



# Contemporary Theatre Review

ISSN: 1048-6801 (Print) 1477-2264 (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/gctr20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/gctr20)

## Editorial

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**To cite this article:** Christopher B. Balme & James Rowson (2025) Editorial, Contemporary Theatre Review, 35:2-3, 97-106, DOI: [10.1080/10486801.2025.2574770](https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2025.2574770)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2025.2574770>



Published online: 21 Nov 2025.



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## Editorial

The closure of theatres in March 2020 around the world was a genuinely global experience. Most theatres indeed cultural venues of any kind shut down and remained that way well into 2021. Although the immediate impact was clearly economic, as the whole workforce employed in the performing arts sector was effectively laid off or placed on various furlough schemes, the long-term effects may be much wider. The closures produced an absence in the form of a complete dearth of live performances. The flow of productions and personnel, which is both local, national, and international (especially opera), was interrupted for months, even years as carefully calibrated timetables evaporated, and hastily improvised workarounds in the form of streaming became all the rage. As the pandemic progressed, the topics changed from sheer economic survival to the pros and cons of digitalisation, to the mechanics of social distancing in a theatre auditorium. Only now, in 2025, are we beginning to see the outlines of theatre under post-pandemic conditions. While theatres are back to nearly full capacity, the long-term effects, as in the wider political world, are only gradually coming into focus. The massive, indirect economic effects generated by inflation and cost-cutting by governments have even impacted the normally well insulated German theatre system, which, while regionally variable, has particularly affected the vibrant Berlin theatre scene.

This special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* emerges from the transnational collaborative research project *Theatre after COVID* between The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London (Central) and the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU). The project aimed to address the structural crises in the theatre industries in the UK, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, analysing the long-term institutional effects of the pandemic on theatre and live performance. It culminated with an international conference held in Central's Embassy Theatre in November 2023, where many of the articles included in this special issue were first presented as papers. The event also brought together leading industry figures from the UK and Germany for a series of panel discussions and roundtable conversations, underscoring how collaborative research practices can impact on wider discourse within the theatre industry. The articles and documents collected in this special issue

attempt to provide an analysis of the pandemic's impact on the performing arts from a global perspective. Global does not mean the entirety of the world's nation-states, but certainly a cross-section of them. The articles survey theatre from both a systemic and an aesthetic-technological perspective. They have a certain UK-German slant, which can be explained by the editors' involvement in the *Theatre after COVID* project.

This volume was published in the autumn of 2025 at a time of deep uncertainty and debate around the future of live theatre practice. Theatre institutions are locked in 'a constant state of disruption' as the loss of artistic leaders from the sector, stagnating audience numbers, and funding cuts have impacted the programming and development of innovative new work.<sup>1</sup> In the UK, a landslide win for Keir Starmer's Labour Party in the 2024 general election has failed to reverse the decline in funding for the theatre sector over recent years, with industry experts acknowledging that this chronic underinvestment is now 'not a blip but a trend, whichever government is in power'.<sup>2</sup> As Lyn Gardner has profoundly written in leading British theatre publication *The Stage* in March 2025: 'the good years of arts funding are gone forever'.<sup>3</sup> While the decision by Arts Council England (ACE) in March 2025 to extend the current round of National Portfolio Investment Programme – the core funding programme for arts organisations, museums and libraries across England – until 2028, has been met with cautious optimism by theatre organisations in receipt of this funding, it has also meant that new applications are now on hold. This has resulted in Olivier Award-winning theatre writer Amanda Parker stating that: 'the decision shines a light on the inherent inequities in ACE's multi-tier funding structure and the disparity of security between the NPO [National Portfolio Organisations] "haves" and the project-funded "have-nots". For those who have been preparing a bid in the hope of joining the portfolio for the first time, the news couldn't be worse'.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation, and Brexit has placed the UK theatre industry under increasing fiscal uncertainty. A new report published in May 2025 by the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) and UK Theatre has warned that a 'significant' number of theatres are at risk of insolvency and that a third will run at a deficit this financial year.<sup>5</sup> In a call to arms to build a more resilient sector, SOLT's co-CEOs, Claire Walker and Hannah Essex, have succulently underscored these urgent challenges: 'Theatres are doing more with less – and the strain is showing. Rising costs, shrinking support, and ageing infrastructure are putting the sector under unsustainable pressure. We are seeing world-class organisations forced to cut programmes, delay maintenance, and scale back outreach. If we want to maintain the UK's position as a global leader in theatre – and continue to inspire the next generation of actors, writers, and technicians – then government must act'.<sup>6</sup>

In Germany, at a time when theatre has barely recovered from the pandemic, the sector is now grappling with the rapidly emerging geopolitical fault lines that have appeared in the wake of Russia's full-scale

1. Christopher Balme, 'Covid and the Theatre: a Constant State of Disruption?' *Static* 1, no. 2 (2022): 55–62.
2. Lyn Gardner, 'Arts Council must reform funding if theatre is to survive' *The Stage*, March 31, 2025, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/arts-council-must-reform-funding-if-theatre-is-to-survive-challenging-landscape> (accessed July 17, 2025).
3. Ibid.
4. Amanda Parker, 'Arts Council England's NPO extension: the sweetener before the bitter pill?' *The Stage*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/arts-council-englands-npo-extension-the-sweetener-before-the-bitter-pill> (accessed July 17, 2025).
5. Society of London Theatre and UK Theatre, *The State Of British Theatre In 2025: Growth, Risk And The Urgent Need For Public Investment* (Project Report, 2025), <https://uktheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/05/SOLTUKT-State-Of-British->

- Theatre.pdf (accessed July 17, 2025).
6. Chris Wiegand, 'New report says "government must act" to ease pressures on British theatres', *Guardian*, May 22, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/22/new-report-says-government-must-act-to-ease-pressures-on-british-theatres> (accessed July 17, 2025).
  7. Angelica Villa, 'Berlin Moves Forward With €130 M. Cuts to Arts and Culture', *ARTnews*, December 23, 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/berlin-moves-forward-with-e130-million-cuts-to-arts-and-culture-1234728609/> (accessed July 17, 2025); Stefan Dege, 'Can Germany still pay for arts funding?', *Deutsche Welle*, July 7, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/can-germany-still-pay-for-arts-funding/a-70947145> (accessed July 17, 2025).
  8. 'Being John Malkovich In Sofia – Acclaimed Star's Production Disrupted By Nationalists', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 08, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/malkovich-sofia-shaw-theater-protests-nationalists-november-2024/33194350.html> (accessed July 17, 2025).
  9. Danny Dorling, *The Next Crisis: What We Think About the Future* (London: Verso, 2025), 10.

invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the faltering of the transatlantic alliance. In March 2025, Germany's parliament passed a historic bill introduced by Friedrich Merz's Christian Democratic Union CDU party to amend the country's fiscal rules to allow a record level of state borrowing to invest in the country's military defence. In contrast, it was reported in December 2024 that the state of Berlin had passed a €130 million cut to arts funding for 2025, representing 12% of its total cultural budget, including substantial reductions to the budgets of major institutions such as the Schaubühne, Berliner Ensemble, and Volksbühne.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere in Europe, cultural organisations have weathered waves of populist radical governance that have sought to challenge artistic freedom and institutional autonomy. This includes the high-profile dismissal of Matej Drlička, artistic director of the Slovak National Theatre, from his post by popularist prime minister Robert Fico in August 2024 and the violent disruption of the opening night of Hollywood A-lister John Malkovich's production of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* by 'ultranationalist' groups on 7 November 2024 on the grounds of its 'anti-Bulgarian' content.<sup>8</sup>

Against this precarious backdrop of reduced resources, right-wing populism, and continuing war in Ukraine, this special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* takes up a specific vantage point of the pandemic, interrogating the transformations and opportunities that have arisen since the initial spread of COVID in early 2020 until 2025. As Tony Fisher insightfully proposes in this issue, COVID has its own temporality that marks a break in time between pre- and post-pandemic theatre. 'One of the things that strikes me about the experience of COVID', Fisher observes, 'is how distant that time seems from us in some respects – as if there were a kind of collective amnesia [...] it's important for us, I think, to try to recollect and record what happened' (p. 271). The research articles and documents on this issue are framed by questions concerning the volatile impact of the COVID crisis on theatre practice, institutional change, and notions of cultural value, as well as the experiences of cultural and creative workers across the globe during this time. Moreover, they proceed from the hypothesis that a profound and sustained crisis of this kind will have far-reaching effects on the institutional fabric of the performing arts, taking a forward-thinking approach to the complex challenges facing live theatre in a post-COVID world that underscores the industry's resilience.

Notions of 'crisis' are articulated throughout the articles in this issue to frame wider examinations of institutional and artistic shifts in theatre practice that have occurred in the wake of the pandemic. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the term 'crisis' has been consistently used by academics and critics to describe the multifarious external threats – ranging from the economic to the societal – facing live theatre and performance around the world. As British geographer Danny Dorling writes, 'It may seem that we are heading towards an age of [global] compound crises: what might be called a polycrisis'.<sup>9</sup> Responding to the impact of the pandemic on the Australian culture sector, Julian Meyrick and Tully Barnett further argue that 'culture is

10. Julian Meyrick and Tully Barnett, 'From Public Good to Public Value: Arts and Culture in a Time of Crisis', *Cultural Trends* 30, no. 1 (2021): 75–90 (76).
  11. Clare Wallace and Clara Escoda, 'States of Emergency: Performing Crisis', in *Crisis, Representation and Resilience: Perspectives on Contemporary British Theatre*, eds. Clare Wallace, Clara Escoda, Enric Monforte, and José Ramón Prado-Pérez (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2022), 1–20 (2). See also, Dom O'Hanlon, ed., *Theatre in Times of Crisis: 20 Scenes for the Stage in Troubled Times and Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2020).
  12. During this period, leading theatre-makers such as Katie Mitchell spoke about embracing digital platforms as part of their practice to navigate pandemic restrictions. See, for example, Katie Mitchell, interview by Wes Williams, *Rev Stan's theatre blog*, September 26, 2020, <https://theatre.revstan.com/2020/09/torch-oxford-qa-with-ben-whishaw-and-katie-mitchell.html> (accessed July 17, 2025).
- one of the first domains in which crisis makes itself felt as a pluralized, concrete phenomenon', reflecting the fact that 'crisis is a cultural trope as much as it is a nexus of transformative social and political events'.<sup>10</sup> Although not directly responding to the COVID crisis, collections such as Dom O'Hanlon's *Theatre in Times of Crisis: 20 Scenes for the Stage in Troubled Times* and *Crisis, Representation and Resilience: Perspectives on Contemporary British Theatre* edited by Clare Wallace, Clara Escoda, Enric Monforte, and José Ramón Prado-Pérez, demonstrate a preoccupation with how 'cascading emergencies, pressures and ruptures' can affect the aesthetic and structural dynamics of theatre and performance.<sup>11</sup>
- In this issue, crisis is foregrounded and analysed in multiple contexts. Pascale Aebischer and Karen Gray consider how debates around cultural value have been re-shaped during the time of COVID crisis, suggesting that external forces such as the pandemic serve as a catalyst for 'government and public questioning of the value of culture [that] will have detrimental impacts regardless of how the sector is organized (p. 113). Rosemary Klich reflects on the ongoing crisis in regional theatre in the UK and the impact of the pandemic on theatre buildings as crucial sites of community building and placemaking, while Heidi Lucja Liedke's article examines how crisis points can offer opportunities for theatre to become more resilient and courageous. In the Documents section, Iliana Dimadi, Head Dramaturg at the Onassis Stegi in Athens, charts a protracted crisis in Greece over a 20 year period – including the Greek debt crisis that began in 2008 and the migration crisis in 2015 – before reflecting on the shifting challenges facing the Onassis Stegi and Greek theatre since the start of the pandemic.
- The broader context for this special issue is the wide-ranging critical responses by theatre scholars to the exigent demands placed on theatre and performance by the pandemic in 2020 and beyond. COVID was an exogenous shock that sharply exposed the pre-existing structural fragility of the theatre sector on a global scale. In the immediate aftermath of the first waves of the pandemic, academics and critics responded to the alacritous transition to online performance and ways of working as theatre-makers and organisations began urgently to conceptualise alternative artistic practices.<sup>12</sup> In *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations During a Pandemic*, Caridad Svich presents a series of sixty conversations with UK and US theatre makers about the restrictions and opportunities that COVID-19 restrictions presented, providing a 'moment in historical time' where theatre workers reconceptualised their practice in digital and remote spaces.<sup>13</sup> Kendra Capece and Patrick Scorese's edited collection *Pandemic Performance Resilience, Liveness, and Protest in Quarantine Times* similarly interrogates the artistic and emotional challenges of producing work during the pandemic, interweaving personal accounts and interviews by artists and academics.<sup>14</sup> English-language publications, such as Barbara Fuchs's *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* and *Performance in a Pandemic* edited by Laura Bissell and Lucy Weir, primarily focused on the short-term shifts to

13. Caridad Svich, *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations During a Pandemic* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2021), 2.
14. Kendra Capece and Patrick Scorese, eds., *Pandemic Performance: Resilience, Liveness, and Protest in Quarantine Times* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2021).
15. Barbara Fuchs, *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2022) and Laura Bissell and Lucy Weir, eds., *Performance in a Pandemic* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022).
16. Pascale Aebischer, *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of Pandemic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb, and Erin Sullivan, eds., *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2022); Maria Chatzichristodoulou, Kevin Brown, Nick Hunt, Peter Kuling, and Toni Sant, eds., 'Covid-19: Theatre goes Digital', special issue, *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 18, no. 1 (2022). Other publications that, while not entirely focused on post-COVID digital theatre, provide an significant examination of the rapid acceleration in online performances and audience engagement during lockdown periods include: Erin Sullivan, *Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice* (Cham:

online streaming and digital performance that occurred during the initial stages of COVID-19 restrictions around the world, including the emergence of nascent virtual communities within the theatre sector.<sup>15</sup>

Other key publications in this area include Pascale Aebischer's *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of Pandemic* that examines the experience of watching productions of Shakespeare online during the first year of the pandemic, Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb, and Erin Sullivan's edited collection *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*, and a special issue of *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* on digital theatre following the pandemic edited by Maria Chatzichristodoulou et al.<sup>16</sup> Alongside these studies into digital practices and online theatre, a number of timely English-language reports also spotlighted the urgent need to address the substantive impact of the pandemic on the theatre workforce including *The Impact of COVID-19 and BLM on Black, Asian and Ethnically Diverse Creatives and Cultural Workers* by Roaa Ali et al., *Freelancers in the Dark: The Economic, Cultural, and Social Impact of COVID-19 on Theatre Freelancers*, and *The Situation of Theatres in the EU Member States* commissioned by the European Commission.<sup>17</sup> These reports provide compelling data on how the pandemic exacerbated hierarchical institutional practices in the theatre sector, as well as the pre-existing precarity experienced by the workforce – in particular, emerging artists, freelancers, and Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse theatre workers.

Since these studies, scholars have taken a broader approach to examining the pandemic's impact on the global theatre ecology, which has resulted in drops in audience attendance, further deteriorations of working conditions in the sector, and driven more risk-averse programming by organisations. *Pandemic Preparedness in the Live Performing Arts: Lessons to Learn from COVID-19*, a project led by Aebischer and Karen Gray along with a team of researchers from across the G7 countries, takes a future facing approach to the lessons learnt from the pandemic by providing 'preparedness for future crises, whether caused by new pandemics, climate-related disasters, demographic changes, economic pressures or the impacts on the live performing arts of national and international politics'.<sup>18</sup> The focus of this project also forms the basis of Aebischer and Gray's article in this special issue. Kate Craddock and Helen Freshwater's *Theatre and Its Audiences: Reimagining the Relationship in Times of Crisis* has offered an extensive examination of how the disruption of the pandemic has influenced audience behaviour and expectations.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, focusing attention on the vital role that theatre played in the public sphere during COVID-19, Fintan Walsh's monograph *Performing Grief in Pandemic Theatres* makes an explicit connection between the performances created throughout this period and the death and loss experienced during this period, arguing that 'theatre artistic stepped into the void created by the broad absence or inaccessibility of public mourning ceremonies by creating new aesthetic and dramaturgical forms and spaces for grief'.<sup>20</sup>



- Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); and Heidi Lucja Liedke, *Livecasting in Twenty-First-Century British Theatre: NT Live and the Aesthetics of Spectacle, Materiality and Engagement* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2023).
17. Roaa Ali et al., *The impact of Covid-19 and BLM on Black, Asian and ethnically diverse creatives and cultural workers* (Project Report, Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity and Creative Access, 2022); Holly Maples et al., *Freelancers in the Dark: The Economic, Cultural, and Social Impact of Covid-19 on Theatre Freelancers* (Project Report, University of Essex, 2022); and PPMI and KEA European Affairs, 'The Situation of Theatres in the EU Member States' (Project Report, European Commission, 2022).
  18. Pascale Aebischer, Karen Gray et al. *Pandemic Preparedness in the Live Performing Arts: Lessons to Learn from COVID-19* (Project Report, The British Academy, 2024), 4.
  19. Kate Craddock and Helen Freshwater, eds., *Theatre and its Audiences: Reimagining the Relationship in Times of Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2024).
  20. Fintan Walsh, *Performing Grief in Pandemic Theatres* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 4.
  21. Sarah Thomasson, ed., 'Festivals in the Pandemic', special issue, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 32, no. 3–4 (2022).

This special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* will aim to fill the gaps left by these important studies on the pandemic's impact on theatre work. Generating a renewed and enlivened engagement with 'theatre after COVID', the issue will provide a significant critical consideration of how theatre continues to adapt and react in the aftermath of the COVID crisis. We also hope that this publication will complement and connect with the themes addressed in *CTR's* previous special issue on COVID-19 from 2022, *Festivals in the Pandemic*, edited by Sarah Thomasson.<sup>21</sup> Thomasson's special issue provided a crucial space for theatre-makers, festival directors, and academics to reflect on the challenges and opportunities stemming from the pandemic for both festivals and the broader live performance ecology until mid-2022. Building on this publication, this special issue aims to provide insights into the long-term consequences of the pandemic, examining how wider discourse has shifted and allowing for a continuation of key questions and debates articulated in the *Festivals in the Pandemic* issue.

## Articles and Documents

The issue opens with Pascale Aebischer and Karen Gray's article 'Cultural Value in a Time of Crisis: Public debates and governmental discourses in the G7 nations'. On the systemic level, the article looks at each of the G7 countries in terms of workforces, organisations, and their audiences, and the structures underpinning theatre in these countries, which vary greatly. The results draw on a one-year comparative research project involving fourteen researchers in eight countries. The project documented the accelerative effects of the pandemic on questions relating to cultural value and revealed the highly path-dependent nature of cultural systems. The Black Lives Matter movement, while not a direct result of the pandemic, erupted during it and highlighted not just the histories of social injustices but also how COVID affected marginalized communities. Across the G7, the pandemic exposed the precarity of artists, with only France and Germany developing robust programmes to address their predicament. Against the background of wide-ranging debates over cultural value, the article contends that ultimately it was instrumentalist arguments that prevailed, whether in terms of the economic 'growth' provided by the arts or their socially reparative potential.

During the deepest and darkest lockdowns in 2020, the brightest light shone digitally. Whether theatres streamed old recordings of past productions or began to produce bespoke productions for the internet (with various degrees of hybridity in between), digital theatre appeared to hold the key to new possibilities for theatre. Fans of German theatre based in New York suddenly gained gratis access to the digital vaults of the Schaubühne in Berlin going back to the 1970s, whereas disciples of Milo Rau's NTGent, arguably the most talked-about theatre in Europe at the time, could watch new productions online in high-quality, digital streams for a modest price. These developments are reflected in all the articles in the issue, but in two in particular: Heidi Lucja Liedke's

‘Theatre meets Technology and Other Forms of Crisis Management’ and Erin Sullivan’s contribution, ‘From Facsimiles to Films: Theatre Broadcasting after COVID’. Liedke explores how the discourses on the uses of technology and the value of culture in society have been intertwined in Germany since the COVID-19 lockdowns and how the pandemic has tightened these ties into what she terms ‘Covidian love affairs’ (p. 182). At the Staatstheater Hannover, the pandemic helped drive digitalisation, but a big part of the digitisation was backstage. This achievement has led to more long-term collaborative ways of working. On stage, the state theatre in Augsburg had already been experimenting with digital technology, so it could easily adapt to the crisis with innovative productions utilising VR. Theatre broadcasting also existed well before the pandemic (opera from the Met in the US and NT Live in the UK) as Erin Sullivan stresses, but the shutdowns affected transformations so that the live experience became less important and ‘streamable’ content aligned to film much more so. The embrace of digital technology is one of the more emphatic stances we find in the independent scene, which implies a critique of entrenched positions. Yet Sullivan’s article demonstrates how, in the UK at least, theatre broadcasting was adopted by mainstream theatres.

James Rowson’s contribution, ‘British Theatre in Crisis Mode: Recording COVID, Resilience and Rebirth’ argues that the long-term institutional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on UK theatre have the potential to reimagine and explore how the industry has adapted and transformed in response to the crisis. Rowson analyses data from a series of surveys, structured interviews, and public media discourses from throughout the pandemic to provide a longitudinal examination of change in the British theatre industry since the start of the pandemic. Rowson’s article is followed by Bianca Michaels’s ‘The Pandemic as a Game Changer? On Programme Planning in German Public Theatre during and after COVID and why Formats Matter’. As mentioned above, German theatre was relatively well insulated from the economic effects of the pandemic, especially when compared to countries such as the UK. Transformations can be observed, however, on the level of programming, as Michaels argues. Focusing on the 143 publicly funded theatres in Germany, Michaels engages with broader trends in theatre programming in the country, providing an in-depth engagement with data from close to 3,200 theatre events from March 2020 until the end of the 2022–23 theatre season. The subtitle of her article, ‘why formats matter’, points to a development in German theatre that both predates and was accelerated by the pandemic, namely that theatres have begun to develop other ‘formats’ beyond just staging plays. This reflects changes in expectations concerning theatre and could affect the institution of German public theatre as a whole.

Nigeria does not belong to the G7, so the article by Mark O. Onwe and Victor S. Dugga, ‘Staging Social Distance: Performance Analysis of Theatre in Nigeria since the COVID-19 Pandemic’, provides valuable insights into how the pandemic played out in a theatre community in the Global South. As Nigeria is a major entertainment hub for the African



continent, the effects of COVID restrictions were significant. While social distancing restrictions and lockdowns were quite rigidly enforced in urban centres, they had less effect in rural areas. Onwe and Dugga analyse three productions that were streamed across a variety of online platforms by the Afrotivate and Jos Repertory Theatres in Plateau State between 2020 and 2022, in order to engage with the broader response to the pandemic of theatre artists in Nigeria, as well as post-COVID digital theatre. Drawing on the concept of intermediality and the work of theorists including Ernest W. B. Hess-Lüttich and Freda Chapple, this article offers an important account of how new hybrid performance models were harnessed by Nigerian theatre-makers to experiment with new aesthetics and engage with wider social and ethical anxieties in the country stemming from the pandemic.

The precarious economic situation of the performing arts in Italy is the focus of Matteo Paoletti's article, 'Funding Theatre in Italy: Critical Scenarios Across the Pandemic'. Based on funding records of theatres in Italy between 2013 and 2023 that are archived in his MIDAS database, Paoletti argues that the pandemic exposed glaring structural weaknesses in a fragile system with few safeguards for employees in the industry. The responses by the government tended to exacerbate existing inequalities, with A-listed opera houses obtaining the lion's share of financial relief. The article also considers the wider impact of the pandemic on audience behaviour and workforces in the Italian context, highlighting that although the majority of theatre workers have been protected in their roles due to having permanent contracts, audience numbers remain worryingly below pre-pandemic levels. Finally, Rosemary Napier Klich focuses on mid- and large-scale producing theatres in the East of England in her article 'Regional Theatres as Placemakers: COVID Recovery, Communities of Practice, and Sense of Place', arguing that it is important to acknowledge regional theatres as community builders and placemakers, roles that have not only been revealed but dramatically emphasised by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through collaboration with the Mercury Theatre in Colchester, the New Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, and the Norwich Theatre between 2022–23, Klich finds that regional theatres in smaller cities and towns in the UK are facing specific challenges including audience engagement and labour shortages, and stretched budgets as a result of 'the fallout from Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the cost of living crisis' (p. 250). Nonetheless, Klich argues that regional theatres remain at the forefront of artistic innovation, alongside providing outreach and engagement work and playing a vital role in community recovery and placemaking following the pandemic.

The Documents section begins with Iliana Dimadi's provocative essay, 'Greek Performing Arts, Onassis Stegi, or How to Rave Against all Odds'. Dimadi maps the wider development of the performing arts in Greece since 2004 – the year of the Olympic Games in Athens – contending that 'against all odds, the rise of culture and creative industries in Greece coincided with the deepening of the recession that drew international attention to the country' (p. 255). It further provides

reflections on how the Onassis Stegi responded to the evolving social distancing restrictions across 2020–21 with both organisational and artistic innovation that has not only sought to radically push the boundaries of contemporary performance, but also facilitated ‘new [institutional] policies, good practices and structural transformation’ (p. 266). Dimadi’s approach to tracing the effects of COVID on the Onassis Stegi and Greek theatre more widely highlights the innovative transnational and multilingual approaches to collaboration and theatre-making that have allowed artists to connect and expand their practice following the pandemic. This is especially apparent in her accounts of the Onassis’s staging of Lukasz Twarkowski’s epic performance piece *Respublika* in collaboration with the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre in August 2024 and *Poetic Consultations* (2020–22) that was created with the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, both of which foreground international and multilingual forms of dramaturgy that offer new ways of articulating identity, experiences of coexistence, common well-being, and geographically diverse voices.

Bishnupriya Dutt, Anuradha Kapur, and Tony Fisher engage in a conversation on ‘Indian Theatre In The Time Of COVID’ invites us to consider the ‘contradiction between the spatiality of the theatre and the straightened spatiality imposed by the pandemic’ by asking the questions: ‘What new opportunities, new forms of theatrical spatiality, and new forms of public spatiality became available for Indian theatre makers? Did it incentivize different kinds of spatialities for theatre and even for a new kind of theatre of protest?’ (p. 275). The play *Pandemic* (2020) by Gobardanga Naksha, *Jamlo Makdam* (2021) by Chena Adhuli, and Maya Rao’s digital work during COVID restrictions are addressed as key examples of activist theatre in India, which addressed pressing societal and political concerns that were heightened both during and after lockdown restrictions were implemented across the country. In the final piece in this issue, Camila González Ortiz interviews Pamela López, former Director of Programming and Audiences at the Gabriel Mistral Cultural Centre (GAM) in Santiago, Chile, about how the venue was forced to rapidly re-negotiate its programming and creative ways of working as a response to the initial outbreak of COVID in the country in March 2020. López’s retrospective reflections of the pandemic are framed by the nationwide social unrest in Chile between October 2019 and March 2020, driven by deep-rooted disillusionment over social inequalities prevalent in the country. She contends that these protests, the epicentre of which were along the avenue in Santiago where the GAM is located, helped prepare it for the challenges of COVID, forcing them ‘to be incredibly flexible; decision-making had to be swift and responsive to what was happening in the streets’ (p. 284). By bringing theatre and COVID into dialogue with these protests, López takes a future-facing analysis of shifts in the Chilean culture sector, demonstrating the lasting impact these multifaceted crises have on live performance and the country’s nighttime ecology.

In their article ‘COVID-19 as Cultural Trauma’, Sociologists Nicolas Demertzis and Ron Eyerman write: ‘There has never been

22. Nicolas Demertzis and Ron Eyerman, 'Covid-19 as Cultural Trauma', *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 8, no. 3 (2020): 428–450 (430).

anything affecting modern daily life as the current pandemic. It is imposing itself physically and virtually, as an image, with unprecedented and expanding force, condensing time and space worldwide in the most critical way'.<sup>22</sup> Taken together, these articles and documents provide an ongoing contribution to the shifting critical perspectives in which theatre during and after the COVID crisis is analysed, as well as offering original and urgent insights into the long-term consequences of the pandemic on the global theatre ecology. Even in highly divergent theatre systems such as the German and the British, the effects of the pandemic have, and continue to be, highly isomorphic. Just as the pandemic generated remarkably similar responses around the globe, so too have theatres followed a roughly similar playbook. Consigned to lockdowns in the first phase, cautious openings, and then renewed closures in the second and third phases, followed by more or less complete reopening since early 2022, theatres have done all in their power to return to the status quo ante. The utopian energy of the initial lockdowns, where dreams of a new theatre were articulated, has dissipated and been replaced by a high degree of uncertainty and pragmatic responses. The interruptions, gaps, and workarounds created by the pandemic have, however, opened up new spaces that make a return to path-dependent patterns of production and reception ever more problematic.

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