Producers as Central Figures in the Theatre and Performing Arts Ecosystem

2025

A Report and
Contextual Texts

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MAGDALENA TĘDZIAGOLSKA | ANNA BIERNAT

Producers as Central Figures in the Theatre and Performing Arts Ecosystem

A Report from a Qualitative Study with contextual texts by Vânia Rodrigues and György Szabó

Zbigniew Raszewski
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Foreword

KAROLINA DZIEŁAK-ŻAKOWSKA | KRYSTYNA MOGILNICKA

When we began planning a study of the theatre and performing arts production community in Poland in September 2024, we found its silence particularly significant, especially in the context of the international studies and reports we were aware of[1]. This profession, which is essential for the entire theatre ecosystem and crucial for producing performances as well as theatre and performing arts projects, did not seem to be sufficiently recognised in Polish arts research, funding systems or press coverage. While artists, creators, researchers, curators, and directors were present in the public discourse, we struggled to identify texts devoted to producers, their professional settings and related contexts.

During the pandemic and resulting lockdowns when the culture sector experienced a standstill, a group of female producers working in theatre and dance set up a grassroots network. They began to work towards visibility and inclusion of their perspective[2], and their meetings began in 2021. In the years that followed, several texts were published[3]—mainly in periodicals interested in presenting the arts behind the scenes—that tried to bring the production professions closer

1   This primarily involves discussions within the **On the Move** network, of which the Theatre Institute is a long-standing member. On the Move conducted a **survey** in 2022 for people working as producers, agents, and managers in the performing arts field, which we were able to access courtesy of the network. The full report is not public, and some results are available on the website of **PAMPA network**.

2   See **Sieć Producencka** [Producers' Network].

3   See *inter alia* **'Produkowanie czyli tworzenie'** [Producing aka Creating], *Didaskalia* 2023 no. 175/176, an interview with Alicja Berejowska, Sonia Nieśpiałowska, Ula Zerek, and Karolina Wycisk conducted by Zuzanna Berendt and Anna Majewska; Katarzyna Renes, **'Moje życie z projektami'** [My Project Life], *Dwutygodnik* 2022 no. 350, Izabela Zawadzka, **'Sfrustrowani poszukiwacze satysfakcji'** [The Frustrated Satisfaction Seekers], *Didaskalia* 2021 no. 162.

From the left: Krystyna Mogilnicka, Magdalena Tędziagolska, Anna Biernat, Karolina Dziełak-Żakowska. Photo by Alicja Borowiec

together by evoking individual perspectives. However, it was difficult to avoid the impression that the subject was haphazardly emerging in the context of a broader trend to notice and describe invisible professions. This only strengthened the need for adopting a scientific approach so that it would be possible to talk about these professionals with more distance and objectivity and to support the importance of a range of individual perspectives. Our goal was to find out who the producers working in Poland are. How do they see themselves? Do they acknowledge one another? What do they need? What is the reason for the position of this profession on the market today? Or should we not speak of a single profession, but instead of 'producer professions' or even of managers, so that picking the correct name of the profession would enable us to reach as wide a group as possible, representing the same set of competencies? Do they operate internationally or join networks emerging in Poland and abroad, such as the Sieć Producencka [Producers' Network], PAMPA[4] or the German produktionbande[5]? These questions resulted in our collaboration with sociologists Magdalena Tędziagolska and Anna Biernat (from the research studio Badania i Działania), with whom we designed a qualitative and exploratory study preceded by extensive research.

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4   See **PAMPA network**.
5   See **produktionsbande network**.

We hope the resulting report will enable action to be taken on behalf of producers in both local and international contexts and hopefully create a sense of enquiry and a need for further, more comprehensive research focused on this profession.

The contextual texts accompanying the report introduce an international perspective. The article penned by Vânia Rodrigues highlights the importance of looking at producers' practices, sharing specific examples of cultural work and drawing conclusions that should inform cultural policy-making at local and international levels. The author dissects the artificially imposed assumptions and points to solutions that make goals such as sustainability or ecology more realistic and relevant. What was essential for us was that Vânia Rodrigues speaks from the perspective of a practitioner, theorist, and university researcher and that she is based in a country and production environment that—albeit in a way different from our region—may be considered marginal regarding its geographical location. The article by György Szabó, a Hungarian producer with many years of experience and founder of Trafó, an essential institution for the performing arts sector in Europe, was written at our request and offers a perspective of more than fifty years of formation processes of the independent performing arts market in the Central and Eastern European region. As is the case with Rodrigues' article, Szabó's essay inadvertently, but from our point of view very clearly, corresponds to the report's findings regarding the close connection of practitioners and producers with the political system, including the grant system. It shows how non-institutionally funded projects have influenced the development of professional producers or, to use the author's term, leaders of institutions in the cultural sector. The author, being a manager with more than forty years of experience, carries the memory of systemic change and shares many valuable insights into how to work with the shortcomings of this system. (From this perspective, we can see even more clearly how the sudden reduction of project funding for culture, which happened in Hungary in 2010, has dramatic consequences for the arts sector).

We hope this ebook will help you picture producers working in the field of theatre and performing arts in Poland in a new light, as the reports and accompanying articles situate them at the intersection of narratives, opportunities, cultural policies and strategies, geopolitical and cultural considerations.

We also hope it will serve as a source of inspiration for policymakers and the wider artistic community to include producers as experts, perceived in terms of their role in the theatre and performing arts ecosystem, in opinion-forming bodies and in relevant community events.

The ebook was produced in two language versions: Polish and English.
We thank the authors and the On the Move network for their input and support.
Warsaw, January 2025

Producers as Central Figures in the Theatre and Performing Arts Ecosystem
A Report from a Qualitative Study

MAGDALENA TĘDZIAGOLSKA | ANNA BIERNAT

Preface

A theatre producer[1] (or, more widely, persons working in the field of theatre and broadly defined performing arts) is a profession hardly visible in public discourse despite their paramount role in executing artistic events. What is this professional environment like? What are its needs, challenges and visions for the future? To answer these questions, at the invitation of the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, we conducted a study exploring issues related to this professional group. The concept for the study was developed in a participatory way, in close cooperation with Karolina Dziełak-Żakowska and Krystyna Mogilnicka from the International Cooperation Department of the Theatre Institute.

We have opted for a targeted selection of study subjects. Of fundamental significance was ensuring the diversity of the group to best reflect the complexity of the producers' community and identify the challenges and needs of an extensive group of people associated with theatre production. This was possible thanks to the Institute's representatives' recognition of the issue. We invited 14 people who met the following diverse criteria to participate in the study:

- They represented different age groups and different genders;
- They were subject to different systems of organisational arrangements for theatre production and the performing arts, such as institutional theatre, NGOs, a production agency, a one-person company, a community centre, a university, an impresario theatre, informal arts groups, or they acted as independent producers;

1　We use the term 'theatre producer' to denote producers working in theatre and the performing arts. In the report we often use it to mean the entire profession.

- They dealt in the production of different theatre and performing arts genres ranging from dramatic theatre, commercial theatre and off-theatre, through dance, theatre-related events such as performative readings, experimental activities, cross-genre events, and the circus to mass events such as festivals;
- They worked in a professional capacity with artistic groups from different cultures and nationalities and with artistic groups made up of people with special needs;
- They worked in different locations, from large cities to small towns in various regions of Poland;
- They defined their role as that of a 'producer', or they carried out production work in the field of theatre and the performing arts but did not call themselves producers since they preferred different names (e.g. culture animators or artists).

As part of the study, a full-day workshop was held at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute on 6 November 2024, during which participants mapped key themes and topics together. We also collected data on the producers' professional and educational paths and listed the challenges they face.

Our study was exploratory and represents a 'snapshot' of this environment. The selection of the sample, specific to the qualitative nature of the study, allowed us to focus on diagnosing the status quo, map the challenges and tensions, and harvest valuable insights. It is hoped that this will be a starting point for designing solutions to meet the needs of this group and building a strong professional environment.

We hope that the report will stimulate discussion about the specificities and needs of those working in theatre and performing arts production and inspire further research and efforts to develop this vital profession.
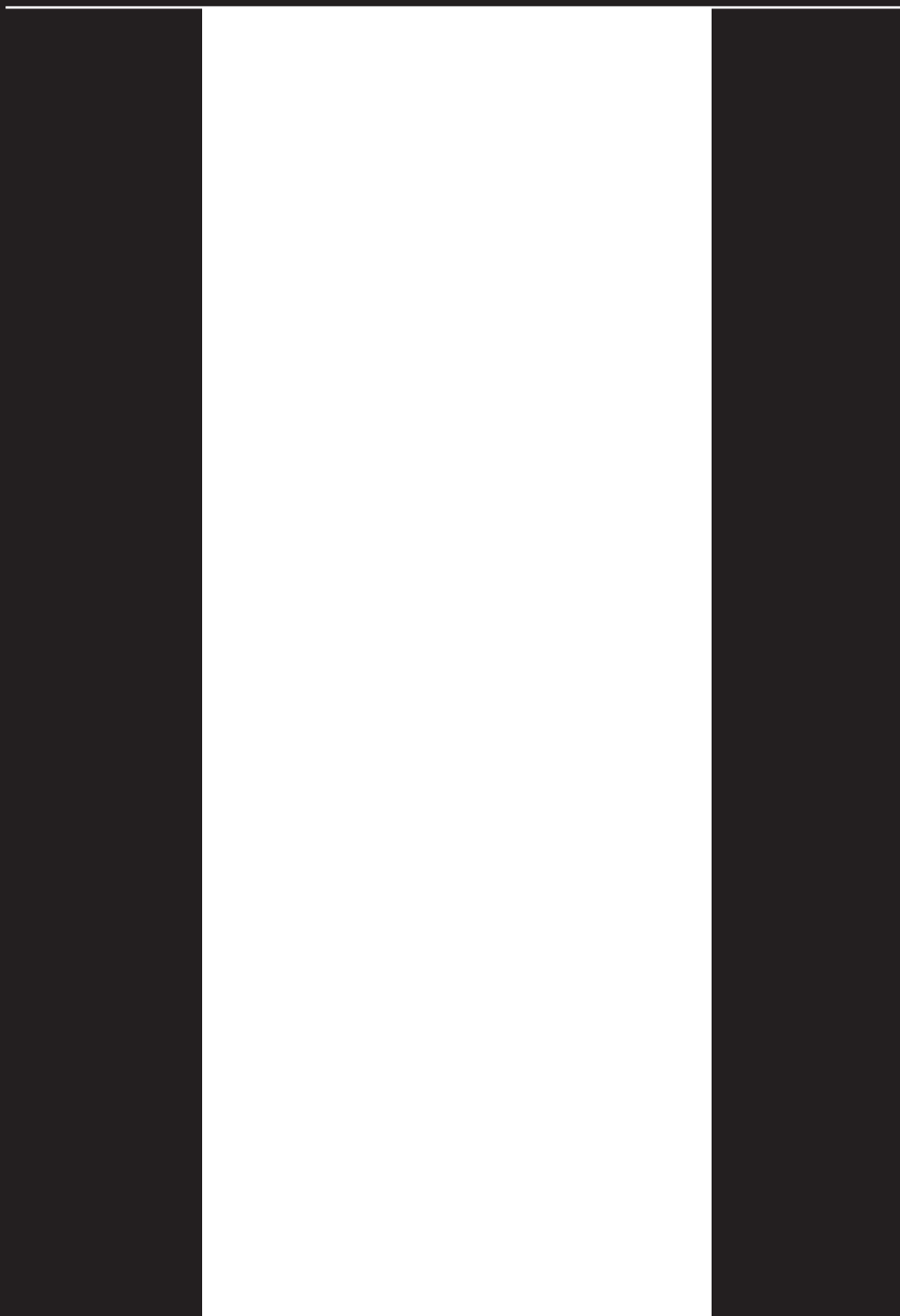
Producers.
Who are they,
and where
do they come
from?

Producers in theatre and the performing arts. Who are they?

An ambiguous profession... In Poland, the profession of theatre and performing arts producers is difficult to define. It is included in the official list of occupations and specialities as 'theatre producer'[2], but the name does not take into account the different contexts and roles in which producers work and play (e.g. working in an institutional theatre vs. running an independent theatre), or is it something that respondents to our study would choose for themselves as such.

In practice, the umbrella term 'theatre producer' encompasses roles such as production manager, executive producer, or managing producer responsible for the entire artistic project. The term also covers a wider range of stage genres than just theatre. The nature of the work depends on the context, the type of institution, the specifics of the project, and individual skills and preferences.

There is also a lack of a clearly defined scope and description of the competencies required to work in this profession...

... and a diversified one. The work of theatre producers in the performing arts is highly diverse and at the same time difficult to capture in a single description. As has often been pointed out, 'there are as many producers as there are ways of working and doing things'. It is a profession that requires a great deal of flexibility, creativity and the ability to work in dynamically changing conditions.

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2   See Code 265404 – Theatre Producer, <u>source</u> on the website of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy.

We do many different things, from formal to informal, from obvious tasks to peculiar diplomatic missions, both in theatres and NGOs[3].

Being in-between. Workshop participants emphasised that theatre production is a kind of 'in-between' profession, involving blending different perspectives, negotiating artists' expectations and institutions' requirements, and even bridging budgetary constraints and creative vision. Producers often have to adapt to changing conditions and act as mediators, organisers and coordinators.

The core of being a producer is precisely being 'in-between' and responding to the needs of different people with different capabilities and expectations.

The artist will have their comments, and the institution will certainly have theirs. We must meet somewhere in the middle.

Alone, but not by choice. Loneliness is inscribed in this profession (even when working as a team). On the one hand, this gives producers a sense of freedom and independence in various areas. Still, on the other hand, it can be conducive to a lack of support and the need to take full responsibility for the decisions taken. It is a job that requires immunity, self-discipline and the ability to set limits.

Caution, attentiveness, empathy and diplomacy are the languages we need to speak to people with very different skills. This often makes us lonely but also independent.

3   All quotes in the report are taken from anonymised statements made by the workshop attendees.

The set of competencies fundamental to working effectively in this role is common to the different working environments in which production people operate.

'Being the job'. The work of producers relies heavily on soft skills such as communication, negotiation, organisation, and the ability to build trusting relationships.

As in caring professions, this role also requires a great deal of 'self-use' as a working tool. For this reason, producers must be attentive to their own needs and well-being.

In some ways, this work is reminiscent of the acting profession in that the actor's use of his or her own emotions and experiences is an integral part of the work

Interpersonal skills. Talking to different stakeholders, be they funders, artists or technical staff, requires a high degree of diplomacy, ease and highly developed relationship-building skills.

Flexibility and creativity. Flexibility and creativity. Production work requires the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, such as limited resources, tight schedules or unpredictable challenges. Creativity enables effective solutions to be found in situations where there are no ready-made answers.

Organisational skills. By managing multiple tasks simultaneously and prioritising them efficiently, activities can flow smoothly, from negotiating and managing budgets to coordinating rehearsals, costume preparation and logistics.

Understanding different worlds. Working as a producer requires the ability to navigate between different environments and identify their specificities, namely formal regulations, grants and the artistic visions or needs of creators. Familiarity with these different perspectives allows producers to effectively reconcile the expectations of different parties and bring them together into a coherent whole.

Interdisciplinarity of competencies. Combining skills in many areas, from managing budgets and facilitating communication between team members to leadership skills that enable all elements of a project to come together seamlessly.

Network of contacts. A producer's greatest asset is their established network of contacts, bridging different backgrounds and disciplines. The ability to operate at the intersection of different worlds means that a producer's work defies simple measurements and complex metrics. It is underpinned by experience, flexibility and the ability to combine different perspectives, making it unique and difficult to quantify.

We have learned to write down every phone number, even those of people we do not plan to see again soon. But you never know what will happen in a few years' time.

How do producers work?

Under the pressure of time. Production is a constant race against time, working in conditions that can rarely be predicted or planned. Decisions on project funding or bank transfers can be delayed for weeks, and the production calendar does not wait for money to arrive. Instead of being able to plan their work at their own pace, producers are constantly adapting to a changing reality.

In the service of others. Producers act 'in the service of others' by supporting artists, creating space for their visions, but they rarely come to the fore themselves. In the theatre hierarchy, they remain in the background as someone 'with tasks to do'. This is invisible work, although it is essential.

Producers often feel that they are not treated as partners. Rather than a collaborative approach, there is an expectation that the producer will adapt to everything from poorly constructed competition conditions to artists' concepts. Despite a gradual change in the landscape, producers still do not feel that their efforts are noticed and appreciated by the community (artists, policymakers, decision-makers or organisations representing artists).

When something needs to be done, and there is no one to do it, the job will likely be assigned to the producer as they will surely complete the task.

24/7. Each stage of production brings new challenges. As we get closer to the premiere, the pace and pressure increase. Working 24 hours a day? This is the reality for many producers, especially in the final stages of projects. Employment contracts or commissions are not adapted to the nature of production work (e.g. they often do not reflect the actual working hours and task-based nature of the activities), so their work is not adequately remunerated for the time spent.

In chaos and with a feeling of having no influence. Producers stress that they often feel that they have no say in the organisation of their work. More often than not, they have to adapt to what is possible in the here and now, and less often, they have the opportunity to search for the most efficient solutions. Chaos, pressure and the need to 'fit in' are endemic to their working lives.

On topics they are not experts on. Some people mentioned that dealing with the legal aspects is challenging, especially the drafting of contracts. Producers are usually well-versed in this area. However, they need legal support for more complex issues. Some of them, working without an institutional background, highlighted the lack of access to specialised knowledge and ready-made document templates, which makes their work more difficult. However, the responsibility for getting contracts right lies with them, creating tension and frustration.

DIFFERENT PLACES OF WORK EQUAL DIFFERENT SCOPES OF WORK

Institutional theatres. Producers can count on the support of legal, technical, and financial departments. Their tasks are more specified.

Independent theatres and spaces, impresario theatres and artistic groups. Producers are responsible for almost every aspect of a project, from budgeting and logistics to working with the cast and publicity. A producer's responsibilities require a wide range of skills, often specialist. More responsibility for the entire production process (including the budget).

How do you become
a producer?

The paths to becoming a producer
in the theatre and performing arts are
varied and often not straightforward.
Most respondents to the study pointed
out that the work was not the result
of a conscious choice but rather
of chance, need, or necessity.

'I am interested in the theatre but not an artist'.

People interested in the arts, who want to work in the cultural sector but do not see themselves as strictly artistic professionals, have been looking for ways to be involved in and close to creative work.

Responding to market needs.

The growth of grant programmes and independent theatres has created a need for people who understand proposal writing, accounting and fundraising. These skills have become crucial in developing new forms of performance.

THE MOTIVATIONS FOR AND POINTS OF ENTRY INTO THE PRODUCTION PROFESSION[4]

I need to know 'how to produce' to be an artist.

Independent artists, deprived of institutional support, had to learn the ropes of production to carry out their own art projects and maintain their autonomy.

I want to be a producer.

I made a conscious decision to choose this profession. Awareness of the producer's role, the possibility of managing one's work, the development of job stability, and the benefits of gaining experience abroad were crucial factors in this decision.

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4   Based on the accounts of the workshop participants.

Professional development: learning through hands-on experience

> **In Poland, there is no clearly defined competence profile for a theatre producer, meaning there is no precise career path.**

> **Most people start their journey with little knowledge of the realities of the job. They often work in the dark, without access to best practices, team support or mentoring.**

Hands-on experience. Producers learn primarily on the job, using their intuition and drawing conclusions from their successes and failures. Over time, by reflecting on their practice, they become more aware of their competencies and identify areas for improvement.

Lack of long-term, systemic support. The process may differ from case to case, but one thing they all have in common is the lack of systematic institutional support for the professional development of producers. There are, however, signs of life, such as the 'PolandDances Producers!' programme launched by the National Institute for Music and Dance[5]

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5   See PolandDances Producers!.
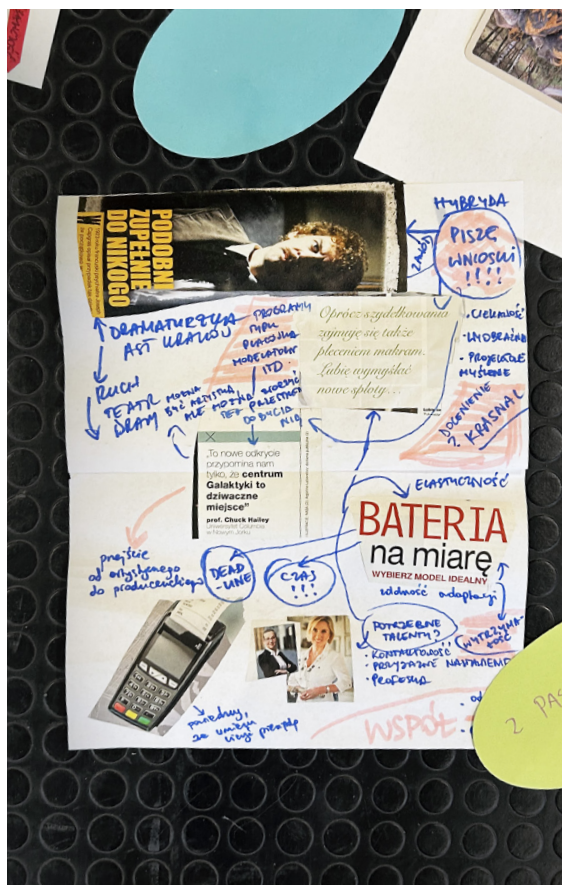
in 2024, for which a group of producers, now known as the Producers' Network[6], have been working for many years.

Formal training in the field is almost non-existent. Only recently has the University of Lodz launched a post-graduate course in theatre production[7], although some workshop participants felt that the role of the producer was not sufficiently clearly defined.

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6   See Sieć Producencka.
7   See Produkcja Teatralna i Organizacja Widowisk [Theatre Production and Performative Events Organisation]. The SWPS University in Warsaw offers the specialisation of Manager, Agent and Producer available in the Department of Culture Studies: and training in the frame of the Laboratory of the New Theatre Practices Producent/Kurator [Producer/Curator].

Experiences from abroad: the highs and lows

The workshop participants have diverse experiences of international collaboration, including being invited to work on foreign productions or co-productions, presenting shows at festivals abroad, and initiating their projects.

Several years of their experience is translated into critical reflection.

THE HIGHS

New standards of work. Better work hygiene, planning, setting boundaries.

Personal development and inspiration. Acquisition of new skills.

Cultural diversity. People representing different cultures enrich both the theatre and performing arts community and the creative process.

Broadening perspectives. Introducing new themes into the theatre and the community, indirectly creating social change and raising awareness.

THE LOWS

Not being treated as partners. Western partners sometimes look for 'cheaper' collaborators.

Cultural clashes. Differences in cultural codes require time and understanding, and their absence can make collaboration difficult.

Bureaucratic chaos. Legal and tax problems in employing Polish artists abroad reduce the competitiveness of projects. As a result, Polish performances are sometimes too expensive for foreign partners.

Financial disparity. Differences in allocated travel expenses and fees exacerbate the sense of inequality.

Can producers ever say 'no'?

Production work is, by its very nature, service-oriented, and it brings with it the pressure to constantly conform to others' expectations. In this role, 'saying no' is often seen as contradictory to the producer's mission; after all, it's your job, and you're paid to do it.

However, setting boundaries is crucial not only to the producer's well-being but also to the quality of collaboration and the outcome of projects.

I started to see how far I could go. It turns out that it is possible to stop yourself getting used to the maximum. Productions are no less successful when you say no; on the contrary, things get better and more pleasant when I am calmer and practise self-care.
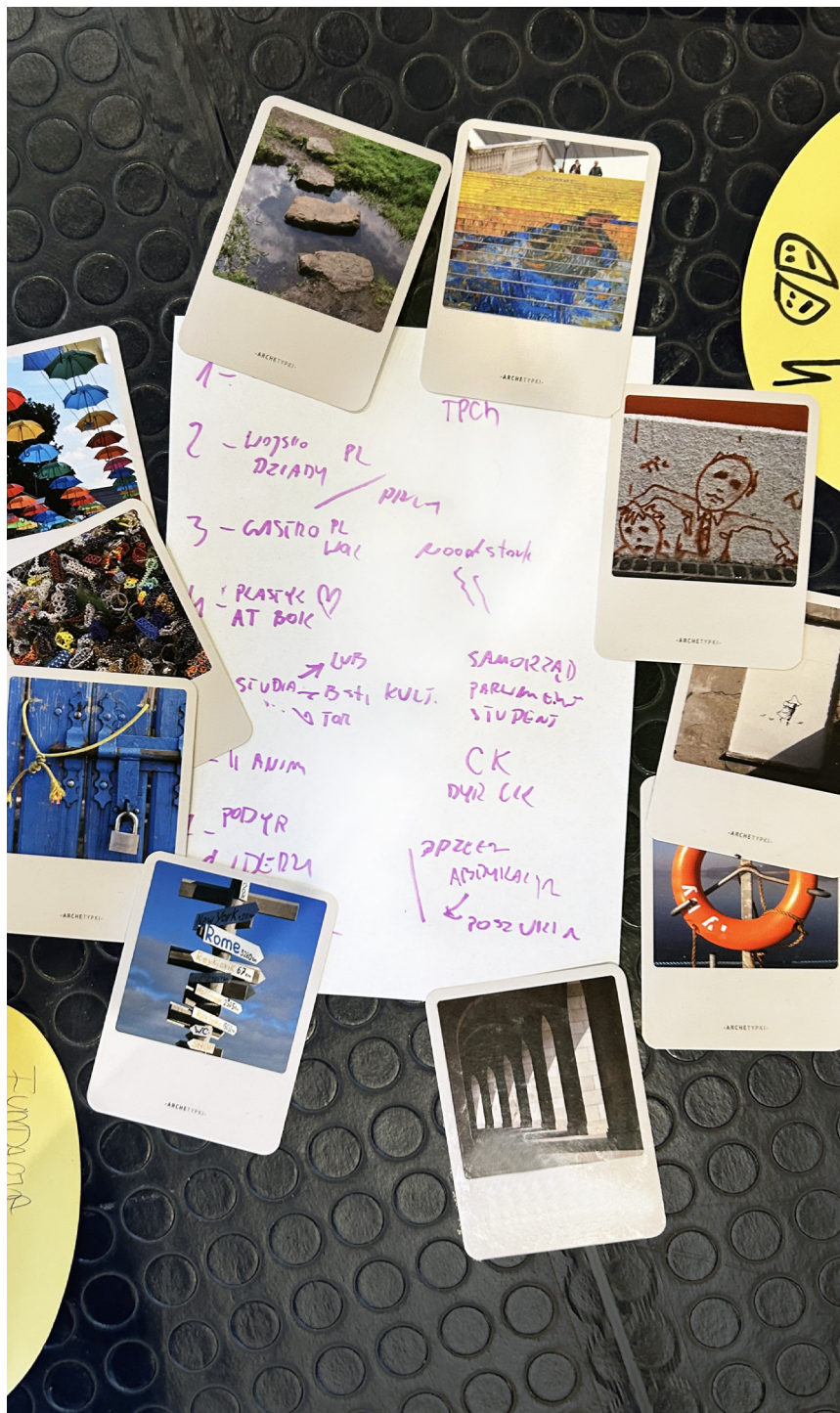
Producers: between commitment and burnout

WHAT DRIVES PRODUCERS?

Responsibility and empowerment.
The feeling of having an impact on the creation and development of culture, the successful realisation of complex productions.

Exceptionality and prestige of the industry.
Working in the cultural sector and carrying out prestigious artistic projects gives producers the feeling of being part of something unique and essential, and it is a source of satisfaction and motivation for them to continue working in the field.

Development and self-improvement.
The chance to learn and grow in a dynamic environment.

We work in culture and it is remarkable that we can work in theatres, produce exhibitions, and we tend to give more and more all the time...

It is a question of how we approach all these [our tasks] because there is a lot of work, and it almost never ends.

THE PRICE FOR INVOLVEMENT

In this industry, there is a lot of room for producers to be abused by others and themselves. Producers often agree to things that do not serve their well-being, such as working long hours, earning low wages, working under pressure, conforming to the expectations of others, and caring for the emotions of others at the expense of their well-being. They meet increasing expectations due to budget constraints or emerging risks, such as the sudden unavailability of other team members.

There is no time to regenerate.

The rhythm of personal life is subject to work.

Professional burnout. An excess of tasks and expectations leads to mental and physical overload.

Self-care is one of the most significant challenges that producers face. Many try to do it, but they are not always successful.

You have to find the golden rule, which is the hardest thing to do (...), start setting boundaries (...), and your life gets a little better once you do that.

I always have to have empathy [for others]; a positive attitude is required. I feel I cannot afford to have days when I am not at my best.

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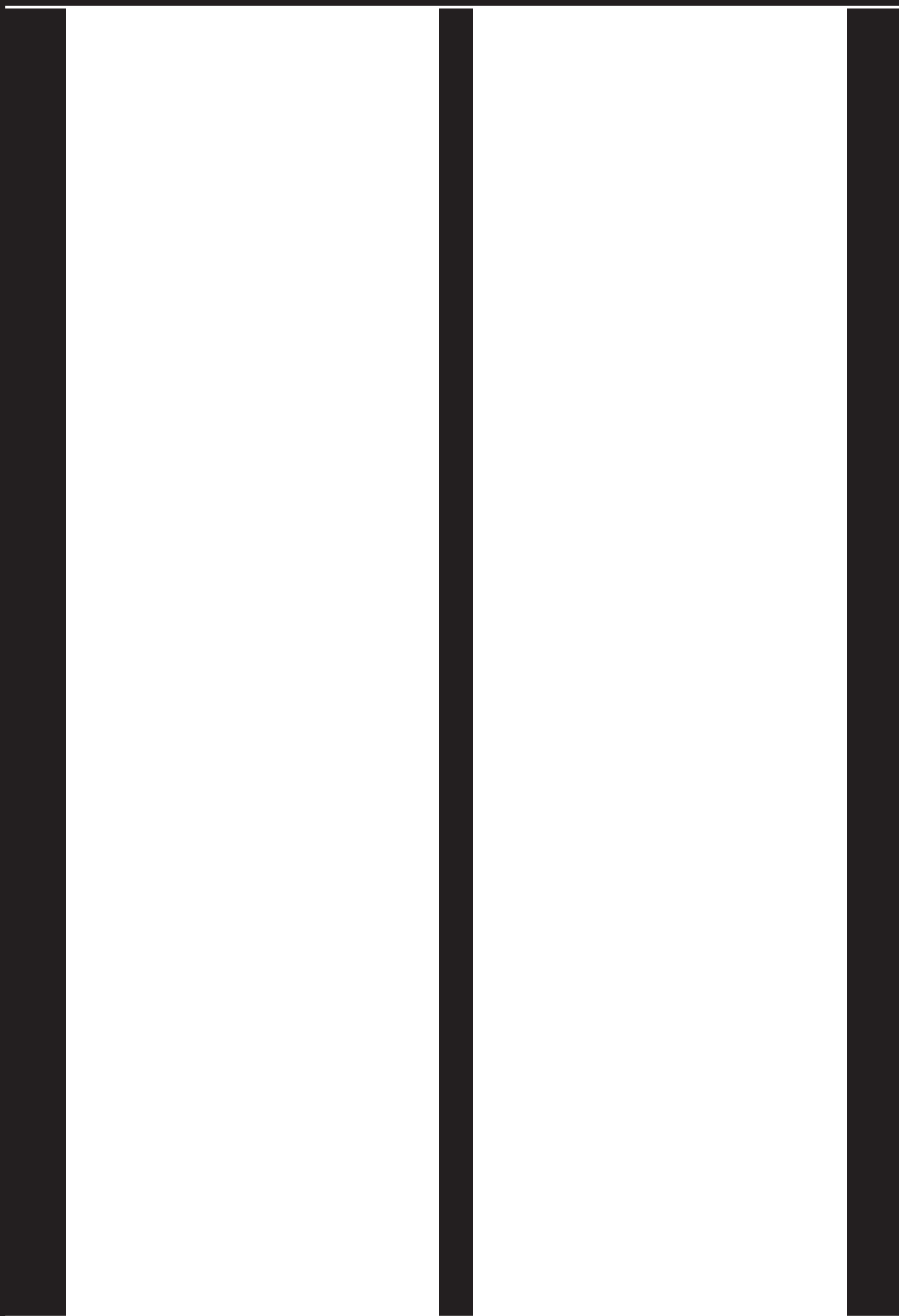
Producers within an ecosystem

Systemic challenges from the perspective of producers

Grant systems do not account for the specifics of theatre and festival productions.

The competition's terms and conditions do not cover the time and measures required for the development process.

Short-term financing timeframes. Projects are funded based on an annual timeline, and schedule gaps (e.g., lack of funds to cover January expenses) do not assure project continuity or stability.

Unequal competition. Independent theatres and venues must compete for the same resources as institutional theatres, which have more organisational capacity and systemic support.

Imposed themes. Competition organisers lay down strict guidelines that frequently do not respond to the actual needs of institutional profiles or their audiences.

In theory, the funding sources are meant to support the system, but in reality, they complicate processes and demand more time and effort on our part.

We have been producing festivals for 20 years but still have to rely on funding schemes that give money for one year at a time. This means we cannot plan what we want to do and who we want to work with. It is challenging for us. Especially when it comes to international projects, where foreign partners find it hard to understand that we have to wait until, say, April to know if we can participate in an event in June.

INDEPENDENT THEATRES AND VENUES ARE ON THE MARGINS OF SYSTEMIC SUPPORT

Participants in the study stressed that although cultural institutions have public funds to maintain their venues and resources, they rarely make them available to grassroots initiatives. Priority given to commercial ventures and the fear of being accused of misusing public funds are significant barriers to the growth and support of independent projects.

The lack of systemic solutions means that independent actors must rely on informal relationships and their determination to see their projects through.

POLITICAL PRESSURE

Decision-makers are known to influence the programming and artistic decisions of theatres and venues that present the performing arts, thus limiting their autonomy. Selecting themes that meet the organisers' expectations can lead to censorship or cancellation of socially relevant projects. The monopoly of specific stakeholders in setting the themes for an artistic discipline (e.g. the treatment of one institution as the 'host' representing the dance field in a given city) hinders the development of other institutions working in the same field.

The impact of the systemic challenges on producers

Challenges arising from the flawed system in which producers operate may cause:

- No possibility of strategic planning.
- Doing 'invisible' work.
- Stress and emotional strain.
- Frustration due to the loss of control over the production process.
- There is a risk of losing the community's trust and a professional partner's reputation. Respondents highlighted that they are often perceived as responsible for the systemic problems discussed here.
- Executing the project according to the project requirements rather than the best quality becomes the priority.
- Pressure to adapt to the imposed political agenda.

We may have had great plans to create an excellent product that we could promote in Poland and abroad, but suddenly, it turns out that the product was just rough and ready, made in a hurry just to get the numbers right. This makes no one happy because the idea is to 'get it over and done with.'

We never know if an event will happen,
and the budget is a mystery until the last minute.

Yet I am the one representing the institution,
and people form an opinion about me, for example,
that I am not delivering. This creates a lot of stress
and unpleasant experiences.

PRODUCERS IN AN ECOSYSTEM
OF THEATRE AND THE PERFORMING ARTS

Other theatre producers

Governing bodies, ministries, funders

Institutions, i.e. the system

Producers are at the heart of the theatre ecosystem. They bring together the world of procedures, artists, audiences, technical staff, and logistics, ensuring the consistency and effectiveness of projects. Despite their fundamental role, they are not always perceived or treated as partners or as indispensable parts of the system.

Artists, creators,directors, actors

Technical staff, the back-office of theatres and performance spaces

Audience

Artists, creators, directors, and actors

The workshop participants agreed on the difficulty of working with this group of stakeholders. Positive stories are the exception to the rule. There are several reasons for this situation.

Varying objectives and motivations. Artists focus on creating their roles and perfecting their skills; recognition from the audience is a source of satisfaction and a priority for them. The producers' job is to ensure that the whole process is taken care of.

Artists know their goals, have a vision of their artistic work, and strive for success, while producers have to keep an eye on everything else.

Toxic work culture. Workshop participants expressed the belief that there is still an unwritten rule in theatre and the wider performing arts community that artists' expectations must be met, no matter how implausible.

When an artist explodes and demands something (...), they usually say, 'Get me this or that now, immediately'.

System limitations. The difficulty of planning collaborations with artists can also stem from the conditions in which they work. For financial reasons and to maintain their public image, artists often work on different projects at the same time, taking on new jobs on an *ad hoc* basis. This makes it difficult for producers to plan their collaborations with them, resulting in a reduced sense of agency for producers and artists.

BEACONS OF CHANGE

The study participants noticed specific positive changes emerging in the market, namely:
- Abusive behaviour in the theatre and performing arts community and their tacit acceptance are becoming less frequent.
- A younger generation of creators is building relationships based on partnership.
- Experienced producers tend to set boundaries and care about the conditions they have to work in.

Based on my 25 years of experience, I can say that this has undoubtedly changed and abuse is no longer accepted.

One visible change is that producers have become indispensable. [Artists] have come to terms with the fact that we are not just the reflections of [their 'splendour'], and they acknowledge our subjectivity.

'Artists *versus* soldiers'

Producers often use the metaphor of 'artists *versus* soldiers' to illustrate how they are perceived and treated when working with artists.

They use these terms to highlight the lack of partnership and the invisibility of their work.

(…) producers support artists while they do not always enjoy reciprocity, although it would be appreciated.

(…) I think that it is a matter of a lack of partnerships and the lack of recognition that we are on the same side.

Producers support artists at every step of the creative process, but they cannot always expect the same from artists, even if they want to. Production work is often taken for granted, as something that 'just happens', when in fact, it requires specific and advanced skills that are as fundamental to the success of a project as the creative input of the artists.

Operating in the 'back office of the creative process', the input of producers is barely noticed by both artists and audiences. This invisible 'back office' tends to be a source of frustration for producers and creates a sense of imbalance between project partners.

Other challenges of the ecosystem. 'Covert' institutional structures

Institutions operate according to their own, often informal rules, which are unknown or unclear to outsiders and new entrants.

This complicates process management and creates additional work for producers in addition to their regular tasks (decoding the system).

Each institution has its own rules and way of organising everything. There are different structures: horizontal and vertical. The moment you enter an institution and do not know how it works, it is very difficult to have a good flow of information and communication.

Good practices empowering producers

■ **'A TEST FOR EVERYONE'**

In one of the institutional theatres, the producers have made it a rule to have everyone working on the show, from the artists to the technical staff, present during the first rehearsal. This allows people to get to know each other and share insights about the project and the planned activities. This removes the need for the producers to act as intermediaries, passing on information to different stakeholders.

Extensive communication is also used in the subsequent stages of the production process. All those involved in a given production are informed of the decisions taken at meetings of the various teams (e.g. technical staff, set designers).

What are the effects of this?

- A better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the different teams.
- Streamlined communication between the teams.
- Possibility for the producers to focus on key assignments, releasing them from the obligation to take care of everything.
- Building a sense of shared responsibility for the production process.

The first rehearsal is open to every staff member, with no exceptions. People introduce themselves, say, 'Hi, my name is this or that, and I am an electrician.' 'I am responsible for props.' 'I am the director (...).'

Conversations ensue, people exchange their contact details, and the sound manager gets to meet the score composer right at the start (...).

■ **'TRANSPARENT TABLES'**

In institutional theatres, everyone from the director to the costume designer has access to the production budget and can see what has been spent to date, the limits of each budget item, and so on. They are also familiar with the procedures for what to do if the budget is exceeded.

What are the effects of this?

- Financial transparency at every stage of production.
- Understanding the specifics of the work of producers and the limitations of this role.
- Shared responsibility for costs and decisions.
- Effective resource management and better planning.

(...) know how much we are spending on a daily basis, what the limits are, how much different things cost. This knowledge is available to the director, the stage designer, and the costume designer. (...) [before] nobody would even think about budgets, everything was needed immediately, regardless of the costs.

Theatre producers

Producers agree that the producers' community is supportive and open to cooperation. In many cities, they know each other, share contacts and help each other solve problems.

If we have a problem, we call each other and discuss what can be done.

If you are looking for something specific, you know who to call, for example if you need a fake pregnant belly made.

The world of film *versus* the world of theatre

The film community was spontaneously mentioned by producers as a benchmark for their situation.

ORGANISATION OF WORK AND PRODUCTION PROCESSES

Film. Production is carefully planned and never begins without secured funding. The timeframe is clearly defined and the schedule is strictly adhered to. Theatre producers find the film production system well thought out and transparent.

Theatre. Producers working for the theatre are usually working around the clock and deadlines are regularly missed. Production work is based on flexibility, connections and putting out fires, which leads to organisational chaos. The system is not transparent and does not take into account the diversity of productions.

THE IMAGE AND ROLE OF PRODUCERS

Film. Producers play a crucial role in terms of organisation and strategic planning. They are seen as leaders and as the key people responsible for the success of the production. Their contribution is visible and valued.

Theatre. Producers often remain in the shadows and are perceived as the 'special agent' or the person who has to solve the most difficult problems. The image of producers in theatre and performing arts does not reflect the key competencies of the role, such as creativity or strategic management.

The film community has done its homework and is well prepared. It is impossible for the cameramen to work longer than the time specified in the schedule. At the end of their shift, they would simply stop working. We do not do that in the theatre. Working overtime is a matter of course.

How to support producers in theatre and the performing arts?

Directions, needs, and specific proposals for solutions

MAPPING THE PROFESSION

Competency profile. Identifying the key competencies (attitudes, knowledge, skills) required in theatre and performing arts production work.

Defining the role and significance. It is necessary to define clearly the role of the production professions in theatre and the performing arts and to increase their importance in the industry, including through effective communication of the scope of responsibilities and competence profile within the theatre and performing arts community.

Consideration should be given to **adding the qualifications of producers to the Integrated Qualification System (IQS)[8]** operated by the Educational Research Institute. Inclusion of the qualification in the IQS could enable the introduction of a validation process and professional certification, thus helping to raise the standards of the profession, facilitate the entry of new professionals into the market and increase the recognition of the profession within the artistic community and beyond.

It is worth continuing research on the community of producers, including the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, in order to obtain a more complete picture of this professional group. This research should provide information on the size of the profession, the diversity of the group, its needs and its educational and professional pathways.

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8   See more about the **IQS**.

BURNOUT PREVENTION AND WELL-BEING MANAGEMENT

A range of psychosocial support services (e.g. respite care).
Systemic strategies to prevent professional burnout.

A SYSTEM OF SUPPORT FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A clear development and certification pathway to plan a career as a producer.

A range of educational programmes and training in theatre production, e.g. a 'production school' with a comprehensive curriculum and mentoring opportunities, developed based on a prior needs analysis.

Mentoring and networking to share best practices.

Job shadowing permits hands-on learning.

A CALL TO CHANGE OF THE WORK CULTURE

Ensuring equal treatment and building partnerships with artists and decision-makers.

Valuing producers and recognising their key role in the creative process.

Managing the production process transparently so that teams know and understand the opportunities and limitations of certain decisions.

Clearly communicating the role and scope of a producer's responsibilities to the team working on a given project and, more broadly, to teams working within a given institution or organisation.

FUNDING AND RESOURCES FOR THEATRE AND PERFORMING ARTS PRODUCTIONS

The need for a well-functioning, stable, long-term funding system for theatre and performing arts productions.

The development of grant competitions in a **multi-year programmes.**

Separate competitions for institutional and independent theatres.

A system enabling the **provision of public space and infrastructure** for producers to use.

Representation of producers in the advisory bodies of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (e.g. in the area of creating assumptions and terms & conditions for grant projects and the distribution of grant funds).

Design of grant programmes based on research taking into account the needs of the production community, including non-institutional ones.

Grant opportunities for producers to enhance their self-development.

HOW CAN THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF PRODUCERS BE IMPROVED?

Adapting forms of employment to the realities of production work (they currently work on the basis of mandate contracts or full-time positions, which do not take into account the actual workload and time spent on the job).

Creating repositories of practical tools for producers, such as databases of model contracts, guidelines and best practices. This is particularly important for independent producers without institutional resources.

Systemic support from experts in areas requiring specific expertise. Producers would benefit from being able to consult and receive advice

from lawyers, psychologists, coaches and mediators (difficult group processes are common in creative projects). This is particularly important for independent producers without access to expertise.

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CONSOLIDATION OF THE COMMUNITY, SELF-ADVOCACY, ENHANCING THE PRESTIGE OF THE PROFESSION

Increasing the visibility of the community of producers so that this professional group can influence systemic decisions and be treated as a partner in dialogue alongside other artistic professions.

Building structures that allow the community and performing arts producers to organise itself would facilitate collaboration and self-advocacy.

Sharing expert knowledge. Harnessing the opinion-forming and expertise potential of the producer community, sharing expertise with other creators ('producer forum' as a platform for dialogue on key producer issues).

Raising awareness within the ecosystem of the specific nature of production work and its responsibilities.

Establishing an industry **award.**

Producers as **person of the day** on e-teatr.pl!

Warsaw, December 2024

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Contextual
Texts
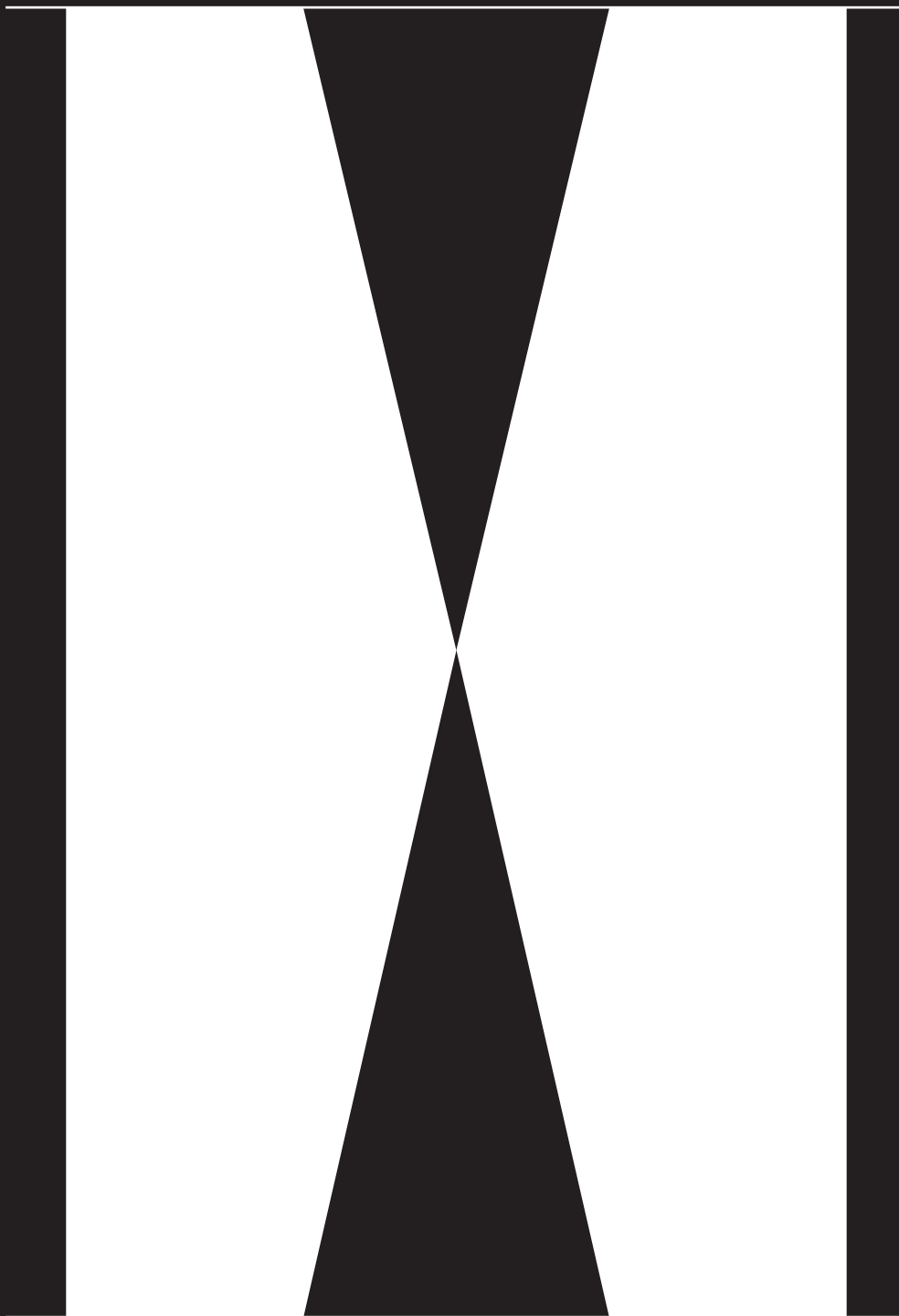
Whoever is Not Lost Does Not Yet Understand[1]

☐ VÂNIA RODRIGUES

■
WE HAVE NEVER BEEN FABULOUS

Back in the day, I remember[2] travelling on purpose to Lisbon and other European cities to attend capacity-building workshops on 'internationalisation'. Typically, this would entail spending a couple of hours listening to a foreign expert speaking in front of their impeccably designed PowerPoint presentation covering issues pertaining to marketing strategy, portfolio management, how to build a touring budget (how to break even!), or how to approach international programmers and hosting venues. Occasionally, there would be a sprinkle of 'intercultural dialogue' on top. I soaked in the 'tips' to enhance my international contacts and networked furiously. At the time, my life as a theatre company's manager was beyond hectic: I was always on the go, from rehearsal room to meeting, travelling back and forth, working on the verge of burnout. As I was

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1 I was unable to resist the temptation of using as a title this phrase by Mônica Hoff in her remarkable text 'How to keep on without knowing what we already know, or, what comes after magic words & politics of salvation'. I did it because it so poetically captures one of the main ideas of this text. I did it also to invite more people to read her text and others in CLIMATE: Our Right to Breathe ed. by Hiuwai Chu et al (Berlin: L'Internationale Online and K. Verlag, 2022). Finally, I did it to acknowledge her critical contribution to my own understanding of climate change issues, and how they impact and implicate the arts. I am keen to connect our work to the work of others as often as possible, making each other visible, and fighting logics of excessive authorial attribution and intellectual extractivism.

2 Throughout this text I have used an ethnographic and autoethnographic approach, directly referring to my own experience as an arts manager, to my experiments in the classroom in the context of a newly established study programme in Cultural Management and Sustainability, and to the rich experiences of six Portuguese arts professionals who have kindly shared their perspectives for the purposes of this writing task. I would like to thank them and acknowledge their fundamental contribution. This text was also partially developed as part of the of research project Green Production – Performing Arts in Transition that I currently lead at CEIS20 – Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of the University of Coimbra.

always racing towards the next performance, the next co-production, the next international booking, fighting for a bigger audience, a higher status, and a bigger budget, it took me a great while to understand that such a mode of production was not only personally and institutionally unsustainable—it was also blatantly un-ecological. However, for many years, securing a single date for a presentation in France or Canada was a marker of success, legitimising both an artistic trajectory and my own professionalisation as an arts manager. This, of course, was because the idea of mobility had become the defining element of success.

> **'It doesn't even matter what you've done concretely; you just list, I don't know how many residencies in three countries and throw in a European network. (…) Your job is increasingly about interconnecting and less about what you actually do.'[3]**

Recently, this conceptualisation of 'internationalisation' has begun to be widely questioned, and concerns about social and environmental sustainability are informing important debates and changes. Indeed, the ecological emergency is already impacting artistic and curatorial decisions, as well as challenging production, touring and management models[4]. But, for many years, I thought that accumulating miles and countries was the kind of international work I was supposed to be doing, so the topics covered in that continuing professional development workshop indeed corresponded—at least partially—to the skills required for the job. This was especially true given that I was employed in organisations based in the outskirts of Europe. Working from Portugal—a small country sitting geographically and culturally between

3   Rogério Nuno Costa, whom I interviewed for the publication of *SISTEMA. INFINITAMENTE. IMATERIAL. Ballet Contemporâneo do Norte. 25 Anos (1995–2020)* [*SYSTEM. INFINITELY. IMMATERIAL. Ballet Contemporâneo do Norte. 25 Years (1995–2020)*] (Santa Maria da Feira: Ballet Contemporâneo do Norte, 2020).

4   See Joris Janssens, Martina Fraioli, *Research Results of Perform Europe* (Brussels: Perform Europe, 2022); *Voices of Culture: Culture and Creative Sectors and Industries driving Green Transition and facing the Energy Crisis* (Brussels: Voices of Culture, 2023) and Gijs de Vries, *To Make the Silos Dance – Mainstreaming Culture into EU Policy* (Amsterdam: European Cultural Foundation, 2021).

Europe and the Atlantic and economically categorized as semi peripheral—meant having less access to markets and fewer opportunities for the circulation of shows. It also implied a relatively fragile cultural policy and arts funding framework and being held down by the lack of proper cultural and transport infrastructure. Above all, considering the country's tardy democratic turn, building an international career in the performing arts represented a practical and symbolic victory over our recent past – a fascist and colonialist dictatorship which described itself as 'proudly alone'. For a Portuguese cultural worker like me, therefore, the circulation of artists and culture professionals in the European space and beyond was as much about work and collaboration opportunities as it was about completing the promise of 'progress' and modernisation, affirming our freedom, becoming European, in a sense. This might help explain why it took me so long to become aware of—and ready to interrogate—the given notion of 'internationalisation', and why many cultural practitioners in similar situations find themselves caught in conflicting perspectives and feelings in the face of current debates sparked by a mounting sense of urgency around climate change and other threats to planetary well-being, and the way these can be related—or not—to our own carbon-emitting activities, especially air travel. Indeed, the questions Portuguese artists and producers are facing are as deeply rooted in national shortcomings as they are global dilemmas. They are utterly practical and indisputably political: should small-scale, not-for-profit artistic and cultural activities based in semi peripheral countries bear responsibility for the ecological crisis? Should cultural practitioners be held accountable for a problem some of them see as originating and reaching so far beyond their power? Should they refrain from intensifying international touring, even in the face of well-known asymmetries inside the EU?[5]

For producers and arts managers, this is a challenge with profound implications. Soon after the historical process of emergence and social legitimation of their profession is almost complete, the social and environmental sustainability dilemmas push cultural management towards reviewing its expansionist assumptions and productivist processes (namely, of high mobility).

I have been arguing elsewhere that this is a critical juncture for the field of cultural management that we must fully acknowledge and seize[6].

5   See Joris Janssens, Martina Fraioli, *Research Results of Perform Europe*, ibid.

6   See Vânia Rodrigues, 'Greening our future: cultural policy and the ecological imperative', *European Journal of Cultural Management and Policy* 2024. No. 14:12707.

While it may be true that the ecological emergency accelerated the debate, the recognition that the sector was operating in overdrive is far from recent. Several voices had been denouncing the 'festivalisation of culture' and the 'regime of creativity', festivals being a clear example of the gordian knot: they function as neoliberal platforms that showcase the perverse processes of 'compulsive creativity' but are paradoxically also the places where its critique is possible. The 'age of innocence'[7] of our internationalisation efforts has arguably come to an end, as our transnational work today is surrounded by paradoxes, frictions and contradictions. Given the crucial intermediary role that producers and managers play in this field, this debate implies that we feel ready to challenge a hegemonic and highly restrictive understanding of 'success', one that had 'internationalisation' as its core attribute. Problematising success in terms of the international dimension of artistic practices would also involve recognising that, despite the indispensability of international cultural exchanges, this field of action is not without its excesses and risks. Some of the most commonly cited risks include: 'self-satisfied hypermobility', in which artists constantly jump from residency to residency, from performance space to performance space, without really establishing meaningful relationships with the communities they pass through or without ever leaving a cultured middle-class audience bubble; the risk of burnout; the risk of 'exoticizing the other', given the disproportionate distribution of travel opportunities; the risks of the monoculture of 'European festivals'; and, last but not least, the risk of ecological negligence, 'due to excessive travelling in environmentally harmful means of transportation'[8].

Time has come for arts professionals to come to terms with the fact that, while the value of transnational exchange and international mobility remains indisputable (and must be upheld as a human and cultural right), our ways of supporting it have perhaps been too

7   See Joris Janssens, *Reframing the International* (Brussels: Flanders Arts Institute, 2018).
8   See *RESHAPE – A workbook to reimagine the art world* (Brussels: Flanders Arts Institute, 2021).

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dependent on the models and worldviews of the 1990s, in their optimistic, Western-centric, export- and growth-oriented tendencies.

Truth is, we might never have been fabulous. Acknowledging this represents a change of pace, of values, and direction. The challenge for arts management is now more complex than simply getting things done. We need to ask different questions: who gets to do things? Where, what for, and for whom? These are interrogations that point to the need to decolonise the field[9] and signal the need to imagine what an eco-ethical arts management might be.

(UN)LEARNING INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Envisaging how international arts management practices might be informed by sustainability and environmental ethics, needs to be rooted in the concrete experiences and perspectives of cultural workers, otherwise it risks being a rhetorical sham. Thinking with(in) our ways of doing is crucial if we are truly invested in learning and unlearning about international collaboration and development in this new context, in which ecological, social and ethical demands fundamentally challenge the arts *modi operandi*. Let us delve into six fragments[10] of statements from Portuguese arts professionals. Their international journey will resonate with many of us, especially those working farther from the centres of privilege, in distinct ways. They help us map old and new gaps, suggest possibilities for action; they improvise, improve, experiment. They can be a beacon for the skills we have to look out for.

- **Clara Antunes (CA), Cláudia Hortêncio (CH) and Marta Martins (MM)** are project managers and producers with diverse backgrounds who share a passion for cultural democracy

9   See Eduardo Nivón Bolán and Delia Sánchez Bonilla, '<u>La gestión cultural en América Latina</u>' [Cultural Management in Latin America] in *Diversidad, tradición e innovación en la gestión cultural. Teorías y contextos* [*Diversity, Tradition and Innovation in Cultural Management. Theories and contexts*], Vol. 1 (México: Universidad de Guadalajara, 2016), pp. 21–56; and Ana Gaio, Avril Joffe, Javier J. Hernández-Acosta, Milena Dragićević Šešić, '<u>Decolonising the cultural policy and management curriculum – reflections from practice</u>', *Cultural Trends* 2023, No. 33 (2), pp. 141–158.

10   Their statements were collected in January and February 2024. In some cases, they were slightly edited for clarity.

and participatory, socially transformative performing arts projects. Currently they are working at different capacities in ARTEMREDE[11], a cultural cooperation project gathering 18 cities, including the capital Lisbon.

- **Ana Carvalhosa (AC)** is a senior producer at CIRCOLANDO[12], a project with artistic direction by André Braga and Cláudia Figueiredo in the field of interdisciplinary intersections, with a focus on performing arts. Throughout its 23-year journey, they have created more than 30 shows, been present in 23 countries, and established a creation centre, Central Eléctrica, that currently hosts over 80 artists annually in residence.
- **Xavier de Sousa (XS)** is a producer, performance maker, and independent curator. Beyond his own creative work, he is involved with New Queers on the Block (UK)[13] and the digital platform for research on transnational performative practices, performingborders (UK/PT)[14].
- **António Pedro Lopes (APL)** works as an artist, cultural manager, curator, and artistic director. He has directed festivals, exhibitions, and artistic projects in Portugal, Europe and USA. A co-founder and co-director of the Tremor music and art festival[15] on São Miguel Island, Azores, he recently coordinated and artistically directed the bid of Ponta Delgada, Azores 2027 for the European Capital of Culture.

Everybody remembers a time when 'the goal was only to establish contacts, to build an international experience and network that did not exist' (MM). They have since then taken part in various EU-funded projects, co-productions and other transnational formats, and are now more fully aware of what it is about: 'partners are motivated by personal growth, knowledge sharing, empowerment, and participation models, where the process matters much more than the result' (CA). 'Participation in networks and the development of collaborative projects contain the potential to create, even if momentarily, a privileged time-space for listening, sharing, and imagining alternative formats, and even institutions' (AC).

11   See **ARTEMREDE**.
12   See **CIRCOLANDO**.
13   See **New Queers on the Block**.
14   See **performingborders**.
15   See **Tremor Festival**.

Internationalisation has been a key steppingstone of their and their organisation's professionalisation, both in terms of the capacities it demanded and the financial resources it brought in.

That process made them aware of 'the centrality of that kind of funding for the continued success of the structure' and made them more attuned to innovation and to new opportunities to 'continuously foster sustained dialogues with international partners' (APL). Put differently, once you start collaborating at a transnational level, there is no coming back: the doors are open to a 'trajectory of tendentially exponential growth' (CA). In that path, there seems to be a time for illusion, and a time for wisdom: 'no matter how small they [the international cooperation projects] are, they require a very significant investment of time and intellectual resources, almost always disproportionate to the financial counterpart they offer' (CA). A shared project calendar might encapsulate exciting promises, but the reality is that they 'almost always find very small teams overwhelmed with work. International projects always bring additional work on top of the usual (which is immense), and often, there is a feeling that during travel and meetings, there is a workload left back home that no one will compensate for, leading to a continuous overload' (CH). This is not, by all means, new. We have long diagnosed a culture of self-exploitation and burnout plaguing the arts and culture, and related mental health issues are finally getting more attention. But, while we hope and fight for significant changes at policy level and in programme frameworks, how can cultural workers devise more sustainable cooperation strategies? 'We have learned to place more and more importance in leisure moments, meals, breaks, time for informal conversations where we can share fears and challenges. We recognise and try and fight the "hyper-productivity of own work plans"' (CH). 'We make sure there is enough time together: not just to address the tasks, but to build trust, to share a glass of wine – quality and pleasure needs to be in the equation' (MM). 'It is no longer just about going to a location to present our show; it is about seeking affinities,

with some calm, between similar or different structures. The formats of sharing have also diversified, with slower processes of knowledge such as conversations, walks, and communal meals now being valued' (AC).

These temporary, committed, intensive projects have also been challenging conventional leadership models. AC speaks, for example, of their decisionmaking processes being done consensually rather than by majority, out of a desire to reach 'inclusive, innovative, and effective decisions. We consciously opted for a horizontal collaborative model, in line with the desire to seek small and slow solutions capable of resisting productivity pressure.' But, she reckons, 'the transition from individualism (of each organisation) to the collective (of an ephemeral project) is a complex and challenging process. To avoid possible deadlocks, we previously defined that after two meetings without consensus, the partner responsible for the action decides.' Developing an international career or working transnationally and in diverse partnerships 'involves mediation, bridge-building, creating matches, extended conversations, coordination, negotiation (including financial negotiation), patience, persistence' (APL) and ability to advance through trial and error. It demands 'humility, dialogue capability, and careful management of relationships (…) so that everyone feels that cooperation is a safe space, mitigating inevitable imbalances resulting from structural power relations (e.g. institutions with more robust budgets and led by men tend to occupy more space)' (CA). Even if we are mostly using European funding mechanisms, we need to 'see beyond Europe and understand our role in the world, including the privilege of the North/West, colonial heritage, and migration routes' (MM). It calls for imagination in 'finding alternative communication methods to the dominance of English' (APL, AC, MM). It includes 'managing tensions, fatigue, and frustrations in airports' and other in-between spaces (CH).

Unsurprisingly, they also confirm that 'in recent years, issues of ecological emergency have gained prominence both thematically and operationally' (APL). They are dealing with this in various ways, many times making it up as they go along, aware of the paradoxes and insufficiencies of their decisions: 'we have been rethinking the number of trips and overall mobility, as well as trying to, whenever possible, change to more environmentally friendly means of transportation' (CH and MM). 'Azores being an archipelago, we have sometimes tried to use boats for the transportation of materials' (between the islands and the mainland) but that remains challenging – due to weather conditions and the scarcity of local resources (APL).

They schedule longer artistic residencies, with greater impact in the local communities, but that also poses a challenge for parents and caretakers travelling for longer periods, so they 'stay with the trouble', and keep experimenting with different formats.

And, CA worries, it may be insignificant that we rearrange artists' trips while, in a given project 'partners travel 36 times over 4 years, totalling about 720 individual trips, with the vast majority involving layovers!'. In fact, artistic mobility (of artists, programmers, producers and audiences) has been on the spot in the conversation around the green transition. But might it be too easy a target? APL and XS speak of other efforts, such as the 'dematerialisation of communication (minimising the use of paper and other physical materials)', using 'the public water network to provide free water to all event participants', organising 'a public transportation system for participants', 'upcycling the festival's merchandise', 'using a cashless system', or acquiring 'materials locally and preferably second-hand'. Working in disparate contexts across the globe has allowed them to perceive how the Global South is disproportionately affected by climate issues. XS talks about his recent work in Kenya, where a warehouse on the outskirts of Nairobi that houses digital content storage drives for YouTube was recently closed because it needed so much water for drive cooling that it deprived more than 10 local villages of water. That experience helped shape important decisions such as partnering up to 'reduce the digital footprint on platforms used for content dissemination, transmission, and marketing', 'reducing and streamlining uploads of digital content on various platforms' or 'co-sharing drives'.

For XS, working with ecological awareness eventually boils down to adopting 'hyper-local production models', that is, working locally with local resources and teams, minimising the impact of travel and shipping of materials. This can easily pass for an operational adaptation, but the implications are much wider: avoiding 'transporting works internationally' (XS) opens up stimulating creative possibilities (re-enactments, delegated performances, etc.), provokes formal experimentation (by reducing

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the quantity of physical materials, focusing more on body, voice, and projections, finding inventive ways to present performances in person), promotes shared authorship, and can encourage redistribution of privilege and access. Working contextually and locally may also bring 'local populations closer to themes related to biodiversity, species preservation, ecological crisis awareness, and the urgency of intersectionality' and foster the 'discovery of local traditions, ancestral knowledge, and gastronomy' (APL), as Tremor Festival does through their Community Kitchen and Na Nossa Mesa projects and their online restaurant guide. But amid all the green buzz, we must remain critical. Indeed, AC speaks of the difficulty in dissociating 'what comes from the agenda and what was already in our concerns of the moment. Agendas are cross-cutting, and a process of conscious unlearning is necessary to avoid falling, in our projects, into a mere enunciation of principles and themes with terms forged from support regulations, which benefit those who dominate the lexicon and the competitive rhetoric.' Again, Portugal might be a vantage point from which to look at all these changes: as a country living in a dictatorship until the mid-1970s, this tendency to overemphasise local artistic production sends chills through our minds and bodies, especially at a time when ultra-nationalistic discourses and extremist populism are on the rise.

TOWARDS ECO-ETHICS IN THE ARTS

Embracing sustainability while working internationally in the arts, then, might have less to do with dutifully applying green recommendations than with unlearning ways of doing which are tied to colonialist and mercantilist legacies. The skills we as a sector need to develop are less anchored in certainty than in ambiguity—that is why, I argue, learning through eco-ethical dilemmas might be vital. Prescriptive approaches to sustainability leave contradiction and complexity behind, or, at the very least, belittle them. Experimenting with ecoethics implies redirecting our attention to mutually reinforcing relationships between the domination of nature and the domination of women, races, and classes. Doing that may involve analysing the sustainability of artistic practice through the lens of permaculture[16], adopting some of its principles such as

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16   This approach is defended and implemented in the **PLANT – Performing Life Akademia Network** Creative-Europe funded project. It is a wonderful example of how to use dominant frameworks to try out counter-hegemonic processes.

observe and interact ('Making the most of what is already in each place. Spending time observing our surroundings in order to devise solutions that fit a specific situation. Decide where to look.'; *apply self-regulation and accept feedback* ('practise reflexivity throughout processes, seek feedback'); *use small, slow solutions* ('Start with small changes, strive for expanded time'; *use the edges and value the marginal* ('learn from the other, try to integrate the difference, propose new intersections'). For producers and arts managers this amounts to redeeming their professions from an actionoriented straitjacket, reconceptualising production and arts management as an *artisanal* activity, and not an industrial, efficiency-led ingenuity. It is a counter-definition of arts management, one that is justice-centred and does not eschew its capacity to interfere sensitively and politically in the world. This eco-awareness and susceptibility points to a different skillset than that which is readily available in arts management programmes. But how do you teach vulnerability? One way I have been attempting this is through our experimental study programme in Cultural Management and Sustainability. We are focusing on training cultural leaders – be they artists, community activists, producers, or top managers – to fully engage with eco-ethics.

We have been experimenting with the use of eco-ethical dilemmas in the classroom, which involves practicing ambiguity, otherness, empathy in fictional circumstances akin to real-world situations. This is a pedagogical practice rooted in an ecofeminist understanding of the broad field of arts management, one that does not interpret ethics in an essentialist way, fully presuming there are no intrinsically correct ethical values when it comes to ecological issues.

Correspondingly, the research I have been undertaking starts from an ethically and epistemologically cautious reading of the plethora of 'best practices' manuals, toolkits and how-to guides, especially those with a pragmatic vocation, which seem to take the link between the environmental emergency and the arts and culture for granted, rather than problematise, debate and justify it. Specifically, I have been arguing against an excessive focus on the pragmatic dimension of the 'green transition' (e.g. the obsession with carbon-emissions calculators and environmental metrics, which can sometimes be read as nearly techno-optimism) and insisting on the contextual situatedness of such a clearly global problem. Indeed, in the nationwide survey we conducted[17], most of the respondents' perceived conflicts seemed to be of a political or ethical nature, poignantly indicating the need to explore the role of cultural policy and of eco-ethics in the arts ecological transition process. The severity of the urgency notwithstanding, we need to make time for questions such as: how much distance is there between mobilising the potential for the social impact of art and its institutions and a sophisticated version of superficial self-instrumentalisation? It seems essential to advocate for a more critical analysis of individual, organisational and sectoral responsibilities towards the ecological emergency – one that allows for a fair degree of ambivalence and is reconciled with uncertainty. Defending leeway for complexity and ambiguity amid the proliferation of public statements and action plans seems to me to be vital to secure a role for the arts and culture in the green transition that is truly transformative, and not merely a mechanistic compliance with procedures.

Porto, March 2024

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17   See Vânia Rodrigues and Fernando Matos de Oliveira (scientific research), Vânia Rodrigues and António Ventura (researchers), 'A Part for the Whole. Report of the Survey "Sustainable and Ecological Practices on the Performing Arts in Portugal"' (Portugal: University of Coimbra, 2023).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vânia Rodrigues worked as an arts manager and consultant for several cultural organisations in Portugal and internationally before transitioning to a research career. Her professional trajectory is associated with various artistic organisations, from national theatres to independent theatre companies. She continues to participate regularly in initiatives in the fields of arts management and production, cultural policies, strategic planning, and transnational cultural cooperation. She holds a Ph.D. in Artistic Studies – Theatre and Performative Studies from the University of Coimbra and a Master in Cultural Policies and Cultural Management from the City University of London. Currently, she coordinates the Post-Graduate Diploma in Arts Management and Sustainability at the University of Coimbra and co-directs the research platform Modes of Production – Performing Arts in Transition and the exploratory project GREENARTS (FCT), musing on the intersections between the regimes of production and creation, as well as the discursive and practical transformations of artistic production in the face of growing demands for social and environmental sustainability. Author of ***Creative Production and Management in the Performing Arts: Modus Operandi*** (London: Routledge, 2024).

Analysis of the Condition of Contemporary Performing Arts in Eastern Europe

☐ GYÖRGY SZABÓ

Eastern Europe became part of the international contemporary performing arts scene (theatre and dance) in the 1970s, but more intensively in the 1980s. It was an exciting time. We were thrown into this turbulent world with no background or experience. We were guided by our intuition and stumbled into the possibilities of collaboration. We were absolute beginners. At the same time, we had to find the cracks in the political wall and adapt to the practices in place beyond it. With our colleagues in the region, we thought a lot about taking advantage of the widening space for manoeuvre created by the retreat of Soviet control, this strange freedom of a vacuum. We wanted to broaden our scope. We wanted more, even though we had ridiculously insufficient domestic resources. The only way to overcome the lack of money was to establish close links with cultural institutions and decision-makers in the US and Europe. We availed ourselves of these opportunities.

Today, more than thirty years after the regime change, we have a vast network of contacts and a solid track record.

Despite these successes, we still had unfulfilled expectations, which could be summed up as hope that our local artists would gain a more prominent position in the Western cultural market.

We remained hopeful until 2004. A few years after we joined the EU, theźcold shower came. We were saddened that Western European interest in us had faded considerably. It became clear to many of us that as the region lost its political relevance, the interest in us declined. We had to realise that we had to do more at home and abroad to get results.

In the decades preceding the accession, we could count on substantial foreign funding for our efforts, which helped many of us overcome the lack of domestic financing. At the same time, one-sided support also had a negative impact, as it was conducive to a lower degree of attention being paid to building a supportive environment for contemporary art in Eastern European countries. I am thinking, in particular, of institutionalisation and especially of the so-called receiving or host venues, which are spaces without artists of their own. It was always apparent in the region that the high level of foreign support would not be provided for long. The halcyon years would surely come to an end at some point. Unfortunately, the continued importance of external financing masked the shortcomings of our domestic cultural market.

I believe I am not alone in feeling that I have little knowledge of how project-based support (a mechanism to obtain funds from public sources based on a grant scheme) for contemporary art has developed in different countries. However, from what I have heard from my colleagues and what I know from experience, everyone followed a similar path, so I have some observations. Still, I would like to note that ensuring a more accurate historical fidelity would require conducting a comprehensive regional study. Time is of the essence since more and more people like myself are retiring from active life, and their expertise is an essential resource for understanding the process of the past.

THE PAST

The change began in the West, where the subversive forces of the 1960s produced profound movements in all the arts. This change was based on honesty and focused on everyday life's sobering realities and problems.

The demand for theatre renewal came from young people who wanted the performing arts to be open and sensitive. This change occurred in a world where post-war living standards were improving and the young baby-boom generation, asserting their independence, turned against their parents and become unquestioning advocates of

their values. This happened with overwhelming momentum. These included a critical confrontation with the past and aggressive realities, the need to deepen democracy, and broadening education. Western policymakers could not help but give in to this elementary movement and gradually provide a framework for its aspirations. The first funding was awarded on a project basis, but even the institutional system was undermined in some countries. In France and Belgium, for instance, the structure of the theatre was spectacularly transformed.

> **Project-based support for the performing arts became a civil right of sorts. This transformation was spurred on by the emergence of fresh American art in Europe, which represented a new challenge for our continent.**

On the other hand, the Soviet Union influenced Western intellectuals, which had a disconcerting effect on Western politics.

What is essential from our point of view is that productions that received significant media coverage and touched the masses in the West were able to slowly infiltrate the Eastern Bloc amid the Cold War, primarily through festival programmes, especially in Poland (ISFOT Wrocław 1969[1]) and Yugoslavia (BITEF Belgrade 1967[2]). During the Cold War, Eastern Europe once again became a culturally conflicting zone. The results of new artistic initiatives were seen by Western policy as a useful tool, which helped to embrace them. The West wanted to make an impact, while Moscow was determined to dominate Eastern Europe. Thus, the export of youthful 'mobile' art behind the Iron Curtain played a key role in promoting Western democracies and in the metaphorical questioning of the values of Eastern European regimes. The fact that Western cultural exports were under foreign control accurately expresses the political will.

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1   International Student Festival of Open Theatre [Międzynarodowy Studencki Festiwal Teatru Otwartego], until 1973 organized under the name International Festival of Festivals of Student Theatre (Międzynarodowy Festiwal Festiwali Teatrów Studenckich) – ed. note.

2   See **Festival BITEF**.

This realisation gave a green light to the professional aspirations of the West, so intensely represented by the young artists of the time and the ambitious producers and host theatre managers behind them. It was this circle that sought ways of extending the visibility of successful productions and their talented artists (Informal Theatre Meeting 1981[3], Trans European Halles 1983[4], Bagnolet International Choreographic Contest 1969), first at home, then across borders, and finally throughout the world, and even in other political systems. These organisations wanted more host theatres in the modern sense and to put them into a distribution network to support artists. We, in our region, were grateful. These artistic products infiltrated our reality thanks to foreign financing. This import of art also proved subversive in our country, challenging the old cultural traditions and the false claims that politics had been making for so long. It opened new pathways for young artists and intellectuals and sparked essential movements.

The emergence of guest performances with an unusual approach and high impact is typical of grassroots initiatives, which, due to a lack of funds, have been set in motion mainly on an amateur level, outside the framework of mainstream national culture. In many cases, they were met with a lack of understanding by politicians, who either banned them or tolerated their existence. Until the political regime change, support for new ventures in contemporary performing art was scarce, unlike in the West, where a well-developed system had been established. In some countries, a local institution was cautiously involved in these endeavours, but smaller alternative/underground venues became the scene of these experiments, offering relatively modest conditions.

Interestingly, the driving force behind these events was usually a local artist, a group of artists, or perhaps a sensitive organiser/ civilian who came out of nowhere.

3   The IETM (International network for contemporary performing arts) was founded in 1981 at an informal gathering of performing arts professionals at the Polverigi Festival (now called Inteatro festival) in Italy.

4   See Trans Europe Halles.

Many of them could not even dream of becoming institutionalised (establishing a permanent venue) because the policy rigidly blocked any such attempt, so they could only organise one-off events or festivals, especially those with some form of international connections. These festivals and events helped their organisers to make further appearances at home, to make new contacts or to invite people from abroad. It is important to note that the international programmes of these events were mainly funded from outside.

With the advent of pluralism at the beginning of the 1990s, the situation of contemporary art changed. It was legalised, and its representatives rightly hoped for public funding. The region typically copied the Western funding system, for better or worse. Despite the system's many faults, everyone was satisfied because domestic funding was finally open to them.

Many saw an opportunity and hoped for institutionalisation in the decade that shaped our present. Yet, these initiatives almost all failed one by one, with the consequences still palpable today. This has meant that the grant system continues to be the dominant source of financing for contemporary performing arts, which are known to lack stability and predictability.

An essential factor in developing this situation has been and continues to be the mistrust and suspicion that has always surrounded the perception of contemporary art in our region in political circles. It is rooted in long-established traditional thinking and the dominance of conservative traditions. In the West, the momentum and scale of the baby-boom generation forced the need for change in response to which cultural policy was amended, and art was integrated into the funding framework. In contrast, this innovative impulse did reach our region through the filter of politics but not with the force to achieve a breakthrough comparable to that in the West. After 1989, it entered the canon of democracy, but not with the force that would have brought about profound change in our region.

THE PRESENT

Today, it is clear that the region's institutionalisation is underdeveloped for its size. With a few exceptions, the number of institutions and their density are low. This underdevelopment is a handicap in many respects.

Cooperation is a fundamental element of the contemporary performing arts scene, primarily requiring institutions or related organisations. The small number of institutions limits the number of possible links. The denser the network of institutions, the more probable the number of links, and the more intense and varied the cooperation at home and abroad. The more integrated we are into the international world, the more up-to-date the artist, the professional environment, and the audience. An artist who lives in 'real-time' is better connected to the world; their art has more chances to be validated, which is an invaluable help for them. A well-developed system of contemporary performing arts institutions can better help local communities form and develop. Not to mention its lobbying power, as a leader of an institution who is part of the local establishment can lobby effectively and often more strongly for the professional interests of artists.

> **Leaders are effective because they understand the interests of policy-makers and funding bodies better than artist do, therefore they are aware of the strength of their arguments.**

Advocacy is essential for the institution because it is fundamentally motivated by the financial situation of the artists and cultural workers affiliated with it since it is a partner. If the artist with whom the contract is signed is in a better financial position, the institution's opportunities and position improve. It may sound strange, but the budget of the host institution consists of 'two parts'. The first is what it has, and the other is what the artist brings.

The stabilising role of the institutions cannot be neglected either. In times of crisis, institutions are often forced to adapt to the situation and can help artists overcome their difficulties up to a certain extent. They are equipped with certain tools to manage and cushion crises. The partnership between the artist and institution is, therefore, always worth nurturing because the artist can rely on it in times of need. A welcome recent development is the emergence and consolidation of production houses/producer organisations as a result of Creative Europe's funding for networks, which is undoubtedly a significant step forward in terms of institutionalisation. But in this case, we see that, even now,

the size of foreign funding is too dominant, while the size of the domestic contribution lags behind this development.

The low number of receiving venues (e.g. theatres) also negatively impacts the touring practices of foreign and domestic productions. The infrequency of foreign guest performances weakens the influx of refreshing new trends from beyond our country and deprives us of their dynamic effects. Moreover, it is also a cost factor, as the cost of touring can be spread among a small number of venues. In addition, weak touring potential slows down the acquisition of a basic set of knowledge and experience by local artists, which is essential for the creation and international distribution of productions.

The sparsity in a given country's territorial distribution depends crucially on its level of urbanisation. A city needs to reach a certain size and development to create a local need for such an institution. It needs a professional milieu and an active public (critical mass). Every new site on the map of institutions marks a vital step in our journey. It reduces the distances between them and makes artistic life richer, more organised, and multi-dimensional. Distance is diminished by the development and speed of transport. Climate change is making the quality of the rail network, which increasingly determines touring, a more pressing issue. All this demonstrates that the development of this sector is closely linked to the country's development. It also shows that contemporary art is an essential indicator of a country's development. It is easy to decipher for those familiar with our world and are aware of the local context.

Finally, I would like to mention a well-known but little-noticed factor, namely the brain drain of artists. With the disappearance of political barriers after 1989, the rich and much more developed Western system began, wittingly or unwittingly, exerting a more powerful pull than before. The brain drain affects established artists and newcomers alike. Success abroad is the coveted and preferred desire of all artists. It is attractive because it can provide them access to high-end market conditions that were previously unattainable in their careers. It is equally tempting for the young artist in search of the best conditions for his or her development. Those who can fit in with their work in the West or get a degree as a beginner beyond our borders see little reason to return. This exodus of potential, like economic trends, weakens the strength of artistic communities and, in their case, their all-important domestic presence, thus slowing down and hampering the development of their home frameworks. Of course, there have been, are and will be exceptions who remain in

or return to their home countries despite all this. These exceptions are essential counter-examples. It would be worthwhile to systematically analyse the reasons and drivers behind these decisions and incorporate their lessons into the design of domestic development strategies to enhance domestic contexts' competitiveness and retention capacity.

EASTERN EUROPEAN REGIONAL COOPERATION

It is a welcome fact that the benefits of regional cooperation in the former socialist countries have been reconsidered in recent years. This has been fuelled by a decline in exaggerated expectations of the West, by growing funding problems there, and by a self-criticism of the postponement of the untapped potential of our region. In my experience, the underdevelopment of regional cooperation results from decades of a predominantly East-West focus in the sector of contemporary performing arts. It was undoubtedly inspired by the political isolation of the one-party system before 1989 and the aroma, richness, and creative power of freedom in the West. This unilateral curiosity has overshadowed the rapprochement between the countries of Eastern Europe. Too much attention was paid to the West and too little to one another. This long-standing neglect of one another has hampered the chances of rapprochement.

A general characteristic of crises is the limited number of options, but crises can also serve as a starting point for searching for new paths. Regional cooperation and convergence appear to be a new opportunity in this case. The first step should be to map our activities and get to know each other, and next, to design and implement processes based on the results.

Breathing life into relationships and creating their subject matter requires time-consuming and long-term building strategies. It also requires public support.

Opening up internally is also a reality we are facing. In many ways, people living side by side and sharing many of the same problems know much more about each other than Westerners may know about us. This way,

the references present in the works will find more understanding ears and eyes domestically rather than abroad.

With this new level of cooperation, I would like to see an essential role in creating a regional performing arts platform on a rotating basis. The idea of making such a platform is not new at all. It has been raised in almost every country over the past decades. The Balkan platform, which will be created in 2025 with the support of Creative Europe, will make it even more topical, as the southern region will be able to present itself and undoubtedly have an interesting selection of productions.

Of course, strengthening regional cooperation does not mean devaluing the rich presence of Western Europe. It will continue to play a crucial role, but it must be assigned its proper place.

> **However, it is possible to build an interdependent system in which national cooperation helps the regional one, and a regional platform helps maintain links with the West.**

This is justified by the experience that national platforms, organised with scarce resources, are today poorly followed by Western practitioners. However, regional selection may hold out the hope that greater immersion will be more attractive to Western managers, producers, and artistic directors.

CONCLUSIONS

The following is a summary of my standpoint. Our region is basically at a semi-peripheral level of development, and there are complex reasons for this. The region typically lacks institutions/host venues, and this fact is coupled with weaknesses observed in the application system in many countries. This fundamentally hinders the internal development of contemporary art and weakens its stability. It is imperative to find solutions in this area, as the political exposure of contemporary performing arts in our region is high. I am convinced that a higher degree of institutionalisation

can provide a higher degree of protection for the profession's autonomy. It provides a basis for organic development and can help the community of artists who are linked to it in many ways in the current conditions of resource scarcity. A denser institutional system provides the grounds for the establishment of more organic internal and external links, higher quality, greater mobility, internationality, and stability. How else to reduce the burden of this dependency in law and economics is a question for the future. Answering these questions will require a broad professional debate.

A FEW THOUGHTS ON THE PROBLEMS OF THE HUNGARIAN SITUATION

Since 2010, FIDESZ has essentially cut off grant-based funding for the independent art world even though it has gained considerable international and domestic recognition. Its institutions are now concentrated exclusively in Budapest, with only a few places in rural university towns with significant activity.

Today's most fundamental problem is the withdrawal of resources from the independent tendering system and its outdated practice. Suppressing funds was undoubtedly a political intention and a measure of censorship and silencing. In addition, the tendering system has not responded to the robust development of the market economy for a very long time, which is a severe failure attributed to many governments. This could be summarised as a failure to consider the cost of living and its consequences.

With a political turnaround expected soon, it is time to rethink funding schemes. The new financing must be fundamentally aligned with economic and professional circumstances, but it must also preserve the viable solutions developed and successfully applied in the past.

For me, the starting point for rebuilding the art market is that today's independent, innovative artist is also an entrepreneur. This aspect has not been addressed since the regime change. The cost of living in 2025 is high, and this fact is inescapable. This is a heavy burden for whoever is involved. The contemporary performer, especially the non-mainstream one, goes against the grain, goes against market demands, and thus understandably enjoys greater market exposure.

The market itself does not provide enough income in our case. Consequently, it needs to be provided with a backbone and structure for

artists to dare to venture into it. This means that it is not just a specific segment that requires public help to work in the public interest but rather the entire market in need of them. If the market does not recognise an artist's work but the artist is doing it in the public interest, then there is no alternative but to use public funding. If this is true, it means that the state and local governments have a crucial responsibility to maintain the project system that funds them and to provide guarantees for it.

At the institutional level, bringing productions to the countryside remains an important objective. Before 2010, plans were made to set up institutions in at least five smaller university towns. These institutions should not only be simple host venues but also have a significant community-building and modernising effect in the countryside.

The third element is the export of contemporary domestic productions. Hungarian cultural institutions that have been active abroad for a long time have participated in this process with varying intensity. Generally speaking, they did not receive sufficient attention before the regime change, but also not since, apart from a few occasions. It was never part of a strategy. However, achieving this is a very complex task because, besides culture, political, diplomatic, and economic interests are at stake. Hence, integrating contemporary art is only possible if a modernisation policy comes to the fore and relies on it because it sees a common ground.

The big question in our country is to what extent the new political leadership will recognise the potential of contemporary performing art. We do not know the answer to this question yet, but given the professional agenda of the performing arts community, we need to be ready to start working at a higher level.

Budapest, January 2025

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

György Szabó graduated from the University of Economics in 1982. There, he did voluntary work for the university club. Afterwards, he got a job in Petőfi Hall, a brand-new youth centre in Budapest. Owing to the national and international programmes managed by Szabó, the centre attracted a large audience for contemporary arts that was previously unimaginable. Intending to develop the local scene, he set up the Workshop Foundation and invested the money he raised in contemporary performing arts. Next, he founded the Trafó building, which was eventually transformed into a multidisciplinary venue with the help of the capital of Budapest (1998). The institution quickly gained widespread international recognition. He was the institution's executive director until 2012. He was removed from his post by FIDESZ. He was eventually allowed to stay and help run the institution until 2025. He was a member of several foreign arts councils and the initiator of Dunapart (Hungarian Performers Platform) and the NEXT platform for young artists. He has taught extensively in various management schools in Budapest. More recently, his research has focused on culture and innovation.
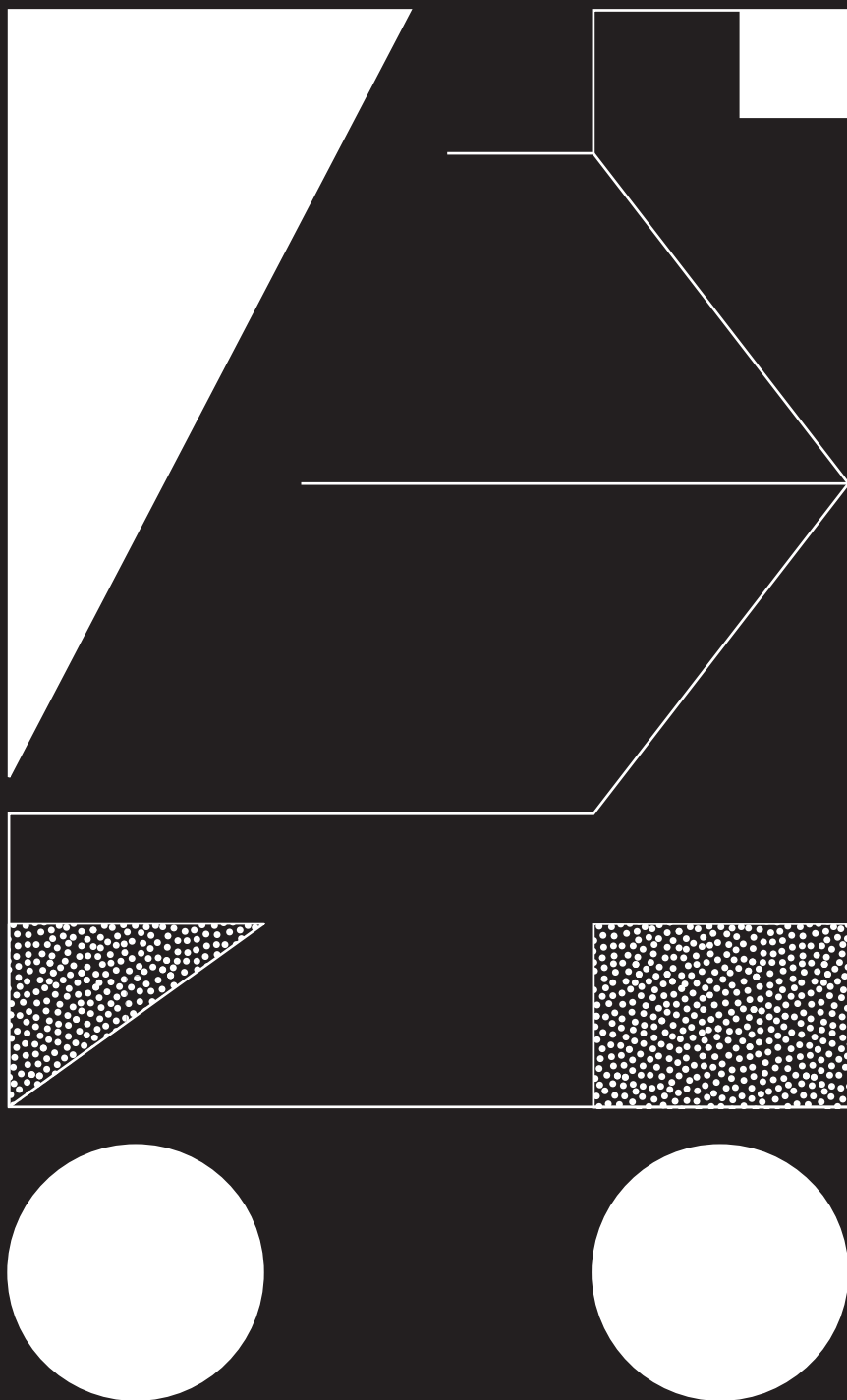
The **Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute** promotes public debate about contemporary Polish theatre, broadens research perspectives and endorses theoretical reflection on the subject, supports research and educational activities, and keeps the most extensive Polish archives documenting contemporary theatre. The Institute supports the Polish theatre community by offering grant programmes and competitions such as Teatr Polska, Lato w teatrze, and OFF Polska. It runs the largest Polish online portal e-teatr dedicated entirely to Polish theatre, the online Encyclopedia of the Polish Theatre, the PROSPERO specialist bookstore, and a publishing house.

The Theatre Institute carries out and supports activities to establish, develop and strengthen international cooperation in the field of theatre and the performing arts. Its activities promote the presentation of Polish achievements abroad and long-term international collaboration at the individual and institutional levels, covering artistic and scientific activities, with special emphasis on interdisciplinary projects. It is a member of networks such as On the Move, ENICPA and SIBMAS, monitors issues discussed internationally, and participates in activities for individual professional groups working in the theatre ecosystem.

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