

THEATER PUSHED TO THE LIMITS BY THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic has exposed the precarious employment situation of artists, but also created a chance for truly equal access to theater. **Maria Babicka** and **Justyna Czarnota-Misztal** discuss the findings of a set of studies on how Polish theaters have coped in these trying times.

The Syrena Theater in Warsaw. The concept of the decoration of the seats was devised and implemented by the actress and director Joanna Drozda



ALEKSANDRA KOS-SOWSKA/SYRENA THEATER

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our lives in an unprecedented way, forcing us to overcome and cross various boundaries in social, cultural, and economic life. You have coordinated a set of studies promoted under the collective name “New Forms of Existence,” shedding light on the situation of Poland’s theaters and the impact of the pandemic on their ecosystem. What was the detailed subject of those studies?

MARIA BABICKA: It’s commonly believed that nothing will be the same after the pandemic. This opinion prompted us to take the broadest possible look at the theater landscape at this particular time. The first person to be invited into the project was Dr. Bogna Kietlińska, a sociologist from the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw. In early April 2020, she started surveys of theater audiences. This was her own research initiative, which she undertook spontaneously and out of passion. She was interested not only in whether and how the public watched theater shows online, but also why they did not do so. She was joined by var-

ious other researchers, who asked more questions. Ultimately, we worked with a team of 25 people. After months of work, they compiled reports on seven topics, which we will refer to here as separate studies. In late May 2020, a survey of theater managers was launched. It was used by Prof. Marek Krajewski and Dr. Maciej Frąckowiak from the Faculty of Sociology at the Adam Mickiewicz University to reconstruct the strategies for coping with the new situation used by theater managers from public and NGO theaters as well as those that operate as independent teams. The results show the scale of disorientation and problems during the first weeks of the pandemic, but they also document enormous mobilization and community self-help.

JUSTYNA CZARNOTA-MISZTAL: In the fall of 2020, a team led by Dr. Anna Buchner took a closer look at the online activities of theaters, analyzed their reach (the estimated number of views of such content as posts, comments, and articles that appeared online and in the media), and talked to those responsible for promotion and representatives of the theater audience. The researchers wanted to find out what the online form offered to theaters and how the experience of being closed down during the pandemic had changed them. Opinions of theater viewers were also important. Another team looked at various groups of theater professionals. The research team composed of Michał Bargielski, Dr. Anna Buchner, Dr. Katarzyna Kalinowska, Dr. Katarzyna Kułakowska, and Maria Wierzbicka described this issue from the anthropological perspective. In turn, the situation of artists (including their financial situation) was analyzed by a team led by Prof. Dorota Ilczuk. Maria Babicka and Marek Dudkiewicz looked at the changes that had taken place in amateur theater during the pandemic. The latter study is extremely valuable to our community because it brings new insights in an area that is often marginalized. We wanted to see all aspects of theater life during the pandemic, which is why each of the studies also included independent, fringe theater and the artists who create it. The last topic we examined was theater criticism. Dr. Małgorzata Ćwikła, Dr. Marcin Laberschek, Dr. Waldemar Rapior, and Dr. Zofia Smolarska attempted to define this area. They mainly looked for answers to the following questions: what impact did the pandemic have on theater criticism, and what strategies did critics use to adapt to the new conditions of talking about theater?

How was the research conducted?

M.B.: We wanted to use a variety of research tools to understand the phenomena we analyzed in as much detail as possible. Due to the pandemic, all data were collected remotely. The respondents



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filled in online questionnaires, and interviews were conducted over the phone or via video communicators. The researchers combined qualitative and quantitative methods. This was evident both in the design of the online questionnaires, which consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions, and in specific research concepts. Data in the studies were often collected in two stages: the first

involved examining a larger group of respondents using commonly available surveys (CAWI), whereas the second centered around individual in-depth interviews (IDI) with respondents selected using the criteria set during the first stage.

J.C.-M.: The same method was employed to examine the strategies and goals of theaters. In collaboration with us, Prof. Marek Krajewski and Dr. Maciej Frąckowiak asked managers from public and private theaters, as well as those operating as NGOs and informal groups, to fill in a questionnaire. The database of the respondents, gathered by the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute, includes over 800 contacts. The researchers obtained a response rate of nearly 30%. Based on the answers, they identified the basic categories of the strategies used by theaters during the first weeks of the pandemic. These became one of the main criteria for selecting respondents for the interviews conducted during the second stage of the study.

M.B.: Marek Dudkiewicz and I followed a similar two-step approach in our study of the situation of amateur theaters. The questionnaire was widely available on the Internet, and it was sent to places where it could reach individuals running amateur theater groups. The respondents were selected for interviews based on how their groups operated, i.e. whether they suspended their activity or continued it remotely. The researchers also used a two-stage approach (an online survey and interviews) to take a closer look at theater criticism. Additionally, during the third stage of the study, they observed how theater criticism functioned in the online environment. In this way, they created a case study of theater criticism during the pandemic.

J.C.-M.: Case study methodology was also chosen by the team whose report described the situation of theater personnel during the pandemic. The team carried out 11 case studies related to individual professional groups. The researchers collected data on each of those groups using various research methods and techniques, including in-depth individual interviews, focus interviews, field observation, the technique of ethnographic interviews called “netnography” (network ethnography), and exploration and analysis of publicly available media materials.

M.B.: The studies were conducted throughout last year, so those launched later may have drawn to some extent on the conclusions of the earlier findings. I can give you two examples. We started developing the concept of research into the operation of online theaters by consulting with representatives of the teams that analyzed the strategies of theaters, theater audiences, and the situation of theater workers. In turn, references to conclusions from the qualitative survey of theater artists, who were one of the professional groups in the study of theater workers, could be made



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KATARZYNA CHMURA/POLISH THEATER IN WARSAW

A rehearsal of *Baba-Dziwo* in the Polish Theater in Warsaw

by Prof. Dorota Ilczuk's team. It prepared a quantitative survey of the situation of theater artists in the pandemic that was carried out in the fall of 2020.

J.C.-M.: Importantly, this was the only study that was primarily quantitative in nature. It was designed in this way because we wanted it to provide a picture of the entire community of artists. The team used an online survey and quota sampling, recreating the percentage share of specific occupations in the population of artists in Poland, which can prove that the sample was representative. The researchers analyzed questionnaires completed by 541 individuals who relied on work in the theater sector for at least 50% of their income in 2016–2019.

M.B.: We should also mention that the teams that worked with us consisted of scholars from various disciplines, including sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, theater studies, psychology, economics, and cultural management. The researchers consulted us about creating concepts of their areas, based on their chosen theoretical positions and methodological perspectives. At the stage of both data collection and analysis, this allowed the creation of paths that linked various perspectives.

What watershed moments for the theater landscape during the pandemic can be identified based on the findings of your research?

J.C.-M.: The research we conducted during the pandemic helped us see the importance of permanent employment, the need for the timely conclusion of contracts, and the problems that may be caused by

the use of freelance contracts, which are a common form of employment in the theater sector in Poland. The report compiled by Prof. Marek Krajewski and Dr. Maciej Frąckowiak shows that the financial consequences of the pandemic had the strongest impact on fringe theaters, whose situation was uncertain even under normal conditions. Major difficulties were also noted by private theaters, governed strictly by the logic of the market.

I feel tempted to analyze this information in the context of the data from the study conducted by Prof. Dorota Ilczuk. Her findings show that contracts with theater artists were terminated in most cases in informal groups (46%) and in private theaters (45%), but the share of terminations was much smaller in public theaters (20%). This shows that the theaters that relied on public subsidies and managed their funds wisely not only handled the pandemic situation best, but also provided for the artists and felt responsible for them. On the other hand, public theaters received additional assistance from the government. Such funds were a lot more difficult to obtain for independent theaters, freelancers, and NGOs running their theaters. The controversy surrounding the Culture Support Fund shows how difficult it is to reconcile the interests of all parties: public and private institutions, entrepreneurs, and organizations. The Fund was created for all organizations involved in culture that reported financial losses in 2020.

M.B.: The pace of the changes shown in our study was influenced by the trajectory of the pandemic and the related changes in lockdown measures. The study

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The New Theater in Zabrze during the Public Theatre Day. There is a note on the armchairs with a hashtag #wearewaiting



PAWEŁ JANICKI/NEW THEATER IN ZABRZE

revealed clear stages related to the beginning of the pandemic, the slow lifting of the lockdown measures imposed on cultural institutions around May and June 2020, the summer vacations, and the second wave of infections in the fall. The reports mention greater adaptation of professional groups and theaters to the new reality, which is reflected, for example, in changes in the perception of the Internet as a new form of communication with the audience, better preparation for activity in the fall of 2020, and greater readiness of theaters to create safe conditions for the audience compared with the spring. On a less positive note, for many respondents the recent period has been characterized by prolonged financial distress and lethargy related to the uncertainty of planning activities and the on-again/off-again ability to pursue online and offline activities.

Surveys conducted by Prof. Krajewski and Dr. Frąckowiak in late May and June 2020 show that members of the theater community in general were disappointed with the assistance measures proposed by the government last year. They were particularly critical of the “Culture on the Web” program, highlighting the need to create works to be watched online and the atmosphere of rivalry. This situation seems to be part of a broader discussion on funding of culture

using grant programs, which hinders long-term and systemic efforts.

J.C.-M.: To sum up, it must be said that Poland generally lacks systemic solutions concerning culture. On the other hand, work is under way on legislation regulating the status of an artist. We will see what comes out of those initiatives.

Will the pandemic change Polish theater in the longer term, more permanently?

J.C.-M.: I believe that certain positive changes are already happening. I hope they will not be reversed. I mean, above all the surge in awareness of the creation of theater archives, including online archives, and growing importance attached to the quality of recording theatrical performances. Another trend we’ve observed involves offering online programs and creating opportunities to watch theatrical performances online, even when theaters are open. Such hybrid functioning of theaters is invaluable for those who, for various reasons, can’t afford to go to the theater on a regular basis. For example, they live in a small town or in the countryside, can’t afford theater tickets, or don’t leave their homes for other reasons.

M.B.: This offers a real chance to make theater egalitarian, and the same holds true for culture in the broad

sense. This topic has been widely discussed in recent years, and the results include numerous grant programs, among other things. Theater is now truly within our reach, and I hope that we, as a community, will be able to take advantage of this opportunity. Another important issue and challenge facing decision-makers and managers of cultural institutions and organizations involves solving the issue of employment. It must be said clearly that the pandemic has shown how many members of the theater community are in a precarious situation. Of course, this was clear even earlier, but the results of our studies have revealed the scale of the problem.

J.C.-M.: I'd like to point out one more trend that we're observing with interest. I mean the democratization of the functioning of theaters, the flattening of their hierarchical structure. People who were previously hidden in the background are given a voice or sometimes even become the center of attention. Examples include seamstresses, who can use their skills, for example, to make face masks. In a crisis, it is typically people who have ideas how to solve it that matter. We'll see if this trend towards appreciating all employees and encouraging them to share their skills, talents, and ideas will continue.

Which of the groups of people linked to theater you surveyed were hardest-hit by the restrictions imposed during the pandemic?

M.B.: The difficulties that various professional groups linked to theater experienced during the pandemic are described in detail in the report on theater workers during the pandemic. When asked who was in the worst situation in their theater, representatives of all professional groups always answered, "The actors!" Our analyses show that administrative staff as well as the personnel responsible for promotion and technical support in theaters have a special respect for artists, which became even more visible in the crisis situation. This was reflected not only in declarations. In fringe theaters, artists helped one another by sharing resources from grants and subsidies. But it is worth noting that actors in public and private theaters are more likely to be employed under employment contracts than those in independent theaters, which provides them with a different type of security. Recent data from the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute's database of theaters shows that public theaters account for only 25% of all theaters in Poland, whereas the share of private theaters is only slightly over 18%. The remaining theaters, which account for nearly 57% of all theaters, operate as NGOs and informal groups.

J.C.-M.: The difficult situation of artists is also confirmed by the results of the quantitative survey. It found that 92% of the respondents felt that the pandemic had negatively affected their salaries. In every

professional group of artists, average monthly earnings fell by more than half. The pandemic affected to the strongest extent those employed under freelance contracts, and this can also be seen in other reports, including the report on theater criticism and amateur theaters.

Will the findings lead to any measures being taken to counteract this situation? Who could or should develop new strategies for acting and countering situations similar to the one we are all grappling with?

M.B.: When it comes to the theater community's expectations, the survey of the team led by Prof. Dorota Ilczuk shows that the respondents, namely theater artists, believe that developing a strategy for the period of recovery from the pandemic should be the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, National Heritage, and Sports (48%), labor unions and artists' organizations (16%), and the government (14%). The local governments were the least frequently indicated answer (3%).

The pandemic has shown how many members of the theater community are in a precarious situation.

J.C.-M.: In addition, there were many initiatives during the year that supported the theater community, including ones urged by its various members. But to show you some examples, the first version of Krajewski's report and the report on the strategies adopted by theaters included recommendations on support for the theater sector for the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute and the Culture Ministry. The publication of the report coincided with the announcement of the Culture Support Fund, which was an initiative of the Expert Team affiliated with the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute. I think that the latter institution has developed many initiatives, apart from those discussed in the reports, namely new competitions, such as "Dramatopisanie" (Dramatic Writing) and DIG IT, changes in the Placówka program, and the launch of a psychological support program for artists – all this to help a greater number of artists in this difficult time. We feel responsible for helping shape policies aimed at preventing similar situations, and we want to be seen by the theater community as a source of real support.

INTERVIEW BY JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA, PHD