuously seeking ways to experiment and innovate following the socialization decree of 1997. In other words, since 1997, Vietnamese cultural and artistic activities have been granted a degree of autonomy within the post-Đổi Mới market mechanism, and this autonomy remains closely tied to the journey of trial and error in the quest for survival, much like the challenges faced by KGKNSV-STS itself.

Despite the numerous challenges faced by small experimental art models stemming from economic and political pressures, the role of these “unknown” clubs in engaging mainstream audiences and fostering creative breakthroughs is undeniable. The existence and development of experimental art necessitate a delicate balance between creative freedom and adaptability to real-world conditions. Furthermore, it requires appropriate support mechanisms to sustain and cultivate these unique values. One such mechanism is fundraising to secure funding.

5. The non-profit nature and sustainability of art within contemporary economic and political systems

Donations have long ceased to be a novel concept in the realm of art, regardless of the level of prominence, ranging from renowned organizations like the National Theatre at Home (National Theatre UK, funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies) and major theaters across the United States to smaller or even micro-scale art practices such as KGKNSV-STC. This phenomenon underscores the inherent “charity” aspect of the arts, particularly for disciplines like theater, which often grapple with financial challenges in comparison to more commercially viable sectors such as film and popular music.

In Việt Nam, the concept of a “cultural industry” remains relatively underdeveloped, and the operational framework of theater as a segment of this industry in Hồ Chí Minh City is fraught with numerous unresolved issues and lacks sustainability. Following a period of growth, the Small Stage 5B disbanded into smaller entities, which subsequently established independent performing arts companies such as Thái Dương Company (Idécaf), Vân Tuấn Company (Phú Nhuận), Hoàng Thái Thanh Stage, Minh Nhí Stage, Quốc Thảo Stage, and Thế Giới Trẻ Stage. In addition, smaller groups have developed the café theater model, performing in intimate spaces with audience interaction. Notable examples include Drama Café Bệt, Drama Café Đồi, Drama Café Cầu Vòng, Drama Café Sắc, and Drama Café Gạo, which emerged during this period. Despite these developments, the officially operating private theaters in this market still face significant challenges in securing funding to maintain effective operations. This financial instability hinders their ability to ensure steady growth, which is essential for fostering high-quality technical creativity in the performing arts.

KGKNSV-STS operates as a form of “autonomous” theater, similar to independent and non-profit theaters in the United States, which often rely on community support through donations, grants from arts funds, and reasonably priced ticket sales to sustain their activities. This approach emphasizes public support as patrons of the arts and engages a community invested in cultural initiatives. Here, the concept of donation implies that the audience and community are not merely consumers but also contributors, facilitating the development of the arts without being beholden to market forces. In this context, the inherent “charity” of art becomes evident, as it serves not only the basic entertainment needs for profit but also carries the responsibility of fostering cultural and spiritual values within the community. This connection creates a network of individuals united by shared cultural and spiritual values. Donations, in various forms, help maintain a free space for artists to create, allowing art to exist for its own sake rather than for short-term profit motives. The “charity” aspect of art is particularly evident in the KGKNSV-STS model, which demonstrates the capacity to provide artistic exploration for the student community without requiring direct material benefits.

However, the sustainability of this operational model remains questionable, given that there is virtually no guarantee of stability regarding these funding sources. Moreover, the organization of fundraising events and the allocation of generated revenue for subsequent operations are often fraught with challenges. These issues have prompted Monica Byrne, a theater artist in the United States, to raise a critical question in her article for *The Washington Post*, titled “Why theater (in its current form) does not deserve to be saved?” that highlights the necessity for nonprofit management mechanisms to enhance their functions in regulating funding sources and policies:

“The professional nonprofit model is killing the form it was supposed to sustain. But theater will survive and could even bloom into a renaissance — if we start funding theater artists directly. The writing on the wall has always been clear: Artists are the ones who find new ways forward in times of change. That’s our job. We innovate. Let us.”⁵

In the context of small-scale independent projects like KGKNSV-STS, which emerge and develop within an economic and political framework where both state and market support for contributions remain fraught with challenges, spontaneous art primarily relies on the

⁵ Monica Byrne, “Why Theater (in Its Current Form) Does Not Deserve to Be Saved.” *The Washington Post*, 9 August 2023, accessed 25 October 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/09/how-to-save-american-theater/>.

selfless efforts of young artists who engage in artistic practices driven by a fundamental belief in the power and essence of pure beauty. This scenario presents a challenging future for amateur art, especially in a climate where genuine artistic expression—both amateur and professional—often appears to be marginally integrated within the cultural industry. This situation is particularly significant as Việt Nam strives to catch up with regional counterparts since the initiation of market reforms, and it has increasingly become a pressing issue that has garnered significant government attention in recent years⁶. However, the reliance on market mechanisms for the development of the arts through “socialization” policies and the current state of the theatrical landscape in Hồ Chí Minh City highlight a lack of coherence and commitment in arts development strategies. The deficiencies in supporting artistic growth underscore the disconnection of cultural creators from the cultural industry, as works that are fully integrated into this industry increasingly risk becoming hollowed-out commodities, which is exemplified by Andreas Huyssen’s observation on the fact that in consumer society, art is commodified, transforming into spectacle and losing intrinsic meaning, as culture becomes indistinguishable from commercial products:

“[...] art works become commodities and are enjoyed as such; in consumer society, the commodity itself has transformed into image, representation, and spectacle. [...] “Use value has been replaced by packaging and advertising. The commodification of art ends up in the aesthetization of the commodity. The siren song of the commodity has displaced the promesse de bonheur once held by bourgeois art, and consumer Odysseus blissfully plunges into the sea of commodities, hoping to find gratification but finding none. More than the museum or the academy even, department store and supermarket have become the cemeteries of culture. Culture and commodification have been collapsed in this theory to the extent that the gravitational pull of the culture industry leaves no meaning, no signification unscathed.”⁷.

⁶ Government of Việt Nam. “Quyết định số 1755/QĐ-TTg của Thủ tướng Chính phủ: Phê duyệt Chiến lược phát triển các ngành công nghiệp văn hóa Việt Nam đến năm 2020, tầm nhìn đến năm 2030” [Strategy for developing Việt Nam’s cultural industries to 2020, vision to 2030, No. 1755/QĐ-TTg], issued on 08 September 2016, signed by Vũ Đức Đam, accessed 25 October 2024, <https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/default.aspx?pageid=27160&docid=186367>.

⁷ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, and Postmodernism*. (London: Macmillan Press, 1986) 21-22.

It is evident that the so-called “cultural industry” has failed to establish a sustainable foundation for the mechanisms that foster the emergence and development of genuine culture and art characterized by autonomy.

Conclusion

The Student Theater Space, often regarded as a minority within a minority, exists in an amateur realm in a country where what is referred to as the “theatrical industry” lacks the sustainability needed in the context of socialized theater, which has encountered numerous challenges since the Đổi Mới reforms. This situation highlights the project’s proximity to what is termed “pure art”, where anonymous artists practice their craft with a spirit of dedication, viewing their labor as a form of donation that allows them to narrate the stories they desire—stories that stem from their generational spirit—free from the influence of any commercial agents. This phenomenon reinforces the significance of anonymous works in contemporary society, which is often manipulated by the industrial machinery of the market or shaped by the preferences of sponsors that can be politically complex. Therefore, the works produced within the framework of KGKNSV-STC can be regarded as a form of “socially significant art” or “the purest form of socialized art.”

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: 16 Seasons of *Không gian Kịch nói Sinh viên / The Student Theatre Space* (KGKNSV—STS) 2014—2024

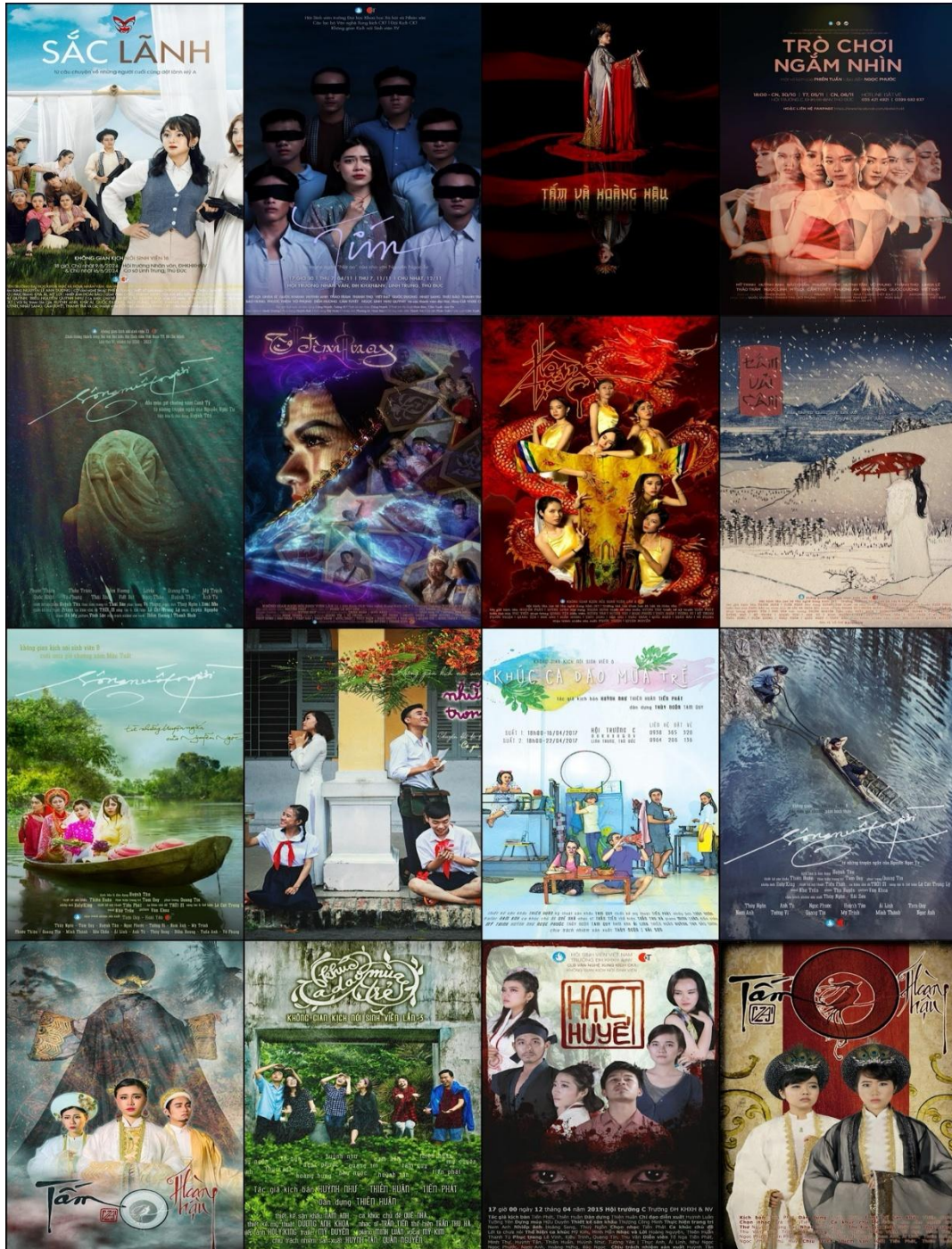


Figure 2: The seventeenth season of *Không gian Kịch nói Sinh viên / The Student Theatre Space (KGKNSV—STS)* is going to be premiere this November

