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British Theatre in Crisis Mode: Recording COVID, Resilience and Rebirth

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic affected all levels of the UK theatre industry, creating a series of wide-ranging impacts on the theatre workforce, affecting livelihoods, work and employment structures, aesthetic trends, and funding and income generation. More than four years after the start of the first national lockdown in the UK, it remains clear that substantive long-term shifts in both theatre practice and the institutional fabric of the performing arts have occurred in fundamental ways that are still being understood. In addition, audience behaviour has continued to fluctuate in response to unpredictable external influences, and theatre organisations are faced with crucial choices relating to their creative and community practices. This article builds on the results of the UK strand of *Theatre after Covid*, a collaborative, transnational research project between The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, and the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. By combining a mixed methods approach that blends online surveys, structured interviews, and discourse analysis, I examine the long-term institutional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on UK theatre and explore how the industry has adapted and transformed in response to the crisis. In doing so, I suggest that despite the ways in which the uncertainty of the pandemic has destabilised the theatre ecology, COVID-19 has brought opportunities to reimagine the potential of what theatre practice is, who it engages with, and how it is understood.

Keywords: COVID-19; crisis; cultural institutions; institutional change; cultural policy; labour; freelancers; audiences

On 16 March 2020, theatres around the United Kingdom went dark as a result of a government announcement by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson advising the public to 'avoid pubs, clubs, theatres and other such social venues'.[1] A week later, the UK entered its first national lockdown resulting in a ban on public gatherings and the official closure of all theatres in the country. In London, West End venues in the heart of the city closed their doors as industry figures and critics warned of a 'hammer blow' that would result in 'devastating uncertainty and potentially a lot of loss of employment and income' for those working in the sector.[2] In the following months, several high-profile theatre institutions, including the Royal Shakespeare Company, Manchester Royal Exchange, The Royal Lyceum in Edinburgh, and Cameron Mackintosh in the West End announced redundancy plans for their staff, while several regional and small-scale theatres collapsed into outright administration as a direct consequence of pandemic restrictions on live performances and ticket sales.[3] The intense urgency and precariousness of the situation was further brought into stark relief by a report published in June 2020 by the Society of London Theatre that predicted 70% of theatres across the UK faced permanent closure by the end of the year, as well as the loss of more than half the jobs in the field.[4]

Despite the abrupt and volatile shock of the initial phases of the pandemic on the cultural sector, there was also a surge of new artistic discourses that articulated the nascent optimism that the COVID crisis would provide a crucial chance to reconceptualise and reshape existing theatrical institutions and structures. These public debates were preoccupied with the complex challenges facing live performance and the futurity of theatre as the sector began its recovery. As Christopher Balme observed in May 2021, 'the crisis-induced interregnum has created a space of intensified reflection about the future'.[5] New campaigns shed light on how individual theatre workers and non-building-based companies had been excluded from pandemic relief packages, advocating for organisations to confront and re-envisage their established employment structures and for freelancers to be included in the decision-making processes of major cultural institutions.[6] Conversely, however, there was also a widespread anxiety that the industry would return to pre-pandemic models of working practices, alongside more established and risk-averse forms of theatre and performance-making. The pandemic also precipitated a renewed and urgent focus on the organisational structure of theatre production and the industry's inveterate reliance on a precarious freelancer workforce. This was linked to a broader emergent narrative within the creative sector that COVID-19 would further entrench the inimical cultural and economic dislocation between theatre institutions and independent artists and workers.

More than four years after the start of the first national lockdown in the UK, it remains clear that substantive long-term shifts in both theatre practice and the institutional fabric of the performing arts have occurred in fundamental ways that are still being understood.

1. Boris Johnson, 'Prime Minister Statement on the Coronavirus', March 16, 2020, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-16-march-2020 (accessed January 26, 2024).
2. 'Coronavirus: West End shuts down as Boris Johnson's advice sparks anger', *BBC News*, March 17, 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-51906370 (accessed January 26, 2024) and Chris Wiegand, 'UK theatre ticket sales drop 92% due to COVID-19', *Guardian*, March 19, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/mar/19/uk-theatre-ticket-sales-drop-92-percent-due-to-covid-19 (accessed January 26, 2024).
3. For more on COVID-19's impact on regional theatres, see Rosemary Klich's article in this special issue 'Regional Theatres as Placemakers: Community and Cultural Recovery in the East of England', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 35, no. 2–3 (2025): 224-41.
4. Mark Sweney, 'Majority of UK theatres and music venues 'face permanent shutdown', *Guardian*, June 9, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/jun/09/majority-of-uk-theatres-and-music-venues-face-permanent-shutdown (accessed January 26, 2024).

In both the live and digital space, theatres have had to radically adapt and re-invent themselves to stay relevant in the endlessly shifting cultural landscape of the pandemic. In addition, audience behaviour has continued to fluctuate in response to unpredictable external influences, and theatre organisations are faced with crucial choices relating to their creative and community practices. Alongside the proliferation of digital and hybrid modes of theatre-making, the COVID-19 pandemic has also precipitated developments in how theatres operate at both institutional and organisational levels in an attempt to respond to the volatile economic impact of the pandemic on the culture sector. Moreover, the UK remains locked in a sustained crisis, as soaring inflation and energy prices have placed further exogenous threats on theatres still reeling from the pandemic and worn down by over a decade of conservative austerity politics.

This article draws on my work for the UK strand of the transnational collaborative research project *Theatre after Covid* between The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, and the Configurations of Crisis working group at LMU Munich. The project ran between January 2022 and September 2023 and was led by Principal Investigator Professor Christopher Balme, alongside postdoctoral researchers Roaa Ali, James Rowson, and Thomas Fabian Eder. We applied a unique methodological approach that utilised online surveys, structured interviews, and discourse analysis to address structural crises in the theatre industries in the UK and the German-speaking DACH countries (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) brought about by the pandemic. This research aimed to analyse the acceleration of structural change in theatre and live performance triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and explore how the industry continues to adapt and transform in response to the crisis, revealing the disparate changes in theatre practice since March 2020. The distinctive longitudinal methodology that underpins this article, in which a diachronic approach to data collection and research has revealed substantive change in the British theatre ecology, serves to expand existing research and provide sustained new insights into the long-term impact of the pandemic on theatre and performance.

This article examines the long-term institutional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the theatre ecology in the UK. The COVID crisis has affected all levels of the UK theatre industry, creating a series of wide-ranging impacts on the theatre workforce, affecting livelihoods, working practices, and support networks. Analysing new data from the project's two surveys and a wide range of public media discourses that emerged throughout the pandemic, this article aims to consider how the UK theatre industry has responded to a series of emerging crises since March 2020. It addresses how pre-existing crises in the theatre

5. Christopher Balme, 'COVID, Crisis and Prognosis: Prospecting the Future of Theatre', *Forum Modernes Theater* 32, no. 2 (2021): 178–91 (180).

6. These online advocacy groups ranged from small discipline led support groups, such as the weekly Zoom conference for freelance theatre directors run by Robert Icke and Lyndsey Turner, to national campaigns such as The Freelancer Task Force and Freelancers Make Theatre Work.

industry have been exacerbated by the pandemic to explore the urgent challenge of COVID on theatre production in the UK and how the vital relationships between theatre institutions and individual theatre workers have been disrupted. It also considers how the protracted cost of living crisis has created a period of stasis and destabilised sector recovery, as institutions grappling with unforeseen aesthetic and economic crises including lack of funding, resources, and the ability to support artists. In doing so, this article suggests that despite the ways in which the uncertainty of the pandemic has destabilised the theatre infrastructure, COVID-19 has brought opportunities to reimagine the potential of what theatre practice is, who it engages with, and how it is understood.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The *Theatre after Covid* project employed a mixed methods approach informed by quantitative and qualitative data to develop a rich picture of aesthetic and institutional shifts in theatre. We examined a diverse range of public media discourses that emerged throughout the pandemic, as well as blending artistic and institutional responses through a series of surveys conducted in 2022 and 2023 with theatre practitioners and organisations in the UK.[7] The project was designed as a panel study to trace the responses of our survey participants over an interval of time since the final lifting of all COVID related restrictions in the UK in March 2022. The same respondents were surveyed in 2022 and again in 2023 to provide unique longitudinal insights into the shifting theatre ecology in the UK in the wake of the pandemic and the implementation of stringent social distancing restrictions on live performance. The first survey in 2022 additionally asked respondents to reflect on their working patterns before the pandemic, while the 2023 iteration also offered a space for them to articulate their expectations for the future of the industry and their careers. This established a longitudinal perspective to the data that covered the volatile cultural landscape since March 2020, as well as generating opportunities to consider the futurity of theatre and performance in and beyond 2023.[8]

The first survey in the UK ran between March and August 2022 and was completed by 102 respondents. Of these, 73 were individuals working in the performing arts field and 29 were senior representatives of performing arts organisations. Although it is difficult for this sample size to represent the diverse fabric of the UK's theatre sector and its workforce, our results have produced a unique longitudinal recording of working practices and modes of theatre production since the start of the pandemic, offering urgent insights into British theatre in crisis mode. The second survey was conducted between March and June 2023 and

7. I would like to acknowledge the work of my colleague Dr Roaa Ali who was the Postdoctoral Researcher on the Theatre after COVID project until September 2022, when I took over from her. Roaa was instrumental in creating and running our first survey in 2022, as well as the overall trajectory of the project and its focus.

8. The German language strand of the project mirrored the methodology used in the UK. The same survey, with a few minor regional adaptations, was conducted in German-speaking countries and the UK.

was completed by 89 respondents, all of whom had also participated in 2022. This second survey was designed to track the individuals who had completed the 2022 survey but failed to do so in 2023, to provide a dataset of those who may have left the industry during this time. From this, we can discern that the 13 respondents who failed to participate in 2023 were primarily individuals on freelance contracts working in front-of-house and box office positions within theatres. These results reinforce a wide range of media sources published since the outset of the pandemic that highlights the increasing pressures placed on front-of-house staff, including unsustainable economic precarity, job insecurity, and burnout from aggressive audience behaviour, which has led to many rethinking future career trajectories and taking new roles in divergent sectors.[9]

While I have summarised the demographic breakdown of the respondents to surveys elsewhere,[10] it is crucial to note that from the sample of organisations that participated 64% were subsidised theatres, 24% were independent performing arts companies, and only 7% were commercial venues (see Image 1).[11] It was important to our project that the dataset produced reflected the variegated theatrical landscape in the UK and the manifold ways theatre institutions across different geographical regions had been impacted by the COVID crisis. 48% of participating organisations were located in large urban areas with more than 100,000 inhabitants, 17% in smaller cities with a population between 20,000 and 100,000, 21% in small towns, and 14% in rural locations (see Image 2). Our survey results further underscored recent labour patterns in British theatre, including the sector's increasing reliance on a freelance workforce, fixed-term contracts, and zero-hours employment (see Image 3). In addition, more than half (57%) of the individual respondents who filled in the survey identify as female. Those who were representatives of organisations, however, were split more evenly by gender, with the largest group of respondents identifying as male. This contrast between the two groups draws attention to wider national patterns and the results of an extensive study by Tonic Theatre, which reveals that men outnumber women in senior roles at UK theatres by a ratio of two to one.[12]

In addition to the results of the two surveys, we supplemented our datasets with qualitative data gathered from media sources such as newspaper articles and periodicals published in the UK. In doing so, we captured an urgent snapshot of the public discourse that emerged throughout the evolving stages of the pandemic. We analysed over 200 articles and media reports from British publications between 2020 and 2023, including *The Stage*, *Guardian* newspaper, the BBC, regional news outlets, and the UK government website. Using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis tool, we applied a text-mining strategy to determine the most frequently used verbs and nouns across the publications. We visualised this dataset of key terms as a tag cloud to provide

9. See, for example, Samuel Sims, 'It's time for theatres to stop treating front-of-house staff as disposable', *Exeunt*, December 17, 2020, https://exeuntmagazine.com/features/time-theatres-stop-treating-front-house-staff-disposable/ (accessed January 26, 2024) and Giverny Masso, 'Front-of-house workers fear burnout over aggressive audiences and reduced staff', *The Stage*, January 18, 2022, https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/front-of-house-staff-fear-burnout-over-aggressive-audiences-and-reduced-staff. (accessed January 26, 2024).

10. See Thomas Fabian Eder and James Rowson, 'Documenting Crisis: Artistic Innovation and Institutional Transformations in the German-Speaking Countries and the UK', *New Theatre Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2023): 333–54 (348).

11. In the context of our study, we use the term 'subsidised theatre' to describe organisations that are supported by government funding, particularly through Arts Council England (ACE), Creative Scotland, Arts Council of Wales, and Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Independent performing arts organisations are used to describe smaller independent organisations not in receipt of government funding and private theatres include large commercial institutions such as the West End theatres.

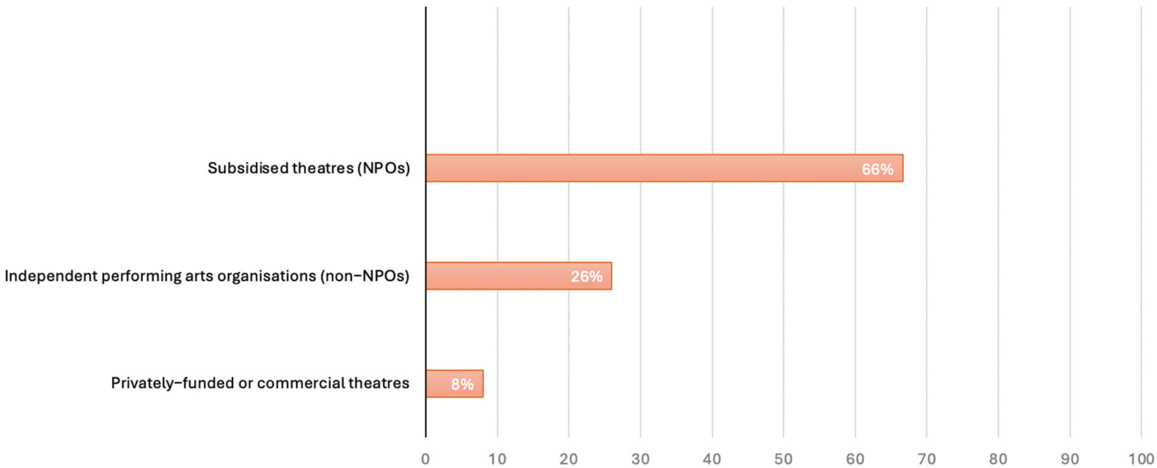

Image 1: The sample of organisation representatives from the Theatre after COVID surveys.

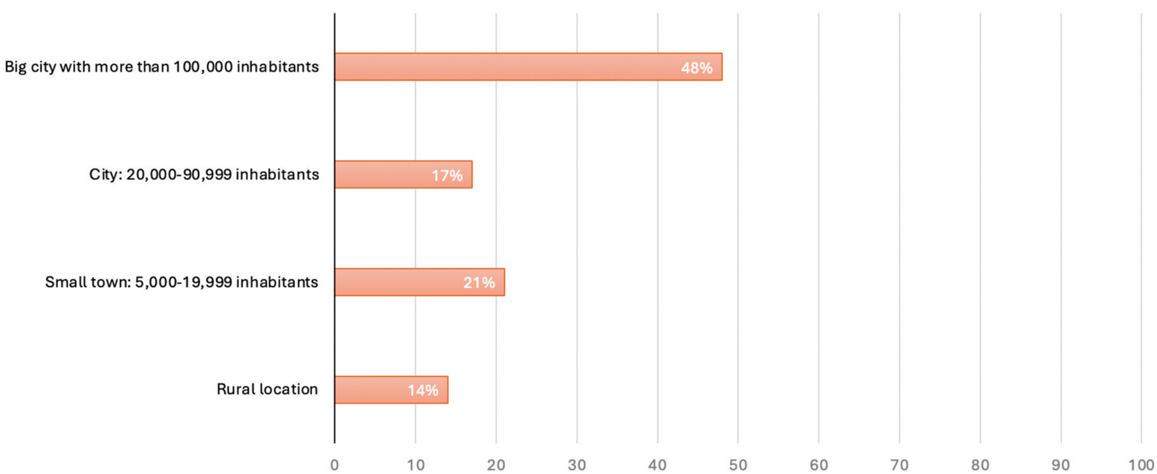

Image 2: The geographical location of organisations from the Theatre after COVID surveys.

a clear representation of the preoccupations and anxieties articulated by theatre artists and critics. This diachronic approach revealed the evolving narratives of the crisis in media discourse as attention shifted from initial theatre closures to sector recovery and the start of the cost of living crisis in 2022 (see Image 4). This discourse analysis combined with our two large-scale surveys provided a methodology for examining the urgent risks and opportunities that the COVID-19 crisis presented for theatre and performance in the UK, as well as considering emergent questions surrounding government policy and support for the theatre sector at the height of the crisis.

'Rethink. Reskill. Reboot': Government Hostility and Industry Resistance

In their article '"A plague upon your howling": Art and culture in the viral emergency', Mark Banks and Justin O'Connor observe that despite the arts and cultural sector issuing a series of urgent warnings as the pandemic swept across Europe in early 2020, the impact of the COVID crisis was met with 'indifference and silence' from the British government.[13] 'While some of [Britain's European] neighbours had begun to identify specific supports for the art and cultural sector during March and April' Banks and O'Connor argue, 'the responsible ministry of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and wider senior Government appeared to be doing very little to support professional arts and culture'.[14] The Government's initial reluctance to grasp the severe precarity of the creative and cultural industries, particularly during the first national lockdown, intensified the perception that the value of cultural workers' roles was abraded throughout the pandemic. As Nicholas Hytner wrote in 2023: 'Three years after the pandemic started, audiences might be back, but confidence that the arts can withstand waning government support isn't'.[15]

In addition, the Government's Cultural Recovery Fund, which was finally announced in July 2020, privileged established building-based cultural institutions in London and provided little security for small- and mid-scale venues, regional theatres, and touring companies. 'Rescue packages and policies in the United Kingdom instead differentiated between parts of the economy that were worth saving and parts that were not', writes Pascale Aebischer in her book *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of Pandemic*.[16] 'The dividing line appeared to be drawn between industries that offer long-term, regular employment and parts of the economy, like the creative industries, that depend on short-term contracts and the availability of a large number of freelancers'.[17] The government-backed 'Rethink. Reskill. Reboot'

12. The study highlights that 'Women account for only 37% of artistic directors of the 179 theatres and companies that get core funding from the Arts Council, dropping to 24% in those receiving more than £500,000'. Lyn Gardner, 'Theatre's gender inequality is shocking – but change is in the air', *Guardian*, September 22, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2014/sep/22/theatre-gender-inequality-tonic-advance (accessed January 26, 2024).
13. Mark Banks and Justin O'Connor, '"A Plague Upon Your Howling": Art and Culture in the Viral Emergency', *Cultural Trends* 30, no.1 (2021): 3–18 (7).
14. Ibid.
15. Nicholas Hytner, 'The arts in Britain are teetering on the brink. Here is my plan to save them', *Guardian*, May 7, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/may/17/arts-council-britain-plan-save-new-body (accessed January 26, 2024).
16. Pascale Aebischer, *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of Pandemic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 53.
17. Ibid. See also, Banks and O'Connor, '"A plague upon your howling"', 8.

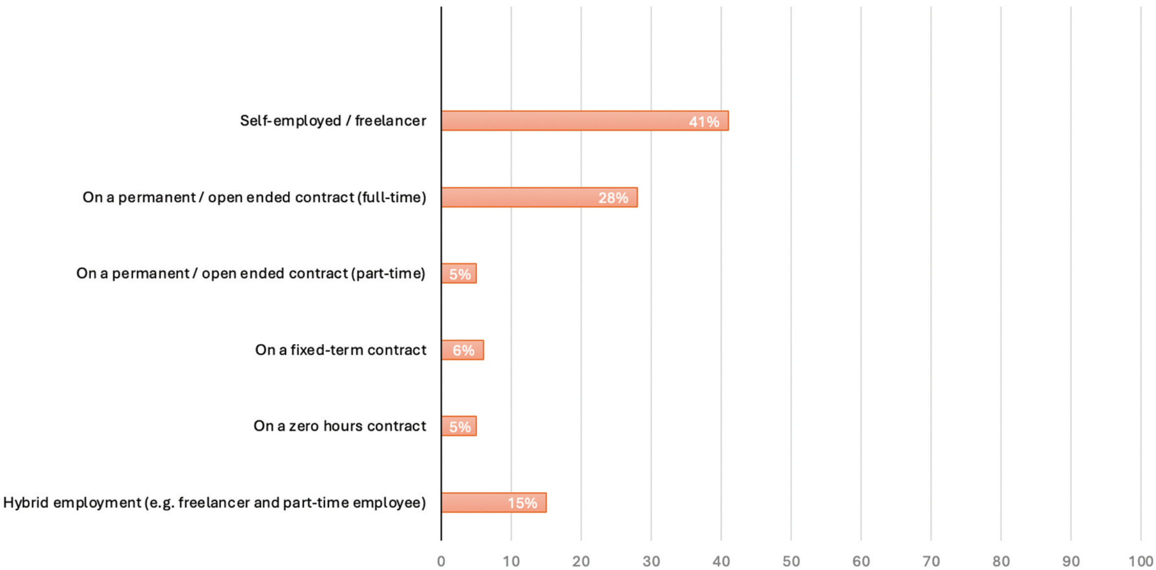

Image 3: The percentage breakdown of the current employment statuses of individual respondents in the first Theatre after COVID survey, 2022.

Image 4: The most frequently used verbs and nouns across the publications analysed for the Theatre after COVID project. NVivo.

campaign, which suggested that theatre workers should re-train in sectors such as cyber, further underscored these pertinent anxieties about the loss of their identities as theatre workers (see Image 5).[18] While these fears were also in part due to the inability of companies and individual artists to produce new work for live audiences, it also exposed a cogent unease within the theatre industry that the vulnerability of a sector already enervated by a decade of austerity was deemphasised in the initial stages of the crisis and remained a low priority throughout the pandemic.

The *Theatre after Covid* project's analysis of data from articles and media reports demonstrates that the crisis generated a fervent discourse that articulated a nascent anxiety that the official government response to the pandemic had further entrenched structural and funding hierarchies within the UK theatre infrastructure. Writing in *The Stage*, Lyn Gardner articulately describes that although the creative industries had already been weakened by austerity measures implemented by the coalition government after the 2010 election, the pandemic forced new light on how 'the government really doesn't understand how theatre is produced and how it doesn't care'.[19] This was echoed by industry figures such as Philippa Childs, head of the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union (BECTU). Childs reports that the Cultural Recovery Fund disadvantaged the flexible and mutable work structures in the UK theatre industry, meaning that 'many theatre industry workers are freelance and have fallen through the gaps of the income support schemes and received no government help. The government has failed these people at every stage of this crisis'.[20]

In our surveys, we asked respondents if they felt well informed by both regional and national government about how they intended to shape cultural and theatre policy in the wake of the pandemic. 74% of our individual respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt well informed by their regional government, while 60% also disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement concerning national government. In comparison, only 27% reported that they agreed or strongly disagreed. These results articulate a clear frustration over the paucity of information provided by the Government to theatre workers across the UK after the final lifting of pandemic restrictions in early 2022. Interestingly, these figures remained consistent in our 2023 survey, indicating that these findings were not solely driven by the short-term instability and financial precariousness caused during the crisis's early stages. They instead demonstrate an underlying concern of individual theatre workers that they have been detached from debates over policy and decision-making processes as the industry attempts to re-build and recover from the effects of COVID.

The data from the 30 freelance respondents to the surveys shows an even wider dissonance between freelance theatre workers and

18. For more information on the campaign, see, for example: Marianka Swain, 'The government's attitude to Fatima and the arts will put them on the wrong side of history – they just don't know it yet', *Independent*, October 12, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/cyberfirst-advert-rethink-reskill-reboot-fatimas-next-job-coronavirus-arts-b992467.html (accessed January 26, 2024).

19. Lyn Gardner, '15 things I won't forget about 2020 and its impact on theatre', *The Stage*, December 14, 2020, https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/some-of-the-things-i-wont-forget-about-2020-and-its-impact-on-theatre (accessed January 26, 2024).

20. Matthew Hemley, '3,000 theatres jobs at risk under current redundancy plans', *The Stage*, July 3, 2020, https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/exclusive-3000-theatres-jobs-at-risk-under-current-redundancy-plans (accessed January 26, 2024).

Image 5: 'Rethink. Reskill. Reboot' advert produced by the UK government as part of the CyberFirst campaign led by the National Cyber security Centre, 2020. Originally accessed at: https://www.Ncsc.gov.uk/cyberfirst/overview.

government at both national and local levels. This perceived rupture in communication highlights that freelancers feel excluded from the wider discourse on how the performing arts sector should emerge from the pandemic. This was notably evident in freelancers' perceptions of their relationship with national government, with 52% strongly disagreeing that they felt well informed by the Government, compared to 40% overall. A further striking result is that 90% of all ethnically diverse respondents felt uninformed by their regional government. This is significant to note, as it corresponds with more extensive data indicating that the Government and the cultural sectors' response to the pandemic disregarded Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse theatrical professionals.[21] Moreover, 60% of our ethnically diverse survey participants stated that they were happier in their jobs before the pandemic. This is in contrast to 48% of all respondents, indicating a concerning trend of dissatisfaction that could have a long-term detrimental effect on diversity in the industry.

Significantly, when we asked the same question to representatives of performing arts organisations in 2022, the number of respondents who agreed significantly rose. From this group, 76% felt well informed by national government in relation to cultural policy and sector recovery. This reflects the fact that, as I have noted above, the Cultural Recovery Fund was centred on supporting larger organisations and institutions, rather than individual workers and creative freelancers. This also correlates with broader media and industry discourse that has called attention to how the disparity of support following the first national lockdown failed to recognise the need for structural reforms to work and employment practices in theatre, as well as wider institutional change.[22] It is important to note, however, that this number fell substantially to only 46% in our 2023 survey that took place after the removal of financial support for theatres and during an increasingly turbulent period of 'devastating [Arts Council England funding] cuts' to buildings as part of the Government's levelling up agenda.[23]

As I have written elsewhere with Thomas Fabian Eder, the COVID crisis precipitated a 'wider reinterpretation of the theatre ecology, including online activism such as the emergence of advocacy groups [. . .] that aimed to articulate the demands and concerns of freelance theatre workers throughout the initial stages of the pandemic'.[24] Other academic reports have further underscored how these groups used online digital platforms to: 'create dialogue with fellow theatre workers [. . .] share information and promote activism around issues including better working conditions within the industry as a whole', emerging as 'large voices in the debates surrounding the freelance theatre workforce in the industry, both for COVID-19 related issues and wider debates on industry change'.[25]

21. Roaa Ali, Stephanie Guirand, Bridget Byrne, Anamik Saha, and Harry Taylor, *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).

22. See, for example, Lyn Gardner, 'How can we support freelancers? Give them salaries and a seat at the table', *The Stage*, July 12, 2021, https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/how-can-we-support-freelancers-give-them-salaries-and-a-seat-at-the-table (accessed January 26, 2024).

23. Archie Bland, 'Wednesday briefing: Inside Arts Council England's devastating cuts', *Guardian*, November 23, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/23/wednesday-briefing-inside-arts-council-englands-devastating-cuts (accessed January 26, 2024).

24. Eder and Rowson, 'Documenting Crisis', 340. Examples of these large activist initiatives include the Freelance Task Force founded in April 2020 and Freelancers Make Theatre Work that was established in June of the same year.

25. 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) 186–8.

Our survey data underscores that while respondents felt informed about the issues that these nascent groups campaigned for, they conversely reported feeling uncertain about the ways in which they could effectuate manifest political change or institutional transformation within the industry. Across individual respondents, only 40% felt that advocacy campaigns gave theatre workers a seat at the table when negotiating policy issues, while 51% disagreed. Furthermore, 61% agreed or strongly agreed that advocacy groups in the theatre sector have no political influence on policy change or increased government attention to the performing arts. This suggests a deep-rooted level of scepticism towards the efficiency of these campaigns from individual theatre professionals. Although the initiatives have provided an important step towards rethinking the structural relationships between some theatre institutions and freelancers, artists and other theatre workers have articulated concerns that this activism rarely translated into government policy or the inclusion of theatre workers in the urgent post-COVID recovery planning for the sector. Moreover, these task force initiatives were frequently established and marshalled by established theatre organisations, meaning that they posed a conflict of interest and hindered substantive and lasting change at an institutional level that was vital in the immediate aftermath of the initial crisis.

The survey results therefore call attention to how COVID did not simply exacerbate the lacuna between theatre institutions and their employees but also contributed to discontent among theatre workers that they had been marginalised by a number of high-profile policy failures throughout the pandemic by the Government. Significantly, our data reveals that while theatre workers had little trust in effectuating institutional or policy shifts through large-scale advocacy groups, they have instead been generating their own peer-to-peer support networks to articulate their core anxieties and needs since the start of the COVID crisis. For example, 84% of respondents to our 2022 survey saw an increasing need for communication, networking, and exchange with colleagues, rising to 87% in 2023. In addition, 63% of individual respondents reported working towards common policy goals with their peers in more informal networks, rising to 75% in 2023. These trends highlight a shift towards more collaborative and small-scale activism within the sector as theatre artists continue to navigate the precarious cultural climate and find new ways to articulate shared anxieties, as well as amplify their demands for structural change within the industry and new policy development.

Thus far, I have focused on the ways our survey data demonstrates how theatre workers in the UK felt shut out from the urgent debates that emerged on sector support and recovery during the pandemic. Although government policy excluded freelancers and small-scale, non-building-based businesses from pandemic relief packages, emerging collaborative networking models demonstrated that the theatre industry could find novel and innovative approaches to address the sector's recovery, fostering a more collaborative advocacy and decision-making process among theatre workers. In the following sections, I will further analyse the data from our two project surveys in 2022 and 2023, focusing specifically on the long-term impact of the pandemic on both individual theatre workers and institutions.

Individual Theatre Workers: Working Conditions, Precarity, and Collaboration

In January 2021, it was reported in a study commissioned by the European Authors' Societies entitled 'Rebuilding Europe' that Europe's creative and cultural economy had lost 31% of its revenues over the past year.[26] The report, which covered the cultural and creative sectors in both the EU and the UK, laid bare the devastating damage of the pandemic to the performing arts. Although the sector was one of the fastest growing industries before the pandemic, it was revealed that the performing arts were the hardest hit of nearly every other economic sector covered by the report, with a 90% collapse in turnover between 2019 and 2020. The report underscores that 'the cultural and creative economy is one of the most affected in Europe, slightly less than air transport but more than the tourism and automotive industries'.[27] This situation was intensified in the UK by the fact that theatre was among the first sectors of the economy to experience restrictions and the last to be permitted to reopen, with the constantly shifting government guidelines and uncertainty throughout 2020 and 2021 contributing to the cancellation of productions and major festivals into 2022.[28] This is evidenced by the fact that at the height of the national lockdowns, the National Theatre in London stated it was 'losing between £4 m and £5 m a month'.[29] Moreover, the financial shockwaves of the COVID-19 crisis on the theatre sector also resulted in **severe** repercussions to workers' livelihoods, with BECTU warning in July 2020 that an estimated 3,000 theatre jobs, excluding freelancers, were at risk of redundancy.

The pandemic also brought new attention to the precarity faced by freelancer theatre artists. Successive national lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 highlighted the British theatre industry's long-standing reliance on a diverse freelance workforce, foregrounding pre-existing inequalities between salaried and freelance workers. Writing in *The Stage* in November 2020, Lyn Gardner asks an urgent question: 'Who will pay for theatre's recovery? We must take care it is not theatre's freelancers – for too long they have provided extra subsidy for the arts through their low pay and lack of benefits [...] freelancers may continue to pay the most, under more draconian conditions, while being paid less'.[30]

26. Marc Lhermitte et al., *Rebuilding Europe: The cultural and creative economy before and after the COVID-19 crisis*, (London: Ernst & Young, 2021), 6.
27. Ibid.
28. The lack of clarity around the Government's response to the Omicron variant in December 2021 resulted in low audience confidence and poor ticket sales impacting on the last minute cancellation of the Vaults Festival in January 2022 due to 'insurmountable financial vulnerability' and the closure of *Pride and Prejudice* (*sort of)* at the Criterion Theatre due to a lack of audiences attending London's West End theatres.
29. Vanessa Thorpe, 'Key cultural institutions under threat: "If this goes on much longer, it's hard to imagine any theatre surviving"', *Guardian*, May 23, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/may/23/key-cultural-intstitutions-warn-facing-financial-collapse (accessed January 26, 2024).
30. Lyn Gardner, 'Freelancers have been overlooked and underpaid for too long', *The Stage*, November 23, 2020, https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/freelancers-have-been-overlooked-and-underpaid-for-too-long (accessed January 26, 2024).

Despite these warnings from leading industry figures and critics, however, it was reported by the Office for National Statistics in April 2021 that job vacancies in arts and entertainment had fallen as low as 79% since the start of the pandemic. Many theatre freelancers additionally fell between qualifying for government aid initiatives such as the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) grant and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) due to the complex and diverse nature of their professional working practices.[31] The financial crisis in the sector was exacerbated by the fact that the emergency National Cultural Recovery Fund (CRF) rescue package prioritised the safeguarding of established, large-scale institutions without requirements for organisations to retain and support existing freelance staff. This process excluded freelance workers from institutional decision-making on the theatre sector's recovery, diminishing, and disempowering their voices within the organisations they worked for at a time when their working practices remained in unprecedented tumult and uncertainty.

The results of our first survey, conducted in Spring 2022, further reiterated that theatre freelancers were working longer hours than their peers and for less pay, predominantly on short fixed-term contracts. This labour was also often invisible and unacknowledged, with many freelancers reporting that they regularly worked unpaid overtime each week in their roles.[32] For example, 38% of freelance respondents answered that they worked 50 hours or more a week compared to 27% overall. More tellingly, while 25% of the survey's total respondents reported being paid more since the pandemic, only 14% of freelancers had experienced this. Prior studies have examined the relationship between extended work hours in the British creative sectors and the development of a burnout culture and reduced productivity.[33] However, our findings also reveal a clear link between the pandemic and the growing financial instability and uncertainty experienced by freelance theatre workers in comparison to salaried staff. This insecurity has potentially resulted in 56% of freelancers answering that they were happier in their jobs before the pandemic, compared to 47% of all respondents. These figures did not change in our follow-up survey conducted in May 2023. Although this is not a significant difference, it demonstrates that while the pandemic provided a vital opportunity to re-think the ways in which the industry works, as well as the relationship between cultural intuitions and their freelancer employees, this has yet to translate into how freelancers are valued and paid for their labour. Instead, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in sustained uncertainty and industry crisis, presenting a profound moment that has amplified pre-existing precarity, vulnerability, and financial instability in the UK theatre sector.

Our surveys also aimed to provide a clearer picture of the long-term impact of COVID-19 on new workers entering the performing arts industry. Since the onset of the pandemic, industry figures have

31. Office for National Statistics, Vacancies and jobs in the UK: April 20, 2021. https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/jobsandvacanciesintheuk/april2021#vacancies-for-january-2021-to-march-2021 (accessed January 26, 2024).

32. The average overtime worked without pay per week reported by the freelance survey respondents was 6 hours in 2022 and 6 and a half hours in 2023.

33. Paul Evans and Jonathan Green, *Eyes Half Shut: A Report on Long Hours and Productivity in the UK Film and TV Industry* (Project Report: BECTU, 2017), 6–7.

underscored the urgent risk of a 'lost generation' of young and emergent artists whose training and career progression were at risk due to successive national lockdowns and theatre closures.[34] 11% of the individual respondents for our two surveys had graduated in 2019 or later. They worked across a diverse range of professions within the industry, including as artists and technicians, as well as in education and outreach. 75% defined themselves as either freelance or self-employed. Importantly, the surveys indicate that fewer new graduates regularly collaborate with established theatre institutions compared to our overall respondents in both 2022 and 2023. This was even though 75% of new graduates stated that they saw an increasing need for communication, networking, and exchange in their work in 2022, which rose to 100% in 2023. This data suggests that emerging theatre workers have been excluded from crucial opportunities to expand their connections within the performing arts since the start of the pandemic. This inability to create new communication and networking opportunities outside of their immediate roles has further been underscored by the fact that 75% of early-career respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they didn't know which organisation represents their interest in politics in both surveys, rising to 80% in 2023.

In addition, 50% of recent graduates reported having to take additional work in traditionally low-income front-of-house roles, such as bar staff, box office, or ushers, to subsidise their other work in the industry. This was substantiated by an open response question that asked respondents to articulate how their work situation has changed as a result of the pandemic:

> I took a job as a freelance artistic associate with COLAB [London based, immersive theatre company] during the pandemic, but have since had to move to a combination of part-time teaching in higher education and freelance directing/performing/devising.[35]
>
> Worked part-time bartender in a live music venue pre-pandemic, now bar manager in an immersive theatre venue.[36]
>
> I am now working more within the education sector than I was before.[37]

These responses highlight how new graduates have had to find part-time employment outside the sector to support their work in theatre. Parlous working conditions and economic insecurity experienced by emerging artists in the theatre industry are not new, of course, and have been widely acknowledged in academic literature before 2020.[38] However, our data also underscores the increasing paucity of full-time work for new graduates since the start of the pandemic as the UK theatre industry continues to recover from the long-term impacts of the crisis. Moreover, our surveys also reveal that between 2022 and 2023 emerging theatre

34. Georgia Snow, 'European theatres warn generation of talent could be lost by COVID', *The Stage*, February 17, 2021, https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/european-theatres-warn-generation-of-talent-could-be-lost-by-covid, (accessed January 26, 2024).

35. Theatre after COVID survey respondent no. 64. Theatre freelancer based in London. Theatre after COVID UK Survey 1, May 24, 2022.

36. Theatre after COVID survey respondent no. 89. Theatre freelancer based in London. Theatre after COVID UK Survey 1, June 15, 2022.

37. Theatre after COVID survey respondent no. 29. Theatre freelancer based in Buckinghamshire. Theatre after COVID UK Survey 2, April 12, 2023.

38. See, for example, Sabina Siebert and Fiona Wilson, 'All work and no pay: consequences of unpaid work in the creative industries', *Work, Employment and Society* 27, no. 4 (2013): 711–21; Orian Brook, David O'Brien, and Mark Taylor, *Culture is Bad for You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 21, 201–3.

workers have also experienced a further deterioration in pay and job security, with multiple young respondents reporting that their positions within organisations have transitioned from being in more secure employment to freelance roles.

These survey results reiterate that young freelancers in the theatre sector are increasingly exploited, leading to a substantive exodus from the field. This is particularly the case for young people from low-income and ethnically diverse backgrounds, evidenced by a recent report from BECTU published in December 2022. The authors of the report warn that theatre is facing an 'existential threat' due to a skills shortage that has been exacerbated by the pandemic, with early-career workers and people from ethnic minority groups most likely to be those leaving the industry.[39] This underscores that the retention of young people entering the industry is a significant challenge for theatre institutions to address and re-enforces the urgent need for organisations to re-think training and career opportunities aimed at the new workforce entering the industry since the start of the pandemic.

39. Giverny Masso, 'Talent drain poses "existential threat" to theatre – BECTU', *The Stage*, December 1, 2022, https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/talent-drain-poses-existential-threat-to-theatre–bectu (accessed January 26, 2024).

The data from our second survey also demonstrated the additional pressure on theatre and the live arts in the form of the bleak economic outlook in the UK since the second half of 2022. Termed the 'cost of living crisis', this unprecedented rise in inflation and fiscal instability driven by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, COVID, and Brexit has further contributed to the additional challenges facing the theatre industry in the aftermath of the pandemic. Stiflingly low wages prompted the trade union Equity to launch a campaign in 2023 calling for a 17% weekly pay rise for performers and stage managers working in the West End.[40] At the time of our first survey in 2022, 30% of all individual respondents reported earning the same to do the same amount of work they had been doing previously before the pandemic. When asked the same question in our second survey, this figure had increased to 39% of participants who were now being paid the same as before the pandemic, despite rising inflation caused by steep increases in the prices of energy and food. Our survey also found that independent theatre workers across the UK were regularly working significant unpaid overtime. The results revealed that in 2022 they were working on average six hours of unpaid overtime a week, rising to six and half hours in 2023. Reflecting similar patterns noted above, freelance respondents reported working higher unpaid hours than their salaried peers, with an average of ten hours a week in 2022 and eight in 2023.

40. Equity, 'Stand Up For 17%', https://www.equity.org.uk/campaigns-policy/stand-up-for-17, (accessed January 26, 2024).

Alarmingly, workers in the UK have also reported a dramatic rise in job insecurity. A recent article in the *Guardian* by Ella Braidwood published in February 2023 reports: 'people are leaving the industry [. . .] there is a massive exodus of people that don't come from wealthy backgrounds and so can't keep doing'. [41] In our 2023 survey, 44% of all individual respondents felt that their professional existence was currently

41. Ella Braidwood, 'Wave of protest plays staged as UK theatres face closures and staff shortages', *Guardian*, February 3, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/feb/03/playwrights-fight-back-theatres-face-closures-staff-shortages-cost-of-living (accessed January 26, 2024).

under threat, while only a comparative 20% replied that it was not. The reasons given for this were complex, but many respondents articulated the ongoing pressure of the cost of living crisis in the UK as a key facet of their unease as inflation and soaring energy bills continue to hit all areas of theatre, creating further financial instability after the challenges of COVID. It is clear from the survey results then that not only have the pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis generated a substantive and sustained decline in working conditions but also created a very real threat to job security in the theatre sector. Furthermore, these shifts in working hours and redundancies have disproportionately affected those already on precarious variable-hours contracts, such as those in front-of-house and technical roles, highlighting the urgent need to re-think problematic employment structures in theatre institutions and the increasing reliance on a 'gig economy' and labour market comprised of temporary and part-time positions in the performing arts sector.

It is evident that despite the ongoing crises in British theatre, the pandemic has reaffirmed the need for more collaborative and dialogic models of theatre practice and networking between theatre-makers and institutions. The survey responses indicate that there is an increasing desire among theatre workers for wider and more meaningful collaboration. 84% of individual respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they saw a growing necessity for communication, networking, and exchange with colleagues. Interestingly, this figure rose to 87% in the second 2023 survey, indicating that this remains a pressing and pertinent need for the facilitation of creative networking and engagement between institutions and independent theatre workers. As I have noted above, there is also a significantly higher level of desire for creative networking and engagement amongst recent graduates, with this figure rising to 100% in both surveys for those who have graduated since 2019. These results also translate practically into how the survey respondents reported rethinking the way they work creatively with their peers. Across all individual respondents, 57% reported increasingly collaborating with others working in the performing arts, with this figure increasing to 59% in 2023.

Our survey results into independent theatre workers underscore the need to rethink extant discourse surrounding sector recovery in the long-term wake of the industry crisis caused by the pandemic. This echoes the work of creative economists Roberta Comunian and Lauren England, who argue that the prevailing rhetoric on resilience in the sector is short-term, while the COVID crisis has foregrounded the necessity for a sustained reassessment of the sector's business model.[42] As our findings indicate, there needs to be a continuing shift away from lobbying and policy that singularly advocates for the finite and unsustainable support provided to the theatre sector and its workforce during urgent times of crisis. Rather, more long-term thinking into structural and institutional reform is required, as unethical practices and working

42. Roberta Comunian and Lauren England, 'Creative and Cultural Work Without Filters: COVID-19 and Exposed Precarity in the Creative Economy', *Cultural Trends* 29, no. 2 (2020) 112–28 (122–3).

conditions within the industry remain major concerns expressed across the sector. While the ongoing cost of living crisis continues to destabilise the industry's long-term recovery, it is also clear that amid widespread turmoil since the pandemic began, theatre artists have forged new creative collaborations during these times of crisis. The development of these dynamic artistic networks and innovative new ways of working has the potential to reshape how theatre artists work, forming a vital outcome of the continuing challenges and crises confronting theatre in the UK.

Theatre Institutions in Crisis

Alongside the vital data gathered on independent theatre workers, a central aim of the *Theatre after COVID* project has been to generate new insights into the impact of the COVID crisis on theatre institutions, providing a long-term analysis of organisational change and shifts in the institutional fabric of the theatre industry. Since the start of the pandemic, theatre buildings and organisations in the UK have been deluged by a series of successive crises that Alice Saville describes in the *Financial Times* as a 'breaking point' for the industry. [43] Emerging from the initial artistic and economic tumult triggered by successive national lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, British theatre has grappled with diminishing and unpredictable audience numbers, funding cuts, and the volatile impact of the cost of living crisis, which has resulted in further unprecedented challenges across the country.

As I have highlighted in the previous section, the devastating financial repercussions of the pandemic forced buildings to implement staff redundancies, an act described as 'cultural vandalism beyond repair' by BECTU.[44] During the height of pandemic restrictions in 2020 theatres including the Royal Shakespeare Company, Manchester Royal Exchange; Theatre Royal Plymouth; The Royal Lyceum in Edinburgh, Theatre Royal Newcastle; The Oxford Playhouse; and Cameron Mackintosh in London's West End announced a series of redundancies as they battled to reduce costs and secure their long-term survival. Concurrently, a number of regional and small-scale theatres were forced into outright administration, including Nuffield Southampton Theatres after six decades, as well as the Southport Theatre, the Braintree Arts Theatre in Essex, and the Artrix Arts Centre in Bromsgrove. Reflecting on its decision to make 41% of its permanent staff redundant in August 2020, the New Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich revealed that 'it is clear that we are looking at a remodelled theatre landscape that requires us to reimagine our operation, business plan, and personnel structure'.[45]

Our second survey revealed that 44% of theatres were forced to implement staff cuts between May 2022 and June 2023. One small-

43. Alice Saville, 'Fringe theatre is in crisis. Can anything be done?', *Financial Times, July 22, 2023*, https://www.ft.com/content/75f2deb2-0a6e-4d1d-b154-e6ee8d16dc6f (accessed January 26, 2024).

44. Hemley, '3,000 theatres jobs at risk'.

45. Mathew Hemley, '41% of New Wolsey Theatre's permanent staff face redundancy', *The Stage*, August 6, 2020, https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/41-of-new-wolsey-theatres-permanent-staff-face-redundancy (accessed January 26, 2024).

scale, independent performing arts organisation in the south-west of England reported in the second survey: 'production costs, travel, lack of Arts Council support, [and slashes to] funding from local authorities, trusts and foundations' had all contributed to them having to let staff go in this period.[46] These figures underscore that while the COVID crisis shed new and urgent light on the financial precariousness of the UK theatre industry, these have only intensified since the official lifting of final pandemic restrictions in February 2022, as buildings continue to close and organisations reduce their staff numbers. Furthermore, they also highlight the policy failures of the Cultural Recovery Fund that privileged established building-based cultural institutions in London and provided little security for small-scale venues, regional theatres, and touring companies.

In addition to making unplanned redundancies since the start of the pandemic, theatre organisations have had to contend with a growing paucity of technical and backstage staff following an abrupt departure of these workers from the sector. While it has been observed that 'backstage and offstage skills shortages were highlighted before the pandemic began', the COVID crisis has created a sustained and critical skill gap in sound, lighting, and creative digital technicians as these workers continue to move into film and television.[47] The results of our surveys reinforce this data and scholarship that suggests backstage and technical staff have disproportionately left the theatre industry in the wake of the pandemic.[48] In 2022, 46% of organisations surveyed had vacancies for creative digital technicians, increasing rapidly to 76% in 2023. Unsurprisingly, this meant that theatres were now focusing their resources on training existing staff in technology-related skills, with the percentage increasing from 46% in 2022 to 71% in 2023. While Sam Mendes' Theatre Artists Fund has initiated a new £1.5 support scheme aimed at providing new opportunities for backstage and technical workers across the UK, the long-term consequences on theatre buildings from the ongoing loss of established members of the workforce remain uncertain.

An important aim of our survey was to open up new insights into the impact of the pandemic on small-scale, regional theatres, and touring companies. In doing so, we aimed to examine what this might tell us about inequality in terms of regional distribution of resources. Touring theatre is currently in a state of economic vulnerability and is confronting a crisis on multiple fronts. Reduced resources and decaying infrastructure have impacted practically every level of live touring, rendering traditional touring models unsustainable. English Touring Theatre executive producer Sophie Scull warns that audience levels have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels and that the cost of touring work had become 'almost untenable'.[49] This is especially problematic as the UK touring circuit is where emerging theatrical talent is nurtured and

46. Theatre after COVID survey respondent no. 43. Theatre organisation based in south-west England. Theatre after COVID UK Survey 2, May 2, 2023.
47. Jamie Body, 'Exodus of technical workers to screen industry continues, theatres warn', *The Stage* October 18, 2022, https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/exodus-of-technical-workers-to-screen-industry-continues-theatres-warn (accessed January 26, 2024).
48. See, for example, Maria Chatzichristodoulou, Kevin Brown, Nick Hunt, Peter Kuling, and Toni Sant, 'COVID-19: Theatre goes Digital – provocations', *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 18, no. 1 (2022): 1–6 (3).
49. Sophie Scull, quoted in Giverny Masso, 'Touring is becoming "almost untenable", theatre leaders warn', *The Stage*, October 26, 2022, https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/touring-is-becoming-almost-untenable-theatre-leaders-warn (accessed January 26, 2024).

experimental work often first performed. These anxieties have been mirrored in a recent study conducted at the University of Essex, which contends that the manifold challenges of the pandemic between 2020 and 2022 have 'drastically limited' the capacity of regional theatres to perform their 'crucial role in serving local communities'.[50] This is supported by the results of our two surveys that foreground how regional theatres and touring companies have been the hardest by redundancies and staff shortages. Notably, 45% of small-scale regional theatres and touring companies reported making redundancies in 2022, rising to 51% in 2023, a substantively higher percentage than that of all the organisational respondents. These regional theatres and touring venues have also been disproportionately impacted by the shortage of workers in digital and technical roles, with a higher percentage reporting vacancies in these areas than large-scale buildings in highly populated cities.

50. Rosemary Klich and James Rowson, *Theatres Beyond the Stage: The Recovery of Regional Theatres as Placemakers in the East of England* (Project Report: University of Essex, 2022), 8. See also, Klich, 'Regional Theatres as Placemakers'.

In a previous article, I state that the results of our first survey in 2022 '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'.[51] At the height of the pandemic, the Internet became an expansive terrain for the development of innovative hybrid performance modes, as well as serving as a powerful platform for promoting causes, engaging in activism, and exchanging expertise. Digital performances and streaming platforms were utilised as vital tools to keep audiences engaged in theatrical practice during the pandemic. They also served as a potential revenue source to alleviate the initial impact of lockdown closures. Our first survey demonstrated an important digital readiness and willingness among organisations to generate new online content. As I have observed, an 'overwhelming majority' of theatre organisations reported that they had offered digital artistic formats to their audience in the first survey (see Image 6).[52]

51. Eder and Rowson, 'Documenting Crisis', 349.

52. Ibid.

Between early 2022 and mid-2023, however, our surveys identified a clear decrease in their use of digital technology to connect with their audience in the past year from 86% of all theatre organisations to 71%. This hesitancy to commit to producing further virtual and hybrid work can be partly explained by the difficulties faced in monetising digital content, especially for small-scale regional theatres and touring companies. This was further exacerbated in the early stages of the pandemic when many large-scale buildings provided audiences with access to free digital content such as National Theatres At Home's streaming of *One Man, Two Guvnors* starring British celebrity James Corden. While the survey results reflect that the economic challenges of producing hybrid work have resulted in a decrease in new digital productions in 2023, it is also clear that institutions remain optimistic that they will continue to create future work that incorporates digital technology, with 71% reporting in 2023 that they

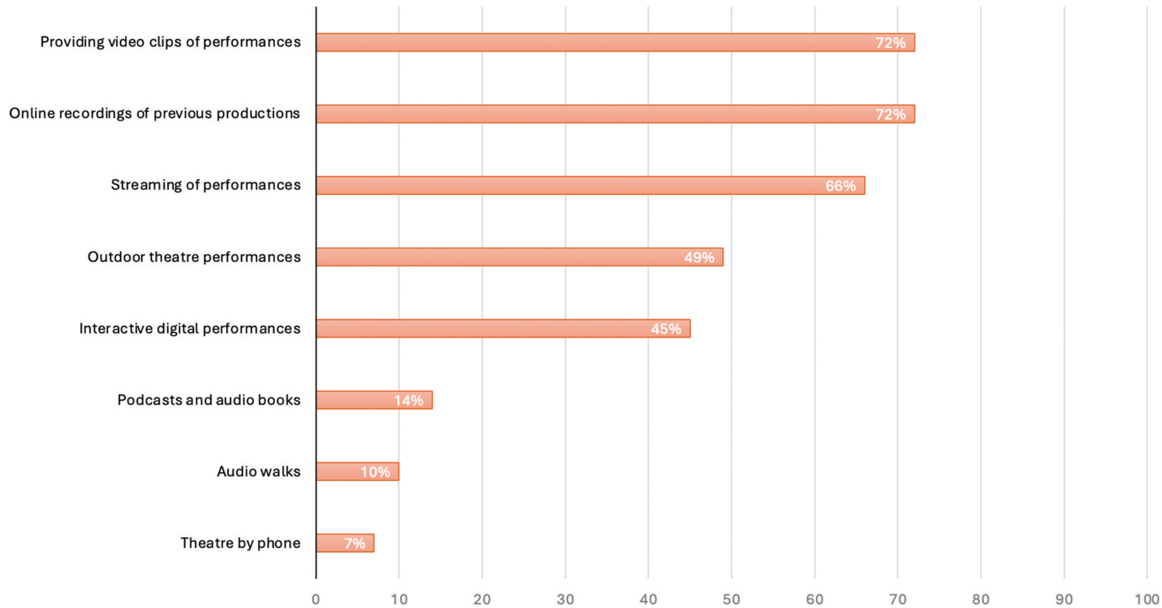

Image 6: Percentage of performance formats used by performing arts organisations to connect with their audience during theatre closures in the lockdowns. Theatre after COVID first survey, 2022.

expect to use more digital technology in their work the future. This suggests that prolonged investment in digital and hybrid work is vital to support the continued production of innovative new theatre work that has the potential to engage new and diverse audiences on both national and international levels.

The rapid transition to online performance and broadcast theatre in 2020 was also accompanied by a move towards creating vital outreach and participation programmes online. Although there has been a manifold use of digital formats by organisations to connect with their audience since the start of the pandemic, our data suggests that there was an emphasis on community engagement and outreach, with 69% of organisations hosting digital workshops and 48% providing digital home schooling options for parents (see Image 7). While these numbers dropped slightly in 2023, it is important to observe that these virtual outreach programmes have remained a core feature of the online content offered by small-scale regional theatres. Despite the significant disruption caused to audience and community engagement by the crisis, the pandemic has also precipitated a substantive shift in how outreach and educational initiatives are delivered. These new ways of working have had a significant impact on how community connections are established, addressing previous barriers to engaging with audiences and participants

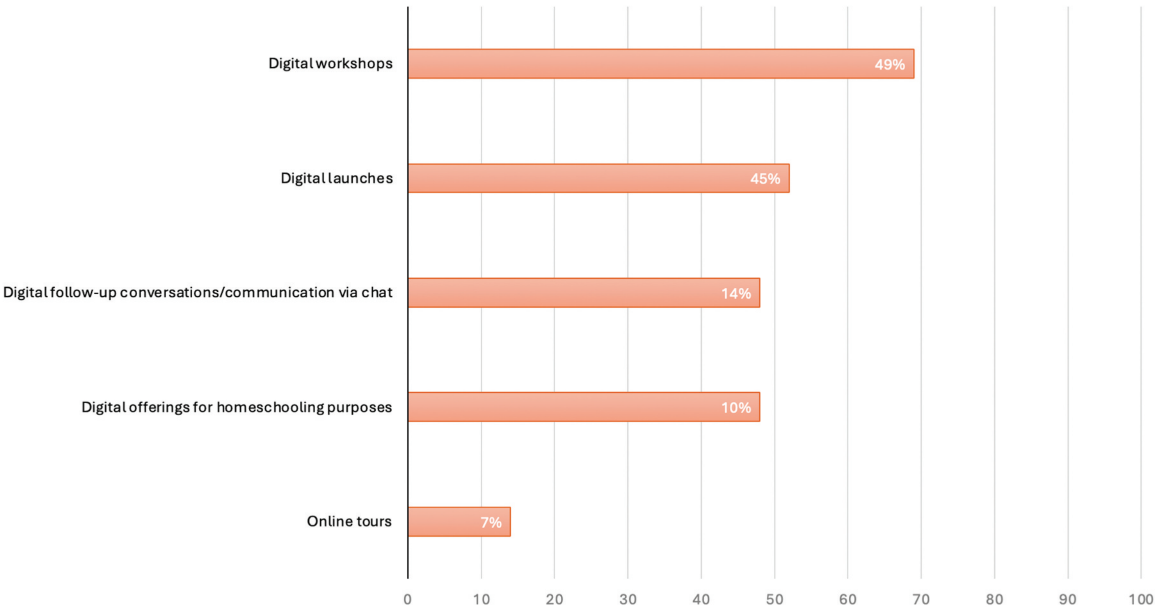

Image 7: Percentage of delivery formats used by performing arts organisations to connect with their audience during theatre closures in the lockdowns. Theatre after COVID first survey, 2022.

who live in more remote, rural locations, as well as those with disabilities and long-term health conditions.

Moreover, the pressing challenges of the extant cost of living crisis have continued to pile additional internal and external pressure on theatres across the country. The escalating cost of fuel and building materials has further challenged their economic viability and ability to stage new, innovative work following the volatile instability of the early phases of the pandemic. For example, despite the Government's help for business, the Mercury Theatre in Colchester was reported to be at a 'crisis point' in October 2022, with a 'huge increase in its annual energy bills from £38,000 last year to up to £120,000 in 2022–23'.[53] David Greig, artistic director of the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh, has echoed this, stating that: 'everything is strained. Cast sizes are strained. Programming choices are strained. Set budgets are strained. Artist development is strained. Studio work and outreach work are strained. We are doing everything we can, but the equation just does not add up'.[54] Greig's fears are corroborated by the results of the surveys, with 77% of organisations highlighting that their current financial situation had deteriorated considerably in 2023. This figure increased to 90% for small-scale, regional theatres, and touring companies, re-confirming that these organisations have been particularly

53. Esther Addley and Harriet Sherwood, '"It's really desperate": cost of living crisis spells bleak times for British arts venues', *Guardian*, October 22, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/oct/22/its-really-desperate-cost-of-living-crisis-spells-bleak-times-for-british-arts-venues (accessed January 26, 2024).

54. David Greig, quoted in 'Cost-of-living crisis: the harsh reality of the perfect storm facing theatre', *The Stage*, November 17, 2022, https://www.thestage.co.uk/long-reads/cost-of-living-crisis-the-harsh-reality-of-the-perfect-storm-facing-theatre (accessed January 26, 2024).

vulnerable to the present economic crisis. Furthermore, 50% of the small-scale and touring also reported that the cost of living crisis would soon threaten their existence, suggesting that a significant number of theatre organisations are currently at risk without urgent new strategies for their survival.

The survey data also evidences the impact of the cost of living crisis on audience numbers, which had continued to fluctuate due to discordant and contradictory government guidelines throughout 2020 and 2021, as well as the cancellation of productions and major festivals in 2022. Balme observes this mutable and unanticipated audience behaviour, arguing that despite the loosening of pandemic restrictions and an anticipated surge in live theatregoing, there has in fact been a 'reluctance on the part of audiences to get back in their seats'.[55] In the 2022 survey, 55% of organisational respondents reported that they had lower audiences than before the start of the pandemic, rising to 100% for regional theatres and 80% for touring companies. These figures have worryingly increased in 2023 as the soaring cost of living reached a crisis point in the UK, with 76% of organisations answering that they currently have fewer audience members today than before the first COVID-related theatre closures in March 2020, again increasing for both regional theatres (100%) and touring companies (85%).

55. Christopher Balme, 'COVID and the Theatre: a Constant State of Disruption?', *Static* 1, no. 2 (2022): 55–62 (55).

It is clear that at the time of writing in early 2024, the significant and widespread economic challenges facing the theatre sector remain a pertinent challenge for theatre institutions across the UK. Although the pandemic and cost of living crisis have both generated widespread uncertainty that has affected all areas of the country's theatre ecology, these exogenous crises have created unique challenges for regional theatres and small-scale touring companies. At the same time, however, theatre institutions have forged innovative, new forms of contemporary artistic practice in response to the urgent challenges of the pandemic. These collaborative, multimodal, and multidisciplinary performance formats have the potential to radically reinscribe the theatre ecology in the UK and provide exciting opportunities for engaging with new audiences and communities.

Conclusion: Theatre, Pandemic, and Crisis

In the introduction to their 2022 edited volume *Crisis, Representation and Resilience: Perspectives on Contemporary British Theatre*, Clare Wallace and Clara Escoda observe that 'politically, ecologically, economically, social and culturally, the twenty-first century is awash with crisis, so much that it is a challenge to find our bearings'.[56] Moreover, they contend that British theatre has been in a state of profound and

56. 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 (1).

sustained crisis that has formed a 'dynamic and integral feature/aspect of the post millennial British theatre environment'.[57] Directly focusing on the impact of COVID on the culture sector, Julian Meyrick and Tully Barnett further acknowledge that at times of intense crisis, 'structures, institutions, and relations embark on a process of unravelling', which creates the potential to offer 'unlooked-for opportunities to revise what existing knowledge comprises'.[58] The shock of the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified pre-existing narratives of change in the UK theatre ecology, accelerating structural and institutional change within the industry. Since 2020, theatre workers and institutions have had to radically reinterpret their artistic practice and resiliently address the urgent national and international challenges of the pandemic.

As of early 2024, the long-term future of the UK theatre industry is still uncertain due to the ongoing challenges posed by the COVID pandemic and the consecutive cost of living crisis. The fundamentally alerted theatrical landscape has seen additional pressure in the form of recent, high-profile cuts to arts funding. In November 2022, a number of prominent London theatres, including leading new writing and off-West End venues the Donmar Warehouse, the Hampstead Theatre, and the Gate Theatre, received a 100% cut to their funding as part of Arts Council England's controversial plan to redistribute funding across regions in the country to 'level up' access to the arts. The 138-year-old Oldham Coliseum in the North of England closed permanently in March 2023 after being stripped of its Arts Council England funding, while the Bristol Old Vic was announced in November of the same year as a high-profile casualty of Bristol City Council's arts cuts beginning in 2024. Simultaneously, there is a prevalent occurrence of burnout among individuals holding high-ranking positions in management, which has caused a rapid turnover in leadership roles in theatre organisations, exacerbating instability within the industry.[59]

The data from the *Theatre after COVID* project reveals that the pandemic has produced a crucial paradigm shift that has revised how theatre is made, providing new potential to push the boundaries of innovative artistic practice and establish new audiences. In this article, I have traced the emergence of new discourses and ways of working since the start of the pandemic and aimed to provide detailed insights and priorities into the long-term planning and recovery for the theatre sector in response to both COVID and the cost of living crisis. Our wide-ranging data and diachronic discourse analysis reveal the urgent need for structural reform within theatre institutions that readdress inequalities and foreground greater opportunities for co-curation and collaboration. This focus on organisational reform has the potential to open up new spaces of shared decision-making, as well as promote cooperation between theatre institutions across the UK to prioritise a re-thinking of the ecology of practice and training. My analysis also shows that

57. Ibid. 2.

58. 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 (75–76).

59. See, for example, Vanessa Thorpe, 'Exit, pursued by stress: bosses of smaller UK theatres quit in droves', *Guardian*, August 13, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/aug/13/worry-as-uk-theatre-bosses-quit-in-droves (accessed January 26, 2024).

individual theatre workers felt excluded from the post-pandemic rebuilding of the industry and marginalised by the Government's reductive support of the culture sector throughout the crisis. Despite the mobilisation of several advocacy campaigns centred around the needs of theatre artists in the early stages of the pandemic, these groups were perceived to have had little impact on government policy or sustained institutional change within the industry.

These findings suggest that decision-makers and senior management in theatres should carefully evaluate their organisational structures and working practices in the wake of the pandemic and the increased attention on the precarious situation faced by theatre workers, especially those who operate on a freelance basis. Our survey results reveal that it is crucial to prioritise long-term institutional transformation in the sector and improve working conditions, as unethical working practices and conditions within the industry continue to be consistent anxieties articulated by individual theatre workers. In addition, our surveys have also captured the significant experiences of emerging theatre artists, emphasising the need to reconsider the opportunities targeted at young people entering the industry who have been impacted by the pandemic in different ways, including disruptions to their education and training. It is also vital, however, that with the ongoing threat to livelihood as a result of the cost of living crisis, mid-career artists are retained within the sector to avoid the loss of valuable knowledge and expertise in creative practice. Moreover, while data from our surveys shows that organisations and independent theatre artists have experimented with innovative digital and hybrid work since the start of the pandemic, there should be a prolonged investment in digital technology on a national level to consolidate and advance new forms of theatre practice that emerged in response to lockdowns and social distancing measures. Finally, there is also an urgent need to address support for small-scale venues, regional theatres, and touring companies, which have faced unique challenges since the start of the pandemic and have been particularly affected by recent shifts in audience behaviour.

The *Theatre after COVID* project began with the aim to trace the structural crises in the UK theatre industry brought about by COVID-19. It is clear that the pandemic forced a re-evaluation of what it means to be a theatre worker, as well as how work is created and watched. The COVID crisis has opened up a series of new discourses on the value of theatre and live performance since March 2020, as well as providing theatre organisations and individuals with vital opportunities to re-think their artistic practice. Although the industry's resilience and adaptability has been underscored throughout the project's data, our research also foregrounds that long-term stability is required to generate meaningful and sustained institutional change. As the shockwaves of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis demonstrate, the value of arts and culture and the ongoing threat to theatre professionals and organisations remain vital and meaningful questions for theatre and performance research in 2024 and beyond.

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