

Livestreaming Reimagined – Pandemic Theater Experiments at the Junges DT

An OSUN Digital Case Study

Executive Summary

What happens to the art of theater when one can no longer physically access the theater? Is it possible to innovate ways of storytelling amid a pandemic that still connect artists and audiences like before? As life shifts online, can the theater do so to? This Open Society University Network (OSUN) audiovisual case study explores these issues as part of a series of cases on Digital Theaters.

This case explores these questions by examining the Junges Deutsches Theater (DT) in Berlin, Germany and how it successfully continued to operate throughout the Covid-19 pandemic by devising new ways to reach audiences in a socially distanced world. This case includes interviews with director Gernot Grünwald, dramaturg Lasse Scheiba, and performers at the Junges DT.

The case includes the following elements:

§ Video Interviews

§ Written Case Study: This Document

Theatre and the plague: Covid-19 and performance

The Covid-19 pandemic upended how the world functions, bringing sudden and unprecedented changes to every aspect of our lives. The year 2020-2021 witnessed profound and historic developments in the relationships among theater making, media, and society: from productions abruptly cancelled and theater venues closing, to new digital and hybrid theatre forms on social media. The global health crisis forced performance makers to redefine theater and its central social and cultural functions.

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For centuries, theorists have described theater as being “contagious”. It was Greek philosopher Plato who first described performance through medical terms like ‘infection’, ‘contagion’, and ‘inoculation’.¹ Several thinkers since have spoken of how ideas spread just like diseases and expose the relative immunity or strength of bodies in contact. In theater, emotions and influence travel from the body of the performer to the body of those watching them perform.²

During an actual contagion, when audiences and performers alike are affected by the inability to be in a closed space together, it is impossible to not think of how this conception of theater becomes literal. Theaters in Elizabethan London remained shut for long periods of time during the bubonic plague as city officials proclaimed that continuing performances would create a situation “whereby great infection with the plague, or some other infectious diseases, may rise and growe, to the great hynderaunce of the common wealth of this city.”³ Epidemiologists and zealots alike believed that the theater was the cause of plague – one concerned about the virality of disease, the other of the virality of “immoral” ideas.⁴

Pandemic and innovation

While the bubonic plague closed theaters but it didn’t stop theatermaking. Prolific playwright Shakespeare is believed to have written some of his best works during periods when theaters were shut down.

During the Covid-19 pandemic too, society went from theater as a ‘contagion’ to questioning how to continue theater making during a contagion. When theaters around the world closed in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, theater makers faced a difficult decision: they either had to stop performing since the auditorium as a public gathering space had become inaccessible or find new ways of connecting to their audiences.

In many ways, it was a resurrection of French dramatist and writer Antonin Artaud’s 1934 lecture, ‘The Theatre and the Plague’. In it, Artaud draws a parallel between theater and the plague. He says,

“In the theatre as in the plague, there is a kind of strange sun, a light of abnormal intensity by which it seems that the difficult and even the impossible suddenly become our normal element.”⁵

¹ Felton-Dansky, M. (2018). *Viral Performance: Contagious Theaters from Modernism to the Digital Age*. Northwestern University Press.

² Sugiera, M. (2017). *Theatre as Contagion: Making Sense of Communication in Performative Arts*. *Text Matters*. 7. 10.1515/textmat-2017-0016.

³ Gurr, A. (2009). *The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642*. Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Pollack, D. (2020, March 14). *The Broadway Shutdown Could Be Good for Theater*. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/03/broadway-shutdown-could-be-good-theater-coronavirus/607993/>

⁵ Artaud, A. (1958). *The Theater and Its Double* (M. C. Richards, Trans.). Grove Press.

Many performance makers devised a variety of new formats to build such pathways of reconnection, from archival recordings and live-streams to phone calls and audio walks. The impossible suddenly became the new normal.

One such new disruptor was the Junges DT group, located in Berlin.

New pandemic playbook

The Junges DT is the youth theatre branch of one of the most renowned theater houses in Germany – the Deutsches Theater Berlin. The Deutsches Theater Berlin was founded in 1883 by playwright Adolf L'Arronge who sought to create a home for high-quality theater. The Deutsches Theater came to world renown with the tenure (1905-1932) of its artistic director Max Reinhardt and his elaborate productions of Shakespearean plays. Reinhardt reimagined theater in terms of a large-scale festival gathering and developed a diverse repertoire at the Deutsches Theater that drew on many different styles and genres. In 1920, he established the Salzburg Festival with the performance of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Jedermann*.

The Deutsches Theater continued its role as an artistically prolific theatre with a wide range of famous performers and directors after World War II during the Great Depression period and has since been one of the leading theatre institutions in Germany that both stands for key directorial figures and an interest in the development of dramatic writing.

The Junges DT was created by dramaturg Birgit Lengens in 2009 and has been creating a wide array of theatre productions with children and teenagers aged between 10–22 years since then. With theaters being shut down during the Covid-19 pandemic, the team at Junges DT faced an important dilemma – how to continue the work they had been doing amid lockdown restrictions? Determined to provide a space for young performers to nurture their artistic talents, the theater group found new ways to perform. Throughout the pandemic, the Junges DT developed a variety of artistic formats and narrative forms with and for young people which have allowed art and solidarity to continue despite the pandemic.

Between March 2020 and March 2021, the Junges DT developed over eight different digital formats. These included a WhatsApp play, an interactive puzzle game (invited to the prestigious festival of youth theatre production “Theatertreffen der Junged 2021), a podcast series that captured beautiful moments during the pandemic, a literary walk, two audio plays on SoundCloud, a web series on Zoom, seven Live Monologues on Instagram, an interactive live stream theatre production and three digital youth clubs for theatre- interested teenagers).

Dramaturg Lasse Scheiba, who devised a wide range of these formats with the young performers explains:

“The initial pressure came from the young performers themselves because we were suddenly in lockdown and we just have a lot of young people for whom the Deutsches Theater is a second home. It all

started because I felt the need to keep the community together and give them some support either through rehearsals or via our Instagram account where they could keep in touch with one another. That was a major driving force during the first weeks of lockdown – these young people needed something. We couldn't just drop everything.”⁶

Instead of putting the youth theater on hiatus during lockdown, the dramaturgical team at the Junges DT started rehearsing on Zoom which became an experimental hub for digital theatre making. The closed down theater was able to provide more resources for its youth performers during this period, such as bigger performance spaces, access to prop and make-up artist and so forth. Moreover, as the Junges DT worked with amateur actors, its ability to experiment with new digital performance platforms (such as Zoom or Instagram) was easier.

Experiments in livestreaming

The stage was now digital and the performers had a new observer – the camera. As the team at Junges DT experimented with new formats of storytelling, they particularly focused on livestreaming.

While streaming theater has been an established pre-pandemic medium particularly for large and internationally renowned theatre institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera House and the National Theatre in London which both developed live-HD performances, its ubiquity took on a new dimension during the pandemic when there was no physical access to the theatres. To fill the void of embodied productions, many theatres began opening up their archives, streaming archival video cuts that were usually inaccessible to the general public.

The Junges DT produced several live-stream productions in this time and, in experimenting with its potential, pushed the boundaries of what is possible in a livestream. One such example is the production *Selbstvergessen – Of beginnings and endings* (premiered in April 2021), co-directed by Gernot Grünewald and video artist Thomas Taube. The piece explores the lives of six patients of dementia, examining their lives as understood by their grandchildren. Centered on the theme of memory and remembering, *Selbstvergessen* contrasts the fading memories of the grandparents with the aspirations and futures of their grandchildren. The production explores how one constructs and deconstructs their identity through recollection and highlights how the pandemic left the young and the elderly the most vulnerable groups.

Grünewald began working with the six young performers in the Fall of 2021 when the theaters in Germany had briefly re-opened only to be shut down again for a second extended lockdown in November 2021. This meant that the play which was originally scheduled to be performed in-person in a small black box theater at Deutsches Theater now shifted online. The initial phase of rehearsals took place largely on Zoom.

⁶ Interview with Lasse Schieba

However, the shift only enriched the subject matter. Sharing intimate looks into each other's bedrooms helped the children to devise the stories of their own grandparents, since they had easy access to memorabilia and photos of them that they could share with each other. When the production was able to return to the physical rehearsal spaces at the Deutsches Theater after two months of rehearsing (Feb-March 2021), they had to reimagine the use of space and framing entirely from what they had already built. Ultimately, the creative team opted for a livestream-only performance with no access to a subsequently available ondemand version.

Grünewald worked with multiple cameras and an entirely deconstructed theatre space to create a live-edited stream. It was an investigation into what camerawork in the theatre might mean. As he said:

“And that was its own peculiar difficulty: what is the role of the camera? [...] It was an interesting and new adaptation process where there are different rules. There are rules for the stage, there are rules for Zoom, and there are rules for live film or livestream - and they are all not the same.”⁷

With two mobile and one static camera, Selbstvergessen created a complex mash-up of film and theatre in which any recognizable theatre space or audience perspective disappeared. Instead, the digital audience encountered a highly complex and layered set of images and scenes that questioned our established understanding of how space and time might work in performance and instead connected the memories of the grandparents with the visions and hopes of their grandchildren.

The camera was no longer a framing device that offered an audience perspective onto a black box stage but instead became another player in the space, always in intense proximity to the performing children. The young performers addressed the camera at various points throughout the performance, at times so close that their noses almost touched the lens.⁸

Another important shift lay in the work process of the production team. The director Gernot Grünewald and the video artist Thomas Taube developed an entirely new way of working together, as Grünewald describes in detail in an email communication:

“The performance was planned as an analog work with some video projected onto several moving walls in the performance. Then we decided to shift to a live-film format, which is distinct from a livestream because it does not only render a theatre production digitally; rather, it creates a new medium. With that shift, Thomas' role moved beyond that of classic video artist working on a theater production. He became a co-director for the live film...That is so important because when we had to go digital, we also created a new kind of collaboration between directing and video art that had not existed in this manner prior to the pandemic.”

⁷ Interview with Gernot Grünewald

⁸ Mosse, R., Janke, J., König, J., Stein, C., & Tecklenburg, N. (2022). Viral Theatres' Pandemic Playbook - Documenting German theatre during COVID-19. *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 18(1), 105-127. 10.1080/14794713.2022.2031800

In many ways, *Selbstvergessen* is a hybrid between film and theatre. Speaking about the changes, Lasse Kühlcke, a performer at Junges DT says:

“What we are developing here right now is also a kind of in-between medium, it's a new level. Where some people might say, ‘theatre has to stay classical’, I would say, ‘No. One can really great new things with technology.’”⁹

Two months later, in June 2021, another youth production under the direction of Lasse Scheiba took a different approach to livestreaming theatre. The *Monster vom James-Simon Park* (June 2021) is a grotesque homage to the horror movie genre, in which different groups of teenagers are being attacked by bizarre monsters when they are all out partying in a Berlin park. It is devised production that was part of the annually running “Youth Club”-format, that brings together a group of around 14-15 teenagers to develop and perform in their own theatre piece at the conclusion of a four-month period. Speaking about the topic, Lasse Scheiba said:

“For my most recent youth club the subject was The Mosters of James-Simon Park and the topic was excess and the desire for excess mixed with the horror movie genre. Obviously that has a lot to do with Covid pandemic.”¹⁰

Again, much to their dismay, the young ensemble of *Die Monster* had to spent the majority of their rehearsal period on Zoom. However, the dramaturg Lasse Scheiba created a set of Zoom practices (rotating DJ duties among the performers; warm ups such as a joint dance-off on Zoom; automatic writing exercises; shared virtual backgrounds, and so on to build a communal space for the young people, even though it had to be remote. They rehearsed in two groups of seven people and only met as the complete team of 14 when they were allowed back into the theatre to rehearse in May. It was not an easy shift for the young performers. Anna Suzuki, who was part of the group, shares:

“What was difficult for me at the beginning was that I was in my own room where I sleep and where I learn, and then, I am supposed to do exercises where I let go, come out of my shell, try to embody different perspectives and empathize with others. That is really difficult to do on the same space one also lives in.”¹¹

Scheiba gave the performers the option of completing their work on the play as an interactive online format, an analog performance in an ad-hoc performance space or as a livestream. The young performers ultimately opted for another livestream production, which helped Scheiba use some of the Zoom techniques they had honed during their digital rehearsal time.

⁹ Interview with Lasse Kühlcke

¹⁰ Interview with Lasse Scheiba

¹¹ Interview with Anna Suzuki

Unlike *Selbstvergessen*, *Die Monster* opted not for multiple cameras and live cuts but instead for a single-camera, single-shot set up. In other words, the 14 performers had to take the camera along on their spooky night out. Scheiba said:

“I preferred the live-stream idea because I had worked for four months with them on Zoom and a lot of the improvisations that we developed would not have worked in front of a seated audience.”¹²

Since the camera was always in the midst of the action and addressed directly as if it were another performer, the digital audience became transplanted onto the stage in a way.

Conclusion

These two very different experiments with camera work and remote theater at the Junges DT showcase both the creative potential unleashed by the lockdown restrictions and also highlight what an important support system the theatre offered to young people who were stuck at homes and had limited interactions with their peers. Moreover, the productions both received a much larger and wider audience than they would have, had they been produced for the physical stage. In the analog format, the Junges DT would have reached around 150-180 people in total over a typical production run. On Zoom, they had an audience of 500 for each of their performance evenings.

¹² Interview with Lasse Scheiba