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Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

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BEATRICE BERSELLI*

**Benjamin Wihstutz, Daniele Vecchiato, and
Mirjam Kreuser (eds), *#CoronaTheater.
Der Wandel der performativen Künste in der
Pandemie*¹**

Abstract

This review focuses on *#CoronaTheater*, a thought-provoking collection of essays issued in 2022. These essays discuss the intersection of performing arts with the COVID-19 pandemic, examining the use of communication technologies to define a new kind of theatre, performer, and audiences. By reflecting on the immediate and long-term transformations of the theatre, as well as on the political and social developments during and after the pandemic, *#CoronaTheater* foregrounds at least three points of discussion: the impact of lockdown on the performing arts, providing a representative selection of firsthand accounts; the burning question of the post-pandemic future of theatre, attempting to understand how institutions might reinvent their spatial and dramaturgical practices in a virtual community-building; the reflection on questions of sustainability, social participation, and inclusion by exploiting digital theatre's potential to reform the theatre as institution. Finally, yet importantly, the contributors of *#CoronaTheater* introduce a decidedly cultural viewpoint into a discussion that had so far been dominated primarily by medical, political, and epidemiological perspectives.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19; theatre; performance; performing arts; pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic radically affected human lives on many levels, including health, economic, and social well-being. The artistic and creative industries experienced an unprecedented impact, with the performing arts sector bearing the brunt of the crisis (Pietrzak-Franger et al., 2023). Live performances were among the first to suffer from sanitary restrictions, economic uncertainty, and a decline in public attendance due to their reliance on social interaction, shared experiences, and physical presence. Deserted theatre halls became a poignant sign of the times, echoing Hamlet's sentiment that "the time is out of joint" (Shakespeare 1899, 93). The closure of theatres and cinemas across the world became inevitable, with no clear timeline for reopening (Aggermann, Doecker, and Siegmund 2017). Festivals

¹ Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2022. ISBN 9783957494351, pp. 210

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and live events were cancelled or postponed, while theatre productions and film releases were rescheduled or delayed indefinitely. Social interactions shifted from bustling intermissions to socially distanced encounters or virtual experiences like quarantine concerts and Zoom readings. In this context, theatre companies faced two options: either remain closed or adapt the theatre experience. Seeing the crisis as an incentive for innovation, new possibilities for audience participation were created. Despite the devastating impact of the pandemic, people around the world found creative ideas to respond to unprecedented circumstances by developing alternative forms of performances: artists sang their arias on city balconies, DJs played from the rooftops of houses, theatre companies organized outdoor events, and many productions went online with the rise of live-to-cinema broadcasts, live intra-media performances on Zoom, and prerecorded versions of plays streamed on social media. Therefore, the rapid increase in actors and theatre producers embracing digital platforms in response to the crisis indicates that, during lockdown, “online became the new live” (Murphy McCaleb 2020).

Since 2020, a large number of publications have taken on the task of responding to developments in what has been variously termed “viral”, “pandemic”, and “digital theatre”. Among these, Pascale Aebischer and Rachel Nicolas’s *Digital Theatre Transformation: a Case Study and Digital Toolkit* (2020) constitutes a crucial point of reference, as it concentrates on adaptations of many pieces from analogue to digital, exploring their main features. Barbara Fuchs’s *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* (2021) conceptualizes virtual theatre as a hybrid form that combines film and theatre aesthetics, investigating the transformed conditions of theatre-making and viewership in times of pandemic. Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb, and Erin Sullivan’s edited collection of essays titled *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation* (2022) is a phenomenological history of experiencing a great variety of Shakespeare productions during 2020, which debates concepts such as liveness, immersion, and presence. Premised on the impossibility of physical co-presence, post-pandemic theatre and performance have strongly relied on a sense of liveness established through shared virtual spaces and a higher degree of interactivity between performers and audiences.

These aspects are explored in an important compendium of essays edited by Benjamin Wihstutz, Daniele Vecchiato, and Mirjam Kreuser. As the product of two online workshops held at the University of Frankfurt in collaboration with the *Mousonturm* and the University of Padua, the volume focuses on the relationship between COVID-19 and theatre. It reflects on the post-pandemic future of performing arts. By exploring the topic from a great variety of perspectives, employing different theoretical lenses, and

featuring contributions from scholars and artists across Germany, Austria, and Italy, the collection attempts to unravel the complex web of connections engendered by staging performances during a great crisis. In doing so, it aims to foster a profound understanding of how such new practices interface with current cultural issues.

First, by calling attention to an aspect too often neglected by the public sphere – the question of the future of theatre – #CoronaTheater introduces a distinctly artistic and cultural perspective to a debate that has hitherto been dominated mainly by epidemiology, medicine, and sociology. As the sociologist Rudolf Stichweh pointed out, the art system was initially completely ignored in the shadow of a health and epidemiological system, primarily because art and culture were seen, at least by politics and by most media, as less relevant compared to other disciplines in the hierarchy of societal subsystems (Stichweh 2020, 203).

The title of the collection explicitly refers to a series of hashtags that shaped the pandemic narrative from the very beginning. #Wirbleibenzuhause, for instance, instructed most citizens to “stay at home and save lives”, discouraging the attendance of theatre and live venues. The media portrayed the empty (or half-empty) auditoriums as images of terror and, in some cases, as symbols of criticism against the strictness of containment measures. In May 2020, for instance, the picture of the dismantled stalls and deserted halls of the Berliner Ensemble went viral in German newspapers. Just a few weeks later, on the other hand, with the hashtag #kulturtrozcorona, artists, musicians, and filmmakers expressed their need to experiment with alternative forms of sharing and being together.

In the introduction, the authors explain how, in the middle of the crisis, the theatre as an “art of presence” was significantly affected, with its principles, practices, and conventions being identified as posing an increased risk of infection. The crowds in enclosed spaces, the bodily presence of actors and spectators (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 58), the physical and collective plays with loud speeches and singing, the queues at the ticket office, post-performance discussions at the cafeteria or in communal spaces, and première celebrations were suddenly perceived as dangerous and unsafe. The cover image of #CoronaTheater features Doris Uhlich’s dance performance, *Habitat*, adapted for the pandemic. The transparent full-body suits of the nonprofessional dancers evoke a dystopian atmosphere, symbolizing a diverse, precarious relationship with the body experienced during the pandemic. These suits represent the fear associated with the body as a vehicle of infection and the apprehension surrounding the loss of traditional gathering spaces like theatres and other public places. At the same time, Uhlich’s performance, playing with physicality, collectivity, and theatrical space in new and creative ways, represents the theatrical potential of giving rise to alternative forms,

both aesthetical and dramaturgical, previously unknown. This also raises the question of whether the pandemic has made theatre more sustainable, inclusive, and barrier-free.

The contributions of the volume *#CoronaTheater* are divided into two sections. The first section, *Pandemische Publika und Dramaturgien* (Pandemic audiences and dramaturgies), sets the scene by providing an informed theoretical context for thinking about contemporary theatrical and critical practice. By exploring the emergence of new dramaturgies and forms of public engagement during the pandemic, the authors attempt to define and conceptualize a post-pandemic audience, delving into digital dramaturgies in theatre, social media, and various streamed content. The second section of the volume, *Postpandemische Infrastrukturen und Nachhaltigkeit* (Post-pandemic infrastructures and sustainability), shifts to how the climate crisis is portrayed on stage. This leads to the discovery of new 'ecological' dramaturgies which, often based on role-playing games or live streaming, test more concretely post-pandemic working methods and technologies to exploit in the future.

The first section begins with an essay by Doris Kolesch, *Gemeinsam/Allein. Publikum in digitalen Performances* (Together/Alone: the audience in digital performances), that explores the negative and positive implications of new experiences in the theatre during the pandemic. By showcasing the impact of COVID-19 on contemporary arts, particularly in the realm of theatre and live performances, Kolesch concentrates on the audience's experience in the reception of digital performances. The concept of *gemeinsam/allein* (together/alone) is introduced by Kolesch as a starting point to understand the challenges and shifts posed by the pandemic in the relationship between performers and audiences. To do so, Kolesch questions the traditional presence-based audience experience, highlighting the emergence of new forms, such as one-on-one performances and, more generally, those without a live audience. Despite the social nature of theatrical reception and theatre as a collective experience, Kolesch demonstrates the effectiveness of performances without a live audience, redirecting one's attention from the core of performance to the exploration of new ideas for contact with the public. These include streaming archival performances or interactive online experiences. By providing concrete examples and exploring various digital formats adopted by theatres, streaming, and online plays, the author explores the innovative responses of the theatre community to the challenges posed by the pandemic, urging for a redefinition of the role of people attending theatres. Moreover, Kolesch also underlines how the digital shift enabled theatres to reach wider and more diverse audiences, transcending geographical boundaries and allowing for increased accessibility, particularly for those with disabilities or limitations. However, the author raises critical questions about the nature

of digital audience engagement and the new barriers introduced by digital formats, such as technological requirements and potential limitations on audience interaction, thus urging scholars and theatre practitioners to investigate the profound implications of the evolving relationship between audience and performing arts in the digital era.

The essay by Ramona Mosse that follows, *Auf der Suche nach dem Publikum – Zuschauerräume in der Pandemie* (Looking for an audience: auditoriums during the pandemic), addresses the question of how actors have to cope with the absence of a physical audience, reflecting on the changed perception of space and social experiences due to lockdown restrictions. By insisting on the image of empty auditoriums as symbols of crisis, with their folded plush-red armchairs, Mosse starts her contribution by discussing both the end of the theatre as we know it and the challenge posed by digital theatre in replacing the live, material experience, emphasizing its difficulty in capturing authentic atmosphere. Throughout her essay, Mosse refers to the study *Performen ohne Publikum* (Performing without a public) by Daniel Reupke and Jasmin Goll. According to them, digital theatre will never fully replace the materiality and unique experience of a live performance (Reupke and Goll 2020, 215). Mosse criticizes the limitations of digital theatre in capturing the immersive atmosphere of live performances. She states that the flat screens of a computer or smartphone drastically reduce the richness of the orchestral sound, as the whole scenario is compromised by the ability to interrupt the stream at any time. At the same time, however, the author explores alternatives beyond this “technoscepticism”. Similarly to Kolesch, Mosse sees the pandemic as a great opportunity to reassess practices and theories and rethink the interplay between technology and theatre, generating a different kind of audience engagement that does not rely on physical presence. By examining theatrical projects such as productions by the Old Vic in London and the Burgtheater in Vienna that employ creative strategies to maintain the theatrical atmosphere and engagement despite the absence of the audience, Mosse argues that the pandemic has provided an unprecedented opportunity to explore alternative ways of performing, also illustrating the potential of engaging with different spatialities. The concept of *Netztheater* (network theatre) is interesting, which Mosse introduces in the second part of her essay to show how the pandemic challenged the traditional definition of physical presence in theatre. An example of *Netztheater* is the work of the *Jungen DT*, a group of nonprofessional young players from the Deutsches Theater of Berlin, who developed various intriguing digital formats during the lockdown phases. A notable project that emerged during the pandemic is *Selbstvergessen. Vom Anfangen und Aufhören* (Self-Forgetting: About Beginning and Ending). Originally planned as a live performance, the play had to adapt instead to Zoom rehearsals

due to the pandemic's challenges. Hence, the resulting production was a streamed, multi-perspective live film involving significant changes in the use of the physical theatre space. Theatre settings vanished as screens replaced the audience area, creating a complex interplay between theatrical and cinematic space. Mosse explores another project by *Junges DT*, titled *Die Monster vom James-Simon-Park* (The monster of James Simon Park). Directed by the dramaturg Lasse Scheiba, it also employed an experimental approach to live streaming, using an innovative single-shot/single-cut technique that contributed to maintaining audience engagement. Therefore, by showcasing the theatre's ability to innovate and explore new formats during the pandemic, both projects developed new theatrical vocabulary and tools that challenged traditional notions of spectatorship/presence in theatre and led to the consideration of new thresholds in the future of performance in the context of evolving digital technologies.

The fundamental relationship between theatre and digital media triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is also the main point of reference in Mirjam Kreuser's essay, "*The people formerly known as audience*". *Dramaturgie, Aufmerksamkeitsökonomie und Subjektdispositive im Netztheater* (Dramaturgy, attention economy and subject dispositives in network theatre), where the author emphasizes the need to move away from the traditional theatrical concept of co-presence/live performance as a fundamental condition for representation when approaching theatre in a digital context. In particular, Kreuser focuses on three digital productions that go beyond simple streaming and remediate theatrical perspectives with elements of gaming and social media. The app-based project *Loulu* is an interactive fiction presented as a single-player game where players/spectators engage with the main character, Frida, through text-based communication on a messenger app. In *Homecoming*, on machina eX, players have to help an old school friend, Rabea, who is struggling with the pandemic. By demanding active involvement from participants to progress the storyline and "save Rabea", the success of the performance depends on interactive spectatorship and collaborative problem-solving. Lastly, *Werther.live* on punkt.live is presented as a live stream, integrating social media platforms used and interacted with in real time. In particular, Instagram allows viewers to access, follow, and even contact the main characters' profiles, blurring the boundaries between the performance and everyday digital communication. Hence, viewers can consume the performance solely through the stream or engage with it alongside the characters' social media profiles. According to Kreuser, this disposition aligns viewers with the concept of the Benjaminian *flâneur*, navigating digital public spaces and engaging with their rhythms while maintaining agency in directing attention. To sum up, by illustrating these examples of contemporary digital practices, Kreuser reflects on the

implications of the net theatre for spectatorship, emphasizing the need to rethink the traditional roles of spectators and performers. The Internet's complex but interactive communication structures challenge hierarchical theatrical conventions and lead to a democratization of social elements within performances, transforming the audience from passive spectators into active participants in a shared experiential community whose interactive engagement contributes to the narrative progression.

Quite differently, but in the same perspective, Daniele Vecchiato's "*Konflikte sind voller Aerosole*". *Dramatisierungen der Corona-Krise auf deutschsprachigen Bühnen* ("Conflicts are full of aerosols". Dramatizations of the Corona crisis on German-speaking stages) explores how German theatre dramatized the COVID-19 crisis through two specific theatrical productions conceived during the initial lockdown, with the purpose to highlight the diversity of artistic responses to the pandemic: *Death Positive. States of Emergency* by Yael Ronen and *Black Box- Phantomtheater für 1 Person* by Stefan Kaegi. Ronen's *Death Positive*, first performed in October 2020 at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin, puts themes such as fear, loneliness, and death in symbolic relation to the pandemic, raising important questions about the societal relevance of theatre in moments of crisis. In particular, through meta-reflection and poignant dialogues, the play prompts discussions about the importance of art in society, with its potential to heal and connect people in precarious times. On the other hand, Kaegi's *Black Box* reflects on the effect of theatre closures on society. The immersive experience of the play involves participants in an audio walk through the deserted backstage areas of a theatre, where visitors are told via headphones where to go and what to observe as if they were part of a film crew. By exploring these vacant spaces, visitors are confronted with experiences of absence and isolation. At the same time, however, they encounter remnants of past performances, gaining insights into various theatrical professions in different epochs. Despite being alone during the tour, the presence of voices and sounds creates a sense of communal engagement, prompting reflection on the essence of theatre and performance as physical, sensory, and shared experiences, contrasting with the isolation lived during the pandemic. Hence, by addressing various aspects of pandemic life and reflecting on the impact of a lockdown on the theatre community, *Death Positive* and *Black Box*, according to Vecchiato, illustrate the significant role of theatre as a fundamental medium of communication in every modality of expression.

Amateur-Experimente als Theorielabor. Corona-Home-Videos, pandemische Medien und die Frage der Distribution – eine unsystematische Intervention in sechs Einstellungen (Amateur-experiments as a theory laboratory. Corona home-videos, pandemic media, and the question of distribution – an unsystematic intervention in six settings) by Alexandra Schneider deals with

the impact of the pandemic on the perception of media objects, focusing on amateur “corona home videos” created during the quarantine. Through examples from film history and artistic practice, Schneider illustrates both the intersection of amateur and professional realms in media production and the significance of these videos in capturing crucial moments of everyday life. By providing access to otherwise invisible spaces and conditions, these videos make the media-economic and artistic implications of the COVID-19 crisis more tangible. In the illustration of examples like the Marsh Family’s viral musical performances, Schneider also discusses how social media entertainment (SME) platforms like YouTube and TikTok evolved from web-based social networking services to closed, platform-based systems where users can easily share content beyond their circles, both reaching wider audiences and altering the traditional distinctions between public and private media and amateur and professional content. Therefore, according to the author, the pandemic led to innovative, virtual forms of communication and artistic performance that created new possibilities for expression and collaboration across distances. The productive intertwining of amateur and professional practices and the potential for exploiting commercial infrastructures like Zoom in ways that transcend familial and individual career logistics – according to Schneider’s conclusion – could contribute to reshaping the landscape of media production and distribution.

Holger Schulze’s contribution *Affektrepertoires der Selbsteuphorisierung. Kleine Anthropologie des gestreamten Konzerts* (Affective repertoires of self-euphorisation. A brief anthropology of the streamed concert) closes the first section of *#CoronaTheater* by discussing the transformation of live concerts in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when some of their traditional elements such as physical venues, live audiences, backstage areas, and dynamic stage setups faced significant challenges due to restrictions and safety concerns. By exploring alternative formats of concerts, the chapter delves into live-streamed music events performed from artists’ homes or staged on platforms like TikTok or Instagram. Schulze considers Mare Rebillot’s and Amanda Palmer’s live-streamed productions, which, among other things, maintain a strong connection with the audience. The text concludes by questioning the characteristics and cultural implications of this intensive but relatively new post-digital music landscape, exploring the analytical and anthropological aspects of streamed concerts and collaborative performances. Hence, the author reflects on the very nature of these performances, challenging assumptions about attention spans and the role of digital technologies in shaping contemporary musical experiences.

Maximilian Haas’ *Generalprobe Corona. Pandemie und Klima* (Corona final rehearsal. Pandemic and climate) opens the second section of the book, spotlighting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the institutions of

the independent theatre, dance, and performing arts in Germany. More specifically, by focusing on the attempts of theatrical institutions and artists to manage an unprecedented situation, the author emphasizes how the pandemic tested the foundational aspects and social establishments of the independent scene in Germany. Despite the lack of preparation, the text highlights how practitioners, actors, and performers swiftly developed operational concepts and performative formats that coordinated the demands of prevention with those of artistic production. In response to the need to maintain theatrical activities during the pandemic, many theatrical institutions had to rapidly reflect on possible solutions for infection protection and hygiene, promptly implementing them into their institutional practices. To prove this, the author refers in his essay to the creation of a stage inside the theatre *Mousonturm* in Frankfurt, designed to allow a limited number of spectators to join the theatre safely and adhere to social distancing measures. This project not only addressed pandemic-related challenges but also embraced questions of sustainability, utilizing materials like wood and clay intended for reuse in house construction.

Additionally, the text highlights how many theatrical institutions creatively compensated for limitations in rehearsals and performances by implementing technological infrastructures to produce digital or hybrid events. Consequently, Haas discusses the ecological implications of transitioning to digital formats in performative arts. While the use and construction of complex technical infrastructures for digital production may have significant environmental impacts, these impacts could be relatively minor compared to greenhouse gas emissions associated with heating, cooling, and illuminating theatrical buildings, as well as the travels of people to attend the theatre, whether by car or by plane. In conclusion, Haas deeply reflects on the need to reinvent the performative approach under digital conditions. Consequently, by introducing the intersection of ecological concerns in the performing arts and framing it within the broader context of the climate crisis, the author spotlights the importance of considering issues of environmental sustainability. According to Haas, this could contribute to rethinking performative arts practices for the future and reflect on the potential lessons for addressing other crises.

Haas' engagement with ecological concerns intertwined with issues brought by the pandemic paves the way for the next chapter, *Über Fluglärm. Pandemische Arbeiten von LIGNA und Lawrence Abu Hamdan* (About aircraft noise. Pandemic work by LIGNA and Lawrence Abu Hamdan) by Benjamin Wihstutz, which offers one of the most interesting points of view of all those analyzed in this volume, as it discusses the impact of flight noise and airports on the author's daily life in Mainz, Germany, particularly focusing on the change brought about by COVID-19. More specifically, the author describes

how the reduction in air travel due to the pandemic led to a noticeable decrease in flight noise, providing a unique experience of quiet skies. By starting with a reflection on the history of air travel, from the advent of commercial jet travel in the 1950s to the contemporary era characterized by concerns about flight noise and environmental impact, Wihstutz argues that the pandemic, coupled with growing awareness of climate change, led to a significant shift in attitudes toward air travel. By forcing people to find alternatives to in-person gatherings and events, COVID-19 and the lockdown led to a reevaluation of the necessity and environmental consequences of air travel. Hence, Wihstutz suggests that the pandemic may serve as a precursor to future crises, particularly climate change, underscoring the need to look for more sustainable alternatives to traditional modes of travel, mobility, and global connectivity. In the second section of the essay, the focus shifts to the intersection of the crises faced by airports and the performing arts. More specifically, Haas refers to the work of the radio and performance collective from Hamburg, LIGNA, which, staging a GPS-based video walk called *The Passengers* at Frankfurt airport in July 2021, offered participants a new way to experience the airport while addressing themes of global connectivity, capitalism, and climate change. By guiding participants through various locations within the airport while simultaneously transporting them across six other airports worldwide through the video display on their smartphones, the video walk tells specific stories related to each airport, underscoring the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of air travel and airport facilities. Despite their physical and geographical differences, these airports share a uniformity spotlighting their role as nodes in a globalized world dominated by capitalism and logistics. Overall, LIGNA's production serves as a form of global theatre, blurring the boundaries between reality and simulation while shedding light on the hidden narratives, dark sides, and power structures that define the modern airport experience. While it may seem that this work does not contribute significantly to the broader discussion on the evolution of performative arts during the pandemic, a closer look reveals its relevance as a dress rehearsal for addressing climate change, with its video material acquired without the need for physical travel. In conclusion, Wihstutz argues that this shift towards more sustainable artistic practices reflects broader societal efforts towards sustainability, with the COVID-19 pandemic serving as an opportunity for the arts to embrace environmentally conscious approaches. This shift towards sustainability could pave the way for performances at decommissioned airports in the future, a prospect that residents would welcome for its dual benefits.

Following on thematically from the previous essays of this section, Stefano Apostolo and Sotera Fornaro, in their essay *Zwischen Mythos, Klimakrise und Pandemie* (Between myth, climate crisis and pandemic),

argue that, in the context of COVID-19, social separation and the sudden disruption of relationships are likened to a pause from reality, necessary for reflecting on political decisions and facing current challenges. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a resurgence of interest in Greek tragedies, especially those exploring themes of leadership, responsibility, and the management of societal upheaval. Hence, by discussing works by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as vehicles for prompting people to reflect on the ethical, moral, and social issues of their own time, the authors highlight the enduring relevance of these ancient narratives in prompting audiences to contemplate philosophical and moral aspects of their own time, such as authoritarianism and environmental degradation. Plays such as *Antigone* and *King Oedipus*, for instance, offer fundamental insights into the challenges of governance during social and political crises as they explore the consequences of power abuse. The second part of the contribution analyzes Alexander Eisenach's innovative theatrical production *Anthropos, Tyrann (Ödipus)*, which reimagines Sophocles' classic tragedy of *Oedipus Rex* to confront contemporary environmental issues. Staged during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, Eisenach's play exploits innovative digital theatre techniques and a 360-degree camera to actively engage remote audiences and immerse them in the performance. By modernizing the Oedipus myth, focusing on challenges like climate change, Eisenach aims to prompt spectatorship reflection on humanity's relationship with the environment and the responsibility of past decisions in shaping the present. Therefore, the play underscores the need to shift away from exploitative attitudes toward nature, advocating for a synergistic approach between science and art. Nevertheless, despite the innovative nature of digital production, the chapter also discusses its limitations, including environmental impact, production costs, and the challenge of reconciling digital theatre with traditional live performances.

With Yana Prinsloo's *Theaterarbeit als Reproduktionsarbeit. Über spekulatives Fabulieren im pandemischen Theater* (Theatre work as reproductive work. On speculative fabulation in pandemic theatre), which comes next in the book, the intersection of theatre and work is explored, considering the implications of the pandemic in this field and the need for a comprehensive understanding of the conditions of work in the cultural sector. More specifically, the three main points presented in the essay are the portrayal of artistic experience as precarious, characterized by poverty and resource scarcity; the need for discussing strategies for regeneration and renewal within the theatre community; the inadequacy of governmental support programs for freelance artists, highlighting the fragility of the labor rights and protections for people working in the cultural sector. However, by delving into the complex and evolving nature of work shaped by historical, economic, and social factors, Prinsloo discusses the outstanding efforts of

artists, particularly of those in the independent theatre scene, in overcoming dichotomies and challenging traditional sociological dynamics, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary labor industry. Finally, Prinsloo presents the feminist performance collective Swoosh Lieu, which, founded in 2009, employs innovative intermedial approaches like audiovisual elements and collaborative composition rather than pre-produced texts or strict directorial frameworks to actively engage the audience and stimulate reflection. Their digital production, *A Room of Our Own* (2021), drawing inspiration from Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*, tests new working methods and possible future technologies, thus challenging traditional modes of performing and innovatively contributing to shape post-pandemic theatrical scenarios. What is more interesting is that the project explores the pandemic impact on women from a feminist perspective, criticizing societal limitations and challenging gendered narratives. Therefore, like many other productions presented in the volume, this work, too, reflects the urgent need for societal and artistic reevaluation toward a more caring and inclusive future.

In the last contribution of the volume, *Und geht das also nun wirklich in Richtung ökologische Dramaturgie? Drei Anzeichen dafür* (So is this really moving in the direction of ecological dramaturgy? Three signs that it is happening), Kai van Eikels discusses the emergence of the concept of "ecological aesthetics" within the realm of performing arts, particularly focusing on the changes prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic in the years 2020 and 2021. More specifically, the author advocates for deeper integration of ecological principles into all aspects of artistic creation, moving beyond superficial engagement with ecological themes towards a more immersive and transformative experience for both creators and audiences. The study reveals intriguing developments that answer the question of what an ecological aesthetic might entail. The term "ecological aesthetic" implies that merely addressing ecological themes within established formats, such as writing plays about the climate crisis or incorporating elements like animals and plants into theatrical spaces, may not sufficiently provoke meaningful change regarding ecological issues. According to van Eikels, ecological aesthetics must be structured around three closely related aspects. First, it delves into the idea of "reimagining imagination", proposing a recalibration of how imagination operates within the context of performing arts. While traditional theatre primarily engages sight, recent developments demonstrated the crucial role of other senses, such as sound and olfaction, in shaping the audience's experience and stimulating reflection. This shift away from visual dominance is, according to van Eikels, seen as crucial in fostering a more holistic and conscious engagement with ecological themes. Consequently, the author introduces the need to redefine liveness in

performance, spotlighting the importance of sensory aspects beyond visual cues. To prove this, the author discusses examples, such as Vera Voegelin's *Earthbound*, where auditory elements, such as voices and soundscapes, play a central role in creating immersive experiences that transcend traditional boundaries between performer and audience. Third, van Eikels insists on the idea of "rethinking the performance", encouraging a reevaluation of what constitutes a theatrical production and advocating for collaborative world-building processes, whether analog or digital, that actively engage participants in shared experiences. This can be, according to the author, exemplified by formats of gameplays like *Live Action Role Play* (LARP) and *Real Live Game* (RLG), which, through specific practices like reading, discussions, and workshops, encourage participants to collectively build and negotiate a fictional world during a performance. By embedding gameplay within production, negotiation, and world exploration processes challenging traditional notions of performance, this approach can contribute both to fostering broader ecological thinking and situating aesthetic strategies within collaborative practices, which offer new formats for communication and engagement. In conclusion, van Eikels urges a shift from conventional practices towards more collaborative, dynamic, imaginative, and participatory forms. These forms prioritize cooperation with the audience's imagination rather than focusing solely on analog or virtual realities. By doing so, they create immersive experiences that resonate with the complexities of current ecological challenges.

Alongside contributions written by scholars and experts in the branch of theatre, film, literature, and music, the volume also includes three talks with leading representatives of the performing arts, which, similarly to the single essays, delve into questions related to changed spaces and dramaturgies, working methods, and infrastructures during the pandemic, aiming at complementing the themes covered in *#CoronaTheater* with a more concrete perspective. Hence, by adding first accounts of actors, creatives, and people working in the theatre industry, the authors of the volume are determined to give access to an understanding of the process, rather than simply the product, of the complex stage production during the pandemic.

The first talk involves Benjamin Wihstutz, the Viennese choreographer Doris Uhlich, the radio and performance artist Ole Frahm, and the theatre director Antje Thoms, discussing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their works. Uhlich starts by describing the adaptation of her dance piece, *Habitat*, spotlighting the difficulty of ensuring safety while maintaining the essence of collective experiences. Ole Frahm reflects on the evolution of his concept of radio ballet, now manifested in a globally adapted performance called *Dispersion Everywhere*. The artist highlights the need for international solidarity and trust in working with a group by discussing the challenges

of organizing dispersed performances during the pandemic. Lastly, Antje Thoms discusses the exploration of new spatialities in theatre, sharing her experience directing *Die Methode*, a station drama set in a theatre garage where the audience drives through. The conversation delves then into the institutional challenges the artists had to face due to pandemic restrictions, bureaucratic hurdles, safety protocols, and the economic impact on the theatrical realm, concluding with important reflections upon the future of theatre. By exploring not only the challenges but also the opportunities arising in the context of performative arts, such as the use of platforms like Zoom and social media on theatre, the boom of video conferences, and the development of new genres, the dialogue concludes advocating the need for a transformation of artistic practices, emphasizing the importance of flexibility and adaptability.

In the second talk, the journalist Georg Kasch, the theatre director Jana Zöll, the dramaturg and artistic co-director Anna Wagner, and the performer Marion Sièfert discuss the impact of a pandemic on theatrical representation, exploring the challenges and opportunities of online performances. In particular, the authors reflect upon how to maintain liveness and interaction with the audience online, exploring issues related to accessibility and sustainability for the future. Kasch starts by emphasizing the difference between traditional theatre and digital representations, highlighting issues related to sound, image, and the loss of the live dimension. Anna Wagner introduces then the *Manila Zoo* project by Eisa Jocson, a hybrid work with both actors from the Philippines performing from their living rooms projected on a screen and a physical audience attending theatre, thus emphasizing the importance of digital platforms involving artists from different parts of the world, thus making theatre more accessible. Marion Sièfert talks about *Jeanne dark*, a live-streamed monologue of a woman exposed through a live video on Instagram, offering different perspectives on the same performance and, at the same time, bringing challenges related to online interaction on social media. Lastly, Jana Zöll describes *Challenge Accepted – ich bin in deiner Wohnung* (Challenge accepted, I am in your apartment), a performance exploring identity through the digital medium, addressing the relationship between the artist and the audience. Despite the opportunities offered by technology and the benefits brought by the hybridity of digital theatre, the artists conclude their conversation by emphasizing the irreplaceability of the physical and live experience of traditional theatre.

The third and last talk involves Professor Sandra Umatham, theatre expert Noa Winter, directors Julia Wissert and Matthias Pees, and the cultural anthropologist Julian Warner, who discuss the impact of crises on cultural structures, underlining that the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and challenges in the cultural domain, while simultaneously highlighting

the necessity for change. By spotlighting that the crisis can present a great opportunity to question certain structures and initiate changes, Pees, Wissert, and Warner agree that the pandemic can be seen as a forerunner of a more ethnically conscious theatre of the future. However, they also argue that the crisis does not inevitably lead to transformation and sustainable changes; it depends on how individuals cope with it, their decisions, and the measures they take, requiring continuous reflection and adaptation. The closely interconnected questions regarding work methods, infrastructures, power critique, and ecological sustainability must be addressed together to establish more sustainable infrastructures and effect positive changes in the cultural landscape. The dialogue concludes by underscoring the importance of ecological sustainability in the cultural sector, with theatres and other cultural institutions often not being carbon-neutral and the discussion on environmentally friendly practices gaining more and more relevance.

To sum up, the essays collected in #CoronaTheater demonstrate that the vitality of theatre and performance contributes to its persistence in the face of any crisis – adapting as a medium just as humans have done – in attempting to bring about the endemic stage of COVID-19. Despite difficulties and challenges that performers encountered and still encounter in the future, the alternative options that the theatre created during the pandemic allowed the industry to become more accessible and recruit a wide range of audiences, leaving a lasting impact on the idea of a ‘classic’ theatre experience.

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