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# Documenting Crisis: Artistic Innovation and Institutional Transformations in the German-Speaking Countries and the UK

The unprecedented suspension of cultural events across Europe in March 2020 had a profound impact on the performing arts. Alongside the proliferation of digital and hybrid modes of theatre-making, the Covid-19 pandemic has also precipitated a substantive shift in how theatres operate at both institutional and organizational levels in an attempt to respond to the volatile economic impact of the pandemic on the culture sector. This has provided a decisive moment for the reinterpretation of the theatre landscape, raising fundamental questions relating to institutional transformation that challenge precarious working models and entrenched hierarchical divides. Drawing on wider transnational research as part of the 'Theatre after Covid' project, this article examines the institutional effects of the pandemic on theatre and performance in the United Kingdom and the German-speaking countries. It details the findings of a wide-ranging survey conducted in 2022 with theatre workers and organizations that address how the industry is adapting and transforming in response to the crisis. Using this new data as a starting point, it analyzes how new forms of artistic innovation have emerged during Covid-19. By focusing on these institutional and aesthetic developments, the article argues that the pandemic has produced a paradigm shift that has crucially reinscribed how theatre is created, programmed, and understood.

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THE UNPRECEDENTED suspension of all cultural events across Europe in March 2020 had a profound impact on the performing arts.<sup>1</sup> The exogenous shock of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a sudden rupture of established institutional paths that the theatre sector had previously followed. Performing arts organizations and companies that may have previously been resistant to new forms of production began urgently to conceptualize alternative

artistic practices, resulting in the accelerated reorganization of theatre programming and audience engagement. The pressure to adapt to the new situation through innovation was imperative: 'Artists, whose livelihoods were most seriously imperilled, led the way beyond nostalgia and despair with their commitment to making theatre, however dire the circumstances,' writes Barbara Fuchs.<sup>2</sup> Further: 'What had at first seemed like a quick fix

became instead hugely enabling – not just a life raft but a flotilla of rapidly proliferating possibilities.<sup>3</sup> Alongside the proliferation of digital and hybrid modes of theatre-making, the Covid-19 crisis has also precipitated a substantive short-term shift in how the performing arts operate at both institutional and organizational levels in an attempt to respond to the unprecedented economic impact of the pandemic on the culture sector. In other words, the pandemic provided a decisive moment to provoke a crucial reinterpretation of the global theatrical landscape, raising fundamental questions relating to institutional transformation that challenge entrenched economic models and hierarchical divides.

This article examines the possibilities of innovative institutional change triggered by the Covid-19 crisis. By analyzing a diverse range of public media discourses that emerged throughout the pandemic, as well as corresponding artistic and organizational action through a wider ranging survey with practitioners in the German-speaking DACH countries (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) and the UK, this article aims to decode how both organizational and artistic innovation has been articulated by institutions, independent theatre-makers, and critics since the start of the pandemic in Europe in March 2020. By setting its analysis of the impact of the pandemic within the context of contested notions of artistic and organizational innovation, it attempts to broaden the fundamental understanding of the institutional effects of Covid-19 on the performing arts. In doing so, it explores the pandemic-related mechanisms that led to the accelerated development of innovative content and forms, the institutional adjustments these processes required, the recognition they received, and the seismic shifts in theatrical practice that occurred as a consequence.

## Innovation

‘Crisis can offer openings for innovation,’ write Christopher Balme and Tony Fisher, ‘but, equally, provide instructions for a “return” or “restoration” to some former state (to “return to basic values”).’<sup>4</sup> The concept of

innovation in the arts is by no means a new phenomenon. In both the humanities and the social sciences, art is commonly understood as the creation of the ‘new’ or the development of perspectives deviating from societal routine.<sup>5</sup> Despite such a claim to novelty, theatre and the performing arts have established rules and routines regarding their ways of working, content, and form that constitute conventions in the field. Viewed from a neo-institutional perspective, performing arts productions cannot be read as isolated instances in a vacuum but should be understood in the context of other texts and productions, current events, and contemporary discourses. In its consideration of artistic innovation in the context of the Covid crisis, this article considers how innovation must be discussed in relation to socio-cultural conditions to be fruitful. It therefore conceives innovation as a deviation from current practice that is not only thought of but explicitly implemented.

Although, since the 1970s, the social sciences have theorized the concept of innovation, and it is no longer a term used exclusively in economics, it is still a critical and, often, contentious term in the context of the performing arts, as theatre practice and the market are frequently seen as irreconcilable opposites. The UN’s 2019 publication *Culture and Working Conditions for Artists* describes artists as those who ‘innovate, challenge norms, inspire, and entertain. Their works generate new social energy, trust and engagement that can improve people’s daily lives. Their innovations and creative expressions drive development processes that can expand people’s choices and inspire them to imagine an alternative future.’<sup>6</sup> In other words, a contribution is expected not only to artistic development but to the ongoing growth of social responsibility and democratic practice. Innovation in the arts takes precedence by positioning it as a key facet in the viability of funding and the prospect of production resources, reducing the achievement of artistic innovation to a funding condition in a manner that has been critiqued by artists and art associations as ‘innovation compulsion’ or ‘innovation imperative.’<sup>7</sup> This notion is tied to changes in cultural policy that have occurred

in both Germany and the UK since the 1980s that have claimed the notion of artistic innovation as a legitimizing narrative.<sup>8</sup> The relentless drive for innovation in the culture sectors, necessitated by explicit policy discourse and funding conditions, has promoted modes of performance and cultural production that co-opt theatre-makers as key models of innovation under a neo-liberal economy, strengthening new economies of precarious labour in the arts and implementing artistic innovation as a political demand. While neither elaborating on nor dismissing this critique, this article does not follow the hortatory notion of innovation as a call to (economic) action. Rather, it views innovation in an institutional and structural context to examine developments initiated since the outbreak of Covid-19, and how they have been embedded in theatre institutions.

Academic literature on organizational and artistic innovation from manifold disciplines has expanded significantly in the last two decades, in part driven by new research perspectives on economic and social change that conceptualize the pressure to innovate as an opportunity rather than an impediment. Cultural theorist Elena Raevskikh writes: 'Today, artistic innovation goes beyond the cultural sphere [and] enhances social and economic impact of urban policies, cultural offers and industrial productions.'<sup>9</sup> She argues that artistic innovation is not simply aesthetic but has the potential to impact on social and economic forces by contributing to social enterprises focused on education, social integration, diversity, and human rights, while additionally promoting values of liberalism and tolerance.

Raevskikh suggests, moreover, that the notion of artistic innovation is 'essential not only for the industries that seek to create new sources of value, but also for the public cultural institutions . . . that are expected to renew their perimeter and to redefine the relationship they have with their audiences'.<sup>10</sup> Organization Studies scholar Soo Hee Lee similarly underscores that artistic innovation is closely related to social and institutional innovation. He notes that 'contemporary art institutions increasingly compete to display

artistic innovations through their curatorial work, which derives from and shapes their institutional logics'.<sup>11</sup> Following Raevskikh and Lee, the practicable implementation of the new may find its legitimation in the context of an overarching societal discourse that speaks to contemporary public concerns.

In addition to this exogenous consideration of the term, such scholars as social scientist Fiona Kerr foreground artistic innovation's endogenous prerequisites, conceptualizing it in terms of its immediate conditions. Kerr describes innovation as a cumulative process that rarely occurs spontaneously, but does so when ideas build on each other in a layering process that leverages knowledge and skills. The prerequisite for such a process is an open 'space' in which unexpected encounters can take place. Moreover, for Kerr, 'time' to both reflect and fail allows for creativity, while 'diversity' of thought, experience, and skill are key to introducing cross-connections through which new ideas can emerge.<sup>12</sup> In other words, innovation is not only a result of exogenous or external counterforces such as the Covid-19 pandemic, but also comes from internal, endogenous change generated reiteratively by collective action.

Comparing these ideas from organizational theory with wider academic literature on artistic innovation, a number of similarities and differences become apparent. Management and Organization Studies scholars Xavier Castañer and Lorenzo Campos argue that, unlike the organizational innovation described by Kerr, an artistic organization's past is not sufficient as a referent for novelty to be considered innovative; rather, the innovation introduced must be new to the field as a whole.<sup>13</sup> Connected to the conditions of time, space, diversity, and an environment that accepts the opportunity of failure as requirements for fostering innovation, is the idea that it is not 'competition, but collaboration between professionals and organizations through the rapid and free exchange of ideas and information'.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to this open organizational set-up, the results of which are difficult to predict, a long-standing discussion in institutional theory suggests that institutions impose rules on organizations to

preserve established routines and to make processes predictable and controllable. Consequently, the spontaneous introduction of deviations to those routines, or the integration of new practices or products into existing institutions, is not readily achievable.<sup>15</sup> This in turn raises the question of how progressive institutional change becomes possible. Castañer and Campos believe that ‘repeated cycles of initial homogeneity followed by the emergence of innovations that generate diversity and compete with existing paradigms, leading to the selection of one of the competing paradigms that becomes the dominant one, embeds the idea of innovation in an institutional framework’.<sup>16</sup>

In summary, innovation is at odds with existing structures and their path-dependencies. Agile management practices such as the openness to failure and provision of resources such as time and space, as well as a creative culture characterized by diversity and cooperation instead of competition, combined with the pressure to overcome the conventional, offer the fecund framework to prepare the ground for it. At the same time, an endogenous drive is needed to make it understood, not as economically imposed, but as inherently necessary to a field’s development. If these theoretical considerations hold true, innovation is introduced and maintained not only because of political demands or economic pressure, but also because the endogenous process combined with those environmental factors come together in space, time, and social circumstances.

The precipitous shock and volatility of the pandemic provided a singular moment of transition and reform in the field, as artists and organizations were driven to reconceptualize theatrical conventions and experiment with new forms of artistic production. The conditions created by Covid-19 offered the possibility for the acceleration of embedded institutional change, necessitating new opportunities for creativity to occur. In the remainder of this article, we present an initial analysis of media discourse on the opportunities and risks of innovation attributed to the performing arts in the context of crisis. We then examine the results of our surveys conducted in the German-speaking counties and the UK in the

first half of 2022. These two identical parallel surveys addressed both individual theatre professionals and performing arts organizations to shed light on their willingness to innovate. They considered, as well, the new formats and ways of working introduced during the pandemic. In this way, we analyze the significant opportunities that arose to break with conventions. At the same time, we analyze how some artists and theatres are resisting the changes demanded by the pandemic, illustrating the pandemic-induced transformation of the performing arts since March 2020.

### **Pandemic Narratives: Analysis of the Media Discourse on Covid-19 and the Performing Arts in the DACH Countries**

As part of our wider transnational research into the profound and wide-reaching impact of Covid-19 on the theatre industries in the DACH Countries and the UK, we have analyzed a collection of 435 articles from major German-speaking newspapers, which include the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Der Standard*, among many others, and an additional 167 contributions of the periodical *Politik und Kultur*, to shed new light on the risks and opportunities connected to artistic innovation in the wake of Covid-19. These articles were published between March 2020 to March 2022. Throughout our research on both the German- and English-language sources, we employed the use of a text-mining strategy to highlight the most frequently used verbs and nouns in the publications to reveal what the authors were predominantly concerned with.

Through this method of analysis, digital means and crisis-related aid were found to be the most frequently articulated concepts. A structural debate about the impact of the pandemic on working conditions in the field, and a discussion about changing aesthetics in response to the restrictions, were also key themes addressed in the articles. To differentiate between these generic concepts, the following keywords were used to sift through the body of data: technology commitment; digitization; artistic innovation; working conditions; income; internationalization; cultural

governance; ecology; protest; organizational field; diversity.

These formed the starting point for the methodological transition from deductive text mining to inductive code development. For this purpose, the initial question came back into focus: how does the media, explicitly the German-language daily newspapers and the periodical *Politik und Kultur*, reflect on the risks and opportunities of the Covid-19 crisis for the performing arts, and thus for the theatre in the German-speaking countries?

### Innovation Dynamics Related to Discourse

The structured summarizing content analysis of the media articles reveals that the exogenous shock of the pandemic featured widely in public discussion.<sup>17</sup> It predominantly described the pandemic as a strong break that provided a crucial opportunity for rethinking institutions and reorganizing society. However, this opportunity was not associated with completely new themes or practices but, rather, as an acceleration of pre-existing movements such as globalization, the socio-ecological transformation, and the spread of digital applications in society at large. Given the exceptional situation in which the performing arts and theatre found themselves during the crisis, both critics and theatre workers themselves have publicly questioned whether the field needs to redefine its role in relation to these prevailing themes.

Furthermore, the pandemic was perceived as a time of experimentation, leading to the discovery of new working methods, forms, and aesthetics. However, it was not only the restrictions on producing live work, or the curiosity to try something new, that inspired these alternatives. As the survival of the performing arts in the DACH countries depends directly on government funding, and as public discussion about reducing this spending is not uncommon, it was conceivable that the field's societal necessity and the associated public spending would be called into question once production ceased. Without a mandate, there is no funding, and therefore the new situation threatened not only the immediate financial fundamentals but the basic

legitimacy of the field. Responding appropriately to the lockdowns was existential, and the challenge was thus to prove that the performing arts had an essential public responsibility that they should continue to carry out, despite the loss of the public spaces they had previously created.

If there were no crises, there would be no art. It is the crisis-processing medium par excellence.<sup>18</sup> That is how Ulrich Khuon, Artistic Director of the Deutsches Theater Berlin and former president of the German Stage Association, characterizes the societal responsibility of the performing arts. Indeed, a number of articles called for the performing arts and theatre to participate in the public discussion about the pandemic, and credited them with the ability to mediate the conflicts it had caused. They describe the performing arts as a place for interpreting pandemic restrictions beyond state guidelines and as a hub for social negotiation processes.

Moreover, the performing arts and theatre are credited with negotiating the tension between individual freedom and necessary restriction by creating community experiences and collective self-reassurance. In addition, they are considered to have a positive effect on mental health, which responds to the increasing psychological damage connected with Covid-19 and the implementation of social distancing measures. Finally, theatre is portrayed as a 'laboratory' for the crisis that reflects and consequently influences how society is shaped. Thus, Michelle Müntefering, Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office, who recognizes theatre as a site of public discourse and debate, and also as a place of refuge and humanity where communities can be built, even praises culture as the European language of multilateralism, human rights, and international cooperation. She suggests, in an article in *Politik und Kultur*, that these values are threatened by the pandemic and that they can potentially be preserved through art and culture.<sup>19</sup> The buzzword 'solidarity' repeatedly plays an important role in the discourse. Some of the sources suggest that the pandemic restrictions on freedom and community raise awareness of how precious

these values are, while, conversely, they also see compliance with the imposed measures as an opportunity for social cohesion that can be substantiated by the performing arts. The creation of solidarity and community, then, is emphasized as an important task for the field in times of crisis.

The above media analysis reveals expectations placed on the performing arts throughout the pandemic. An analysis of programming schedules during Covid-19, which may confirm these expectations, must elsewhere shed light on which issues found particular prominence in productions. In conclusion, however, a general politicization of theatrical content during the pandemic and deviations from routines and entrenched positions – that is, a change in focus from a provocative or critical role towards a healing and balancing one – were immanent to the new situation in which the performing arts found themselves.

### **Innovation Dynamics Related to Form**

The performing arts responded to the pandemic as early as the summer of 2020, after the initial lockdown was overcome and as it became evident that the early online experiments had found an audience, making large-scale changes to their ways of working, reshuffling their programming and adapting their aesthetics. Business as usual became impossible, and tried-and-tested formats could no longer be employed. Simultaneously, the social task of art, or rather the need to legitimize itself in crisis, was put on the agenda more than ever before. This and other preconditions inspired many artists and theatres to find an overwhelming variety of solutions to create new work, despite the social distancing measures in place.<sup>20</sup>

Media discourse described the search for new forms as a progressive development since the start of the pandemic. In spring 2020, the search began with private and home-made digital content, which was followed by previously recorded productions being made available online. Productions designed specifically for the digital space only gradually emerged, and, as the first lockdown ended, new regulation-conforming live

formats also began to be staged. Additionally, new hybrid formats emerged that blended digital and analogue space or sought other ways to circumvent existing limitations. For example, the arts journalist Anne Fritsch explains how Juli Zeh produced *'Corpus Delicti'* in an underground car park in Göttingen as drive-in theatre without the risk of contagion. Jan Philipp Gloger translated *Macbeth* into a conspirator chat on Telegram. The Theatre Augsburg transferred entire performances into virtual reality via VR glasses. Creativity suddenly had no organizational or structural limits.<sup>21</sup> Reports about investments that were made to develop online work and provoke long-term digital change included examples of redirecting funding guidelines by establishing fellowship programmes to explore digital aesthetics, employing new tech staff, offering extra training for technological applications, or acquiring new technical equipment.

During the pandemic, additional resources, especially in Germany, provided time, and the shared challenge of encountering new media led to new collaborations between artists and theatre-makers. Covid-19 accelerated the existing development of digital practice, and the field responded quickly to the challenges, exploring new aesthetics and digital content. The German-language data includes quotations by directors who either praise the new collaborative opportunities that had come with the use of digital applications or else cite theatre critics who celebrate digital production. In addition, it presents the transition from analogue organization to a more digital way of working as a low hurdle that was quickly mastered. Ulrich Khuon concludes that theatre had discovered 'digital mobility not just as a stopgap, but as an aesthetic and structural option'.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, digital programming is associated with international reach and inclusive value. Several authors noted that these digital formats provide greater accessibility for disabled audience members, as well as those in rural locations. They further present the digital as an ecological opportunity as it dramatically reduces the need for air travel and international meetings. Annemie Vanackere,

the Artistic Director of Berlin's Hebbel am Ufer, describes a paradigm shift that introduces environmental considerations as part of international work and thus challenges existing routines. As she comments, in an interview with the daily newspaper *TAZ*:

'The more international, the better' – this maxim from the 1990s and 2000s is currently being scrutinized. But working only locally would not be the right direction as a new dogma, either. Berlin's artists and residents are so interconnected with other people and places around the world that the potential for new approaches is obvious.<sup>23</sup>

Here, the integration of digital measures is conceived as an opportunity to continue international cooperation in an ecologically meaningful way. Other sources confirm that digital ways of working have enabled cross-border collaboration and communication, identifying them as a key starting point for new forms of digital co-production. Consequently, notions of globalization, and socio-ecological and digital transformation, have been addressed through theatre's artistic expression and ways of working during the pandemic.

### **Between Digital Euphoria and the Analogue Heritage**

Digital transformation within the performing arts is not without controversy. Producing high-quality digital content is complex and challenging, which resulted in some critics questioning the online offerings presented during the pandemic as lacking in artistic quality. At the same time, the articles we have analyzed emphasize the importance of live experiences. Some even argue that the digital can never replace a live event, since it shapes an atmosphere and creates specific concentration within the audience that the digital cannot. Some point out that the digital transformation caused by the crisis stagnated as soon as live shows were possible again, and that the interest of professionals to continue with this development is small. There are those who blame the poor quality of some digital experiments for an increase in the significance of live interaction, and who consequently evoke a renaissance of the analogue.

These positions demonstrate the path dependency of the institution and suggest that, in addition to an endogenous marker of contemporary engagement with life and society, other constitutive myths, such as the preservation of cultural heritage and repertoire, also shape the field. In addition to these poles of digital euphoria and analogue longing, other authors take intermediate positions. In this way, the tension between the digital and the analogue is associated with an opportunity for innovation that is directly linked to the Covid-19 period. Nevertheless, the following evaluation of the quantitative data will provide information on which pandemic changes related to Covid-19 were particularly dominant.

### **Pandemic Narratives: Analysis of the Media Discourse on Covid-19 and the Performing Arts in the UK**

The project also analyzed over eighty English-language articles and media reports in order to investigate how notions of artistic innovation have been articulated throughout the pandemic in the UK. As our analysis of this data demonstrates, the Covid crisis produced an explosion of multifarious discourses that advocated the potential of new modes of theatre practice and ways of working. The pandemic created a moment of profound disorientation and discontinuity that raised fundamental questions aimed to reconceptualize the working practices of the theatre industry and ask what it means to be a theatre worker in a time of sustained industry tumult. Writing in the leading theatre publication *The Stage*, Lyn Gardner astutely observes that the pandemic had emphasized the 'fault lines' in British theatre after a decade of austerity.<sup>24</sup> The pandemic foregrounded entrenched institutional practices and the precarity experienced by the theatre workforce, in particular emerging artists and freelance workers. Moreover, it reinforced the 'huge gulf between the salaried and the freelance', and resulted in the proliferation of theatre artists and freelancers who faced a financial crisis due to loss of work, particularly if they fell through the gaps of government aid initiatives such as the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) grant.<sup>25</sup>

The pandemic has precipitated substantive rethinking across the industry, with theatres calling for the prioritization of organizational reform and placing innovation at the core of their institutional restructuring. As Gardner further observes, 'It is those organizations that have been able to improvise, throw away their well-laid plans, and do something different that have fared best during the pandemic. It is those that have been least able to adapt . . . that have seemed most out of touch and self-serving.'<sup>26</sup> In the UK, this took the form of the development of new digital and hybrid performance models, as well as a wider reinterpretation of the theatre ecology, including online activism such as the emergence of advocacy groups The Freelancer Task Force and Freelancers Make Theatre Work, which aimed to articulate the demands and concerns of freelance theatre workers throughout the initial stages of the pandemic.

At the same time, there were calls for organizations to confront and re-envision their established employment structures and financial strategies. For example, in March 2021 the publicly funded Battersea Arts Centre in South-West London outlined a bold alternative agenda to put artists and freelancers at the forefront of their proposed working model, including pledging part of their Culture Recovery funding to support them. Tarek Iskander, the theatre's Artistic Director, addresses this directly, arguing: 'This pandemic has highlighted that the "infrastructure" that now needs the most protection is not our venues, but our freelancers. So, I would push for less core funding for buildings and more core funding for individuals.'<sup>27</sup> This is a view shared by Rupert Goold, Artistic Director of the Almeida Theatre: 'We will plough as much of any grant we receive as we can towards freelance artists and industry professionals . . . They are the people who built our industry and it is they who will renew it.'<sup>28</sup>

Iskander and Goold's concerns about the impact of the pandemic on theatre workers, and the notion of what has become known as the 'gig economy' in the UK, are indicative of wider debates concerning how the Covid crisis has exposed problematic perceptions of cultural value of theatre, including how the

state funds the creative industries through public arts policy. Clio Unger observes that theatres in Germany responded more quickly to the artistic challenges of the first nationwide lockdown and with greater flexibility than their counterparts in the UK. Unger contends that this was a result of Germany's well-established 'government funding and longer-term employment contracts', as well as the implementation of the UK furlough scheme, which meant many theatre employees were legally prevented from working.<sup>29</sup>

Conversely, other studies in the field have underscored how the pandemic 'presented new opportunities for creative reflection [in the UK] as the pace of life slowed down' and the global crisis put ongoing societal challenges 'into sharper focus'.<sup>30</sup> Chief Executive of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Shona McCarthy, observes that 'in many ways, this moment of pause and this breathing space, while it has probably been the most stressful and challenging time, has also been time to rethink and reset'.<sup>31</sup> While it is clear from our data that the media discourse in the UK underscores pertinent anxieties that the pandemic had exacerbated the industry's precarious working practices and funding models, the abrupt paradigm shift in the British theatre industry also demonstrates the nascent potential of arts organizations to engage in innovative creative practices. The shift calls into question, as well, structural and organizational development in order to react to the demands of Covid restrictions. This has seen organizations react to the manifold challenges of the pandemic in new and exciting ways by re-evaluating extant hierarchical divides in the theatre industry and acting as crucial sites of community engagement, advocacy, and skills-sharing.

### Discourses of Innovation

A recent report published by the Centre for Studies of Home suggests that 'the past few years may come to be seen as a unique moment of significant artistic innovation where creativity became a powerful way of confronting and responding to a complex public health crisis'.<sup>32</sup> As in the DACH countries, theatre in the UK

was seen as a way of navigating the increasing uncertainty of the Covid crisis. In the UK, this mutability was heightened by the shifting and frequently inconsistent government restrictions and guidelines as the pandemic continued to evolve. Media reports were quick to highlight the benefits of the UK's creative industries on wellbeing and mental health with a series of articles in the *Guardian* drawing attention to the vital communal nature of theatre and emphasizing its 'viability'.<sup>33</sup> This reflects the views of Mehmet Ergen and Leyla Nazli, co-founders of London's Arcola Theatre, who similarly point out that, immediately after the easing of the first lockdown restrictions, there was 'a real willingness from audiences to support live theatre'.<sup>34</sup> Despite the latter, however, there was also a key anxiety that the government's response failed to acknowledge how live theatre is created and the significant contribution that the arts make to the economy. The lacuna existed, despite the fact that statistics from a recent Arts Council England report, published in 2019, show that, pre-pandemic, cultural industries contributed £10.8 billion to the UK economy and that productivity in the arts between 2009 and 2016 was greater than that of the economy as a whole.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, there was also wider discussion that articulated the need for theatres to attract new audiences in the wake of the pandemic. Focus on making theatre more viable and accessible to many who were previously excluded has been directly linked to notions of cultural and artistic innovation. As had been addressed in German-language media reports, the alacrity with which UK theatre organizations effected the transition to online performance content resulted in the emergence of new forms of audience engagement and outreach. *The Stage* reports that during the UK's first national lockdown in 2020, 20 per cent of adults were watching theatre, dance, or musical performances digitally, and that one in five were doing so for the first time.<sup>36</sup> The emergence of new digital platforms and forms of engagement in the wake of the crisis provided organizations with the unique potential of providing access to their work to a global audience base, exposing new and innovative talent in ways previously unimaginable.

The shift has been highlighted by a recent study conducted at the University of Essex, which observes that engagement with digital content was high among 'new audience members' who had never physically visited a theatre: young people aged sixteen to twenty-four, and those who identified as visually impaired, D/deaf, disabled, or as having a long-term health condition.<sup>37</sup> Other theatres, reacting to the strict social distancing measure in place in the UK throughout much of 2020 and 2021, experimented with producing work in open-air and site-specific performance spaces, facilitating nascent creative engagement with local communities and providing further potential for cultivating new audiences. Finally, the pandemic also precipitated a focus on community-based projects, reaching new local audiences previously excluded by mobility, limited financial resources, or because they lived in rural and remote communities.

### New Ways of Working

As in the DACH countries, the initial response in the UK to pandemic restrictions forced theatre workers to engage in nascent acts of artistic work and collaboration, forging new models of digital communication with their peers. Reacting to the initial closure of theatres, digitally broadcast performances emerged at the forefront of the radically altered theatrical landscape. A report published in April 2020 in the *Guardian* summarizes that, 'Since venues were forced to close in mid-March, a huge number of digital theatre projects have been announced. The National Theatre of Scotland, Home in Manchester, HighTide, and Headlong were among the first companies to commission major online programmes of work exploring life in lockdown.'<sup>38</sup> These took the form either of previously recorded performances of high-profile productions or new independent work created and filmed under lockdown by multi-regional artists working across diverse platforms such as Zoom.

As the nature of the pandemic continued to evolve unpredictably, the challenges faced by institutions and organizations shifted, with many theatres striving to improve their digital

resources and capabilities. Smaller venues such as the Southwark Playhouse and Orange Tree Theatre began to invest in live stream performances of new plays on their own digital platforms in early 2021, while buildings remained closed as part of the ongoing Covid restrictions. The Camden People's Theatre commissioned an online festival, facilitating the crucial support of new digital and hybrid performance work by experimental and emerging artists throughout the pandemic. The theatre's Chief Executive, Kaya Stanley-Money, discussed how they had 'been reliant on digital tools . . . to deliver extensive artist support and community projects'.<sup>39</sup>

These responses to the pandemic by small- and medium-sized independent organizations provided a crucial opportunity to open up significant new avenues of artistic innovation and establish new modes of creative collaboration between institutions and theatre-makers. As in our German-language sources, there was also an increased focus in the UK on headphone theatre and new forms of aural dramaturgy, including dramatized video calls and audio walking tours that utilized binaural recording technology, such as the Royal & Derngate theatre's *The Whisper Tree* (2021).

Structurally and organizationally, theatres in the UK additionally experienced 'a steep learning curve that dictated a digital competency most probably never aspired to'.<sup>40</sup> Several theatres acknowledged that the need to create new hybrid forms of performance during the pandemic meant that they had diversified their working practices and sought new working relationships with digital artists and technical workers. According to Rachel Moore, while many buildings in the UK had been 'slow to embrace digital technology', they had 'quickly pivoted to create digital content with live streaming or on-demand offerings', embracing the possibility of digital theatre as a vital means of producing content for their audience.<sup>41</sup>

This is echoed in other media sources that report how 'buildings invested heavily in creating a strong digital presence during the pandemic', suggesting a clear willingness of theatre organizations in the UK to experiment with innovative structural ways of producing

digital work.<sup>42</sup> Manchester-based ThickSkin Theatre describes how they inventively allied and forged creative collaborations with virtual-reality filmmakers and production companies to create their immersive VR experience *Petrichor*. 'There's a really interesting collision of different worlds coming together,' explains the company's Executive Director, Laura Mallows.<sup>43</sup> 'We mashed together the film and theatre world and the output is a VR experience.'<sup>44</sup> This further-substantiated shift in how theatre responded to the challenges of the pandemic is evidenced in their readiness to expand their working practices and collaborate with technical staff.

### Digital and the Analogue

Despite the rapid rise of digital theatre during the pandemic, there remains a widespread anxiety over the pervasive reliance on digitalized working practices in the industry. The development of new multimedia performance practices has been divisive, with both artists and critics calling to repudiate the digital dominance of broadcast theatre. The need to compete with television and on-demand digital content providers, and such international streaming services as Netflix and Disney+, has placed new financial and creative demands on theatre organizations. As in our German-language sources, there was also scepticism that the embodied, communal experience of live art could not be replicated with digital theatre.<sup>45</sup> James Rowson and Holly Maples observe that 'many theatre workers also felt that smaller companies were unable to compete with the free content being made by larger cultural institutions . . . creat[ing] barriers for smaller companies to attract paying audiences to their online performances'.<sup>46</sup> Rowson and Maples describe how arts organizations remain unsure of how to monetize digital content, which has been compounded by concerns that the rapid push to digitize working practices has compromised the quality of work being produced.<sup>47</sup> The complex economic challenges of digital theatre, and understandable fears that theatre workers are unable to make a profit investing in online work, have also been echoed in our data,

raising wider questions about the long-term future of digital practice in the UK.<sup>48</sup>

As has been highlighted in our German-language data, there is a belief that the industry is quickly returning to pre-pandemic modes of artistic practice. This was articulated in one recent report in *The Stage*, which notes: 'When live performance returned, the levels of interest in digital waned in many instances.'<sup>49</sup> Other reports lamented the readiness to repudiate digital and multidisciplinary forms of theatre, contending that 'the digital downfall feels almost wasteful in terms of the development that's been seen in the format over the past year'.<sup>50</sup> While the long-term future of digital innovation in the UK remains uncertain, it is clear that there is a contentious and polarizing debate about the use of online digital platforms and how theatre practice will respond to the continuing challenges of the Covid crisis.

### **Innovation and Practice: The DACH Survey Results**

It has been suggested in the previous sections that institutional change in the performing arts has been realized in relation to the opportunities that have arisen from the pandemic. To complement our analysis of the media discourse, we also conducted a survey with independent theatre workers and organizations to widen our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on the performing arts, and to provide primary data documenting the pandemic experience. Unlike descriptive studies, this exploratory approach relies on a readily available, non-probabilistic sample. In addition, unlike explanatory studies, it takes an open-ended approach in which a large number of variables are queried, allowing for great openness to new questions and insights, and practical suggestions from the data. This mixed-methods design therefore results in widening our understanding of the pandemic's impact on the performing arts, juxtaposing the quantitative survey data with the qualitative media analysis data to increase the validity of the results.

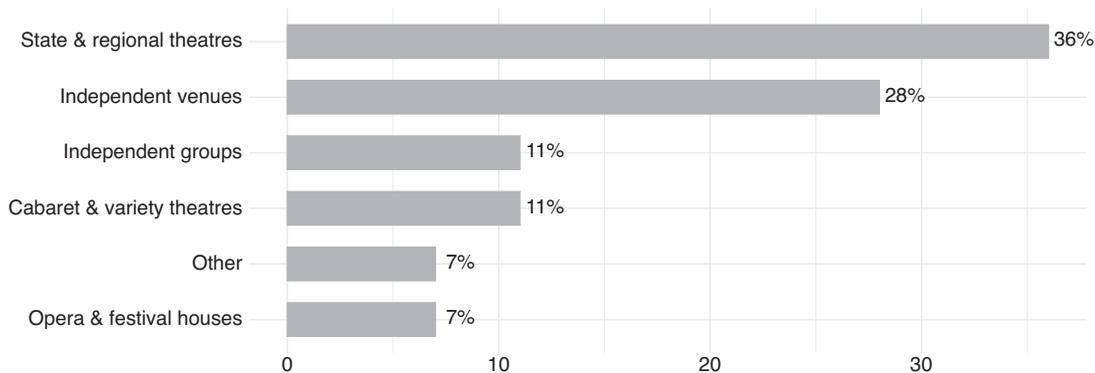
The following national performing arts associations and professional networks distributed

the questionnaire we created for this project within the field: Deutscher Bühnenverein (Germany); Bundestheater Holding (Austria); Schweizerischer Bühnenverband (Switzerland); Regie Netzwerk (all DACH Countries); Ensemble Netzwerk (all DACH Countries). In the independent performing arts field, these were: Bundesverband Freie Darstellende Künste e.V. (Germany); Interessen-Gemeinschaft Freie Theaterarbeit (Austria); and t. [Theaterschaffen Schweiz] (Switzerland).

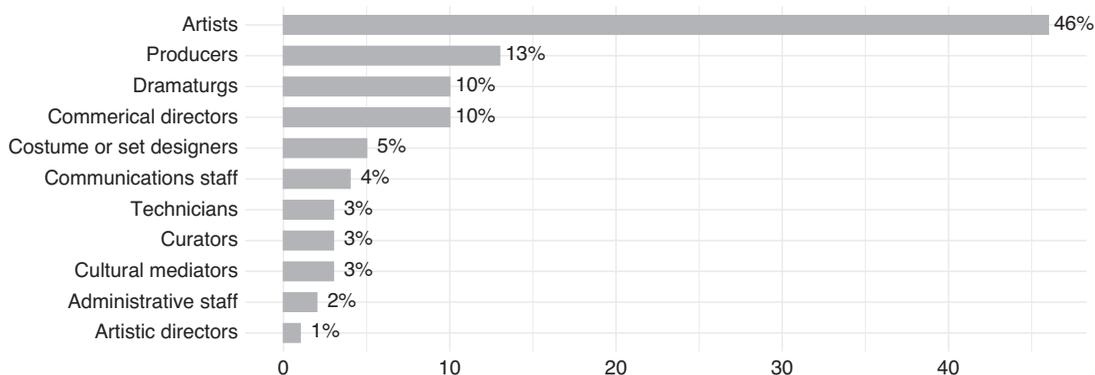
The survey ran between January and April 2022, reaching 231 respondents in German-speaking countries. Of these, 79 were representatives of performing arts or theatre organizations and 152 were individual professionals working in the field. It is important to note that, due to financial restrictions, no translations into French, Italian, and Romansh were made for the questionnaire; consequently, for the quantitative account only stakeholders in the German-speaking part of Switzerland could be addressed (Figures 1 and 2).

The survey asked both individual professionals and organizations about their resources during the pandemic, including hours worked, financial resources, working conditions, technological requirements, and commitment to participate in digital arts activities. Moreover, respondents were requested to recall the time before the pandemic, allowing for comparisons regarding the pre-Covid and the current situation, with a distinction also being made between independent performing arts and permanent stages (municipal and state theatres, private theatres, opera houses, and so on), which allowed for a diverse assessment of the survey results.

The survey's investigation of the Covid-19 support programmes for culture introduced in the context of the pandemic in the different countries reveals a major distinction. The Austrian government describes the Covid-19-related funding plan as a measure to combat the effects of the pandemic;<sup>51</sup> the Swiss government regulations describe it as a measure to mitigate the economic effects, adapt institutions to the changed situation, and preserve the cultural landscape, meaning that the measures in both countries



**Figure 1.** The sample of organization representatives from the DACH countries survey.



**Figure 2.** The sample of individual respondents from the DACH countries survey.

primarily relate to relief efforts.<sup>52</sup> In Germany, the cultural fund 'Neustart Kultur', launched in the summer of 2020, represents a generously endowed 'rescue and future programme' that was intended not only to mitigate the pandemic's impact, but to strengthen and develop the arts during periods of crisis.<sup>53</sup> This marks an alternate premise, and the income figures and working conditions of the individual professionals surveyed clearly reflect this distinction.

Six per cent of the German higher-income respondents from permanent stages experienced a deterioration of their monthly individual net income amounting to more than €3,001 before the pandemic to between €1,201 and €3,000 during the pandemic. For as much as 8 per cent of lower-income

permanent stage employees, an improvement from less than €1,200 before the pandemic to between €1,201 and €3,000 per month during the survey period was recorded. Moreover, an increase of 7 per cent of the German independent respondents from less than €1,200 to between €1,201 and €3,000 was recorded. Thus, a significant number of professionals in a lower-income category have experienced an existential leap out of precarity, while only some higher earners have suffered losses. Although these figures are not representative, they indicate a pandemic funding principle that has improved the economic situation of the more vulnerable professionals in the field in Germany. By contrast, Austrian professionals in both independent and public theatres suffered significant income losses

during the pandemic and no such development can be observed. Similarly, in Switzerland, the pandemic led to a significant loss of income for many. The accompanying tables illustrate the shifts between the individual income categories for each country sample (Figure 3).

With the altered financial and organizational situation brought about by the pandemic, working conditions have changed as well. Fifty-six per cent of the German respondents experienced a decrease in workload compared to before, and as many as 74 per cent of the Swiss and 82 per cent of the Austrian

respondents state the same. Moreover, 77 per cent of the total sample accomplished their work with fewer hours per week compared to before Covid-19. This, however, is no deficit for a large proportion of artists and cultural workers. They were able to continue in their roles, and 58 per cent of the total sample even stated that during the pandemic they were more satisfied with their work.

The comparison between independent professionals and permanent stage employees, and that between countries in this regard, showed little difference. Although Covid-19 exposed professionals to a high-risk situation,

### Germany

| Income Category | Independent Professionals<br>2020 (n=14) | Independent Professionals<br>2022 (n=14) | Permanent Stages<br>2020 (n=37) | Permanent Stages<br>2022 (n=37) |
|-----------------|--|--|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| < € 1200        | 46%                                      | 39%                                      | 13%                             | 5%                              |
| € 1201 - 3000   | 54%                                      | 61%                                      | 65%                             | 78%                             |
| > € 3001        | 0%                                       | 0%                                       | 22%                             | 16%                             |

### Austria

| Income Category | Independent Professionals<br>2020 (n=55) | Independent Professionals<br>2022 (n=55) | Permanent Stages<br>2020 (n=12) | Permanent Stages<br>2022 (n=12) |
|-----------------|--|--|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| < € 1200        | 46%                                      | 58%                                      | 27%                             | 50%                             |
| € 1201 - 3000   | 50%                                      | 38%                                      | 64%                             | 50%                             |
| > € 3001        | 4%                                       | 4%                                       | 9%                              | 0%                              |

### German-speaking Switzerland

| Income Category | Independent Professionals<br>2020 (n=27) | Independent Professionals<br>2022 (n=27) | Permanent Stages<br>2020 (n=4) | Permanent Stages<br>2022 (n=4) |
|-----------------|--|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| < CHF 1800      | 16%                                      | 26%                                      | 25%                            | 0%                             |
| CHF 1801 - 4000 | 42%                                      | 56%                                      | 0%                             | 25%                            |
| > CHF 4001      | 42%                                      | 18%                                      | 75%                            | 75%                            |

Figure 3. Changes in income of respondents between spring 2020 and spring 2022.

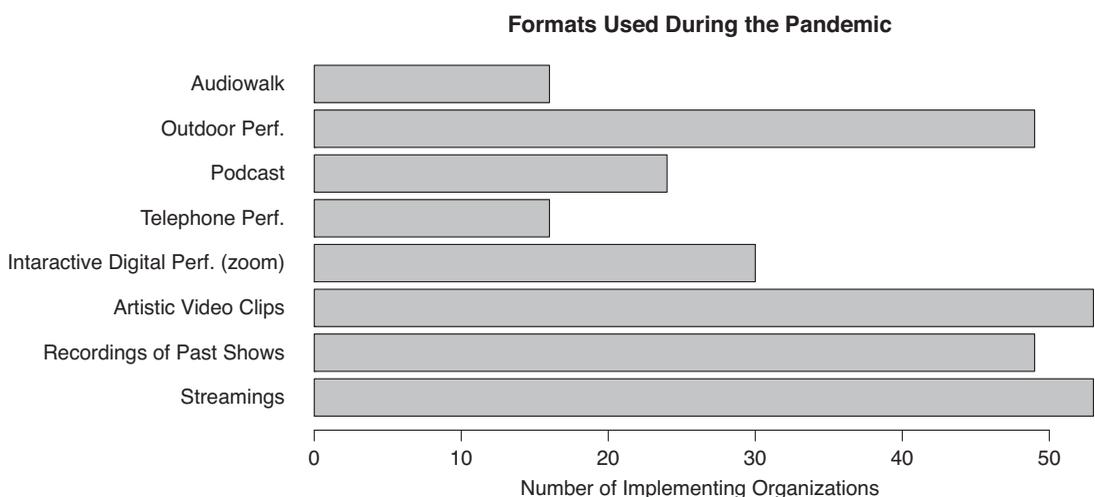
they had more time for their work and, at least in Germany, in a significant number of cases they experienced an increase in financial resources, even if the theatres were closed and the possibilities were limited. Here, paradoxically, the pandemic proved positive, especially for independent performing arts professionals, as the new funding opportunities countered the inadequate working conditions that characterized work in the field before the pandemic.<sup>54</sup>

The continuing cooperation between professionals confirms ongoing activity. Only 23 per cent of all individual respondents reported that they had less contact with other professionals or organizations in the field compared to before the pandemic. The remaining 77 per cent had the same amount (21 per cent) or more (56 per cent), despite social distancing measures. Since live events and physical co-presence have been restricted in all countries, this increase is likely due to a turn to the digital space.

To examine this shift, the questionnaire measured 'technology commitment', using an established scale indicating technological acceptance and technical competence.<sup>55</sup> The responses to these questions showed that performing arts professionals in the field in mid-2022 were only slightly above average committed to using digital technology, with

an overall score of 3.4 on a 5-point rating scale. At the same time, the majority of respondents (57 per cent) indicated that they use more digital technology in mid-2022 than they had done before the pandemic. This suggests that there remains scepticism towards digital development in the theatre and that a commitment to the analogue prevails among practitioners. Nevertheless, the data shows a general shift towards greater use of digital technology, and not only has technology commitment increased but so has digital competency. Fifty-nine per cent of all the performing arts and theatre organizations surveyed offered training for their staff to improve digital skills; 14 per cent of them even state that they employ more technical experts than before; and 66 per cent had open technical positions for which they could not find employees. This development has led to 82 per cent of all surveyed organizations presenting digital content during the pandemic, with 77 per cent stating that they were producing more digital arts offerings in mid-2022 than they had done before (Figure 4).

Eighty-seven per cent of the organizations who worked with streaming to reach their audience, and 53 per cent of those who presented recordings of past events, reported that they had never done so before the pandemic. Seventy-seven per cent of those who used



**Figure 4.** New formats introduced during the pandemic in the DACH countries.

interactive digital performances, and 43 per cent of those who presented artistic video clips (online readings, videos of artists, etc.), had also never done so previously. Thirty-eight per cent of those who created audio walks, and 88 per cent of those who worked with phone-in shows, had never done so before. Finally, 50 per cent of those who produced podcasts, and 14 per cent of those who staged outdoor performances, had not done so before Covid-19. These numbers demonstrate that a far-reaching learning process has taken place and that many organizations have ventured into new territory, shifting away from conventions and creating their own form of aesthetic language. The time of the pandemic was indeed a time of experimentation.

To assess the impact of these new developments, the survey further questioned the representatives of organizations regarding their loss of audience members during the pandemic. In Germany, 89 per cent, in Switzerland 70 per cent, and in Austria 50 per cent of all venues report that they had lower audience numbers in mid-2022 compared to before the pandemic, even though, at this point, live performances were possible again and most theatres were showing both live and digital productions. A representative survey of the Swiss population conducted by the Swiss Bundesamt für Kultur in November 2022 came to a similar conclusion. Accordingly, the crisis has led to a retreat into the home and a decline in the number of in-person visitors as 'attendance at cultural events was replaced by digital productions'.<sup>56</sup> In addition, the most frequently cited reasons given in the study are not a lack of interest or mistrust of new formats, but a change of habits and financial considerations.

The above analysis demonstrates that the creation of new digital and hybrid offerings countered the closure of theatres due to Covid-19-related restrictions. Professionals and organizations have adapted organizationally and aesthetically as a result. However, the available evidence also reveals clear differences between the independent theatre and the permanent stages. When the survey indicators for artistic innovation – activities deviating from convention, disregard for

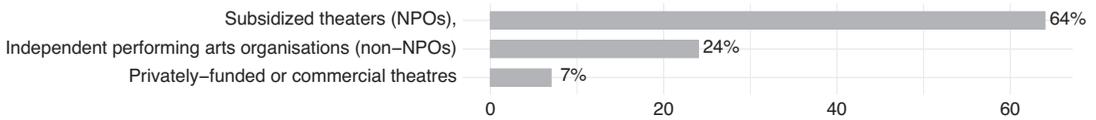
tradition and repertoire as a guideline, addressing new content, and experimenting with new forms – are combined with creating a scale from them, it becomes apparent that innovation is significantly more important for the independent performing arts (3.63 on a 5-point scale) than for permanent stages (2.89 on a 5-point scale).

Comparing countries, the commitment to innovative practices was higher in Austria (3.62) and Switzerland (3.36) than in Germany (2.98). Interestingly, in these countries, work opportunities and incomes were lower during the pandemic, suggesting that higher competition also demanded more innovation. Nonetheless, organization representatives from all countries and fields indicate that developing new forms and formats was more important at the time of the survey than it was before Covid-19. In addition, the search for new forms and formats and the objective of making innovative contributions to public discourse are clearly and significantly more prevalent in the independent performing arts than in the permanent stages in the DACH countries.

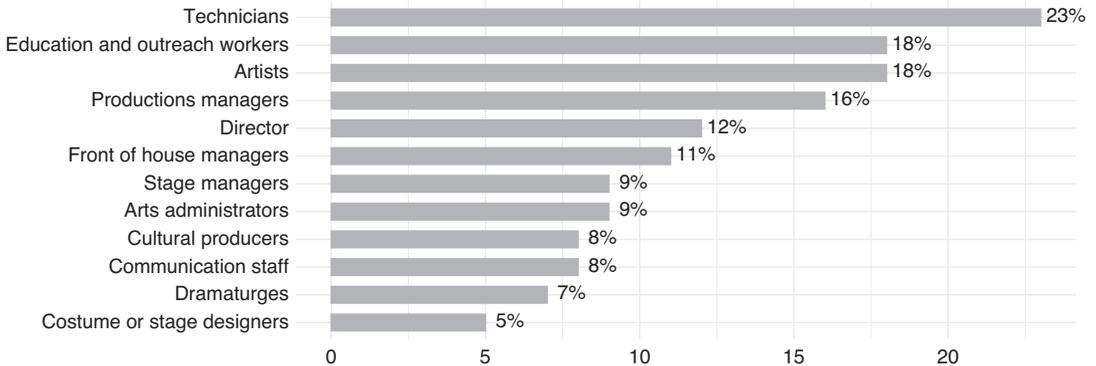
### **The Show Must Go On: Innovation and Practice from the UK Survey Results**

In the UK, our survey was completed by a total of 102 separate respondents. Seventy-three were individuals working in the performing arts field, and twenty-nine were senior representatives of performing arts organizations (Figures 5 and 6).

The sample of organizations that took part in our survey was varied, but they were overall much more likely to be subsidized theatres than independent performing arts companies or commercial venues.<sup>57</sup> Freelancers make up the majority of the UK's theatre ecology and the sector relies on a workforce that is 88 per cent self-employed or freelance.<sup>58</sup> Our survey reflected this, with the largest group of respondents declaring that their current employment status was self-employed or freelance. It is worth noting that, in addition to this, there was a broad spread of other employment statuses also listed by the respondents, including working on



**Figure 5.** The sample of organization representatives from the UK survey.



**Figure 6.** The sample of individual respondents from the UK survey.

permanent or open-ended contracts, fixed-term contracts, and zero-hours employment. The survey thus provided an important snapshot of the diverse working practices of British theatre workers in 2022.

In *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations During a Pandemic*, Caridad Svich argues that the catalytic events of the global pandemic triggered a ‘huge, evolutionary pivot’ that ‘recalibrated’ the field of theatre and live performance.<sup>59</sup> This is backed up by the results of the UK survey, where participants report an increase in workload since the onset of the pandemic. Fifty-three per cent of respondents claim to now be working more, although it is significant to observe that this figure is noticeably lower compared to 56 per cent in Germany, 74 per cent in Austria, and 84 per cent in Switzerland. As has been argued above in our analysis of English-language articles and media reports, this can potentially be explained by the DACH countries’ ability to respond to the challenges of the Covid crisis with greater speed and versatility due to long-standing state funding

models and more stable employment contracts for theatre workers.

What these results do suggest, however, is that, despite the paralytic disruption caused to the theatre industry in the UK by the pandemic, the widespread industry closure in 2020 and 2021 allowed theatre workers a crucial lacuna that effected a moment of reflection and reconceptualization of their craft during the artistic tumult of the Covid crisis. Covid-19 accelerated digital practice and innovation, driving artists and organizations who may have previously been resistant to virtual and hybrid performance to rapidly experiment with new digital practices so as to reconnect with audiences, thereby advancing new forms of theatre that navigated social distancing restrictions.

Moreover, one of the urgent consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the sudden disruption of established networks for theatre workers around the UK. Echoing the responses of our DACH country participants, respondents to the UK survey underscore that theatre workers and companies have

found new and diverse peer-to-peer advocacy during the pandemic, including new forms of digital support and communication. Survey respondents reported rethinking the way they work creatively with their peers. Across all individual respondents, 57 per cent said they are increasingly collaborating with others working in the performing arts. This rose to 87.5 per cent for those who have graduated since 2019, suggesting an especially high level of desire for creative networking and engagement amongst emerging artists. In addition, survey respondents were also asked whether they currently experienced more support from advocacy groups than before the pandemic. Thirty-seven per cent agreed or strongly agreed with this statement; in comparison, only 21 per cent reported that they had experienced less support during this period.

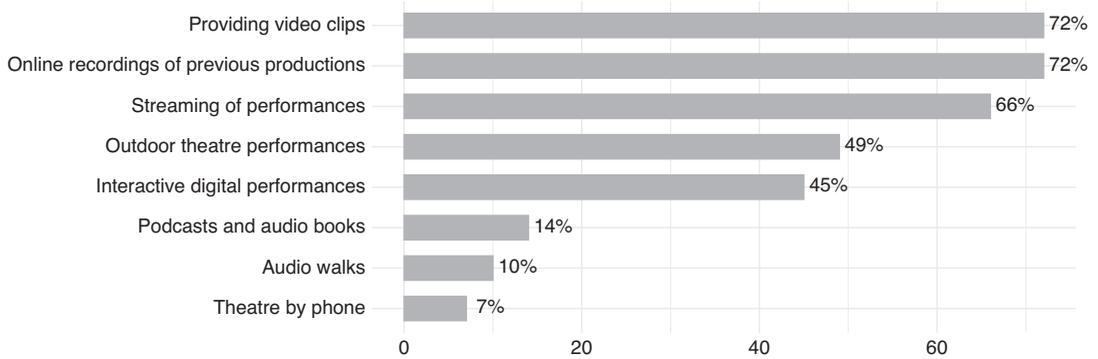
As we have noted above, at the height of the pandemic during lockdown, 20 per cent of adults were watching theatre, dance, and performance arts online. According to a study conducted into the digital transformation of the theatre industry in the UK, 75 per cent of respondents reported that 'they would purchase tickets to watch a live Zoom theatre production at any time, even when theatres were re-opened'.<sup>60</sup> We asked survey respondents to recall their own 'digital readiness' and articulate their digital development from the start of the pandemic until mid-2022. The survey results reiterated the role online work has played in the sector during the pandemic and highlighted the proliferation of digital theatre in the wake of the first national lockdown in the UK in March 2020. The majority of respondents (53 per cent) told us that since Covid-19 they were using more digital technology in their work. There was minimal difference in responses across age groups or regions, suggesting a widespread move to the digital since the start of the pandemic.

These figures reflect the results from the DACH countries survey, suggesting that the technological commitment of institutions to innovate with online and hybrid forms of theatres was similar in the UK, compared to Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Similarly, in the UK, 52 per cent of the arts

organizations surveyed reported offering digital training for their staff since 2020, with 7 per cent employing more technical expertise to meet the exigent demands to produce new forms of broadcast theatre and hybrid digital work. This turn to the digital was further substantiated by the responses of our independent respondents, with 66 per cent answering that they were interested in using the latest digital applications and technical devices for their work. Corresponding to the data from our DACH countries survey, an overwhelming majority (86 per cent) of theatre organizations reported that they had offered digital artistic formats to their audience in the past year, with only three saying they had not. Seventy-two per cent of the organizations we surveyed also reported that they were now streaming more digital arts content in mid-2022 than before the pandemic, a comparable number to those from our DACH countries survey showing that theatres were motivated to build digital content into their repertoires and experiment with new digitalized working practices.

Although there has been widespread experimentation with multifarious digital platforms, our survey data suggests that there are certain forms of digital content that were most likely to be produced by theatres while they were closed during the national lockdowns. The result of our survey also saw wider institutional innovation beyond digital platforms, with 45 per cent of organizations staging outdoor theatre performances and 10 per cent producing audio walks and forms of aural dramaturgy (Figure 7).

It is clear from these results that not only did the pandemic generate wider opportunities for practitioners to experiment with inter-medial digital projects, but it also contributed to theatre organizations experimenting with the development of new forms and re-evaluating their wider creative practice and aesthetics. This liminal work, employing innovative use of such disparate digital platforms as WhatsApp and Zoom, and video game design and interaction, demonstrates that, in the UK, the pandemic similarly offered a period of artistic innovation as organizations aimed to rethink their working practices and



**Figure 7.** Percentage of performance formats used by performing arts organizations in the UK to connect with their audience during theatre closures in the lockdowns.

forge new artistic dialogues and collaborations. In doing so, these innovative new ways of working recalibrated how theatre organizations interacted with audiences on both a national and international level, as well as how they operated on both a structural and economic model.

As in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, the challenge of audience behaviour in the UK remains a crucial facet of the ongoing development of risk taking and innovation as theatres look to win back audiences and target financial stability after the lifting of restrictions. As a recent study into regional theatres in the east of England has observed, 18 per cent of previous audience members have not yet returned to theatregoing and 20–21 per cent are booking ‘considerably less than they were before the pandemic’.<sup>61</sup> This suggests a significant number of ‘potentially lost audience members’ that theatres must navigate in the new artistic climate and fluctuating audience behaviour.<sup>62</sup>

In the UK survey, we asked the representatives of organizations if their audience numbers had changed since the first Covid-19-related theatre closures in 2020. Fourteen per cent reported that they had much lower audience numbers than before the pandemic, while 41 per cent had lower audience numbers than before. This provided important insights into the demographics of those theatres that had lost audience members since the start of the pandemic. The survey data demonstrates that

100 per cent of regional theatres and 80 per cent of touring companies had lost audience members, suggesting that small-scale venues, regional theatres, and touring companies have faced unique challenges since the start of the pandemic and have been especially impacted by changes in audience behaviour. Moreover, 100 per cent of theatres in the UK that had lost audience members said they had presented digital artistic formats to their audience in the past year, suggesting that this had little impact on retaining audience numbers. These figures suggest that ‘lost audiences’ is a challenge facing theatre organizations in the UK as well as the DACH countries.

Our survey also aimed to open up new insights into the wider institutional innovation of theatre buildings as they attempt to reform their organizational and artistic structures after the initial shock of the pandemic. While producing a precise picture of artistic innovation in the industry is complex, the survey data shows interesting patterns of engagement with the development of new ways of working. The results suggest that there has been an important shift in the UK theatre, with the pandemic providing the opportunity for theatre institutions to reflect on their organizational structure and provide a substantive rethinking of their previously entrenched working practices.

Despite evident unease that the decline in audience numbers has stifled creative evolution and impeded risk taking, resulting in

increasingly economically driven and risk-averse programming, the theatres that participated in our survey were keen to stress that the pandemic had, in fact, presented new opportunities for artistic innovation. For example, 93 per cent noted that they had placed a greater emphasis on innovation since the pandemic, while 59 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed that developing new forms and ways of working was more important to their organization in mid-2022 than it was before the pandemic.

These results similarly correspond to the answers given by the respondents of the DACH countries survey. Although in the UK the link between independent theatres and the importance of artistic innovation is less well defined, the overall result shows an important shift in the working practices of organizations, as well as in their attitude towards innovation and experimentation since the start of the pandemic. In addition, it is also important to note that, in the UK, the pandemic has produced a re-evaluation of the embedded hierarchies in the industry and a more innovative approach to who and what is programmed. When asked, 62 per cent of organizations stated that they believed there were now more opportunities to increase ethnic diversity amongst their workforce. As this article has noted above, however, there is still a key anxiety that the industry will return to pre-pandemic modes of work and programming, alongside more established economic models for theatre and performance.

While it remains clear that the volatility and uncertainty of the pandemic have destabilized the global theatre ecology with devastating economic and artistic effect for those working in the sector, there remains the capacity for theatre to bring artists together and create new and dynamic forms of contemporary practice. The industry's resilience is underscored in our survey results, demonstrating the development of dynamic creative networks, new forms of aesthetics and practice, and crucial ideological institutional shifts taking place off-stage since the start of the Covid crisis. These innovations have the potential to create a more collaborative and fluid theatrical landscape, reshaping organization models and

revising how theatre is programmed and watched.

### **Conclusion: Theatre after Covid?**

The global Covid-19 pandemic has shed new light on the notion of artistic innovation in theatre as the urgent demands of the crisis forced a rapid artistic and institutional response to the unprecedented interruption of physical, in-person performance. In both the DACH countries and the UK, many arts professionals and organizations have been required to reinvent themselves and diversify their artistic practice. Despite contrasting differences in funding models both before and during the pandemic, theatre-makers and organizations in these regions have simultaneously continued to advance new and innovative ways of working that have navigated successive national lockdowns and social distancing measures in place throughout 2020 and 2021.

This article has sought to identify the potential for unique artistic and organizational innovation in both the DACH countries and the UK in the wake of the pandemic. Alongside the backdrop of manifold media articles and reports that foreground the potential for innovative digital projects, artists and theatres are also demonstrating an increased technological commitment, reporting that they have implemented a variety of new formats and themes. Buildings and organizations have seen a consolidation of virtual, online work, and an increase in staff skilled in digital technology, either through training or hiring policies. In addition, the provision of aid and resources to the field provided the opportunity to continue working, rather than having to secure alternative income streams, freeing up time that would not have been available otherwise.

The obstacle of not being able to use the usual stages led to the exploration of new spaces, both digital and physical. As the field was forging new ground, this exploration was associated with a greater tolerance for imperfection in artistic practice, even if this study's discourse analysis revealed a small number of critical articles on the quality of new

productions. Moreover, in dealing with the new, an increase in communication between professionals was noted, indicating a culture of cooperation rather than competition.

An endogenous transformation of the field has been observed in our wide-ranging collection of data. Theatre critics have seized upon this topic in both the DACH countries and the UK, and have vociferously debated the impact of these structural and artistic innovations, as well as their potential long-term impact, on theatre and live performance. Our surveys have also captured the vital experiences of theatre workers and organizations during the pandemic, providing a new emphasis on their investment in digital technology, new forms of practice, and shifts in institutional power.

In the DACH countries, this general drive for novelty is clearly measurable, whereby the objective to innovate is more pronounced in the independent performing arts than in permanent stages. In the UK, while the distinction between subsidized and independent performing arts organizations has been less pronounced in our survey data, artistic innovation has been demonstrated to be a clear outcome of the pandemic and has been prioritized by both organizations and independent theatre workers.

As this article shows, despite the wide-ranging differences in the respective theatre sectors, as well as the political responses to the crisis in the performing arts in all the countries studied, the Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly brought an increase in digital infrastructure and know-how, capacity, but also in new artistic practices and innovation. There is a long-term optimism that this infrastructure and knowledge will also continue to persist in organizations and artistic practice after the pandemic. Thus, rethinking the ontological premise of the performing arts beyond physical liveness found its resolution in the pandemic, which cultivated digital production beyond the co-presence of bodies. By anchoring new resources, in both financial terms and audience capacity, the organizational and aesthetic changes described above have been brought about and have a good chance of persisting. Theoretical theatre studies

approaches that begin to conceive the analysis of digital theatre as an empirical basis for its epistemological constitution, alongside or even instead of the live experience, underscore this development.<sup>63</sup>

However, although the pandemic has spurred creativity and structural adaptations to the performing arts that have been deployed and tested, the second component necessary for innovation, the long-term implementation of the new, remains challenged by turbulent times. The end of Covid restrictions across Europe has encouraged some to position themselves against those developments and return to live, in-person performance, highlighting a certain reluctance to embrace the new and the innovation introduced at the height of the pandemic. The long-term establishment of these new ways of working requires not only structural impetus but also long-term stability and the will to continue what has been introduced.

## Notes and References

1. 'Theatre after Covid' is a collaborative project between the Research Group Configurations of Crisis [Forschungsgruppe Krisengefüge der Künste] and the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, supported by LMU Munich and the German Research Foundation (DFG). Principal Investigator: Professor Christopher Balme (LMU Munich).

2. Barbara Fuchs, *Theatre of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2022), p. 1.

3. Ibid.

4. Christopher Balme and Tony Fisher, 'Introduction', in *Theatre Institutions in Crisis: European Perspectives*, ed. Balme and Fisher (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), p. 1–24 (p. 14).

5. See Dirk Baecker, *Wozu Theater?* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2013); Boris Groys, *On the New* (London: Verso, 2014); and Niklas Luhmann, *Die Ausdifferenzierung des Kunstsystems: Vortrag im Kunstmuseum Bern am 19. Dezember 1993* (Bern: Benteli, 1994).

6. Garry Neil, *Culture and Working Conditions for Artists: Implementing the 1980 Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2019), p. 5, <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371790>>, accessed 24 January 2023.

7. Thomas Kaestle, *Was das Freie Theater Bewegt* (Berlin: Bundesverband Freie Darstellende Künste, 2017), p. 31; 'Theater und Netz Vol. 7: Die Innovationsschraube oder wie kommt das Neue in die Kunst?', *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, 4 May 2019, <<https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2020-02/2019-Theater-und-Netz-7-Programm.pdf>>, accessed 24 January 2023; Silke zum Eschenhoff, 'Versprechen auf die Zukunft: Der Zusammenhang

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8. For a further discussion on the wider impact of contemporary funding models on theatre and performance in the UK, and policy requiring innovation from the performing arts, see Jen Harive, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 23, 63; and Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

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