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Theatre after Covid

Innovation or Path Dependence?

Abstract

Drawing on a mixed methods approach, this paper will present findings from survey data and discourse analysis of materials gathered in the UK, Germany, Switzerland and Austria. It asks the question whether the exogenous shock brought about by the Covid pandemic has prompted theatres to innovate. Starting from the theory of path dependence which suggests that institutional change is extremely difficult, the paper will argue that preliminary findings do indeed point to transformations that affect both technological and institutional dimensions of theatre, particularly in the field of digital infrastructure and knowhow. The differences vary, however, considerably across the countries and theatre systems surveyed which provide a point of departure for a discussion on systemic differences. The surveys also provide some surprising results concerning work satisfaction and income as support programmes ensured that theatre workers could survive and in fact reduced pressure to produce and perform on schedules that were often deemed unsustainable.

Keywords: Covid-19, path dependence, performing arts institutions, digitalization

Introduction

In early March 2020 the most severe crisis to affect the performing arts since the Second World War took hold. By the middle of March the world was in the grip of unprecedented lockdowns to prevent the spread of the Corona virus Sars-Cov-2 and its associated illness Covid-19. Most theatres and indeed cultural venues of any kind were closed throughout 2020 and were subjected to intermittent closure and restrictions well into autumn 2021. How can we as theatre scholars approach this once-in-a-century event? Crises of this magnitude could be expected to cause both institutional and aesthetic transformations on a significant scale. In the depths of lockdown this seemed to be true as theatre artists, administrators and scholars embarked on a process of introspection regarding the future of their medium.

To address these questions the authors present results from a research project that has been conducted in the UK at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in collaboration with researchers based at LMU Munich. The project investigated, among other questions, whether the pandemic produced artistic and institutional innovation on a scale that was to be expected. And secondly, did the effects of the pandemic play out differently in the heterogeneous institutional frameworks of German-speaking and UK theatre? The former with its high level of public funding, the latter with a theatre system that is much more 'sensitive' to market forces?

In the first section of the paper we will briefly discuss the two terms: artistic innovation and path dependence which define the two ends of a continuum along which organisations and even the institution of theatre can be positioned. These are sociological questions that can be best addressed and answered with sociological methods. In this case a mixed methods approach involving discourse analysis and survey data was employed. A comparison of German-speaking countries and the UK is productive because both regions have highly developed cultural infrastructures which are based, arguably, on heterogeneous institutional logics and legitimacy myths. Over a two-year period we observed how the institutional infrastructure and logics reacted to and recovered from (or not) the pandemic which led to eighteen months of closure of performing arts venues.

Path dependence and innovation

Organisations defend at all costs hard-won and outworn myths, which leads to what sociologists and institutional economists define as path dependence, the tendency for organisations and institutions to resist change. Path dependence research usually tries to identify what events in the past lead to current practices. Following historical sociologist James Mahoney, path dependence is defined as “contingent events set into motion institutional patterns (...) that have deterministic properties” (Mahoney 2000, 507). These lead in turn to so-called “self-reinforcing sequences” that serve to strengthen the contingent path. This dynamic suggests that whatever the institutional future may hold, and whatever the intensity of the utopian impulses set free by the pandemic, path dependence will almost certainly work to ensure that as little radical change as possible will come about.

Despite path dependence-induced inertia, it should, nevertheless be possible to detect shifts in the institutional frameworks using a mixed methods approach. One of the defining myths of the subsidized theatre sector is that of artistic innovation. Only through state subsidies is it possible to ensure artistic freedom which is usually defined as freedom from market forces.¹ In this myth art and the market are positioned as antitheses, best known in German through the concept of the *Kulturindustrie*. By the 1990s, however, in its anglicized version of the Cultural Industries, the antithetical relationship had been flexibilized so that the two terms no longer defined a conflictual relationship in a situation of radically reduced public funding.

‘Artistic innovation’ is a relatively recent addition to our discursive vocabulary. While art, at least since modernism, but even before it, has been explicitly tied to the so-called ‘innovation imperative’ encapsulated in exhortations such as Ezra Pound’s ‘Make It New!’ or Robert Hughes’ television series on the rise of modern art, *The Shock of the New* (BBC, 1980), the term innovation has, until recently been linked to technology and business. *The Oxford Handbook of Innovation*, first published in 2005, does not contain any entries on art or culture. Recent contributions on ‘artistic innovation’, most of which postdate 2000 bear traces of innovation’s technological and economic legacy (see Eder and Rowson 2023). In a world in which the term ‘cultural industry’ is no longer a contradiction

¹ Since direct censorship is less of a problem in liberal democracies, artistic freedom is defined differently in illiberal regimes.

in terms but a positive category of economic growth, it is little wonder that artistic innovation has also entered the vocabulary of funding organisations and project managers.

Researching theatre during and after Covid

The outbreak of the pandemic resulted in a proliferation of research from universities, the industry itself and thinktanks. The research was conducted almost in realtime and explored different facets of the pandemic's impact on the field of arts and culture in general. The first responses came in the form of scenarios produced by consultancies and thinktanks. These started to appear very quickly, within months of the first lockdowns. A Munich-based consultancy, Actori, which specializes in culture and sports, published in May and October 2020 estimates of the economic impact of lockdowns for Germany on the performing arts.² The focus was on theatres and opera houses, orchestras, festivals and museums. Some of the assumptions were already outdated by the time the reports were published. The report concludes with a summary of chances and challenges for cultural institutions and their—in most cases—public sponsors (state or municipal authorities). The former are seen in the area of digital outputs and the possibilities of acquiring new audiences. The challenges reside not just in a better calculation of financial knock-on effects but also in the demand for 'future strategies'. These are formulated explicitly in terms of 'scenarios' in order to better calculate the artistic, social and monetary effects of the Corona crisis. The Actori scenarios constitute just one example of consultancy-based research, others are discussed in Balme (2021).

The largest project in the UK, indeed perhaps worldwide, is the AHRC funded *The Pandemic and Beyond* project which by its own account brings together 70+ teams of researchers across the UK who are exploring the wide-ranging impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and looking for solutions.³ Individual scholars have also attempted to reflect on the impact on the pandemic on theatre and the performing arts. In *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations During a Pandemic*, Caridad Svich argues that the events of the global pandemic have triggered

2 See https://www.actori.de/fileadmin/PDF_PPT_DOC_XLS/Corona_Studie_-_actori.pdf and the October update: https://www.actori.de/fileadmin/PDF_PPT_DOC_XLS/201001_Corona_Studie_Update.pdf (last visited: September 6, 2023).

3 See <https://pandemicandbeyond.exeter.ac.uk> (last visited: September 19, 2023).

a 'huge, evolutionary pivot' that 'recalibrated' the field of theatre and live performance (Svich 2021, 4). Recent English-language publications, such as Barbara Fuchs's *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* (2021) and *Performance in a Pandemic* (2022) edited by Laura Bissell and Lucy Weir have primarily focused on the short-term transition to online streaming and digital performance that occurred during the initial stages of Covid-19 restrictions around the world, including the emergence of nascent virtual communities within the theatre sector.

The project, on which the current article is based, is unique because it is designed as a comparative study of the performing arts in the UK and German-speaking countries with an institutional focus. It is a collaboration between a team based at the Royal School of Speech and Drama, University of London, and the ongoing research group at LMU Munich (Krisengefüge der Künste, FOR 2734).⁴ The in-depth involvement with the situation in the UK will provide crucial data for a wider, European perspective. Both projects investigate the impact of the Corona crisis around four major research questions with an institutional focus: social justice, especially precarity and working conditions; governance; aesthetics, especially digital innovation; internationalization. These terms guided the construction of a quantitative survey.

Methodology

The project was conceived as a panel study, which typically traces responses over time. The same respondents were surveyed once in 2022 and once in 2023. To record developments in relation to pre-pandemic times, in the 2022 survey, respondents additionally reported their memories of 2019, while the 2023 survey additionally queried their expectations for the future. This establishes a longitudinal perspective over the entire pandemic period as well as opening up prospects for what is to come. The same survey, with a few local adaptations, was conducted in German-speaking countries and the UK.

The content orientation of this quantitative approach builds on a qualitative media analysis that documents how the public media discusses pandemic risks and opportunities for the performing arts and thus indicates where the biggest potentials for institutional transformation lay. The qualitative document analysis

⁴ See <https://www.krisengefuege.theaterwissenschaft.uni-muenchen.de/english-information/index.html>.

based on a data base of currently 865 documents collected since the outbreak of the pandemic by the German research group. It is presented in detail in Eder and Rowson (2023). Social justice, international collaborations, digitalization and participatory governance proved to be the most common issues that emerged from this analysis. The subsequent analysis of the quantitative panel study refers to these four overarching themes. Instead of presenting media expectations, it, however, measured concrete experiences of artists and art organisations.

The German-speaking (DACH) sample includes 117 respondents who took part in both the 2022 and 2023 surveys. As they are exactly the same respondents in both years, the data have high internal consistency as well as a strong explanatory value. The field investigated is the performing arts in the German-speaking countries. As a representative sample of such a diverse population is impracticable, it uses a probabilistic one. The questionnaire was distributed via the newsletters of national performing arts advocacy organisations, representing both, independent as well as permanent stages in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The sample consists of 77 individual artists and cultural professionals. In addition, 40 executive representatives of performing arts organisations responded. The individual artists and the organisation executives each answered different questionnaires. 32% of the total sample live and work in Austria, 21% in Switzerland and 55% in Germany. The UK survey was similarly completed by a total of 89 respondents in both 2022 and 2023. Again, the respondents were the same in both years, 63 were individuals working in the performing arts field and 26 were representatives of performing arts organisations.

Social justice

The above-mentioned media analysis revealed threats to livelihood, deterioration of the social situation as well as loss of income as the main perceived risks for performing arts practitioners and organisations in the wake of Covid-19. This is not surprising given the mostly (self-)exploitative, low-paid, poorly secured and uncertain working conditions prevailing in both independent and permanent theatres long before the pandemic.

Had this threat, however, materialized in a significant measure, it would certainly have had a strong impact on job satisfaction for all those involved. Yet, a majority of respondents in all three DACH countries proved to be more satisfied with their work. Of the Austrian and German artists and cultural workers, just over

50% each stated that they are more satisfied in 2022 compared to 2019. In Switzerland, the figure is as high as 73%. Likewise, a majority of 74% of the entire sample expect no reason for their job satisfaction to worsen, not even after the end of the pandemic air programs. It appears as if the intense pressure of production, which led to the unsustainable working conditions in the field has found relief in new ways of working under pandemic conditions. The less intense regime of performance pressure, fewer premieres, fewer spectators and thus less stress, while at the same time being able to experiment with new ways of working and sustaining a living based on state aid programs, prompted such a development. Nevertheless, the operating conditions to realize productions during the pandemic were different from country to country. Especially in Austria (78%) Switzerland (80%), a large proportion of artists and culture professionals report that the crisis significantly reduced working hours. In Germany a smaller number (70%) reported the same, reflecting that a generously financed Covid-related rescue program *Neustart Kultur* provided better job opportunities than the aid programs in the other two countries. Nevertheless, in all three countries, the majority of respondents did find work during the pandemic, which indicates that the feared loss of livelihood did not occur on a large scale. Neither does a majority of the artists and cultural workers surveyed expect their existence to be threatened in the near future. In Austria 67%, in Switzerland 72% and in Germany 51% of respondents report that they are not in serious danger of experiencing anything of the sort.

For the independent performing arts, Eder (2023) found that in all three countries the already very low average income of independent performing arts professionals declined significantly between 2019 and 2020. In the German example an individual net income of €17,284 euros was determined for a sample of 138 respondents in 2019. In 2020, the same sample had an average of 4,367 € less than in the previous year, which was certainly a direct consequence of the pandemic and a threat to their existence given the small annual amount they had before. Recently the German Federal Association of Independent Performing Arts indicates an individual net income of 20,739 euros for 2021 in a sample of over 516 independent performing arts professionals in Germany (Tobsch et al. 2023). Although the samples of the two studies are not the same, the results show that the immediate threat of pandemic-related income loss was politically coped with and, after the initial uncertainty, the aid and funding programs have even led to a temporary improvement of income for many. Nevertheless, it is unlikely, that this development will continue after the end of *Neustart Kultur*.

Overall, the pandemic made visible, where and how working conditions were unsustainable and it prompted positive change through new and additional funding within the entire performing arts field. The problem of precarious social conditions had been recognized and addressed politically before the pandemic, while at the same time ‘good work’ and social protection became increasingly important in the discourse on work of the future in both academia and politics. Taken together, this gives rise to optimism that policy makers, funders, venues and artists alike have learned lessons from the pandemic that will help transcend old path dependencies and lead to a better future.

In the UK, as in the DACH countries, we asked survey respondents whether they were happier in their careers at the time of our surveys than before the pandemic. At the time of our first survey in early 2022, 46% of participants agreed with this statement. It is significant to observe that these figures are noticeably lower than the DACH country responses analysed above. This is potentially explained by the fact that the results of the UK survey underscored that freelancers in the theatre industry were working longer hours than their peers and for less pay. For example, 38% of freelance respondents answered that they worked over 50 hours or more a week compared to 27% overall, and compared to just 13% in Germany. Perhaps even more tellingly, while 25% of the survey’s overall respondents reported being paid more since the pandemic, only 14% of freelancers had experienced this. These results present an apparent connection between the pandemic and the increasing financial instability and precarity faced by theatre freelancers compared to salaried staff.

Notably, however, when asked the same question in our second survey in May 2023, this had changed to 69% of respondents who were now happier in their careers than before the pandemic. These divergences in responses over the 16 months between our first and second survey suggest an important shift not only in job satisfaction, but also reinforce the notion that the profound uncertainty and industry crisis created by the pandemic presented a crucial moment that amplified pre-existing precarity, vulnerability, and unsafe working conditions in the UK theatre sector.⁵ This data from our two surveys, suggests the immediate impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the performing arts that

5 For example, Roberta Comunian and Lauren England underscore the ‘impact—or rather exposure—that Covid-19 has given to the vulnerability of the creative and cultural industries and their workers’ in the UK (Comunian and England 2020, 112).

were only fully lifted in early 2022, created an urgent moment of reflection for independent arts workers where they re-considered their career goals and the deep-rooted insecure working conditions in the industry. This was apparent at the time of our first survey conducted at the same time when despite the lifting of the most strict social distancing measures, theatres were still grappling with the exacting economic impact caused by a combination of cancelled performances due to outbreaks of Covid among their casts and staff, as well as low audience confidence after the winter wave of cases caused by the Omicron variant. This moment of interruption and reflection within the industry on entrenched unethical working practices and conditions does not appear to have been sustained or developed in the medium term. Instead, the UK theatre industry has experienced a more widespread reset in working practices and expectations for improved working conditions.

Alarmingly, workers in the UK have also reported a dramatic rise in job insecurity compared to their peers in the DACH countries. In our 2023 survey, 44% of individual respondents felt that their professional existence was currently under threat, while only a comparative 20% replied that it was not. The reasons given for this anxiety were complex, but many respondents articulated the ongoing pressure of the 'cost of living crisis' in the UK as a key facet of their unease. Inflation and soaring energy bills have hit all areas of theatre, creating further financial instability after the challenges of Covid.

Digitalization

When it comes to the future of work, digitalization is a key focus. Analysis of media documents revealed a strong focus on the development of a new, digital aesthetics, but also on the possibility of better digitally-driven organisation and working practices. Since we explored digital aesthetics in other publications (Eder and Rowson 2023), this paper focuses on organisational change. The data reveals that the vast majority of theatre and performing arts organisations surveyed in the DACH countries have recognized and reacted to the need for digitalization during Covid-19. They show a high demand for suitable, technical staff; however, the often newly created positions were difficult to fill. Eighteen of the forty organisations had technical vacancies in 2022 for which they could not find staff, and in 2023 the number increased to twenty-five. Since demand could not be covered by new hires, it was met through inhouse staff training.

Seventeen of the organisations already in 2022 offered technical training for their staff, and also this number increased to twenty in 2023. Interestingly, digital art offerings developed exactly the opposite way. Significantly fewer performing arts organisations presented digital productions in 2023 (56%), compared to 2022 (90%).

While on the one hand it becomes apparent that experimenting with digital technology during Covid-19 required serious organisational adjustments, on the other hand it is not entirely certain that the resources and efforts invested will prove justified in the future. A majority of the individual respondents and organisation representatives expect an increase in digital ways of working when it comes to organisation and communication within management, production and administrative processes, however only 31% of the organisations and only 13% of the individual art workers expect to produce digital performances in the future.

As pandemic restrictions in the UK were imposed in March 2020, the industry rapidly responded by relocating theatrical programming online and engaging audiences through new forms of digital entertainment. This included digital and hybrid content specifically created to be viewed online, as well as broadcast performances of previously recorded productions streamed by theatres such as the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. This is backed up by the data from the UK strand of the surveys, which underscores that arts organisations had been quick to employ the latest digital applications and technical devices for their work as social distancing measures were enforced.

As in the DACH countries, British theatres have grappled with the difficulties of filling these technical positions needed for the successful production of digital work. In 2022, 46% of organisations surveyed had vacancies for creative digital technicians, increasing rapidly to 76% in 2023. Unsurprisingly, this meant that theatres were now focusing their resources on training existing staff in technology-related skills, with the number jumping from 46% in 2022 to 71% in 2023. This reinforces wider data and scholarship that suggests backstage and technical staff has disproportionately left the theatre industry in the wake of the pandemic (Chatzichristodoulou et al. 2022, 3). These workers moved into film and television production, leaving a critical skills shortage of sound, lighting, and creative digital technicians in the UK.

Despite the creative response to the pandemic that saw a flourishing of new multidisciplinary performance modes, the survey also reveals reluctance among many theatre-makers and venues in the UK to maintain or develop these digital

ways of working. Between early 2022 and mid 2023, there was a clear decrease in both organisations and individuals using digital technology in their practice. This hesitancy to commit to producing further virtual performance models can be partly explained by the difficulties faced in monetising digital content, especially for small-scale companies and organisations. This was exacerbated in the early stages of the pandemic when many high profile cultural institutions provided audiences with access to free digital content (see Aebischer and Nicholas 2020, 29–30). Moreover, as Roberta Comunian and Lauren England argue, while organisations have provided training for in-house staff, the freelance artists they employ are 'likely to have to pay for this up-skilling and take time off work for training without further forms of support' (Comunian and England 2020, 121). While our results reflect that the economic challenges of producing hybrid work has resulted in a decrease of new digital productions in 2023, it is also clear that not only did the pandemic generate wider opportunities for practitioners to experiment with intermedial digital projects, but also contributed to the development of new forms and the re-evaluating of wider creative practice and aesthetics. This liminal work, employing innovative use of disparate digital platforms and interaction demonstrates that the pandemic similarly offered a period of artistic innovation, as organisations aimed to re-think their working practices and forge new artistic dialogues and collaborations. In doing so, these innovative new ways of working recalibrated how theatre organisations interacted with audiences on both a national and international level, as well as how they operated on both a structural and economic model.

International collaboration

In February 2020, borders around the world began to shut down and international touring ground to a halt. The dissolution of longstanding networks, the cancelling of international projects, premieres and co-productions, contact restrictions, border closures, the risk of contagion in public transport, all these were described as risks for the international networking of performing arts in the media analysis presented above. Some predicted nationalization tendencies, or as Monika Gintersdorfer from the performance collective Gintersdorfer/Klaßen put it in the newspaper *Rheinische Post*: "We should continue to think internationally, so that Corona doesn't lead to everyone going into isolation and only revolving around their own narrow interests" (Krings, 2020).

It is certainly true that international collaboration plays an important role in the performing arts. Though, whether it has suffered due to Covid-19 remains unclear. The 2022 survey revealed the level of internationalization of the forty organisations surveyed in the DACH countries and it confirms that for only ten do not address an international audience and for eight companies international travel is not part of their routine. Moreover, many respondents who work in the German-speaking theatre do not have German, Austrian or Swiss citizenship. Consequently, the performing arts seem to be consistently committed to the task of international cooperation and understanding, as well as to serving an often-international urban cast and audience. The vast majority of organisations claim that their international work has not decreased as a result of the pandemic (AT 83%, CH 78%, D64%). Digital forms of work have been tried and tested, and an increasingly confident use of online meetings, digital events and art opportunities has not only maintained existing international connections, but also created new communication networks, meeting opportunities and collaborations. Overall, the data shows that independent organisations are more interested in expanding their international activities in the future and that many individuals also expect an increase in their international engagement.

In the UK, participants stated that they saw their practice as part of an interconnected international theatre ecology. While the numbers were slightly lower than the result of the German-language survey, 69% of UK organisations stated that international projects and productions were included in their programming. Similarly, 68% stated that their work addresses international audiences and that they had staff working on international projects.

In our 2022 survey, the short-term impact of the pandemic on international work in the UK was apparent and 50% of organisations reported that they were less involved in international activities than before the pandemic. This demonstrates that the initial slump in international work in the first phase of the pandemic continued well into 2022. Significantly, however, 53% of organisations who responded to our second survey in 2023 stated that they were now more involved in international work than they had been a year ago, with a substantive 65% looking to expand international cooperation in the future. This data shows a significant return to a more international outlook amongst theatre organisations in the UK as the sector continues its recovery. As in the DACH countries, this can be explained not simply by a return to pre-pandemic working practice, but rather through the use of digital platforms to

create generative communication networks at an international level with far greater prevalence than before.

Yet, there are also new barriers to sustainable global working practices and international mobility placed on UK theatre workers and institutions in the wake of the UK's official exit from the European Union at the end of 2020. *The Stage* described the combined challenges of both Brexit and the pandemic as a 'double whammy effect' for internationalism that will have a 'particular impact on young and emerging talent who are less likely to be able to afford, or be approved for, work permits' (Snow 2021). While the long-term impact of Brexit is yet to emerge, it has had continuing repercussions on British theatre's recovery from the pandemic and fresh attempts to forge new international collaborations on the European continent.

International performing arts networks developed well before the pandemic were not threaten in the same way. International work is based on strong partnerships, and contacts have been maintained and expanded during the epidemic thanks to digital media. As with the other themes, internationalization is a societal development far beyond the arts. The fact that the fears of national isolation and the collapse of international co-production networks did not materialize during the crisis has strengthened the field as an international one and it leads us to expect that international understanding will here continue to be promoted in the future.

Participatory governance

As the pandemic affected the entire field regardless of the differences between independent and permanent stages, the following section questions if and how the field has pulled together to meet the challenges. Applying DiMaggio and Powell's conception of "institutional definition", an organisational field strengthens its institutional definition when the level of interaction between organisations increases, clearly defined inter-organisational governance structures and coalition patterns emerge, when the information load that organisational in a field have to deal with increases, and when a mutual awareness of being involved in a common enterprise, among participants in a number of organisations develops (DiMaggio & Powell 1983, 148).

In 2022, 76% of individual respondents in the DACH countries noted an increasing need for communication, networking and exchange with colleagues,

in 2023 this figure decreased but it was still 59%. For organisations, it was 85% in 2022 and still 82% in 2023. This clearly reflects the fact that the immediate shock of the pandemic brought a lot of additional communication effort, even if this slowly leveled off over time. Furthermore, in 2022, 52% of individual respondents reported working towards common policy goals with others; by 2023, the figure had risen to 57%. For organisations, it was 75% in both years. In the comparison of theatre types, the numbers are slightly higher for the independent, compared to the permanent stages. This suggests that the focus is not only on communication and exchange, but that artists and culture workers as well as organisations recognize that they are engaged in a common political enterprise. 69% of the independent and 74% of permanent organisations surveyed report having had equal or less contact with other organisations in the field before the pandemic, indicating a clear transformation towards more institutional definition. As for the future, 55% of the individual actors and 78% of the organisations expect to become more involved in alliances with others. Moreover, 55% of the independent respondents reported regular collaboration with the permanent theatres and 71% of respondents from permanent stages report that they regularly collaborate with individuals or organisations of the independent stage. Thus, institutional consolidation is taking place in the theatre subsystems and across the board.

Despite these institutionalization processes, the willingness of governments to include artists, cultural practitioners and performing arts organisations in collective decision-making processes does not seem to be improving. In 2022, 66% of the total sample do not see policy makers giving them the opportunity to provide feedback on policy decisions that ultimately affect them. However, the picture improves as the pandemic progresses. In 2023, only 53% still feel the same way. Overall, respondents in Switzerland see more opportunities for dialogue and feedback than respondents in the other two countries. This indicates that individuals and organisations have directly felt a slight increase in political efficacy. In 2022, only one third of the permanent theatres surveyed stated that they do not believe that their associations are able to assert their positions in politics and 15% of the independent organisations stated the same. However, this also changed dramatically during the pandemic. In 2023, 62% of the independent organisations have found that their concerns are heard, and not a single one disagrees. Among permanent theatres, a few remain dissatisfied, but here too the majority notices that the associations have been effective in

steering them through the pandemic and it had a positive effect, as 60% of all organisations believe that through advocacy they will be able to solve the problems in the field in the future.

Mark Banks and Justin O'Connor observe that in the UK, despite the arts and cultural sector issuing a series of urgent warnings as the pandemic swept across Europe, the impact of the Covid crisis was met with 'indifference and silence' from the British Government (Banks and O'Connor 2021, 7). This initial failure of both institutions and the UK Government to recognise the precarity of the creative and cultural industries, especially in the initial phases of the pandemic during the initial national lockdown in the spring and summer of 2020, intensified the belief that the value and identity of the theatre sector had been eroded throughout the pandemic.

Echoing the results of the DACH country respondents, the UK survey indicates an increasing desire among theatre workers for wider and more meaningful collaboration, as well as communication and exchange. 84% of individuals in 2022 saw an increasing need for communication, networking and exchange with colleagues, rising to 87% in 2023. There is also a significantly higher level of desire for creative networking and engagement amongst recent graduates with 100% reporting a need for more communication and networking with peers, highlighting the importance of a reciprocal working relationship and more defined career paths within the sector for early career employees. Amongst organisations, this was even higher, with 93% in 2022 and 82% in 2023. This suggests that there has been an increasing institutional awareness of the potential of increasing artistic exchange and collaboration precipitated by the pandemic, as new and diverse ways of peer-to-peer collaboration and support are experimented with.

As noted above, the surveys also aimed to shed new light on how theatre organisations and individuals have collectively aimed to work towards common policy goals in the wake of the pandemic. Again, the result of the UK survey had strong parallels to the responses given by the German-language respondents. In 2022, 63% of individual respondents reported working towards common policy goals with others, rising to 75% in 2023. With representatives of organisations, this was slightly higher, with 83% reporting that they similarly did both years. This move towards a common political goal for theatre in the live arts is further reinforced by the fact that 66% of organisations and 54% of individuals surveyed articulated that they aimed to become more involved in alliances

with others in the field beyond 2023. These results demonstrate that theatre workers and organisations in the UK are re-thinking their collective strategies on an institutional level, as well as formulating new reciprocal ways of working between theatres and their freelance employees.

Finally, the data from the first UK survey suggests clear frustration over the paucity of information provided by regional and national governments in the aftermath of the pandemic. 74% of respondents did not feel well informed by their regional government in how it intends to shape cultural and theatre policy. Similarly, 60% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt well informed of cultural policy by national government, while only 27% agreed or strongly agreed. Once again reflecting similar results from the DACH countries, 82% of total respondents reported that they did not believe policymakers allowed them to provide feedback on policy decisions that ultimately affect them in 2022, with this number staying the same in 2023. The survey further revealed wider anxieties in the British theatre industry in its ability to advocate for better working conditions and funding or to communicate effectively with political decision-makers. For example, in 2022, 50% of all participants stated that they did not feel able to specifically participate in political decision-making processes in the field of the performing arts. This had only dropped to 44% in 2023.

The pandemic prompted a crucial opportunity for individuals and organisations to formulate strategies to improve industry conditions and re-consider ethnic, gender, and class-based inequities in the industry. Furthermore, our data suggests greater engagement from advocacy groups during the ongoing pandemic. However, unlike in the DACH countries, there remains a strong scepticism amongst the respondents about these groups' abilities to represent their interests and effectuate positive institutional or political change. Although it is clear that the pandemic created a significant moment where the industry re-considered its collective influence on policy and political decision making, the current Conservative Government's damaging response to pandemic's impact on the culture sector, as well as a decade of austerity that has seen deep funding cuts to the arts, has made many in the industry uncertain of their ability to effectuate change.

Conclusion

Institutional theory suggests that exogenous shocks exacerbate and accelerate pre-existing structural problems. An analysis of structural crises as a complex of interrelated elements may indeed provide a perspective on the 'historical future' (Koselleck 1988, 127). According to the predicative logic of path dependency, the various theatrical "systems" should have re-started without any profound changes. Even in the area of technological innovation, where the greatest innovations were to be expected, there has been a noticeable return to pre-pandemic practices as theatres have wound down their digital offerings. This applies, however, only to the specific area of performances. The path towards the digital organisation of work, however, was already in full swing before the outbreak of Covid-19, and reinforced by it. Now that theatres have regained the possibilities of the analogue, it is only partially being revoked.

The domain of social justice, which involved here mainly working conditions and precarity, revealed a workforce even before the pandemic that was existing on incomes near or even below the poverty line. Two surprising outcomes were that respondents reported an improvement of work satisfaction during the pandemic which is directly related to a decrease in pressure to produce and perform, suggesting that the pre-pandemic norm had established a situation of overwork and overproduction. The expected drop in income did eventuate in 2020 but had already recovered by 2021 thanks to the various aid programmes rolled out by most governments. These lead in fact to a temporary increase in income in the independent scene compared to pre-pandemic levels measured around mid-2023.

The sphere of international contacts, on which the independent companies are particularly reliant, revealed a pre-pandemic field that was already highly connected. Although these contacts were curtailed during the height of the lockdowns, the data shows a significant return to a more international outlook amongst theatre organisations in the UK and DACH countries as the sector continues its recovery. This can be explained not simply by a return to pre-pandemic working practice, but rather through the use of digital platforms to create generative communication networks with their organisations and artists at an international level with far greater prevalence than before. The UK groups, however, face the added complication of travel restrictions caused by Brexit.

Like social justice, international networking and digitalisation, participatory governance did not emerge during the Corona pandemic. Associations existed before, as did political dialogue. But with Corona, many individuals and organisations working in the field realised what influence they had, why they were needed, and that they worked best when their activities were connected back to the field. Thus, the pandemic has improved the democratisation and empowerment of the performing arts, and increased their political effectiveness. It is to be expected that the newly formed political working relationships and the success in maintaining the field in an exceptional situation that threatened its existence will strengthen participatory governance and will continue to play a strong role in the future.

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