

COVID-19's Impacts on Turkish Theatre Industry and the Possible Solutions

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Abstract: This thesis' main goal is to analyse the effects of the COVID-19 measures on Turkish Theatre Industry, mainly in Istanbul. The chronological journey and the importance of theatre in Turkish culture will be introduced through many perspectives. Actors and managers have supplied the data used in the tables while colleagues that have spent time in the thespian scene within Istanbul provided commentary. The difference between the problems and the solutions adopted by private and public institutions such as: virtual environments, online plays, interactive plays, recorded plays made available will be analysed. The analysis will be multifaceted while not strictly empirical. Resources of empirical research done on the subject will also be quoted to be fuel to the arguments of the paper. The change of the audience in both a public funded and a private funded institution will be examined and compared. Different attempts to maintain the contact between the theatre and the audience have different solutions, both good and bad, and they will be discussed further. The aim of the paper is to prove the conclusion that transforming the definitions and thinking interdisciplinary leads to better solutions, certainly in the case of saving Istanbul Theatres.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Relevance of the Topic

The pandemic of COVID-19 has been affecting nearly everywhere throughout the world. Compared to the other global tragedies, COVID-19 surely is one of the most significant states of emergency. It has changed the conditions and approaches for numerous industries. Since the main income of the theatres and performing arts centres is through box office revenues, the pandemic ruled out this aspect in whole which led to the declining of the economical situation of all of the institutions.

Theatre, in word, derived from the ancient Greek word 'theatron', meaning the place of viewing; the word 'theatron' derived from the word 'theasthai' meaning "to see". This has been interpreted differently by many philosophers and artists throughout history, but the majority accepts that the audience, the viewers are a compulsory element of the theatre. Theatre, by definition, is performed in a specific place. It is not repeated and it is special to the time which is performed only. This deems the art as unique. (**Seyben**)

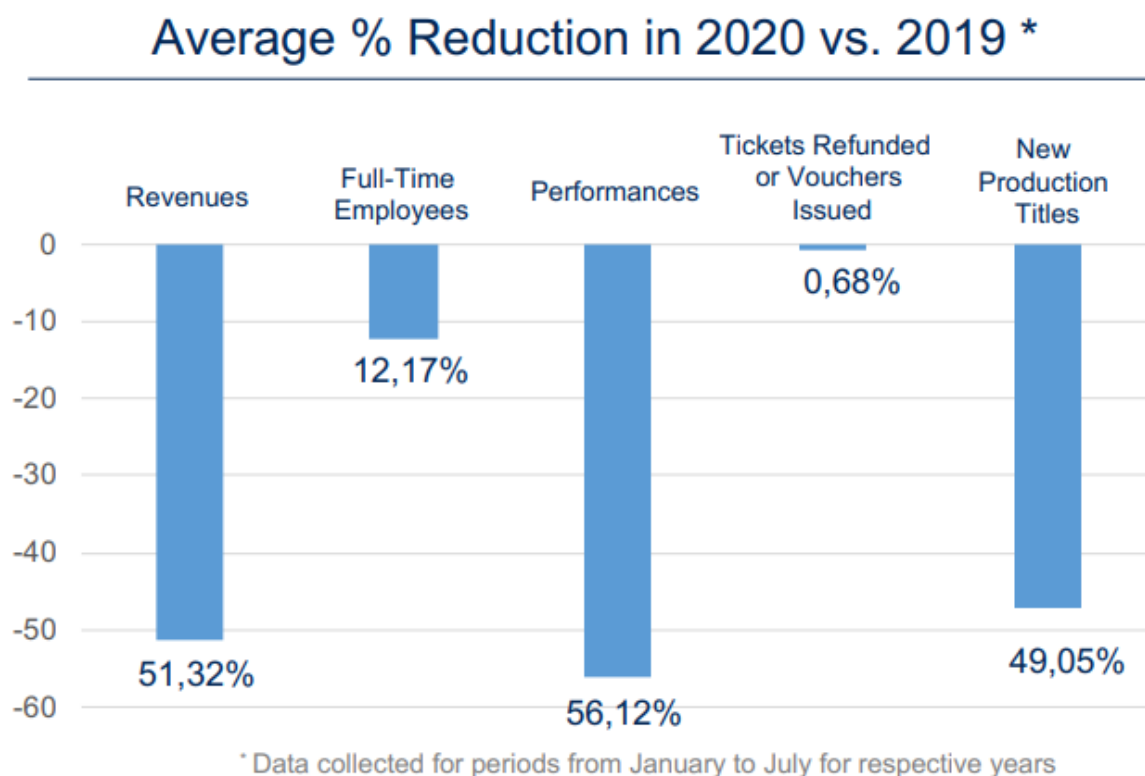
The pandemic inevitably transformed this definition. Inability of being altogether in a stage has raised controversies. The question "Would theatre lose its uniqueness when being recorded and watched online?" Theatre is experienced through presence and on a single current time. The audience and the actors have to be present in the same place at the same time. Hence, theatre is the most **mimetic** art form amongst all. It requires direct presentation rather than indirect representation. The liveliness and the synchronicity is mandatory- the representation

and the reception has to be simultaneous, on a single time, and without any interruptions. (Akim)

Based on research made by SDA Bocconi Arts&Culture Knowledge Center in 41 Performing Arts institutions across 6 countries(mainly throughout Europe and The United States), the impact of Covid on institutions was considered as severe. The potential problems that worried the institutions most were: the uncertainty of the economic environment, the sanitary restrictions for performances and the lack of audience to attend live performances. The reduction of output between 2019 and 2020 are indicated on the graph below.

Table 1.A

Courtesy of: Bocconi SDA



Regardless of the same impact on both U.S and Europe institutions, the trends and the level of concerns differed considerably. While the U.S. institutions worried %80 for future financial position, Europe institutions worried quite less compared to

the U.S.- around %58. This difference was caused by the variation of revenue distribution between them. In Europe, the largest source of revenues for most institutions were public funding, followed by direct revenues and private funding. Whereas for the U.S., direct revenues were the most important- followed by private funding and then by public funding. This differs the impact quite heavily. As the biggest change between before and after COVID-19 were live audiences, the U.S. institutions were surely having a stronger negative impact. This led to distinct approaches between. In order to stabilise the financial situation, the U.S. executives decreased the number of full-time employees by %42.5. This number was recorded as %2.39 in Europe. The public funding affected both the institutions and the employees quite positively. The distinction between Europe and the U.S. is indicated in the chart below.

Table 1.B

Q0_0		Revenues	FullTimeEmpl oyees	Performance s	RefundsAnd Vouchers	NewProducti onTitles
EUROPE	Mean	-45.87	-2.39	-55.39	2.13	-51.77
	N	31	31	31	31	31
US	Mean	-68.20	-42.50	-58.40	-9.40	-32.40
	N	10	10	10	10	10
Total	Mean	-51.32	-12.17	-56.12	-.68	-47.05
	N	41	41	41	41	41

Courtesy of: Bocconi SDA

1.2 Methodology

In this paper, I am going to analyse how Covid-19 has affected the Turkish Theatre Industry- both financially and artistically. I am going to use datas from the box offices of some of the most successful theatre institutions in Istanbul, as it is the capital of culture of Turkey. The audience data will include both Istanbul State Theatre, and Moda Sahnesi. Istanbul State Theatre's revenue and costs are

maintained majorly through public funding, as it is a public institution. Whereas Moda Sahnesi is a private institution, and it depends mainly on box office revenues and private funding. Both of the institutions weren't able to rehearse new production titles for the same period of time, weren't able to accept live audiences during the restrictions, and had a quota of %50 audience until recently due to COVID-19 measures.

2 Cultural and Historical Context

2.1 History of Turkish Traditional Theatre

It is believed by the historians that all of the art forms started within the ancient people through the fear of the unknown- from the inexplicable events and creatures. Therefore, we can say that religions and beliefs affected fine arts excessively. In ancient societies people used to gather around reverends and shamans with enthusiasm. They were influenced by the rituals and the performances. Hence, the shamans and the reverends could be considered as the first actors throughout history.

The rituals and religious ceremonies back in the Turkish communities of Middle Asia consisted of dramatic elements which resemble the main aspects of performance arts today. With time, these shifted to significant events during that time. Turkish legends and myths are great examples of this subject. People used to meet in temples and reenacted the stories told by heroes. In a funeral rite titled "Yuğ" people used to honour the legacy of the dead with musical poems 'Sagu' and dances. For the ritual, they cut their hair, painted their faces and placed "balbal" stones around the meeting place. This mirrors heavily both the *mise-en-scene* and the actors' preparation of the plays. Of course the mystical wasn't the only use for

theatre, Turks being nomadic in the inception of their culture opted for the use of oral tradition in storytelling, which relied heavily on visual aid to help with memorization. Without the use of paper, which was very expensive to get and used mostly on war efforts, the only possible way of securing writing was on tablets of stone or petrified wood. The steps of Central Asia aren't flush with forests and carrying tablets around on horseback for a nomadic tribe was truly inefficient. The stories of culture, interpreted to be oration heavy theatrical pieces that centred around history that were exaggerated to become what is essentially didactical plays.

The similarities of ancient eastern and western theatre culture actually start shining around these areas more clearly. Where education is concerned, even for cultures that are non-nomadic like the 16th century Italian use of stock characters, *Commedia dell'arte*. Ancient Turkish people also heavily relied on such stock characters, especially similar in their personality traits. Early applications mainly relied on ribbons hanging loosely from clothing, which had shamanic significance, the type of clothing and the age of the character stylized by the use of walking sticks and a hunched back. Simplifying characters into cliches allowed less context to be required. Within an oral tradition decreasing the amount of words that must be remembered helped tremendously and in Italian theatre it served to draw the mostly undereducated crowd into the story faster. Reducing the exposition needed and delivering lines from characters with perspectives and goals pre-established helped crowds understand subjects of greater significance and nuance.

According to an article written by M.M. Nikolic, the oldest theatre piece in Turkish culture, is an epic. It was delivered 4000 years ago, taking a victory from a war of those times as the setting. The second oldest piece, a bit newer than the first,

is from the time while the Turks and the Chinese were in conflict. The synopsis of the play is stated as: "There are three main characters. A Turkish hero joins the army and heads to war, leaving his beautiful wife and kid behind at home. While he's gone, a Chinese man tries to seduce the hero's wife. After the Chinese man is unable to succeed, he injures the wife from her face. The poet states this situation as, the man steals her beauty as he was unable to steal her honour. The Turkish hero, while going to war, remembers he forgot his good-luck charm/amulet. He returns back home, and sees his wife's face and the bloodshed. He swears an oath to take revenge, and goes after the Chinese man. The piece ends in redemption and in blood." The Austrian Theatre Historian Joseph Gregor refers to this play as well in his book "Global History of Theatre".

In Turkish Culture, Shamanism has a long history. Shamans' some of the responsibilities in the community were: asking for welfare and health from the *tengri* and the spirits, ensures that the animals and humans to reproduce, calling for the spirits during the times of hardships and disasters, leading the spirits of dead kin to the afterworld, and finally foreseeing the future. Hence, dealing with all of the inexplicable events that can be interpreted as magic of those times.

Accordingly, Shamans needed to possess specific skills in order to influence and impress the community. They needed to have an exceptional recollection, a beautiful voice, a vivid imagination, focus, information of myths and legends and finally, a great grip of the belief system along with the hierarchy of the spirits and the gods. The person having this type of skill set, shaman, is raised and educated within the community. Using this knowledge and skills, the shaman would be able to portray

different spirits with distinct mimics and gestures, making it easier for the community to understand each one of them. Music has also played a major part in these performances, changing the instruments, the rhythms based on the subject of the rituals. The aim was to awaken different feelings in the audience whilst delivering the piece, the poem by diversifying it.

After a long time and following the migration of tribes to Anatolia, the storytelling was unlinked from Shamanism, moving to folk literature. Bards, *Ashiks*, *Meddahs*, were the new storytellers. They were influenced by the neighbouring cultures and religions, while still sharing similarities of the earlier shamans. And as Turks diverted from nomadic life to settlements, the beliefs and the traditions changed vastly. Agriculturing and stock raising lead to *ridings*(theatrical village plays). The ridings consisted of the three major elements of theatre: actors, roles, and the audience. Actors used make-ups, dressing accordingly to the assigned roles, and finally preparing the stage. These performances reflect life, the community, and the individuals; mocking, praising, or criticising them. Thus, using all of the main aspects of modern theatre, while paying respect to the legacy of the traditional rituals. The ridings played a transitional part between old religious ceremonies and modern theatre in Turkish culture.

The long ongoing tradition of theatre in Turkish communities started to professionalise along with the foundation of cities. While the beginning date being unknown, there were numerous different types of folk drama in Anatolia, in Azerbaijan, and in Middle Asia. One of the most proficient and most important types of drama that affected the theatrical perspective was the shadow play of the puppets

“*Karagoz ve Hacivat*”. It has helped the audience to learn about new things, to have a more sceptical point of view, while making them laugh and having fun. The play had changed based on current events, forming the taste of stage arts for centuries.

One of the most important types of Traditional Turkish Theatre is *Meddah*. It differs from other dramas such as eulogy and “*Karagoz*”, as being more of a narrative than theatre. However, it contains parts of impersonation, and personification between the narrative acts which makes the performance similar to drama. *Meddah* highlighted a variety of events and stories, not just serving as a comedy. Compared to the earlier performing arts, it involved different types of narrative techniques; compelling and riveting the audience with scene transitions. Therefore, we can state that *Karagoz* was more of a exhibionist theatre whereas *Meddah* served more of a realistic and analogistic theatre. The actor used two unique tools in order to impersonate or imitate different characters, a staff and a handcloth.

2.2 Modern Turkish Theatre and Institutions

The beginning date of the Modern Turkish Theatre is accepted as 1839, along with the *Tanzimat Reform*. Tanzimat, by definition means reorganisation. Its purpose was to modernise and consolidate the social and political foundations of the Ottoman Empire. It was heavily influenced by the Western Culture, which led to similarities in daily life activities. This transformed the taste in stage arts, hence, the theatrical productions. That year was the year of building buildings and stages specifically for performing arts. At first, the audience was quite limited and the output was slow. The reasons were: lack of people interested in and following the Western Culture, theatre being an expensive activity, and the restriction of women going on stages due to Islamic Law.

First theatre stage was built and founded in Istanbul, 1868, named the "Ottoman Theatre". Gullu Agop was the founder, and they had plays both in Armenian and Turkish. After 1870, the institution proceeded to perform the first plays translated to Turkish. Moliere's plays were the first and it heavily influenced the latter plays written in Turkish. Writers of the era were very interested and eager to produce plays as theatre was the ultimate tool to reach out to the public, including the illiterate folk. Turkish authors such as Namik Kemal, Abdulkhak Hamit and Sinasi were the first to write western influenced theatre plays. First Turkish play written "The Wedding of a Poet" by Sinasi. They began with comedies as the traditional theatre but continued with more complex subjects- family, the education of the youth, tragic love stories, patriotism, and admiration of the West. Turkish and Muslim Theatre Stages, communities and institutions became widespread with the Second Constitutional era.

There were works and attempts to start a theatre institution funded by the government during the first *Tanzimat Reform Era*, but were unsuccessful. During 1913, the Mayor of Sehremini Cemil Pasa(Cemil Topuzlu) included a conservatory for theatre in his municipality. For this conservatory, former manager of the Odeon Theatre in Paris, Andre Antoine was hired. The conservatory was named "*Darulbedayi-i Osmani*". Antoine organised the conservatory in order to educate 300 students in music and theatre. Shortly after his arrival, Antoine had to leave the Ottoman Empire due to World War I. Resat Ridvan Bey was the successor, who dealt with the rest of the preparations.

In 1916, *Darulbedayii*, premiered its first play- *Curuk Temel*. It was adapted from Emile Fabre's "La Maison D'Argile". Muhsin Ertugrul was one of the actors in this play. This play also had a revolutionary part on Turkish Women's Rights, as Darulbedayi led the way for them to be on stage. The first Turkish actress to be onstage, Afife Jale, was one of the students of this conservatory as well. Following the end of World War I, *Darulbedayii* lost its conservatory aspect but kept the theatre institution. Even during the war times, they were able to continue their activities.

After the declaration of the Republic and with the new developments culturally, theatre has played a major part in maintaining a national consciousness. *Darulbedayii* was one of the most important instruments of Ataturk's cultural policies. Over the first years of the republic, the board wanted to increase the interest in theatre and the performances to four in a week but had concerns of low attendance. They brought in Muhsin Ertugrul to the board. He had a different point of view, saying "A cosmopolitan and a big city such as Istanbul should have a theatre open every day every week". In order to prevent low attendance, the stage was open for teachers and students on Tuesdays, military school students and veterans on Wednesdays, and with discounted tickets on Saturday nights. The attempts to raise interest were successful. Shortly after, *Darulbedayii* opened a second stage in order to reach the attendance.

Theatre was seen as a community service during the first years of the republic. This led to high public fundings, numerous benefits for touring the country, and great promotion by the politicians. With the public funding from Istanbul Municipality, *Darulbedayii* was settled in Tepebasi Theatre, serving plays regularly.

Following the issuance of the Municipality Law of 1930, every municipality was assigned to form their own theatre community, to build their own stage in their own city. Hence, *Darulbedayii* went under the administration of Istanbul Municipality with the new name of “Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality City Theatre”.

As of today, Istanbul City Theatre has 10 different stages, and a total capacity of 2751. Being present all around Istanbul, and having a low price policy attracts around 2500 each day. A vast variety of play, including plays for children, is announced at the start of each season. A festival for amateur theatre communities, both for high schools and universities, is held each year. By this festival, people interested in pursuing a career in theatre get the chance to perform on professional stages, compete with more than 20 plays for awards each year. Therefore, acting similar to a conservatory as it was one of the main goals of the institution.

3. The Centurial Pandemic

3.1 COVID-19 and Turkish Theatre

Due to the uncertainty of the pandemic, institutions decided to deliver their plays through online systems. In order not to lose contact with the audience, they followed this path. Based on research made in Poland, theatres had to face a struggle on both financial sustainability and keeping in contact with the regular audience. A participant has stated: “Being together has been taken from our hands, but has been reconstructed at the same time”. (**Kalinowska**)

Continuity of the presence relies heavily on financial sustainability. Even though institutions were able to maintain their presence, it wasn't easy for them to continue the financial liquidity. We have seen a drastic increase on the subject of

online versions, but as they were free of charge they had numerous side effects to the institutions. (**Timplalexi**) Since the sectors in culture and creative arts earn their revenue off of box offices and the level of audience, sudden halt of the attendance caused a major drop in the revenues and financial situation. Institutions receiving public funding took this impact of the circumstances easier, but they can be considered as the minority. Along with the inability to welcome the audience to the stages, not being able to sign sponsorship agreements and the lack of the donations affected the industry vastly. The cut in the subsidy from the government has induced a big deficit. In addition, the difficulty of charging mechanisms for plays and piracy issues have added to the decline of financial stability of the institutions.

A new play needs a big ecosystem. The ecosystem includes stage managers, make-up and costume artists, dramaturgists and finally, the actors. Because of this, the extent of the damage financially exceeds just the lack of box office revenue(**European Parliament**). On the other hand, performances and plays being offered free of charge also brought additional expenses. According to a CSS report made in the EU, for some of the institutions the transition to online environments and new solutions were easier for them as they already included experts in their institution, but it is not applicable for all. Investing on this matter caused a major impact on their budget, together with the declining of their incomes. For example, International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts have conducted a survey on this issue amongst 80 members of the 23 countries. Small institutions in the U.S. and Turkey reported that they don't have the financial resources to record and stream a performance live(**IETM**). A participant from Romania reported the costs of streaming a play would be much higher than the revenue from the online audience(**Polivtseva**).

In January 2021, a study was done by the National Endowment for the Arts' Office of Research & Analysis in Washington. It involved a survey made by Advisory Board for the Arts- reporting only the 70% of the arts institutions that offer online performances have earned revenues and donations; whereas the 30% that do not earn any online revenue have continued their streams in order just to stay in contact with their audience. 47% of the institutions haven't even produced a plan to charge the streamers(**National Endowment**).

A paper assessing the general situation in Turkey had the comment: "As there are numerous independent institutions and communities operating with their own resources, it is getting tougher for them to sustain their presence with the new situation. Over 2000 theatre employees are unemployed as of now. Even though the Ministry of Culture and Tourism is planning to support the private theatres, it is mainly based on projects. It is believed that this won't solve the issue in the long run. In addition, some of the institutions won't even be able to receive the support as they have tax debts."(**Ejder**)

Regardless of the insufficient financial resources and losses, plays and performances recorded earlier have been made available online through social media and live streams in Turkey. Institutions produced new closet dramas, radio plays, podcasts, short pieces for the new environment. As boredom was a big issue during the quarantines the need was obvious. Some of the small communities were even able to produce new titles, regardless of the prohibition of gathering during the pandemic. But the inability to rehearse on a traditional stage have affected the

productions, the lack of knowledge about the dangers COVID-19 individually, and curfews restricted the output of new productions. Additively, the age of famous actors that attract the audience were a big issue as they were in the group that COVID-19 was fatal in.

Table 3.A: View of the Private Institutions' Online Demonstrations in Istanbul

Institutions	Archived Plays Made Available Online	Current Plays Adapted to the Digital Environment	New Productions for the Digital Environment
Apartman Sahne	0	1	0
Asmali Sahne	1	0	1
Entropi Sahne	2	0	0
Kadikoy Boa Sahne	0	0	9
Kadikoy Emek Tiyatrosu	0	0	5
Platform Tiyatro	0	2	1
Siyah Beyaz ve Renkli	0	0	0
Tatavla Tiyatro	0	0	0
Tatbikat Sahnesi	0	0	0
Tiyatro Kare	2	0	0
Uygur Tiyatrosu	0	0	0
Versus Tiyatro	0	0	0
Yolcu Tiyatro	1	1	0

Courtesy of: Derya and Ozge Aydogan

The information on Table 1 is collected through emails, phone calls and interviews between July-August 2021. It highlights the output of the private theatre institutions during the pandemic. Including the earlier recorded plays made available online, and new titles produced. Closet dramas, podcasts and radio plays are excluded. Plays performed on traditional stages that can be considered as classical

drama are examined in this research made by ODU Social Sciences Research Bulletin. Even though some of the stages seem like they have no activity, they have held workshops, interviews, meetings and online lessons.

In an interview with Kadikoy Boa Sahne's producer and actor Gokhan Gurun, he stated that: " We were working on new short pieces just before the full curfew. Since we were unable to perform our plays onstage, we have sought a new way to deliver our performances. With no prior knowledge about this subject we have created a new compact platform where both theatre and cinema artists join together. Through this we tried to transfer the moments to the audience similar to theatre. But as the digital platform did not achieve being altogether with the audience, we did not name it as theatre, treating it as an interface. In order to show that we perform on stage, we used 3-4 to record with wide angles. We have focused just as much on the montage part as we focus on the plays. Every play has different means from theatrical point of view and cinemactical, and what we achieved was something in between."

Moda Sahnesi have practised "Live from the Stage". This meant streaming the play online while being performed live on stage simultaneously. New websites were set up like "Tiyatrolar TV" and "YeniPerform" where the audience can access past plays, workshops and interviews. Experimental productions were done as well. "Is Sanat" have tried to reenact classical plays with a reading rehearsal, available to stream online. Zorlu PSM adapted the cult classic plays from a current perspective and created a new platform named "The Digital Scene".

On the other hand, some of the stages stood up against digital environments. “Uygur Tiyatrosu” co-founder Behzat Uygur said: “ We have performed 12 plays during the pandemic. By thinking online performances are not suitable for the definition of theatre we did not think of working in a digital environment. Additionally, our audience and newcomers would not be interested in an online play as it is insufficient and unhealthy about the art of theatre. The recordings and the shootings are extremely hard, and there weren’t any plays successfully doing so rather than 1 or 2 exceptions.”

Digital environments and interfaces play a major part for the connection between stages and the audience, and help institutions maintain their grip. It helps with the visibility of theatres and surpasses the physical limits by the means of the audience. However, as financial stability is needed for the sustainability of the stages, online performances fail to do so compared to physical attendance. For digital environments to be the saviour of the theatres during the pandemic, financial solutions must be worked on primarily. Especially for the private institutions that do not receive public funding. But in contrast, this new crisis environment led to a great output in creativity and production.

3.2 Thespian Youth of Istanbul, Love In The Days of Covid

For this part of the paper, the language adopted will change slightly to better accommodate the mood and truth of the source material. As a part of my research the author has reached out to friends who share in the love of the arts and have lived through the covid restrictions all the same. Their personal stories were similar enough to the point where the experience is more worth to boil down into a concise interview summary. These are the stories of theatre lovers in İstanbul during covid.

Anıl and Ayça, living both in what could be called more suburban areas of Istanbul, while still not egregiously far from the city centre where the well established artistic venues are located, still find the distance quite considerable. Though their love for the arts were great and the initial part of total lockdowns had starved them considerably, they lived with their families and found the risk of commuting with public transportation to be too dangerous. The economy crumbling down had the unfortunate effect of university graduates living with their families for extended periods beyond the norm. Coupled with car and gas prices, during the pandemic most young adults had to resort to public transportation. Living with older relatives that have pre-existing conditions during a once in a lifetime pandemic makes the decision to see a theatre play ever so heavy.

There were also those that lived close-by to the theatres, which mattered especially after the pandemic restrictions were eased for open air plays and %50 audience quotas. These people living closer to the big city's cultural downtown, Levent and Göksu as prime examples, had the extra benefit of being wealthier. Their experience was more in the line of 'having to pay more money than before to see the plays, but it was worth it to finally get out of the house'. Even for these colleagues, the drop in viewership soon came, as the pandemic raged on wave after wave, with new variants and newly discovered side effects. They were now discouraged from viewing even with a reduced number of seats sold and failed to enjoy the plays with masks on while under stress. The amount of new plays being practised also plummeted, making the honey drizzled world that is the theatre stage lacking in its nectar.

3.3 Examples of New and Experimental Approaches from Theatre Institutions in Istanbul

The pandemic, the quarantine and curfews have limited the ways of socialising. The way of socialising digitally was the prime way of drifting away from isolated life. Socialising digitally was mainly made through multimedia platforms and social media. There have been found innovative new solutions in order to offer different experiences in viewing. These included both passive viewings and interactive viewings.

One of the experimental approaches made by an ensemble in Istanbul is “Map to Utopia”. Map to Utopia was formed with joint forces of Platform Tiyatro and the German “Fringe Ensemble”. By the words of the producer, Mark Levitas, this was a project predicated on game design and theatre; installed on mobile phones transforming the attendance of the viewers from passive to active participation”. It transcribes the idea of living altogether as a community in a city, regardless of the differences individually. One can join the play through Zoom or the designated application through their mobile phones. The play has an interactive structure where the actors and viewers form the script together simultaneously. They share a common experience without physically being together on a stage, but being together virtually. In the play, there are 4 different neighbourhood simulations where the participants create a new character and pave their journey through their avatars. The participants can either be a city planner or a local, searching for solutions to problems in the neighbourhood(**Uysal**). In the example of Map to Utopia, the viewers are an active component of the play, shifting the experience from viewing more to participating in the play. The elements of computers, digital meeting rooms,

smartphones and artificial reality have raised the questions of the play being more of a video game rather than a theatre play.

GalataPerform's "Abandoned Shores/Negative Photographs" project can be considered as another example. They practised the combination of video, audio, performance and installation. It premiered online, during the 24th Istanbul Theatre Festival where the main idea of the play is to transform the environment with the new means of theatre. The plot of the play is a family dinner where the family is not able to get together due to restrictions. The history of the family's individuals is followed as the game progresses, where the viewers participate in this play through the places and environments taking place. They can visit the places but they do not encounter an actor during these visits, at least not traditionally. As this play combines distinct disciplines, it benefited from the possibilities of cinema while forming the scenes, lighting designs and the setting. For the second part of the play, the viewers could actually wander around the places virtually while the physical stage offered installations for the play. Exploiting the multimedia possibilities while benefiting from the different art disciplines such as exhibitions and installations, the play offered an interdisciplinary experimental experience.

Virtual resources were used in theatre in order to attract more audience, and the innovative and creative means increased the variety of the plays. As a matter of fact, online interactive plays have even offered a different experience for a play that was already seen by the viewers. The main difficulty on this subject is finding new ways of adapting to the new systems without diverting from the theatrical narrative.

3.4 Case Studies of the Plays Performed Before and During the Pandemic

At the start of the pandemic in Turkey, in March 2020, all of the performances for theatres were shut down indefinitely. All of the gatherings were prohibited. There was a curfew starting from 8 pm to 5 am each day. This limited theatre productions excessively. Ensembles were reluctant to rehearse due to fear of contracting COVID-19, and because of the obscurity about the situation. They did not know if they should produce new titles, if they were going to have a chance to perform at first. Shortly after, they started making their plays available online. As of 1 July 2020, the restrictions on theatres and other cultural activities were loosened. People were impartial and scared about staying indoors during that time. So institutions and ensembles decided to organise festivals in open air venues. The venues paid much attention to social distancing between viewers and the actors, as the actors did not wear masks. The capacity for the audience was reduced to somewhere near 30% and 40% depending on the venues. This was a great attempt to retrieve the interest in theatre.

Following the issuance of a new law in September 2020, theatres in Istanbul were allowed to admit audiences to their stages with the quota of 50%. This meant leaving a seat empty for every single attendant. Istanbul City Theatre restarted its activities, naming the new season: "Season Minimal". They have chosen the plays that are going to be performed from plays that needed less people in an ensemble. Along with this, in order to protect the wellbeing of the actors and the technical crew, they went on with less performances. Having more free dates on the stages, they have helped smaller private theatre institutions by hosting their plays on their own stages. As the capacity was higher, this benefited struggling private theatres deeply.

They limited the duration of plays to 70 minutes and to 1 act only- in order to lessen the chance of the disease being spread. Due to the increase of the positive cases, all theatre activities had been halted again on 19 November 2020. Until the restart of the activities on 26 June 2021, stages and Istanbul City Theatre continued their activities online. On 16 November 2021, theatres started to work again in full capacity.

I have selected 2 plays from Istanbul City Theatre and 2 plays from Moda Sahnesi that had been performed before the pandemic and are still being performed today. I have asked for data about the total number of performances, total number of audience with the 50% quota and the occupancy rate. The frequency of the performances are set by the management and irregular.

Table 3.B1: Audience Data of the Play “Hastalik Hastasi”

2019-2020 Season	2021-2022 Season with Restrictions	2021-2022 Season without Restrictions
45 Performances	15 Performances	33 Performances
21896 people	6313 people	12973 people
98% rate	94% rate	97% rate

Courtesy of: Halisa Sebnem Akgun

On this play of Moliere, The Imaginary Invalid in English, there is a big interest. The reasons could be regarded as: the play is a classic, famous actors such as Sukru Turen and Sevinc Erbulak are in the cast, and the performances were held in the bigger and more central stages of Istanbul City Theatre. The occupancy rate had lowered just 3% with mostly losing the audience in the group of danger for COVID-19 and the people who are against the COVID vaccinations, as it was compulsory to have 2 doses of vaccine in order to attend plays.

Table 3.B2: Audience Data of the Play “Can Yelegi”

2019-2020 Season	2021-2022 Season with Restrictions	2021-2022 Season without Restrictions
27 Performances	11 Performances	6 Performances
5415 people	1142 people	1710 people
77% rate	76% rate	95% rate

Courtesy of: Halisa Sebnem Akgun

This play has received less interest before the pandemic, as it could be considered as a lower profiled play for Istanbul City Theatre. But the interest in the play increases dramatically after the lifting of the restrictions.

Table 3.B3: Audience Data of the Play “Yeni Bir Sarki”

2019-2020 Season	2021-2022 Season
30 Performances	22 Performances
6079 people	1949 people
81% rate	71% rate

Courtesy of: Kemal Aydogan

This play by Moda Sahnesi decreased its occupancy rate by 21% which is a major drop. Although the cast is formed by well-known actors, the audience is declining. Moda Sahnesi, a private theatre institution, is unable to attract new audiences for this play.

Table 3.B4: Audience Data of the Play “Butun Cilginlar Sever Beni”

2019-2020 Season	2021-2022 Season with Restrictions
40 Performances	20 Performances
8045 people	2856 people
80% rate	71% rate

Courtesy of: Kemal Aydogan

The decrease of audience is lower on this play, but it still is risky. One of the most famous actors in Turkey “Mert Firat” is in the cast of this play. But still he is not sufficient to attract new audiences to his stage. It should also be stated this is one of the most critically acclaimed plays, but still declining in interest.

The differences between the change in the audience level could be caused by numerous things. But it is an accumulation of what the institutions have done during the pandemic. In order to attract more people after the pandemic, stages had to stay in connection with people during the pandemic. But the circumstances for both of them were quite different, as Istanbul City Theatre is an institution funded by the municipality whereas Moda Sahnesi relies on box office revenues and donations.

During the pandemic Moda Sahnesi have started streaming their plays live from stage. The play was ongoing live on stage but there was no audience physically. They charged their viewers lower than regular ticket prices for the online streams, in order to maintain financial stability while keeping in touch with the audience. This drifted away some of the loyal customers of Moda Sahnesi, as they thought they were paying for a recording that they were not going to be able to keep after. But the financial contribution and its continuity was needed for Moda Sahnesi as they did not receive any public funding. Hence, the way of handling the pandemic for Moda

Sahnesi was not beneficial after the restrictions were lifted. The solutions they came up with brought new problems such as declining in audience.

The situation is quite different for Istanbul City Theatre. They have live streamed more than 20 plays during the pandemic restrictions, which drew more than 160.000 viewers(Data provided by Halisa Sebnem Akgun). All of the streams were free but they were removed from YouTube as soon as the play ended. By this, they kept in contact with their audience, produced new titles and assessed the interest in them, and served a great public service. But this was mainly possible since it is an institution getting public funding, and financial stability is a secondary concern. This raised the difference in between.

3.4 The Sustainability of The Possible Solutions

Based on the case study, we can interpret that trying to solve problems may cause new problems. Also, the solutions adopted should just not be for the short run. If they are limited for the short run only, they tend to backfire in the long run. Hence, the solutions must not only be for financial instability. Inability of being together on a stage and not being able to deliver traditional theatrical experiences should be treated as big of a problem as financial issues. By this, the audience wouldn't think of themselves being treated as a customer and a customer only.

The most sensible solution during the pandemic was interactive online plays in my perspective. Through this, the audience feels like they are partaking in a play, forming it together with the actors and the ensemble. Pandemic has transformed the means of interactions, and this must be used in theatre as well. Along with the traditional plays, people should have a chance to experience how theatre was during

the pandemic even after. Not only being interactive with actors, but also interacting with the setting and the scenes would offer a great variety to performing arts.

For example, institutions may work together with cinematic video game designers. Taking a classical theatre piece as the plot and tailoring the story as the player progresses can be the second step of interactive online plays. In addition, using real actors' faces and voices in an interactive cinematic video game would be a great promotion for an institution. Both the developers of the video game and the theatre ensemble would benefit as they would be able to attract theatre audiences to video games and video game audiences to theatre. We are already familiar with the concept of changing the endings of theatre plays, video game designers can start with the most enjoyed adaptations of classical plays. Players tailoring the story with the decisions they made and reaching a unique ending with distinct sets of decisions based on a play would increase the curiosity about the original which would draw the gamers to the theatre. On the other hand, theatre audiences may raise interest in video games as they had a similar experience during interactive online plays, and would be curious about how the story is tailored.

Through this, the solutions adopted for the long run would create a hybrid between two distinct disciplines, hence, creating a new form of theatre. It would be financially sustainable as it solely joins the customers from both ends together.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, all of the industries were affected during the pandemic. Theatre had also been affected and tried to survive through the pandemic by finding new means to itself similar to other entertainment and art industries. The theatre industry

has experienced a major crisis due to the stoppage of the box office revenues. Research and studies done during the pandemic has shown that virtual environments and social media are a crucial part of the new way of socialising. In order to survive in the new means, one has to adopt and come up with new solutions.

Virtual environments have been the way of delivering performances for theatre similar to other performing arts. However, virtual environments and online performances transformed the definition of theatre being “now and here”. The “stage” shifted to online platforms, and “now” has shifted from every moment that a person has a connection to the internet. However, this did not harm theatre, just added a variety to the subject.

Even though the online performances seemed like a saviour for theatre, it did not offer any sustainable solution to the problem. Institutions receiving public funding have made their plays available for free without any regards but this was not the same for private theatre institutions. In addition, the attempt to solve the immediate financial crisis has led to new problems in the future for them.

For the problems affecting the definition of art forms, it is mandatory to be creative and to be able to think interdisciplinary in order to overcome the issue. As all of the industries faced similar problems, the solution found cannot be unilateral.

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