

## Il Teatro nel tempo del Covid 19

### What to do behind the scenes when the curtain drops

di Anna Petraglia



Although many people watched the simmering of COVID-19 early this year in and around China, it still seemed far and neglectable for many, until it hit West World. As the situation, country after country, rapidly progressed, and the World Health Organization declared coronavirus a pandemic, no one could ignore it anymore. March 2020 has seen governments all over the world locking down schools, industries, shops, every single place where people could meet numerously, including from museums, galleries and theatres.

### The curtain drops

Culture is among the most affected sectors, and it is hard to guess how it will rise again, resulting, by definition, in the aggregation of people.

European Commission has even adapted the Creative Europe program to the realities determined by Covid-19 and is setting up two platforms to help share problems and solutions at EU level relating to its impact on the creative and cultural sectors.

From Teatro alla Scala to Broadway theatres, whether big institution or little cultural center, they were among the first to close and will be among the last to reopen. The curtain has gone down for two months now, and it is not known when and how the stage will vibrate again.

In 1926, in his first manifesto of the Alfred Jarry Theater, Antonin Artaud wrote: «Theater is the most difficult thing to save in the world.». As stated by Pam MacKinnon, artistic director of San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater, «Theater is all about gathering, and all of a sudden, gathering together, in space, became officially dangerous».

If for museums it is easier to image a way to let people visit them without standing too close <sup>1</sup>, this is much harder for theatres and similar institutions. Indeed, the restart must consider physical, economic and but also psychological considerations.

Suddenly, thousands of professional jobs in the arts are at stake. Actors, directors, dancers, set designers, tailors, make-up artists: they are among the «invisibles» who have been working silently for years in theaters, and risk now not to do it anymore.

Yet some of them would obtain unemployment benefits, the sector comes out destroyed. Already in February, Italian General Association of Entertainment (AGIS) estimated a loss of 10 million euros at the box office due to the cancellation of 7,400 shows <sup>2</sup>. But it is not just a matter of ticket sales. Because of the effect that the pandemic has on the world economy, donations are at risk too.

«If you have a ticket to a live performing arts event that has been cancelled due to the COVID-19 virus, please consider donating the money to the organization instead of asking for a refund».

This is the message that Dallas Theater Center attendants received in the last weeks. This modality could be

adopted by everyone, as an attempt to turn tickets into donations and cope with this period. Is it true that, in this unexpected situation, governments are trying to assist the high number of categories at risk, but a significant intervention is still waited in most countries for the cultural sector. In absence of a concrete path signaled, performing arts institutions are endeavoring with temporary solutions.

### **Show must go online**

Performing arts actors have for long time now accepted the possibility of having to wait for 2021 to see their productions on stage. While nothing can fully replace those in-person connections that live shows generate, some organizations are making available digital versions of their performances.

Despite the crisis of the sector, the “hosting” subjects are registering an incredible growth. Television, which has long functioned as supporter of the arts by broadcasting them on a massive scale, and sometimes developing audiences, registered 32 million viewers every night in Italy, 4 million more than in pre-quarantine life 3 . Since March 17, Netflix in Italy has recorded an increase in accesses of 332%, the newborn Disney Plus an increase of 290% and Prime Video of 266% 4 . This data should suggest something. Interested parties could leverage these existing platforms, realizing partnership in synergies with them, not interrupting their activity, rather implementing it even when lockdown would be over. This is the case of Teatro alla Scala, whose performances are hosted on Rai channels every morning and once a week in prime time. Smaller institutions, like Cinema Beltrade in Milan, opted for posting contents on their websites. This could be a chance, at least, to develop and re-evaluate digital communication, in which cultural institutions are often lagging behind. In this regard, the European Festival Association provides a collection of information on digital tools for the dissemination of culture through the “On the move” website.

Another obstacle, especially in Italy, is excessive bureaucratization. Legal barriers, such as obtaining authorization from art unions or playwrights, should be removed. Broadway Licensing and Playscripts, for example, has removed an obstacle by making several productions available for educational and amateur programs for streaming on YouTube.

The social distance experimented in these months brings on the table another important theme. Modern consumption, especially among youngsters, is based on the instant availability of products, whenever and wherever they want. This regards also cultural consumptions: the abovementioned platforms and systems, while solving a momentary problem, will contribute even more in amplifying the shift that participation in arts registered. Today what lacks is that feeling of appointment, typical of just ten years ago. People used to wait for a program to start at a precise time, on a precise channel, or to leave their own neighborhood or city to attend a show. Of course, this is not something that can be fixed at the moment, but one could start thinking of it and finding ploys to at least contain it. An idea could be scheduling the online season as if it would be physic, rather than simply making available contents to access at any moment. Attendants could so buy the tickets for their desired show, even in advance, and while waiting for the day of the event they could receive some materials like, gadgets, libretto, a blanket to settle on the sofa, an agreement with a restaurant from which receive an order during the break. After the show, meetings in videoconference with the artists involved could be arranged, to make people know something about what happened “behind the scenes”. Everything to make the experience more significant and improve participation.

Beyond direct participation, in this lockdown situation it could be interesting also involving audiences in indirect participation 5 , proposing some online courses of theatre, singing, playing instrument, etc. It is a fact that in this period online courses and tutorial about doing basically everything are becoming popular, and people would enjoy learning something new and useful while they are stuck home. This practice has been initiated by gyms, who offered online workouts for their subscribers, but it has been easily adopted by cultural institutions too. Teatro dell’Opera in Rome proposes some seminars about opera history. “TheShow Must Go HOME”, an initiative of Teatro degli Angeli in Bologna, aims to continue to make and show art, encouraging people in readings, playing music, sing and dances.

Besides filling the days of citizens, these practices could lead the basis to build a relation with future audiences, that at some point would be able to physically attend shows and classes.

### **Towards a possible phase 3?**

In most of the cases, anyway, all these contents are offered for free, which would not be sustainable in the long term. Italian Minister of Culture Franceschini is working to build a platform to make people pay for these online services in a univocal way. For live shows scheduled in summer, he cannot guarantee anything, if not that everything has to comply with the safety rules, both for public and artists. A common concern, in the perspective of a slow return to a new normal, regards if people would immediately want to gather in large groups. Someone may be very reluctant, also considering that the average age of theater goers is 60-65 years old, which belongs to the category most exposed to infection and less accustomed to digital. It is necessary that governments and unions design a strategy since now, to facilitate and faster the return, and to approach new targets. The world of live entertainment will have to deal with interpersonal distancing measures: nobody will see those interminable lines in front of the box office for a while as tangible proof of the success of a production. If the minimum distance of 1 meter between spectators is strictly assumed, a distance of two places in the stalls is required, which on average means decreasing accesses, and so ticket-revenues, by one third. But it will not decrease production and maintenance costs, leading to an economic loss that seriously jeopardizes the sustainability of such institutions. Meanwhile, the sector begins to move in search of alternatives to gathering people to enjoy a live show. The drive-in format is one of the most feasible options: a format from the past, remodeled to support the entire supply chain of performing arts and to keep families protected. The idea has been first adopted by the Danish city Aarhus, that launched a concert series where fans drive up to the venue and remain safely isolated in their cars. According to a report shared by Forbes, up to 500 people enjoyed the concert by tuning their radios to the specific FM frequency on which the live audio was performed.

### **Conclusion**

Both experts and the public are aware that nothing can ever replace lives for two fundamental characteristics: emotionality and pathos on one side, the unique relation between artists and audience on the other. As it is in their own nature, people involved in the creative sector should use art production to catalyse social movement, to change societal beliefs and behaviors, never forgetting that artists and art often emerge from current struggles.

Inevitably, the traditional paradigms were reset. Even if easier, it is not effective nor helpful to think in the same way it has been done so far, to produce the same products (only readapting them) and to engage the same audience.

This is the time to take opportunities, to risk, to be entrepreneurial, without necessarily thinking big. On the contrary, there is a need to think little, to propose intimate socialization in a moment when sociality is in discussion.

If nothing else, these events should give a pause to consider how pandemics are not merely medical events, but simultaneously social, cultural, economic, and political, with the potential to induce rapid, dramatic interventions into the management, conduct, and understanding of everyday life.

1 In Italy the reopening is expected to be on the 18 th May 2020

2 AGI. (2020, February 25). Il coronavirus fa saltare 7.400 spettacoli in una settimana. Persi 10,1 milioni. Retrieved April 23, 2020, from <https://www.agi.it/spettacolo/news/2020-02-25/coronavirus-spettacoli-cancellati-perdite-cinema-teatri-7213920/>

3 Franco, R., Scaglioni, M., & Tebano, E. (2020, April 18). Quel piccolo schermo che riempie i giorni della nostra quarantena. Retrieved May 3, 2020, from [https://www.corriere.it/sette/attualita/20\\_aprile\\_17/quel-piccolo-schermo-che-riempie-giorni-nostra-quarantena-fc8d45a6-7d84-11ea-bfaa-e40a2751f63b.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/sette/attualita/20_aprile_17/quel-piccolo-schermo-che-riempie-giorni-nostra-quarantena-fc8d45a6-7d84-11ea-bfaa-e40a2751f63b.shtml)

4 Cucinotta, G., & D'Oro, S. (2020, May 2). In quarantena il boom delle tivù in streaming aumenta l'inquinamento digitale. Retrieved May 3, 2020, from [https://www.corriere.it/pianeta2020/20\\_maggio\\_02/quarantena-boom-tivu-streaming-aumenta-l-inquinamento-digitale-cf7b3e92-8aea-11ea-a2b6-e57bd451de7e.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/pianeta2020/20_maggio_02/quarantena-boom-tivu-streaming-aumenta-l-inquinamento-digitale-cf7b3e92-8aea-11ea-a2b6-e57bd451de7e.shtml)

5 Indirect participants are those who attend painting, music or any other artistic class.

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