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# The World of Theatre in a Time of Change

Before, During and After the Pandemic

## Abstract

The past two years have posed unprecedented challenges for the cultural sector as a whole, including theatres. The outbreak of the pandemic, and the restrictions imposed to contain it, turned the institutional routine on its head, placing the world of the performing arts in a dimension alien to it. Our study focuses on the internal processes that characterised theatres before, during and after the pandemic. We will illustrate how the venues have responded to the enforced closures, what they have done to preserve their communities and audiences, and whether they have acquired valuable knowledge at a level that may be applied in returning them to their former domain.

**Key words:** theatre, cultural life, closures, funding, lessons learned

10.56044/UA.2022.1.3.eng

## Introduction

A recurring theme in the literature at the level of network researchers and epidemiologists is that of the appearance of a virus that will force humanity to radically change its way of life. In the public mind, this has usually been depicted as a kind of dystopia, a popular apocalyptic backdrop for artistic works. While history has documented the major epidemics that have directly resulted in the deaths of millions of people, they have usually occurred either in the distant past or in places physically distant from Western civilization, which we, living in a twenty-first century postmodern urban civilization, and as beneficiaries of advanced medicine and health care, have merely ignored. However, the announcement of pandemic restrictions in early 2020, the closure of international border crossing stations, the transformation of air travel, the imposition of home office working and online learning, the banishing of cultural life to the virtual world and the resulting general disruption have affected humanity as a whole.

The period that we have left behind is not without its consequences, and new situations always offer opportunities for experience and learning. Our study focuses on the issues of change, transition and modification, with reference to a specific slice of the cultural sphere, that of the world of theatre. Our aim is to investigate whether the domestic theatre scene has learned from the past two years, and if so, how and whether it can or intends to use the knowledge it has gained in the future. We have collected data by way of interviews conducted in three theatres in Budapest, namely, the National Theatre, the József Attila Theatre and the Vígszínház. Despite the fact that these institutions are not physically distant from each other, their audiences, their frameworks for self-expression, their maintainers and thus their financial resources differ considerably. In our work we distinguish three time periods, namely, before the closures, during the closures, and today.

We would like to thank Judit Nagy, the financial director of the National Theatre, Zoltán Mádi, the financial director of the Vígszínház and Károly Nemcsák, the managing director of the József Attila Theatre, for their support and assistance.

## The demand for theatre in Hungary

Clichéd declarations of the “cultured-nationality” of any people are usually supported, as well as being formulated, from a subjective-emotional starting point. At the same time, there are certain objective and accurate scientific indicators that are certainly worth considering in order to assess the validity of the above statement. One of these is analysis of data related to individual participation in cultural events and theatre performances, the results of which show that Hungary is also an internationally outstanding performer in this respect. According to a 2019 study by Világgazdaság, in Hungary “we spend roughly twice as much on theatre tickets as [people do] in other EU member states”.<sup>1</sup> The figures of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office reveal that while in 2008 there were 4.076 million theatre visits in Hungary, within a decade this number has doubled, reaching 8.628 million, which reflects the tendencies within the country, although this does not provide a comparison with other countries.<sup>2</sup> The rate of growth is striking, especially in relation to the country’s population. Moreover, if we add to this the diachronic data compiled by the World Bank on the development of Hungary’s gross domestic product<sup>3</sup>, then we can clearly see that the growth rate of our demand for offline cultural consumption is outpacing the growth of our economy, and at the same time it also suggests that above a certain relative income level, the Hungarian population is willing to spend more than ever on attending cultural events.

However, the overall picture is more nuanced. There are strong indications<sup>4</sup> that such a large increase in the number of theatre tickets purchased is not only related to the increasing popularity of the theatre, but that there is also a strong correlation with the loopholes of the previously existing corporate tax relief (TAO) system. The scheme, which was introduced in 2009, provided

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1 VG. 2019. „Egyre többen vesznek színházjegyet, főleg Budapesten.” Viewed on 14 March 2022. <https://www.vg.hu/kozelet/2019/09/egyre-tobben-vesznek-szinhazjegyet-foleg-budapesten>

2 Hungarian Central Statistical Office, “Theatres.” Viewed on 25 March 2022. [https://www.ksh.hu/stadat\\_files/ksp/hu/ksp0013.html](https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/ksp/hu/ksp0013.html)

3 “GNI per capita, Atlas method (current US\$) – Hungary.” Viewed on 25 March 2022. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD?locations=HU>

4 Fabók, Bálint. 2018. „Közel hatmilliárd forint közpénzt zsebelt be a színház- és moziipar környezetéből.” G7. Viewed on 25 March 2022. <https://g7.hu/kozelet/20180125/kozel-hat-milliard-forint-kozpenzt-zsebelt-be-a-szinhaz-és-moziipar-kornyezetebol/>

the sector with a previously unprecedented level of additional resources, and was deemed popular with market operators until its withdrawal on the 31st of December 2018. In general terms, the procedure meant that companies paying tax in Hungary could offer their corporate tax payments to the theatres they preferred, which could then acquire additional funds of up to 80% of their net ticket revenue.<sup>5</sup> In theory, this created a win-win situation between the parties, although practice has shown that it also provided an excellent opportunity for subterfuge and, ultimately, corruption. This was one of the reasons given by the government for discontinuing it.

Despite today's advanced Internet penetration across broad social strata, the cultural sphere is one area that requires a high proportion of personal physical presence. After all, while cinemas and possibly concert halls can be replaced, albeit offering a reduced experience by way of commercially available high-tech devices, no analogue or digital media can reproduce the personal, presence experience of the theatre. In addition to their effects on tourism, the restrictions introduced in the spring of 2020 affected the cultural sector in the most comprehensive way. The seriousness of the situation is clearly illustrated by the fact that the last time there was a nationwide cessation of theatre performances was during the Second World War, and never before in peacetime.<sup>6</sup> The impact of this has not been lost, as data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office<sup>7</sup> indicates that by 2020 the number of theatre visits in Hungary had almost halved, compared to the figures for 2018. This is mainly due to the closures, but may also be linked to the reform of the TAO system.

## Sites of investigation

In all the countries where it is found, the "theatre of the nation" is usually considered the community's primary venue. Hungary is no exception. This status is mainly due to the prestige of the institution, its privileged status resulting from

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5 Szabó, Yvette. 2015. Fantomügynökök lepték el a színházakat. Viewed on 26 March 2022. VS. <https://vs.hu/gazdasag/osszes/fantom-ugynokok-leptek-el-a-szinhazakat-1218#!s0>

6 „Ezután: Mikor állhatnak újra lábra a színházak?” 2020. Viewed on 26 March 2022. <https://vs.hu/gazdasag/osszes/fantom-ugynokok-leptek-el-a-szinhazakat-1218#!s0>

7 Hungarian Central Statistical Office. "Theatres." Viewed on 25 March 2022. [https://www.ksh.hu/stadat\\_files/ksp/hu/ksp0013.html](https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/ksp/hu/ksp0013.html)



Figure 1. The National Theatre

its direct maintenance by the state, its existence in constant public spotlight and the high quality of the professional work usually performed there. With regard to infrastructure, the newest of the theatres that we examined is the one located at the Pest bridgehead of the Rákóczi Bridge, with its eclectic building designed by Miklós Ybl Prize-winning architect Mária Siklós<sup>8</sup>, which opened its doors only twenty years ago, on the 15th of March, 2002. The National Theatre's journey to the inaugural production of Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man* has a long history, but it is far beyond the scope of this paper to discuss it. What is important to mention in order to emphasise the physical proportions and possibilities is that, in addition to the 619-seat auditorium<sup>9</sup> and the Bajor Gizi Salon, which can accommodate fifty people and serves as a permanent performance space, there are also two studio stages in the building. The latter spaces are named in honour of the nation's former distinguished theatre artists Hilda Gobbi and Attila Kaszás. The National Theatre works with a company of thirty-two to thir-

8 Bojár, Iván András. 2015. „Egy jó színházat akartunk” – Iván András Bojár's interview with Mária Siklós. *Octogon Architecture & Design*. Viewed on 20 March 2022. <https://www.octogon.hu/epiteszet/interju-siklos-maria-val/>

9 National Theatre. “Visit, Building.” Viewed on 19 March 2022. <https://nemzetiszinhas.hu/latogatas-epulet>

ty-five actors and actresses; guest artists usually take part in a single production, with numbers ranging from forty to fifty. The large company consists of 190 people, including staff working behind the scenes. Their actors rarely play in other theatres, but film shootings are becoming increasingly frequent. The National Theatre can be found on the most popular online social platforms, such as Facebook<sup>10</sup> and Instagram<sup>11</sup>. Their followers number over 35 thousand for the former and around seven thousand five hundred in the case of the latter.

One of the most popular theatres in Budapest and an architectural highlight of the Lipótváros district, the Vígszínház, which was built in 1896, has been one of the cultural centres of Pest since its opening. As reported on the official website of the theatre<sup>12</sup>, the institution, which is owned by the capital but financed by the Ministry of Human Resources, has always considered it its mission to represent and promote the appearance of the European spirit in Hungary. In terms of genre, it has constantly striven for diversity, to cover a wide spectrum of dramatic performance. The building, which was designed by Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer<sup>13</sup>, can accommodate an audience of 1,025<sup>14</sup>, while the institution's chamber theatre, the *Pesti Theatre*, which opened in 1967, has 500 seats.<sup>15</sup> Their studio operates under the name *Házi Színpad (the Home Stage)*. It has a company of fifty-five members, with forty music and dance performers, respectively. Guest artists usually perform under contracts for roles. The Vígszínház's online penetration is outstanding; in addition to having the most visited website nationwide, its popularity on social media is also significant: on Facebook<sup>16</sup> it has more than 120 thousand fans and 25 thousand followers on Instagram<sup>17</sup>. Content sharing on all platforms is continuous.

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10 National Theatre. Viewed on 19 March 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/nemzetiszinhasz/>

11 National Theatre. Viewed on 19 March 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/nemzetiszinhasz/>

12 Vígszínház. "The 125-year old Vígszínház." Viewed on 19 March 2022. [https://www.vigszinhaz.hu/a\\_szinhaz/a\\_vigszinhaz.php](https://www.vigszinhaz.hu/a_szinhaz/a_vigszinhaz.php)

13 Papageno. 2020. „Fellner és Helmer – A legismertebb színházépítész páros története." Viewed on 19 March 2022. <https://papageno.hu/featured/2020/07/fellner-es-helmer-a-legismertebb-szinhazepitesz-paros-tortenete/>

14 Vígszínház. "Vígszínház – auditorium." Viewed on 20 March 2022. [http://www.vigszinhaz.hu/res/vig\\_nezoter\\_alaprajz.pdf](http://www.vigszinhaz.hu/res/vig_nezoter_alaprajz.pdf)

15 Vígszínház. "The Vígszínház – One of Central Europe's most beautiful theatres: the 125-year-old Vígszínház." Viewed on 20 March 2022. [https://www.vigszinhaz.hu/a\\_szinhaz/a\\_vigszinhaz.php](https://www.vigszinhaz.hu/a_szinhaz/a_vigszinhaz.php)

16 Vígszínház. Viewed on 20 March 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/vigszinhaz/>

17 Vígszínház. Viewed on 20 March 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/vigszinhaz/>

Originally intended as a house of culture, the József Attila Theatre, which is maintained by the capital but financed by the Ministry of Human Resources, has been operating as an independent theatre since 1956, with the original aim of serving the cultural life of the mainly working-class community of North Pest. Since its foundation, however, it has consciously strived not to become a layer theatre, and also to constantly preserve, embrace and serve the complementary dichotomy of not only living in Budapest but also in the Angyalföld district at the same time. As a result, the institution's repertoire is colourful, including comedies, musicals and dramas. The 580-seat József Attila Theatre hosts around 110-120 thousand theatregoers a year.<sup>18</sup> It employs more than a hundred actors per season. The large company is supported by seventy-three full-time employees. Like its peers, the institution is present in the most popular online communities. Its followers on Facebook<sup>19</sup> numbers twenty thousand, with approximately sixteen thousand on Instagram<sup>20</sup>.

## The golden age of recent times

The period preceding the outbreak of the pandemic was extremely fruitful for all three of the institutions surveyed. By the end of the 2010's, the total number of visitors to the Vígszínház increased to 370,000, up from an average of 300,000 in the previous decade, and until the closure of the theatre, performances were almost always sold out. The situation is the same for the József Attila Theatre; its audience and performances were steadily growing until 2020. While in 2011, 213 performances were staged during the season, in 2018 there were 418. Their leading actors performed in ten to twelve plays, twenty to twenty-five nights a month. Attendance for the 2018/2019 season was 94.8 per cent, with record revenues. The popularity of accompanying programmes also indicated a strong upward trend, in addition to which, the purchase of tickets months in advance was also typical. Tickets sold steadily for all the performances of the upcoming monthly shows.

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18 József Attila Theatre. "Theatre in Angyalföld – The History of the József Attila Theatre." Viewed on 29 March 2022. <https://jozsefattilaszhaz.hu/szhazunkrol/tortenetunk/>

19 József Attila Színház. Theatre. Viewed on 20 March 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/jozsefattilaszhaz/>

20 József Attila Theatre. Viewed on 20 March 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/jozsefattilaszhaz/>

The National Theatre also enjoyed an outstanding year in 2018, with more than 106,000 people attending its performances. In the following year, a slight decrease was apparent, but the number of guests paying the full ticket price increased by more than the difference between the two years. The National Theatre prefers a free-structure of season tickets, that is, a one-time purchase of four or six discount tickets, which can be used as desired, from performance to performance, or even on a one-time basis. Approximately twenty per cent of its ticket sales are in the form of season tickets.

The Vígszínház is one of the theatres in Budapest that adheres to the traditional season-ticket structure that has been in place for decades. Based on the data available, in the last full season there were nearly 40,000 season ticket holders, accounting for approximately twenty per cent of ticket sales. The structure of the József Attila Theatre's season tickets has undergone a major change recently, with 2019 data showing that the number of season ticket holders represented fourteen per cent of the total audience.

## In closure

The Hungarian government declared a national state of emergency on the 11th of March 2020.<sup>21</sup> Theatres were forced to close their doors with immediate effect as a result of this measure, which had been unprecedented for decades. This caught the institutions unawares and unprepared. This immediately prompted the questions: "What next?" and "What will happen to the companies, the audiences, the people working behind the scenes?" The situation was exceptional from both an artistic and an economic point of view, since the possibility of safely continuing its creative work in a closed community, especially the indoor rehearsal processes, was called into question, while at the same time, it became clear that the loss of revenue from ticket sales due to pandemic restrictions would result in an unpredictable reduction in resources, forcing an immediate adjustment of institutional budgets and business plans. Not all theatres were affected to the same extent, as their budgets vary widely.

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<sup>21</sup> Magyar Közlöny. 2020. "Government Decree 40/2020 (III. 11.) on the declaration of a state of emergency." Viewed on 30 March 2022. <https://magyarkozlony.hu/dokumentumok/6ddbac40c788cb35b5bd5a-5be4bb31294b59f9fc/megtekintes>



Figure 2. The Vígyszínház

The funding model differs from one theatre to another; there are examples of public, municipal, foundation and private funding. In the context of the closures, the situation of the latter became the most unsustainable, as these theatres mainly cover their operating costs by selling tickets. Theatre funding has traditionally been an extremely sensitive area in Hungary, not only from a professional point of view, but also from a political one, in which rigid, ideologically organised front lines have been drawn since the change of political regime, as part of a large-scale cultural war. Many identify Act CXXIV of 2019, which created the National Council on Culture<sup>22</sup>, and which was ostensibly approved in order to strengthen national culture, as one of the battles of this "kampf". According to this piece of legislation, there are currently three theatres of strategic cultural importance in the performing arts sector in Hungary, namely, the National Theatre, the Hungarian State Opera House, and the Budapest Operetta Theatre.

<sup>22</sup> "Act CXXIV of 2019 on the National Council on Culture, Cultural Strategic Institutions and the Amendment of Certain Culture-related Acts." Viewed on 30 March 2022. <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1900124.TV>

The institutions that we examined all receive budget support. The National Theatre, which is financially supported by the Ministry of Human Resources, does not limit itself to maximising its ticket revenues on account of its privileged status. It is a national strategic task to guarantee that the creative staff of the National Theatre may work with a freedom that is not subject to the constraints of the market and that can fully achieve the goals that are declared in accordance with the “national” character of the institution.

From the very first moment of the closures, it was noticeable that the government was taking a generous approach to the cultural sector as a whole, including theatres and artists. While state support for the former has not been reduced, despite the closed gates, the *Thank you, Hungary!* programme was established to assist the latter. The primary objective was to provide financial support to performers who had lost their daily income due to the restrictions imposed by the emergency. The permanent members of the company were not affected; they continued to receive their salaries despite the closures, due to their status as employees. At the same time, it was expected of all publicly funded institutions from the beginning that, just as the state would not abandon them during these troubled times, they should not lose their audiences. As a result, during the emergency, all the theatres examined bore in mind the “pay for work” philosophy, which had been consistently emphasised by the government in the past, employing their staff as far as possible, regardless of their job title.<sup>23</sup>

In the National Theatre each successive wave of the virus was addressed with different strategies. When the pandemic restrictions were imposed, the staff continued to receive their salaries and the institution tried to provide them with work. With the exception of art and artistic jobs, this did not involve any particular planning. Eight-hour working days were reduced to four or six hours a day, and tasks such as inventory-keeping, cleaning, and removing discarded or unwanted material, which would normally be postponed during normal

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<sup>23</sup> At a macro level, workers in the theatre sector are divided into three main groups: artistic (actors, dancers, musicians, directors, choreographers, designers), supporting (prompters, assistants, the stage manager, tutors) and other (technical staff, economic-administrative workers, the organisation department, as well as those responsible for advertising and marketing operations). It varies from one institution to another whether they prefer to employ their permanent company members on a fixed-term or an indefinite contract basis. In addition, some stage productions are often supported by guest artists. They are usually contracted for a specific performance and are remunerated according to the number of performances they give.

operations, were also performed. Several of the theatre's staff volunteered for the National Ambulance Service, which was under considerable pressure at the time. The greatest challenge was to employ artists, as rehearsals were impossible. In many cases, isolation resulted in individuals suffering from depression, and a lack of purpose that took its toll on the art world as a whole. The National Theatre responded to the situation almost immediately, creating an online show called *Szín-Ház-Hoz (Theatre to your Home)*. Members of the company recorded various productions, usually lasting five to ten minutes, in a video format, which the National Theatre then shared with its followers via its Facebook profile. The content available to date<sup>24</sup> is diverse in terms of genre and entertainment, yet it provided a degree of brief but high-quality diversion for theatre lovers confined to their homes. The National Theatre also experimented with streaming performances during the third wave of the pandemic. An "on-demand" version of this was implemented, whereby viewers could buy tickets for pre-recorded performances. The main form of communication was by email, which was the most popular and well-established way of expressing opinions even before the closures.

In the spring of 2020, the work of the actors in the József Attila Theatre focused on online presence. Although voice and speech training, as well as physical, fitness and ballet training, were still available to the artists, they mainly used the free time that they now had for self-training.<sup>25</sup> Many of them also volunteered to work with the National Ambulance Service. A workshop entitled "*Theatre for all?*"<sup>26</sup>, was held for theatre directors and public relations staff, to show how people with disabilities, particularly people with reduced mobility, as well as deaf and hard of hearing, and blind and partially sighted people, could have access to accessible theatre. The institution attempted to maintain contact with its audience through several forums during the closures. To this end, they launched a series of online programmes entitled *J@SzHome*<sup>27</sup>, in which the company pre-

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24 National Theatre. Viewed on 05 April 2022. [https://www.facebook.com/nemzetiszinhas/videos/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/nemzetiszinhas/videos/?ref=page_internal)

25 The József Attila Theatre did not have a company membership in the classical sense, but for the period November 2020 to July 2021, it employed nineteen artists as staff members.

26 József Attila Theatre. „A színház mindenké.” Viewed on 05 April 2022. [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=803193003777422](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=803193003777422)

27 Eszter Vamosi. 2020. „Láthatónak maradni.” Viewed on 05 April 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/100196128285033/posts/109330650704914/>

Photo: Anett Kállai-Tóth



Figure 3. The József Attila Theatre's five-part TV mini-series "Theatre Company During the Quarantine"

sented ad-hoc productions via live online check-ins. The videos, which were made available on the Facebook platform, allowed viewers to not only enjoy the current (or actually cancelled) performances, but also to become acquainted with the members of the company, as they were the artists who were due to perform that day. 2020 also marked the centenary of the Treaty of Trianon. The institution's alternative reality game, called *Trianon-files*<sup>28</sup>, was launched in association with the Hunyadi drama *A Feketeszárú cseresznye* (*The Black-stemmed Cherry*), which was being shown at the József Attila Theatre. In addition to online entertainment, a particularly important contribution was the creation of opportunities for teaching and learning through play. Later, an accessible version of the software was also created, in which the historical figures are brought to life through the voices of the company's actors. The pandemic inspired the artists of the József Attila Theatre to shoot the five-part TV series *The Company during*

<sup>28</sup> Trianon Files. Viewed on 05 April 2022. <https://trianonaktak.hu/>

*the Quarantine*<sup>29</sup>, which can still be viewed on YouTube. The episodes of *Kulissza TV*<sup>30</sup>, featuring interviews with the institution's background personnel, can also be found here. Performances were streamed twice.

In the initial period, the majority of spectators persisted, and only a small number demanded a refund of the ticket price. Later, however, this ratio worsened, and in practice it became apparent that the operation of the pass system in times of crisis could be problematic for the issuer. This was due to the fact that, while ticket sales were successfully frozen almost immediately in the spring of 2020, rescheduled performances had to be arranged for the large number of season ticket holders.

At the time of the closures, the Vígszínház also followed the employment model that we have already explained in relation to the National Theatre. A marked difference was that, unlike the National Theatre, the Vígszínház works with a large number of guest artists, who are remunerated according to the number of their performances. Given that crisis management in Hungary was particularly elaborate, and that theatres were not forced to make cuts even during the pandemic period, there was no obstacle to the guest artists receiving an advance payment from the theatre, the value of which would be "played out" later.

The finance and organisation departments were busy, and the shift also had to confront a number of new challenges, such as ensuring that online activities run smoothly. At the time of the closures, the online rehearsals of the actors were continuous, and live webcasts became a regular feature. The practical implementation of the latter meant that the programme was shown in real time in front of an empty auditorium, and that those who had bought tickets could follow it from their homes. This worked well, as *A Padlás (The Attic)* and *A dzsungel könyve (The Jungle Book)* both had connection numbers in the tens of thousands. It is important to note that these figures represent the number of "links" purchased, and so it is not unreasonable to assume that the actual number of people who viewed the production may have been several times higher. Despite the relatively high viewing figures, it was not possible to com-

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29 József Attila Theatre. 2021. "József Attila Theatre – Társulat a vesztegzár idején – 1. rész: Kiből lesz a cserebogár." Viewed on 14 March 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XD38RrmEVkU>

30 József Attila Theatre. 2021. "1 Kulissza TV: Pozsár Rózsa, Bergendi Áron, Fila Balázs." Viewed on 15 March 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AY5ydd5BD68>

pensate for the loss of revenue from the cancelled performances. At the same time, this solution proved its worth, both in terms of interaction with the audience and employing the entire staff. That the Vígszínház operates in a twenty-first century fashion is clearly demonstrated by the way it reached out to one of the popular genres of our decade during the pandemic restrictions and launched its own podcast channel, called *Vígpodcast*.<sup>31</sup> In episodes that were published on a daily basis, members of the company provided a wide range of audio material for a wide audience: in addition to theatre-related stories, they recorded and made available for free fairy tales, novels, short stories, and compulsory reading material for schools. In addition, the organisation department embarked on an intensive outreach programme. As part of this, they telephoned as many viewers as possible to enquire about their condition and their intentions regarding the tickets or season tickets they had bought. This was well received; people were pleased to be approached. During this period, the economic and organisational departments of the institutions had a considerable burden to bear, as they had to organise a system of refunds.

## After reopening

For the cultural sphere as a whole, it was questionable whether the public would return in the event of the institutions opening their doors again, and if so, how soon and in what proportion. The fear of having viewers not being able to attend was not unfounded, since from the beginning of the closures, the media, politicians, the pandemic operative staff and epidemiologists all drew attention to the need for social distancing, through all available channels of communication. After reopening, three priorities were set for the theatres: on the one hand, the missed performances had to be rearranged, and on the other hand, the new season had to be announced and launched at the same time, and the auditoriums had to be filled as much as possible.

Revival of the performances presented immediately before the closures in the József Attila Theatre<sup>32</sup> was of strategic importance, so this received proportionate marketing attention. However, due to the close proximity of the audiences and performers in the confined studio space, the repertoire was only

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31 Vígszínház. "Víg podcast." Viewed on 16 April 2022. [https://www.vigszinhaz.hu/a\\_szinhaz/podcast.php](https://www.vigszinhaz.hu/a_szinhaz/podcast.php)

32 As a result of the closures, only forty-nine performances could be held in the 2020/2021 season.

reintroduced gradually and was also delayed.

At the same time, ticket sales also decreased, and are now only recovering slowly. To compensate for this, the theatre first opened a ticket counter in the Pólus Center, and later in the Allee shopping centre and in Jászai Mari Square, besides also having a salesperson stationed twice a week in the Játékszín theatre. In addition, they entered into a contractual relationship with eighty commission ticket sellers, since in their case, ticket sales at the box office were always more important than online sales. Digital signs and LED facade lighting were also installed to help raise awareness.

Attracting their audience back as soon as possible was also a priority for the National Theatre. In addition to the institution's intensive poster campaign, it also made an image film, which was shown in cinemas. The nurturing of international relations and the theatre's immediate reopening following the lifting of the closures was identified as an important objective. One of the milestones was the rearranging of the previously cancelled Madcap International Theater Meeting (MITEM) in September 2021. Since the organisation of the following MITEM was on the agenda in April 2022, this international theatre event took place twice during one theatre season.

The audience of the Vígszínház reacted quickly to the reopening and immediately returned to the auditorium in significant numbers. Standing ovations



Photo: Anett Kállai-Tóth

*Figure 4. The József Attila Theatre's five-part TV mini-series "Theatre Company During the Quarantine"*

became standard, and often the actors also applauded the audience. The emotional charge of the performances has intensified compared to what was usual in the past.

## Lessons learnt

In the last two years, the art world has faced constant challenges, but it has survived and returned. Among the lessons learnt during this period, the most important is that personal relationships cannot be replaced by something else. Despite the fact that a wide variety of Internet platforms of impeccable quality are available and that the virtual world has become a reality, none of them can permanently replace the experience of physical presence.

The important conclusion for artists is that feeling a sense of security is not the same as actually having it, especially when it comes to finance. While the actors of this sphere were characterised in countless cases by the maximisation of momentary profits, as opposed to long-term thinking under normal circumstances, the existence of the employee relationship in the pandemic situation was able to provide enormous added value compared to the practice of the invoicing system established in the sector, which at the same time does not calculate with vulnerability. Members of the affected community could only hope that the government would assist them. This happened in Hungary, but not in many countries around the world.

In addition to individual experience, there are also professional lessons learnt from the period that are worth considering. The theatre sector relies heavily on face-to-face presence, but there can be no delay in implementing online solutions. Although theatre cannot become two-dimensional, one of the prerequisites for survival and the growth of audiences in such a critical situation is to gain a more prominent position in digital space. Making high quality recordings of the performances and providing the technical backdrop for live online streaming has become indispensable. The former, for archiving purposes, is already prescribed by the current legal environment, but the latter is complicated by the complexity of royalties and the licensing system.

## Challenges for the near future

Caution is a priority when planning for the new season, especially when it involves spending. This partly includes ensuring day-to-day liquidity and increased control over the entire work process, but also a greater degree of security in considering investments and strategic decisions made for the longer term. The aim is to maintain the operation of the theatre companies providing public service theatre, the repertoire and the season ticket system that is based on it. It has presently become a commonplace for there to be no longer any need to buy tickets in advance or queue for tickets to the most important programmes. Whereas in the past, when the tendency was to buy tickets months before the performance, today's uncertainty means that the decision to buy is made in the days immediately preceding the event. For all theatres, it is important to boost ticket sales once more. However, this is not just a question of art, as there are also strong economic preconditions for achieving it. The uncertainty is well illustrated by the fact that in the case of the Vígszínház, three strategies have been developed for the challenges of the near future – quoting the words of the financial manager, “a crisis version, a live-and-die version and a dream version”.

In the upcoming seasons, there will be fewer main stage productions with less costly and possibly reusable sets, and the main marketing focus will be on reviving existing repertoire. It is a general estimate that, in the event of an economic boom, the overall viewing figures of the sector will be able to return to close to the previous peaks in approximately three years. However, this is not guaranteed to happen. The question currently is whether the pandemic will truly be a thing of the past, and it is already certain that the outlook for the Hungarian economy as a whole will be affected by the new economic recession caused by the Ukrainian–Russian war.

As in all other sectors, the issue of remuneration is an important consideration in culture. On a day-to-day basis, real incomes are being eroded by unprecedented levels of inflation. This will be mitigated by the recent twenty per cent wage increase for the cultural sector as a whole, but the strong financial pressure on theatres, with particular regard to the technical staff, is expected to increase further, as they have to compete with market trends, which are already having a significant draining effect on the construction and concert industries.

Changes are also expected in ticket sales trends. Currently, over fifty per cent of tickets are sold on the Internet, as a result of which the agent system can be expected to disappear, and its position will be taken by larger online agents.

## Conclusion

Viewed from the paradigm of economic rationality, it is theoretically possible to live without a theatre, but at the same time, with regard to a mental welfare society, it is not worthwhile. It is the responsibility of all of us to nurture our language and culture and pass it on to future generations. In this field, the role of the theatre is both invaluable and unavoidable. We have left behind us a golden era of theatre. In addition to the economic and organisational challenges, besides any others that are faced by the theatre companies, the education of cultural consumers and the organisation of new artistic and consumer generations will become a task in the near future that needs to be addressed through a strategy of joint research, dialogue, and foresight.

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