

IETM PUBLICATION

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THE MOMENT FOR CHANGE IS NOW

*COVID-19 learning points
for the performing arts sector
and policy-makers*



Photo: Clark Tibbs

December 2020
9782930897486



Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union

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**The moment for change is now
COVID-19 learning points for the performing arts sector and policy-makers**

IETM Publication

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Published by IETM - International network for contemporary performing arts,
Brussels December 2020

Proofreading: Elizabeth Hayes

Layout: Milton Pereira on a template by JosWorld



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This publication should be mentioned as follows:

E. Polivtseva, 'The moment for change is now: COVID-19 learning points for the performing arts sector and policy-makers', IETM, December 2020.

Link: <https://www.ietm.org/en/publications>

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Photo: John Cameron

Introduction

COVID-19 has left an indelible imprint on the performing arts, and its effects will reverberate in the years to come. While it is evident that the sector has been losing revenues and jobs at an unprecedentedly fast pace, it will take some time to fully estimate the economic impact COVID-19 will have on the performing arts.

This report attempts to explore what other, less palpable, effects the crisis has had on the performing arts. Through a survey and in-depth conversations with six of our members, we looked at what trends the pandemic has generated – and accelerated. Have there been any changes in power dynamics and relationships within the sector? Have there been interesting artistic developments which will expand and grow? Have there been any revelations about the future of international work?

We looked into how the performing arts sector has been adapting to the pandemic and tried to identify some of the interesting solutions for survival which should be scaled up and brought into the post-pandemic future.

We believe cultural policies and funding strategies need to be reassessed, and that funders and policy-makers must rethink the pre-COVID priorities and principles of policies and funding programmes. The sector has been pushed to reinvent itself. The supporting structures must therefore also change to remain relevant, to respond to new issues and address old ones, which have been revealed or exacerbated by the pandemic. This report provides recommendations to policymakers on how to support the sector today, in the near future and in the longer term, and how policies and funding programmes should be reexamined in light of the pandemic.

The crisis has reinforced our belief that the moment for change is now. However, it remains to be seen whether our current reassessment of the existing foundations, structures, rules, practices and values in the global arts community is mature enough. Did we have enough time, mental space, resources, tools for research, dialogues and experimentation? Perhaps not enough, but we do believe that the crisis has taught us some essential learning points and these need to be reflected upon. Thus our report also sums up those learning points, shared by various professionals from different parts of the world – a list of “COVID take-aways” for the performing arts community.

This paper is a quick look back over the past several months, a snapshot of what we have learned so far, and an attempt to imagine a better future. While we acknowledge regional differences, we are trying nonetheless to detect common trends.



Photo: Matthieu Joannon

We surveyed our members (the survey was out for three weeks in September and October and we received around 100 responses) and conducted more in-depth conversations with six performing arts professionals in November and December: Mary Ann Cauchi (Director of Funding and Strategy at Arts Council Malta), Michael De Cock (Artistic Director at KVS, Belgium), Rachel Feuchtwang, (Managing Director of Schweigman&, the Netherlands), Tessa Gordziejko (producer, poet, performer, theatre director, UK), Grzegorz Reske (freelance curator and producer of performing arts, Poland), György Szabó, (Managing Director of Trafo, Hungary).

The various examples cited in the report, as well as the learning points, with which the report begins, are not exhaustive. We will continue monitoring how the situation develops and hold more conversations with our members, which will help us to update this report in the future.

Summary

COVID-19 - NINE LEARNING POINTS FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS SECTOR AND POLICY-MAKERS

1 - We are not in the same boat, but we need to sail forward

It is widely recognised that the live art sector has been devastated by the pandemic. However, what it means for various organisations and professionals in different countries is more complex than it might seem. There are huge variations between different parts of the world, in regard to public support for the performing arts field, the situation of the independent scene, economic development of the country, the state of art education, the position of emerging artists, etc. There has never been global consistency in how issues such as sustainability, business models, freedom of expression, inclusion, neoliberalism, etc. are approached or even defined. The international conversation has involved various degrees of cross-border solidarity and awareness, with some country-specific issues being more on the radar than others. Today, the focus of local arts communities is turning ever more inwards, and some funders are enthusiastically embracing the notion of “local culture”. **We must resist this inward looking tendency, and strive for a new level of international conversation that is interlocal, connecting our local realities across borders.** This means not shying away from learning about each others’ situations, acknowledging the gaps and differences and continuing to build a shared cross-border space for collaborations and mutual learning.



X Photo: X

2 - We need a large-scale and result-oriented conversation on shaping the “new normal”

And we need it urgently, if we do not want to “waste the crisis”. It is time the performing arts ecosystem got together to rethink how it functions. The format or platform for such a discussion should be chosen and developed based on the local or national situation. The key here should be shifting the focus from each player’s own interests and shaping a common vision on the needs and vulnerabilities of the performing arts ecosystem at large, and on the most feasible way of caring for it in a collaborative way. Depending on the national situation, we need to involve funders and institutions in the conversation, before, during or after we, as a performing arts community, make up our mind on what the “new normal” should be: the most viable, relevant and fair models of collaborating, producing, presenting, and working with audiences. **While policy-makers must support the change, it is up to us to conceive it.**

3 - Flexibility is key for creating relevance

In order to create truly relevant art, the performing arts community needs to feel the social pulse and remain true to their artistic values. The pandemic has taught us that radical adaptations and adjustments are hard, but possible and pertinent if done in a meaningful way. Funders should explore (further) and implement the concept of **flexible and agile funding**, which would allow beneficiaries to adapt to various circumstances, as well as allow their creative process and artistic ideas to evolve and develop along the project’s life span, depending on social dynamics and developments in the country and in the world. The pandemic is not the first and won’t be the last extraordinary event; thus it must be acknowledged that every artwork may need to reinvent itself along the way. Artistic projects should be allowed and stimulated to have a bank of meaningful multi-platform options - to remain flexible and versatile. While conceiving a project, we need to envisage how it can be transferred to alternative media, if it is needed, **while remaining relevant.** Funders, in their turn, should be flexible about the evaluation of indicators (number of attendees, revenues, etc.), as various scenarios bring different possibilities in this regard. There should be more trust in relations between funders and beneficiaries, although there certainly should be safeguarding mechanisms to make sure it is not abused.

4 - Pandemic calls for redesigning cultural policies

In many places, the pandemic has been a unique opportunity for the sector to self-organise, sharpen its voice and install or strengthen dialogue with policy-makers. The latter, in turn, were pushed to gain a deeper understanding of how the sector functions, how fragile it is, but also how valuable live art is for society. **We need to build on this new awareness and, based on what the pandemic has taught us, reshape cultural policies. We also need to reshape funding strategies, in order for them to truly suit the sector,** be inclusive (proactively reaching out to underrepresented groups), balanced (between all players in the value chain), and fair. Cultural policy should contribute to a future where art practices, human and professional relationships, economic models, ties among communities and cross-border connections are truly sustainable. If we do not want to get back to the “old normal”, we need to stop putting all our focus on the resilience of the sector, and call on the decision-making bodies to readjust the principles, rules, guiding values, evaluation criteria and methods of their policies and strategies - in close collaboration with the sector. One of the key points to embrace in future policies and funding strategies should be the recognition that research, innovation and adaptation in the performing arts are also work – very essential work – and need to be funded in order to go in turns with production periods and nourish the entire span of the artistic process.

5 - It is high time to become digitally literate

In the past few months, digitalisation of the performing arts has been happening at an accelerated pace. Even those who have never thought of producing for the virtual world have been dragged into it. This COVID-19 digitalisation journey has brought mixed results: from innovative and pioneering work to poorly adapted digital performances which satisfied neither audiences nor artists. A few critical issues have arisen in relation to the rapid steps the sector has taken into the virtual world: copyright issues, online privacy and safety, artistic quality, censorship by platforms, unfair competition with audiovisual sectors, monetisation models, access for spectators with disabilities and audiences from unprivileged backgrounds, digital footprint, and more. It is high time we sort out those issues and reflect on the extent and the way in which the digital element should play a part in the future, even when venues are able to fully reopen. These times of self-isolation have shone a light on how far we can virtualise different parts of our life. It has also proven that live interactions are vital, and the live performing arts, with their unique power to bring people together, are as important as ever (read more in our report [here](#)).



Photo: Liza Poor

6 - In crisis times - accept the crisis

Take-aways for the sector: When there is an emergency, we first need to adapt our own mindsets - and the first shift must be in our own understanding of quality and success. When it is not possible to produce a live performance for a particular stage with the desired number of spectators, we must simply do something else which is relevant and feasible. Take-aways for the funders: In times of crisis, it is unfair to demand the originally promised output and put pressure on box offices, as experimentation and adaptation are not aligned with market logic. The sector needs support in rethinking the way forward, taking risks, exploring the unknown. Artistic work can happen in crisis too and it needs to be funded, but with minimal guidance and restrictions, as artists need to figure out for themselves how they adapt their works to crisis situations and what is most relevant for their creative process and their audiences. It is necessary to support the adaptation of the existing or pre-planned work for unusual circumstances, taking into account the limits of how an artwork can be adapted and the fact that some work cannot be adapted at all. It is also absolutely important that funders support entirely new artistic ideas, and not only those which were supported before.

7 - Let go of inward thinking and focus on what societies need

Let's not reconstruct the silos between presenters and producers which have been dismantled during the pandemic. Let's build on the positive attempts to collectively and collaboratively work towards the common needs of the performing arts ecosystem and of societies at large. The specific needs of each stakeholder in the ecosystem are enormous and urgent, yet it would be interesting to start with looking at what society needs. As Rachel Feuchtwang put it, **"What society clearly needs at the moment is really good art."** Wouldn't focusing on the artistic value of a collaborative work naturally lead to a more equal and fair distribution of resources and power within the sector? Carefully guarding one's own specific interests and pulling the blanket over oneself would certainly not. Examining interests and needs from a broader perspective may also help reassess what we understand by success, visibility, meaning and value in the sector. The pandemic has shown once again how not everything in the arts has to be grand and massive.



Photo: Nick Bolton

8 - We must learn the lesson about freelancing once and for all

Freelance and self-employed art professionals have been terribly undermined by the pandemic. An increasing number of them have been reconsidering their professional choices and will be forced to look for jobs elsewhere. The performing arts sector may be faced with a huge scarcity of talent, creativity and skills in the near future. The socio-economic position of freelance and self-employed professionals in the art sector was difficult long before the pandemic; thus, current events have only revealed the great instability and fragility of the entire art ecosystem which so heavily relies on independent workers. Freelance professionals from minority backgrounds are hit the hardest and they may have even more career challenges ahead, as they are less likely to be able to afford uncertainty, falling incomes, periods of inactivity, etc. Therefore, to maintain the vibrancy and diversity of the performing arts sector and provide millions of highly skilled professionals with decent living and working conditions, **policy-makers must take concrete steps to constructively address the multiplicity of issues at stake: social security, social benefits, unemployment status, remuneration, copyrights, funding structures, and many more.**

9 - Let's go local and strengthen the international

Both local and international are absolutely essential for the performing arts.

Mobility will, hopefully, never get to its pre-pandemic shape and pace, as many hope. The sector's priorities are clearly shifting towards preserving our environment and the professional and human relationships that workers build in the arts sector, along with the consistency and strength of their artistic trajectories. Hectic mobility and touring for the sake of touring, driven by the unquenchable thirst for recognition, visibility and international grants, must be replaced by more meaningful cross-border collaborations, which will not exhaust ecological, human, economic and social resources, but enrich performing arts communities and citizens based in different parts of the world through fair, open, thoughtful and inspiring long-term interactions. **Our art forms need international exchange to blossom. Audiences need to discover other ideas, mentalities, and cultures, to learn about the complexity of the world.** For this to happen, we need to defend and cherish the value of international work, today more than ever. We also need to (re) explore local resources, root ourselves in local communities and, as importantly, try to connect our locality with other corners of the world.

Artistic inventions and deceptions

PANDEMIC AS AN INSPIRATION

As in any era of calamity, there have been new artistic developments arising in the performing arts. Some survey respondents even admitted that the pandemic has inspired some fresh and fascinating practices.

“My view of the arts ecosystem is that it has changed forever. The most dynamic directions open to us are close to the ground, living cultures that redefine what arts and culture mean to society. I have noticed a lot of land-based arts, performance, installations,” Tessa Gordziejko, producer, poet, performer, theatre director from the UK, shared.

Digitalisation has certainly served as a domain for experimentation, learning, and engaging with audiences. Theatre works were turned into video projects - documentaries, short films; performances were streamed, digitalised, in various ways; there have been a great number of audio-walks; shows were turned into social media interactions; many organisations started podcasts, some even started TV channels. Exploring the virtual world has not been a solution for all, as obviously some live performances are not meant to be transferred online; moreover, the sector has been facing plenty of issues related to digital productions: monetisation, access, digital privacy and safety, among others. On the bright side, the pandemic has advanced the exploration of these issues and sparked some long-awaited debates.

The past few months have also brought for some an opportunity to imagine and simultaneously apply multiple channels, tools and media within the same piece of artwork, which originally was thought solely as a performance. Live show, outdoor installation, video, social media interaction, blog, gaming, and many more different formats were explored and used within the same production. This was the case of Pampiric, a theatre piece turned into a multiplatform project - story disguised as a series of beauty tutorials by UK artists Alison Andrew and Tessa Gordziejko. As Tessa said, “the project has developed more transgressive dimensions, by moving beyond the conventions of a live performance.”

Performing arts communities all over the world were forced to rethink roles, functions and boundaries within the sector and the art form itself. Many organisations took up new roles within their communities, like Slung Low, a Leeds-based company, “which overnight became a welfare organisation, distributing



Photo: Hailey Kean

food to people during the first lockdown”. Some companies, being deprived of the conventional stage, started working with hospitals, retirement homes, schools, etc. “We had 34 performances for care homes/hospitals and children. Those are new audiences, and new work, which we have never done before”, said Tora de Zwart Rørholt, from Carte Blanche, Norway, “we are very happy with the performances. They are important for our future development and showed us new ways to connect with new audience groups. Based on these performances we are now developing a new project to continue building relations to audience groups that have difficulties to come and see our regular performances.”

KVS, one of the main Belgian theatres, has also presented work in hospitals and schools for the first time. Whether this is something they would continue after the pandemic, Michael De Cock, KVS Artistic Director, said that these new activities will definitely impact the future of the theatre, bringing new dynamics, ways of thinking and learning points, but that the KVS team are also eager to restart presenting on their own stages.

Socially engaged art has been playing a particular role in the past few months, and it has also been impacted by the crisis in a different way. As the [report](#) by Common Vision (UK) reveals, organisations which had been rooted in their communities before the pandemic and had social and community impact at the heart of their mission, found themselves better equipped to deal with the situation.

LOD Muziektheater, based in Belgium, have been undertaking the initiative “Lunch op Donderdag” (Lunch on Thursday): every Thursday, LOD team members have been cooking thirty meals for people in need, combining this with art. The initiative collected donations from citizens.



Photo: Nathan Dumlao

Some organisations have been testing new working and organisational models. “This summer, we’re contracting three artists to work with no ‘targets’, no pre-defined outcome and no pressure for four months with three different communities in Gloucester” according to the website of Strike a Light, a UK-based art organisation, committed to using the unusual time for building a “new normal”, in which artists would be employed full-time to make art with, and for, communities.

A large amount of public space art has been created (see some examples collected by the IN SITU network [here](#)). As an example, Metropolis, an art-based metropolitan laboratory for performative, site-specific, international art, ran the Wa(l)king Copenhagen project. Metropolis invited 100 artists living in Copenhagen to create 100 curated walks through the city over 100 days – as a performative diary from a city where the coronavirus set the agenda and radically changed daily life.

Multiple festivals engaged in co-productions with artists and small companies, which made far-reaching changes in their programmes. In addition, digitalisation helped many festivals become more global, as they were able to invite artists and companies from all over the world to show their performances and take part in conversations. “In our online programme, we could finally concentrate on topics and matters that were hard to insert into the artistic programme as such,” said Virve Sutinen, Artistic Director of Tanz im August Festival, Berlin.

As some of the performances were partly replaced or complemented by digital talks, many festivals and artists got an opportunity to hold long-awaited conversations, free from geographic boundaries and the usual pressure to sell tickets and provide for a “regular-but-better-than-last-year” festival experience.

There have been interesting examples of how venues collaborated amongst themselves to create feasible programmes to comply with social distancing. Rachel Feuchtwang, Managing Director of Schweigman&, the Netherlands, cited the example of the collaboration of three Dutch venues - Royal Theatre Carré, Theater Bellevue and De Kleine Komedie - that did a joint programme on the Carré main stage, where performances could take place in line with the virus containment measures. They took a big risk, as a lot of work which was supposed to be shown in Bellevue, a smaller venue, was potentially not suitable for the Carré stage. Warne Winkel, another Dutch theatre company, created a sort of auditorium for themselves called the Peepshow Palace, with a lot of little booths around a central performing space; they invited other companies to use it. They also made it available to younger artists and students who would otherwise not have been able to present their work at all.

A turn to minimalism has been a logical and somewhat natural trend: as it hasn’t been possible to produce massive performances, artists experimented with simple formats consisting of minimum material, actors and audiences involved. “The tendency to minimisation in the sense of the size of performance was already happening before the pandemic. The reason was the unsustainability of production costs. What will happen after this crisis, we still don’t know precisely, but it is clear that this minimisation will be seen in many other aspects including mobility”, said Pavla Petrova from Arts and Theatre Institute, Czech Republic. **This has also been part of the trajectory of rethinking success, traditionally measured by scale and mass.**

ARTISTIC PROJECTS AS SURVIVAL SOLUTIONS

The results of the COVID experimentations have been very mixed. Those who had prior experience working with outdoor or digital formats had more success than those who tried it for the first time.

For many, the work produced in the current circumstances was an “artistic deception”, as it did not work out well in terms of quality or creators’ original expectations, if it was about adjusting the work conceived before the restrictions. Due to the limited time available to get up to speed on alternative formats and tools, some adaptations or new projects were less successful: poor acoustics in alternative spaces, lack of intimacy in buildings temporarily used for performances, lack of interaction with online audiences, site-specific work not sufficiently considerate of local dynamics, were just some of the pitfalls. The quality of digital works archived by theatres and shared during the first lockdown has also been a matter of frustration for the actors and directors involved in those productions, as they were not originally intended for online distribution.

In places, where the biggest part of public support went to institutional structures, there has been very little room for alternative practices to emerge and flourish. According to Grzegorz Reske, independent curator and producer, this is what has happened in Poland. Public institutions tended to pursue regular formats and practices, as far as possible, while independent professionals, invited to collaborate with them, did not have any other choice than to attune to their conventional roadmaps. At the same time, building-based organisations have obviously been very constrained in their artistic options, plus the uncertainty - whether the production will be shown live or will go straight to the internet or both - has been a factor undermining the quality of the process and the result.

For many, even if some results of “corona experimentations” might have seemed satisfying, it has been one long path of adaptations and struggling to survive; “**fighting not working**”, as one of the respondents put it.

Many respondents noted that they did not feel like immersing themselves in new creations without having explored the new reality and what audiences need. Instead of creating and presenting, many would have preferred to conduct research, plan the innovation, and make the adaptation thoughtful. For them, research grants would have been more relevant in these times.

It was highlighted that it is too early to discuss new artistic practices which might have been instigated by the pandemic and which may remain there in the post-COVID world.

There is a feeling among the majority of respondents that whatever new formats are emerging today, **there is no certainty they can be scaled up, as the art sector still depends on funders to make it happen**. Both size and priorities of funding programmes will determine to what extent the sector will be able to shape a truly new future. Whether funders will change the guiding values and rules of supporting schemes remains to be seen. There is no certainty either that funding structures will continue practicing the flexibility they have shown during the pandemic. This flexibility has been one of the factors helping new practices to emerge.

So far, the main focus of funding organisations and governments, understandably, has been on creating emergency funds, to save the financial situation of as many organisations and professionals as possible. However, there has not been sufficient support provided to various players in the sector to rethink their role in pandemic times and beyond, and in general to the performing arts field to build on the “covid learning points”, to imagine a better future for the sector. There is also a need to take stock of the diverse artistic practices that have been developing and expanding in the past few months, and to embrace them in the current and future funding landscape.



Photo: Gabriella Clare Marino

Relations within the ecosystem

The pandemic has had both positive and negative effects on the complex and highly diversified relations between various performing arts players (venues, festivals, producers, artists, cultural managers, institutions). Due to the wide discrepancies in performing arts realities across the globe before COVID-19, not to mention the extremely diverse pandemic responses at national level, the situation over the last number of months, obviously, has differed greatly from country to country.

DIVIDES AND RESENTMENTS

A large number of organisations have been primarily worried about their own economic survival, overriding any other concerns. Obviously, publicly funded venues and those depending on box offices, catering services and other commercial sources found themselves in different situations. The latter have had less room for manoeuvre and focused more on their own survival.

Overall, the pandemic poisoned many relations within the sector. Interactions between venues and producers have been tense; uncertainty led to a lack of communication, pending responses, and left no room for collective reflection on alternative solutions.

Many venues decided to take back their production offers or to cut them, anticipating audiences would be reduced, thus contributing to artists' loss of income. Some venue professionals expressed frustration that they were not able to provide guarantees of compensation for potentially cancelled shows, while the pressure from artists' side in this regard has only been growing. In their turn, companies and artists considered venues much less risk-averse than usual, "not always with logic or reason".

In many countries, freelance professionals got little or no support from their governments, unlike institutions and larger structures; social security mechanisms were not available to freelancers either. As Grzegorz Reske, Polish independent curator and producer, observes, in his country artists have been abandoned in these challenging times, while institutions received a massive portion of public support. This is because freelance professionals do not have a structural status in Poland. In the meantime, as he pointed out, some organisations, while getting public support, "have closed their doors without much communication, and nobody knows what they are up to".

Because the most vulnerable players found themselves in an unfair situation, there has been some tension growing in the sector. "A divide has appeared between the funded organisations in the sector and the freelance workforce", said Alistair Spalding, Artistic Director and Chief Executive of Sadler's Wells in the UK, "one of the results of the COVID crisis is that it has shown how there is no real safety net for freelancers in the benefit system and around 36% of the freelance sector haven't been able to take advantage of any of the government rescue packages for various technical reasons. This has led to a growing resentment towards organisations who have been helped during this time. To be clear, the funding bodies have kept to the status quo and have predominantly supported organisations rather than individuals."

Copyright issues have arisen in some countries where public theatres were releasing digital versions of performances without offering creators and authors additional fees despite the extended audience (online views). Grzegorz shares that in Poland, many public theatres have been sharing archived digital material during the lockdown period. This has also been a way to pay artists; however, as Grzegorz noted, the increased reach of broadcasted performances has not been taken into account and fees were fixed at the level of a regular live presentation. The future profits of creators and actors are, therefore, at risk if the copyright issues are not sorted out.

Rachel Feuchtwang, Managing Director of Schweigman&, the Netherlands, reflected on the general trend, even before the COVID-19 crisis, of both sides - presenters and producers - being increasingly focused on their own needs: "Presenters are used to thinking about their own interest, and companies have also becoming less flexible in understanding the needs of the other. For a long time, decision-making has been done by presenters predominantly, of course limited by what companies are offering. Today, there needs to be some movement on both sides."

AWARENESS, SOLIDARITY, CONSOLIDATION

However, there is a sense in the sector that through the pandemic, presenters and producers have become much more aware of each others' vulnerabilities. Cancellation processes, if they were accompanied by negotiations and informal exchanges, have revealed professional, financial and human limitations of the "other side" of the contract. As Gry Worre Hallberg from Sisters Hope, a Copenhagen-based performance-group, said: "As an artist I had to be very clear about the lack of safety net for artists and the precarious life and therefore the necessity that we find a solution that is sustainable to the artists [...]. The institution, on the other hand, then also had to share their fragilities, which led to a deeper compassion from me about the circumstances they produce in." Similar revelations shared through the survey were both about building empathy and gaining knowledge of how different players in the sector work. This awareness will hopefully remain and make future collaborations more fair and mutually supportive.

In some places, this has resulted in attempts to improve the contract conditions between artists and cultural operators. For example, Arts Council Malta encouraged publicly funded venues to be more lenient with fees and absorb more expenses in case of emergency. Agreements signed between venues and companies became multi-tiered, offering several scenarios for artists and companies to be compensated for their work even if the show is cancelled or redesigned, audience capacity is reduced, or an insufficient number of tickets is sold. Mary Ann Cauchi, Director of Funding and Strategy at Arts Council Malta, believes the multi-scenario agreements practice will remain in place after the pandemic, "there should be something in place to safeguard the artists if another pandemic or any other extraordinary event happens". According to Michael De Cock, Artistic Director of KVS, in Belgium, a new type of "fair trade" contract has been introduced, according to which during the pandemic, a performance is either postponed or part of the fee is paid to artists. Now it is up to the theatres and all the venues to respect that.

Alongside divides and tensions (in some cases), the solidarity mentioned by respondents has been enormous and unprecedented. Many presenters put a lot of effort into compensating the losses of artists and everyone involved in cancelled shows or creating new work. They also opened calls for projects, through which artists could be paid. Open calls helped by going beyond the venues' immediate networks and providing support to more artists than just those that normally collaborate with them. Many venues decided to stay open through the summer in order to accommodate the postponed performances.



Photo: Dylan Gillis

Some of them offered their buildings as residencies or rehearsal spaces to artists and companies. Many were offering free digital classes. Some were involved in national initiatives to support freelancers.

Financial solidarity among professionals was shown towards the most fragile players in the sector - freelance and self-employed professionals. As one of numerous examples, [SOS Relief](#) is an initiative, created by the Belgian platform State of the Art, which facilitates person-to-person financial solidarity.

Many unexpected and impactful conversations took place, thanks to the accessibility created by digital diffusion and also to the feeling of emergency that enhanced unity and made many professionals discover and experience the value of sharing, listening, and conversing. Such conversations were aimed at helping tackle professional issues but also had a positive psychological effect on individual professionals.

The pandemic has also made many performing arts players realise they can – and have to – better support each other by sharing and exchanging ideas and resources and by improving collaboration practices. Mary Ann Cauchi, Arts Council Malta, noted that arts organisations in her country are in much closer dialogue today than before the pandemic, whereas "working in silos" and seeking autonomy had been the norm for a long time. "Now a better understanding of camaraderie and its benefits is being recognised across the board and will last post-pandemic too."

In many countries, there has been unprecedented self-organisation within the sector, aimed at refining our collective voice and advocating for the needs and values of the performing arts. Many networks which were originally created to share practices and stimulate professional connections enhanced their political role. The newly formed alliances, or the old ones which were strengthened and revived, played a crucial role in raising the awareness of the challenges in the sector and led the dialogue with policy-makers.

Many respondents admit their local arts community has never been so organised and are certain that this will be continued into the future.

Here are just a few examples of what has been happening in many corners of the world:

“The pandemic strongly activated the independent sector and strengthened the desire to work together”, noted Petr Pola from Nová síť z.s., Czech Republic.

“We did see greater solidarity than usual, in which lobbying for the arts was done by many different parties in unprecedented unity”, highlighted Jeffrey Meulman, National Dutch Theatre Festival.

“Thanks to the newly created Crisiscell in Belgium, there has been a lot of dialogue going on between the government and the sector”, shared Michael De Cock, Artistic director of KVS.

In Malta, the Central Government played a major role in funding the creative and cultural sectors’ resilience and recovery. The Covid-19 Transition Art Task Force was set up by the Ministry for National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government in collaboration with Arts Council Malta.

In Ireland, “the National Campaign for the Arts has brought the Irish arts community together in greater numbers than ever before to respond to the pandemic”, shared Tom Creed, independent artist.

In the UK, the [Freelance Task Force](#) is made up of over 160 freelancers, working in theatre and performance arts. Interestingly, this and other initiatives have been not only focusing on improving the “outside world”, but are also practicing new models of self-organisation and collaboration, attempting to emancipate from the logic and rules of the existing dominant structures, “not to replicate harmful systems”. Fairness, inclusion and access are often the key words in such new initiatives.



Photo: Nazrin B Va

CONFIDENCE BETWEEN PEERS VS “DO IT YOURSELF” TO MINIMISE RISKS

In general, the openness of the performing arts community to working collaboratively has changed in different ways.

On the one hand, there has been more space and stimulus for unexpected and cross-level collaborations. For instance, festivals and artists were co-producing work, aiming for a result that would be inspired by artists' out-of-the-box thinking, but from the start conceived in line with the facilities and infrastructure of future presenters. This urge for unusual and innovative collaborations inspired a higher level of trust between partners: performances were programmed without presenters having seen them live; professionals were invited to take part in projects without having met, etc. Relying on peers' opinions has been happening more often than before. “The confidence between peers has slightly progressed, for instance certain programmes were worked out without meeting the artists or watching their work,” said Krisje Beaumont, advisor at Occitanie en scène, France.

On the other hand, there has also been a trend of exploring and making better use of one's own resources. Some organisations that were able to conceive and implement all stages of production and presenting work on their own, preferred to reduce potential risks and limitations which could be brought by collaborating with other partners, in the uncertain times of the pandemic. Rachel Feuchtwang said her company has been showing this tendency: “Our current strategy under consideration is to invest in order to take a calculated risk, that producing our own work in our own space under certain conditions gives us more control (within COVID regulations) and has more chance of success at the moment.”



Photo: Helen Ngoc

INCLUSIVE CONVERSIONS AND MULTIFACETED COLLABORATIONS

The pandemic emergency has broken many silos. Creativity and agility have been in demand more than ever. Thus independent artists and small companies, which are known to be flexible and reactive to change, were asked by presenters to rethink or create programmes together with them. “We initiated an online brainstorm with artists who we feel connected to. This was appreciated by many of those who we asked to think about the future with us”, shared Rainer Hofmann from Spring Utrecht, the Netherlands. “We were encouraging and going along with artists, who were thinking of alternative versions of shows, e.g. durational, stage-on-stage, small audience groups in performative installations, etc. The general aim was to react creatively to the restrictions and not just put fewer people in an auditorium.”

Artists were brought to many more fora, where decisions were made and new ways of co-creation were practiced. As Rachel Feuchtwang, shared, “I have noticed a positive change in the way some festivals are working with artists; to be much more led by ideas and how the artist(s) can best meet the shared challenges ahead with audiences, rather than putting the artist(s) and productions in the position of simply providing a product which has to meet certain standards.” At the same time, Rachel admitted that this flexibility and openness shown by venues might be a temporary phenomenon, as many of them are already reverting back to form when talking about next year. “I kind of fear that we are going to end up with exactly what we had before the pandemic, which inherently didn't work, even though we knew the system was flawed”, acknowledged Rachel referring to the lack of flexibility on both sides - companies and presenters.

There have also been new models conceived and put forward in which freelance professionals, especially those from minority backgrounds, would have more decision-making power within various structures. Cultured Mongrel, a UK-based artists' collective, proposed a [Board Bank](#), a database of freelancers, from underrepresented backgrounds, who come together for training on being a board member. Arts organisations would be invited to recruit members of the board bank to their board, and freelancers would be then paid to be part of the board bank.

SHIFTING ROLES AND POWER BALANCES

Alternative ways of creating and presenting work enforced or inspired by the pandemic have shaken the usual power balances and roles within the sector.

Building-based organisations had less room to adapt to the social distancing reality and to find a balance between pursuing their artistic values and respecting safety measures. At the same time, many producing organisations have had an opportunity to learn and/or scale up some of the unconventional formats of producing work and reaching audiences. Thus, many artists and companies stated that the pandemic helped them to imagine how they could be more independent from venues, in terms of shaping their work without being bound to venues' infrastructure and having a direct link with their public.

Digitalisation has also played a role in the growing autonomy of producers. As David Pledger, Australian artist and director highlighted: "The online shift to creating and operating has provided greater autonomy from institutions, particularly presenting venues. This has meant a power shift away from institutions and organisations to the independent parts of the sector that are digitally agile and adept at reimagining their work. The platform is the venue. So issues of over-management, censorship, risk aversion are lesser."

Tessa Gordziejko, UK-based producer, poet, performer, theatre director, shared that she had already noticed artists and companies seeking autonomy from venues before the pandemic. There are two types of autonomy here, according to her. Firstly, it is about physical independence of artists and companies (in terms of the actual presenting place of an artistic production), which has been rising in the UK sector over the last few years. The amount of site-specific work co-produced with venues but shown outside their buildings had been growing even before the pandemic. In such co-productions, artists are using infrastructure and facilities of venues; productions are marketed as part of venues' season, but they could take place in many different places, outside venues' premises. Secondly, it is about financial independence (access to funding for producing a performance). According to Tessa, this has not been shifting much in the past years, and the power continues lying with the venues.

However, "power absolutely needs to change", Tessa argued, or at least some current collaboration practices between venues and producers must be improved - made more fair, equal, inclusive. She believes companies and artists will continue searching for and using alternative ways of reaching audiences, and this should be acknowledged, accommodated and reflected upon - by venues, funders, and producers themselves.

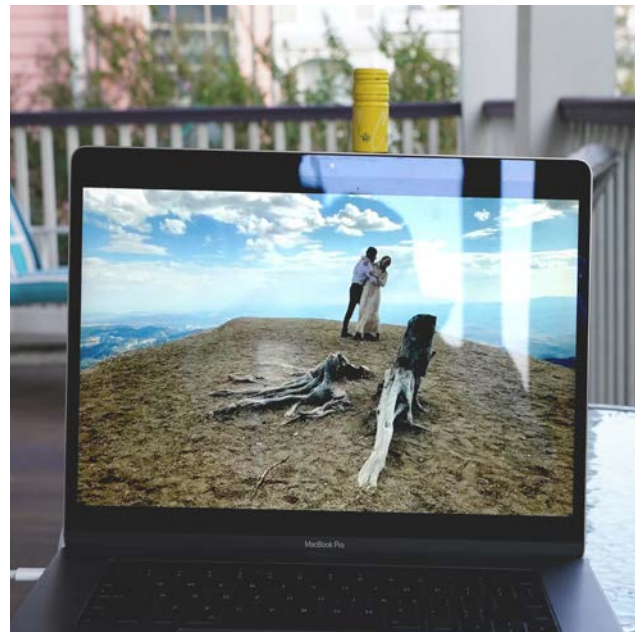


Photo: Jimmy Chion

As for the venues, many of them were forced to rethink their position given the pandemic reality. "Artists were very open to these conversations, venues reacted sometimes with strict rules and less flexibility. This led to the question of whether venues (especially big ones) are able to deal with such a situation, in terms of space but also in terms of creativity," Rainer Hofmann from Spring Utrecht noted.

Many evolved as community centres, some offered their facilities to artists and companies, as rehearsal spaces and residencies. But others, as Tessa said, "have missed the opportunity to develop a massive role for themselves". In her view, this could have meant caring for their community, becoming distribution centres, using their assets for various needs of the neighbourhood / city.

Similar thoughts were shared by Marion Potts, Executive Producer of Performing Lines, Australia: "A lot of emphasis in Australia has been on the way large venues have been affected and 'bouncing back' rather than looking at how we might 'make hay while the sun shines' - be responsive, set ourselves up with the means to be more immediate, flexible and radical in our decision-making. We also need to recognise the wealth of creative activity that can happen outside of these traditional structures - site-specific performance, outdoor public works, immersive, intimate works for smaller audiences."

While some venues have shifted their gears and turned into more community-oriented hubs, for others, mainly those depending on revenues generated by ticket sales and catering, this has been more difficult.

As Alistair Spalding acknowledges, "For an organisation like Sadler's Wells that has an 80% dependency on income from audiences coming into the theatre and at the same time a large workforce that represents our biggest outgoings the immediate issue was how to survive. One of the first opportunities that arose was the furlough scheme and we furloughed 90% of our staff. We also started a consultation process for redundancies and pay cuts protecting the lower paid but cutting up to 27% for senior staff. The 10% that were not on furlough were dealing with cancellations and ticket refunds and for the senior staff working out how we were going to get through including fundraising and a huge amount of lobbying to the government. Although it might have looked rather self-serving not to have turned to our communities at that early point of the crisis we had no choice if we wanted Sadler's Wells to survive through the crisis."

Later on, once having solved immediate problems, Sadler's Wells also engaged in various initiatives supporting freelancers, offering digital classes for older people and young children and opened up the studios to allow younger artists to continue to develop their work.

Many of the publicly funded venues had more room for manoeuvre. As Michael De Cock from KVS argued: "As an institution, it is our mission to stay proactive, think about new ways of working and innovate culture. We should leave the liberty of choice to slow down to the artists." KVS has been working a lot in unconventional ways in the past few months - outside their buildings. However, Michael believes that in the future, physical venues will be key to helping restore the feeling of togetherness that society has been missing this year.

In some countries, the problem of relations between venues and artists had been becoming more difficult before the COVID-19 crisis. According to György Szabó, Managing Director of Trafo, in Hungary, independent small venues are very fragile and reliant on the market, as public support to them is decreasing or almost nonexistent. Many of them survive by selling tickets, thus they take fewer risks such as engaging with emerging and less known artists. Small venues just decrease their staff and lose skills essential for professional marketing and promotion of performances, coordination of collaborations and other key tasks. This makes relations between independent venues and artists brittle, unsatisfying and inward-looking.

György shared: "Traditionally, artists criticise big venues for not giving enough access to emerging artists and small venues for not being sufficiently helpful in terms of contract conditions, promotion and other aspects in which those small venues are not powerful and are thinking about their own vulnerable interests". It has been a logical trend for artists to actively seek alternative spaces to create and present their work. An example of this would be Art Quarter Budapest, an independent art centre, which is based in a former factory building and is rented by artists which create, present and live there.

A grim reality for the independent scene had been unfolding in Hungary long before the pandemic. Now, György believes that the only way forward for the Hungarian performing arts scene is to get together to collectively rethink existing structures and revolutionise the way the ecosystem functions. He hopes the pandemic can serve as an accelerator for this long-awaited process.

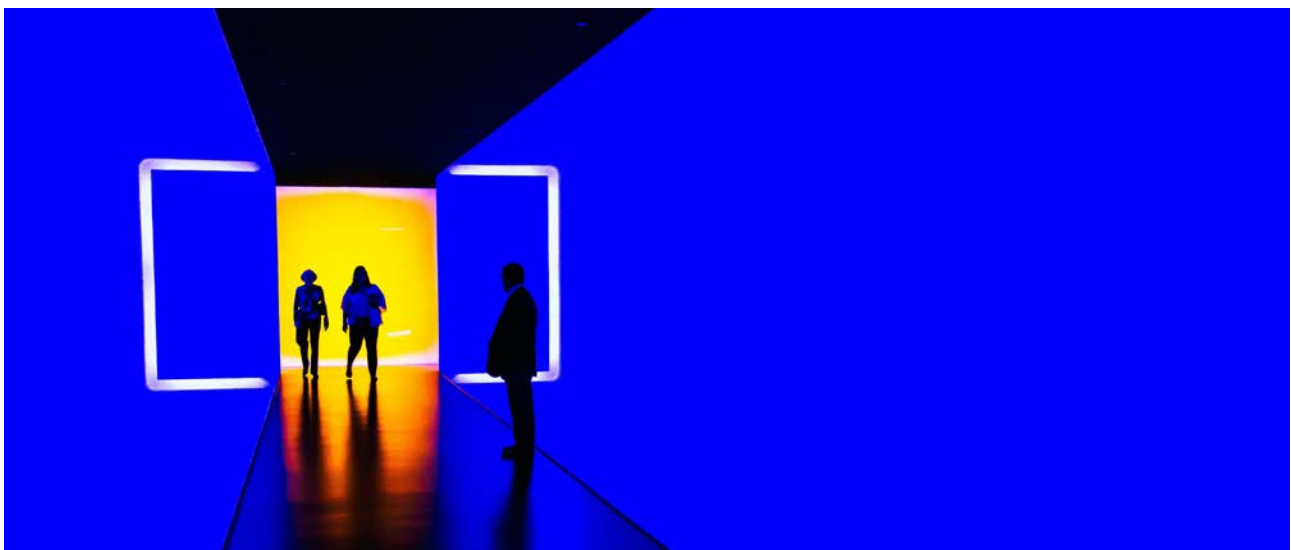


Photo: Werner du Plessis

Going local, rethinking the international or changing nothing

VIRTUAL TRAVELLING AND ITS LIMITS

An incredible number of peer-to-peer meetings have happened, where very specific problems and challenges were shared on a regular basis. However, this has been happening predominantly at national or regional level, where common action has been urgent and feasible. Cross-border discussions have had different purposes and focus, and in some cases, had less immediate relevance.

At the same time, there was an overall acknowledgement that video-conferencing has brought more possibilities for cross-border discussions and connections. Some admitted they had never attended as many international meetings and conferences as in the past months.

Some regional and national power balances have also been changed. "Isolation' in Australia is often a unique regional challenge. The fact that metropolitan and regional arts workers have been as isolated as each other throughout lock-down has upended a conventional power dynamic and suggested a pathway to a more equitable sector," shares Marion Potts, Executive Producer of Performing Lines, Australia.

However, digital tools do not always allow for inclusion, especially when it comes to the places where arts professionals do not feel safe to use digital technologies for discussing sensitive subjects. The inability to attend live events made some artists and art professionals feel even more isolated in their countries than before, when they were able to travel to physical conferences and share their challenges with their global peers in a safe environment. When organising a "global" conversation, it is essential to remember that in some countries, access to some of the platforms, such as Zoom or Skype, is partially or completely blocked.

A large number of respondents acknowledged that, even though the digital world has opened more possibilities for cross-border connections, networking (both national and international) has not been as effective and large-scale as in the pre-COVID era. New international connections have been hard to build, due to the lack of opportunities for professionals to present colleagues and peers to each other, as well as the overall lack of spontaneity inherent in real-life meetings. It has been impossible to see each

other's work and discover new productions. Performers and presenters have not been meeting in real life and have not been making plans for the future.

Engaging in international relations has been still taking place but often without one's direct link to the local contact. Thus, "discovering" the local scenes and communities has been based on trust in existing relationships. This has excluded young and emerging professionals who are not yet visible and known to their internationally connected colleagues. Rachel Feuchtwang expressed some scepticism in regard to those hasty new international collaborations, as she believes that cross-border relationships between venues, festivals and companies are normally built over years. However, she does admit that digitalisation of international festivals did provide some opportunities to "visit" festivals on the other side of the world, which she would not have attended in normal circumstances.



Photo: Bruno Emmanuelle

NEW LOCALISM, FINALLY

More than half of respondents acknowledged that they enlarged their local professional networks, and a considerable number said they started building stronger local practices and audiences. "I found a local partner instead of an international one", was highlighted as one of the positive outcomes of the pandemic.

Some parts of the internationalised performing arts community seem to experience a sort of relief - "finally, I can focus on the local", as something long-awaited and previously driven out by international perspectives, visibility and success (in its narrowest definition). For some, working internationally is just a usual path to follow. In pre-pandemic times, going local for some internationalised art professionals seemed intriguing, for some - increasingly urgent but challenging and too far from the beaten track.

The new reality has forced many artists and arts professionals, who had previously not seen themselves existing without international mobility, to explore hyperlocal dimensions in everything: networks, creation and production practices, relations with audiences, etc. The footprint of touring and individual mobility had been of concern for a few years before the pandemic. In 2020, many in the sector were not only forced to, but also finally found resources, inspiration and time to think about how they can limit their mobility and (re)explore or develop the local dimension of their work.

As Tessa Gordziejko noted: "Rethinking the international dimension had already been happening before. The international is about the literacy of scale. There is no hierarchy of scales: tiny local, medium national and huge international. Literacy of scales means interacting local-to-local, creating partnerships between communities in different parts of the world. **Interlocal is the future of international.**" Creating collaborations between localities of different countries would ultimately mean taking more time to develop conversations, build long-term relationships, less but more conscious and meaningful mobility.

Rachel Feuchtwang agreed the growing focus on the local may partly replace the obsession with going abroad, but she admitted there will always be a market for impactful international work. For her, focus on local audiences is very important.

Firstly, it is needed to reflect on **what kind of work should be shown internationally**, as she believes not everything that has been toured abroad is viable for international audiences. "Some works are inherently nationally oriented. The work we do in our company is absolutely not appropriate in every international region," highlighted Rachel, "by far the most enriching experiences are when you spend longer in a place and when you find out more about what is going on in situ."

Secondly, Rachel believes a meaningful focus on local audiences would also prevent festivals from chasing premieres and exclusive deals. Festivals' demands in this regard mean companies turn up somewhere from abroad at great expense and then cannot perform anywhere else in that country, while local audiences (beyond the art community) do not actually travel around so much to see the performing arts. Rachel has observed presenters being less demanding in relation to exclusivity and premieres during the pandemic, and this should definitely be continued in the future.



Photo: Dovile Ramoskaite

Some art professionals admit there is an interesting shift towards local perspectives, yet they are doubtful of the long-lasting impact of the pandemic on arts professionals' attitudes towards working internationally. In many countries, the sector will continue being forced to look for opportunities abroad. As György Szabó predicts, a growing circle of Hungarian artists and companies hampered by the vulnerability of the independent venues scene and by the lack of public support for the independent sector will continue feeling the urge to engage in international collaborations. Gaining international recognition is not only about success in this case, it is also about survival. The pandemic could ultimately create an even bigger brain drain than before. At the same time, according to György, the Hungarian sector is increasingly concerned about the regional and local dynamics, as well as sustainability of its practices.

Overall, rethinking touring and mobility, aiming for greater sustainability of artistic work, human and professional relationships, as well as the environment, have been of concern globally for a few years now, and the pandemic has brought some food for thought, as well as some room to experiment with new models.

In many places, the local focus has not only stemmed from the sector's urge to reimagine their practices in a greener and more meaningful way. Some governments, cities and municipalities have also taken the opportunity to enhance the focus on local culture, which had been already growing before the pandemic. For instance, as Grzegorz Reske noted, in Poland the emergency support was directed primarily to the local scene and local productions, while international connections have been sidelined. "On the one hand I understand it," Grzegorz said, "but on the other hand, I find it a very short-sighted strategy."

"International dialogue is important, and we should defend it today," argued Michael De Cock, "it is worth sharing humanities and stories, it is worth traveling to the other side of the world, in the right way - with equal dialogue, exchange, research. Some things should be happening locally, but we cannot find everything by only working with local artists".



Photo: Mike Erskine