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Festivals in the COVID Age of Crisis

Roaa Ali and Christopher Balme

Abstract

This article examines the impact of COVID on festivals and the future of the industry. Analysing more than 50 items of online news, scholarly reviews and reports, and governmental guidance, this article examines the immediate effects of COVID in the industry as a whole, and particularly on its precarious artists and workforce. It also explores the changing behavioural attitudes towards festivals. Importantly, the article looks at the long-term institutional changes that might emerge in the festival industry including the future of collaborative working, artistic support, precarious working, and diversity.

Keywords: COVID; crisis; institutional change; diversity; festivals

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Festivals have become a staple of the cultural offerings of communities and locales, increasingly transforming into a global network that relies on the flow between the local and the international in service of considerable economic and cultural returns. In the UK, festivals contributed £1.76 billion to the economy in 2019 with more than 5.2 million attendees.¹ Festivals are hosted both indoors and outdoors and have ‘a variety of management structures ranging from public sector provision, not-for-profit and privately run organizations’.² Pre-pandemic, the unique temporal experiences that festivals generate were ‘bound by place, with patterns and flows of mobility’.³ The COVID-related measures of

1. DCMS Committee, ‘Major Cultural and Sporting Events – Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee’, March 8, 2022, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmcmds/259/report.html> (accessed April 21, 2022).
2. Karen Davies, ‘Festivals Post Covid-19’, *Leisure Sciences* 43, no. 1–2 (2021): 184–189, doi:10.1080/01490400.2020.1774000, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01490400.2020.1774000> (accessed April 11, 2022).
3. Donald Getz and Stephen J. Page, *Event Studies: Theory, Research and Policy for Planned Events*, 4th edn (New York: Routledge, 2020), 57.

4. Gabriel Szatan, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go: How Coronavirus is Jeopardising Music Festivals', *Guardian*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/apr/15/abort-retry-fail-how-coronavirus-is-jeopardising-music-festivals> (accessed April 11, 2022).
5. Adele Redmond, 'Half of 2021 Festivals Have Been Cancelled', *Arts Professional*, July 2, 2021, <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/half-2021-festivals-have-been-cancelled> (accessed April 11, 2022).
6. Dave O'Brien, 'Presentations', *The Stage*, June 24, 2021; and Roaa Ali, et al., *The Impact of Covid-19 and BLM on Black, Asian and Ethnically Diverse Creatives and Cultural Workers* (Manchester: Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity and Creative Access, 2022), https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/212029276/Impact_of_covid_and_blm_on_ethnically_diverse_creatives_and_cultural_workers_report.pdf (accessed April 11, 2022).
7. Masso Giverny, 'Fifty Cancelled Vault Festival Shows Find New Homes', *The Stage*, January 17, 2022, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/50-cancelled-vault-festival-shows-find-new-homes> (accessed April 11, 2022).
8. Natasha Tripney, 'Belgrade International Festival Boss: "Crisis management is our normal"', *The Stage*, September 27, 2021,

lockdowns, social distancing, and intense uncertainty have, thus, shattered the quintessence of festivals and brought seismic disruption to the industry. *The Guardian's* Gabriel Szatan, sums up the existential crisis that COVID brought on the ontology of festivals: 'a global industry has been broken into national components and absorbed into mechanisms of the state. When musicians and audiences are penned in by land borders, infrastructure based around interlocking tour schedules and interchangeable headliners collapses'.⁴

To understand the impact of COVID on festivals and the future of the industry, the authors surveyed more than 50 items of online news, scholarly reviews and reports, and governmental – particularly in the UK – guidance on the topic. The immediate effects of COVID in the years 2020 to 2022 have been profoundly distressing for the industry and its precarious artists and workforce, and the seismic shock has also led many music and performing arts organisations to ponder on their philosophy and rethink their operational models. Perhaps, the most pressing issue that will need considerable thought is that of emerging artists, precarious freelancers, and diverse talent, who lost two years of income, visibility, and exposure. By July 2021, more than half the UK festivals were cancelled.⁵ Globally, the pandemic represented a 'crisis in the sector', according to the professional associations such as the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA).

Festivals provide entry-level opportunities for many artists and there is a particular concern in the Creative and Cultural Industries that the 2020–22 state of suspension could have seen a lost generation of new talent or that many had abandoned the industry altogether.⁶ Particularly in the performing arts, the COVID-related cancellation of flagship festivals like the 2022 Vault Festival, or the scaled down version of the 2021 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and the debilitating uncertainty around these and many other festivals were felt acutely in the theatre industry. Artistic director of Trinity Theatre described the loss: 'Vault Festival is a lightning rod for young talent and the loss will have a painful hole in our industry'.⁷ The pandemic brought deep-seated disparities and inequalities to the surface, imposing questions of structural imbalances in the operational models of the performing arts and the wider creative industries where freelancers and independent artists were mostly forsaken and left out of government aid schemes that targeted those who were either employed or self-employed. The Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF) artistic director Ivan Medenica commented on how the pandemic highlighted the disparities between independent artists and companies and those who were heavily subsidised. In his experience of running the festival in 2021, he observed that 'The latter are not reliant on the opportunity to appear at festivals such as BITEF for their livelihoods and, as such, were unhelpfully relaxed in their attitudes, failing to reply to emails for weeks at a time and failing to appreciate the pressures that the festival organisers would be facing'.⁸

<https://www.the-stage.co.uk/features/belgrade-international-festival-boss-crisis-management-is-our-normal> (accessed April 11, 2022).

9. AFO, 'Government Re-Insurance Update', December 13, 2021, <https://www.festivalorganisers.org/news/567/government+reinsurance+update> (accessed April 11, 2022).
10. Ibid.; and Matthew Hemley, 'Theatre Leaders Pan "Unworkable" Insurance Scheme', *The Stage*, August 12, 2021.
11. Szatan, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go'.
12. *BBC News*, 'Newcastle Festival Postponed due to "Oversaturated Market"', *BBC*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-tyne-61031770> (accessed April 11, 2022).
13. Jaspreet Singh, 'COVID-19 and Its Impact on Society', *Electronic Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2, no. 1, (2020), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3567837> (accessed April 11, 2022).

A Logistical and Operational Nightmare

Of course, the restrictions and uncertainty brought about by the COVID pandemic proved to be a logistical nightmare for festival organisers in terms of following the latest governmental guidance, risk assessment, and protection measures. Insurance has been a particularly sticky point as most festivals and events companies were not insured against pandemics and were thus hit hard at the start of the crisis. New festivals and events to be staged through the pandemic had to contend with soaring insurance rates and the high risk of cancellation. The Association of Festival Organisers lamented the fact that the government insists on organisers covering their own 'Live Events Reinsurance'.⁹ The UK government announced a £750 million scheme in August 2021 in partnerships with insurance market Lloyd's, in which the government acts as a 'reinsurer' and guarantees cover for organisers. The scheme was described as 'not fit for purpose' and 'prohibitively expensive' noting that it does not insure cancelled events due to COVID-related isolation.¹⁰ Finding solutions to address the issue of pandemic insurance remains critical for rebooting the festival industry, and indeed theatre and performing arts in general.

There has been also a concerning trend where many festivals were rescheduled, rather than cancelled altogether, leaving audiences and festival goers uncompensated. Szatan claims that Ticketmaster modified its terms so it would only refund cancelled events, and maintains that even in the event of rescheduled festivals, there are still considerable logistical obstacles for artists, vendors, and audiences.¹¹

In the UK, most of the restrictions on festivals have been lifted as of February 2022. Yet, this has not magically solved the crisis in the festival sector. A scheduled 2022 festival in Wolverhampton was cancelled for lack of ticket sales blamed on COVID and consumer confidence. A Newcastle music festival set to take place in July 2022 was abruptly cancelled two months before its scheduled start due to many challenges, with the festival's spokesperson stating that: 'with an oversaturated market, the ongoing economic crisis and rising costs, 2022 is the wrong year for the festival to expand further'.¹² Admittedly, COVID has brought a host of challenges beyond the immediate health risks including the aforementioned logistical and organisational hurdles, but more widely the pandemic brought forth wide-ranging changes in terms of behavioural attitudes and organisational thinking and transformation.

Social and Behavioural Attitudes

The pandemic, various lockdowns, social distancing, and global travel restrictions have had a substantial impact on social relationships and temporarily altered the way we interact socially, with the long term social impact yet to be fully understood.¹³ It is no surprise that festivals would induce anxieties about COVID transmission specifically, and perhaps also about the manifest disjuncture from social isolation habits

14. Adrian Horton, “‘This is a public health issue’: Can Covid-era Music Festivals Ever be Safe?’, *Guardian*, August 14, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/14/outdoor-music-festivals-covid-coronavirus> (accessed April 11, 2022).
15. *BBC News*, ‘Boardmasters: 4,700 Covid Cases “may be linked” to Newquay Festival’, *BBC*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-cornwall-58309660> (accessed April 11, 2022).
16. Manish Pandey, ‘Festivals and Covid: A Risk Worth Taking?’, *BBC News*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-58315746> (accessed April 11, 2022).
17. Mark Savage, ‘Latitude Festival: Magical, Emotional . . . and a Little Bit Frightening’, *BBC News*, July 24, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-57946872> (accessed April 11, 2022).
18. Oli Constable, ‘Tramlines 2021: Fans “making up” for Missed Years’, *BBC News*, July 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-57948667> (accessed April 11, 2022).
19. Christopher Balme, ‘Covid, Crisis and Prognosis: Prospecting the Future of Theatre’, *Forum Modernes Theater* 32, no. 2 (2021): 178–191, doi:10.1353/fmt.2021.0016.
20. *Ibid.*, 180.

that festivals innately negate. Media reporting on festivals, especially in 2021, was interlinked either with the number, or potential, of COVID cases the festival led to and doubt over whether festivals should be held at all with one *Guardian* article questioning whether festivals can ever be safe in the pandemic, emphasising ‘this is a public health issue’.¹⁴ In August 2021 at a festival in Cornwall, it was reported that more than 4,500 COVID cases were possibly linked to that particular festival.¹⁵ A reading of media reports on festivals in the COVID-era points to the potential for festivals to have suffered reputational damage – attached to an air of irresponsibility and stigma – especially in the first year of the COVID outbreak.

Many festival goers acknowledged that festivals are a ‘Covid breeding ground’, resigning themselves to the fact that catching the virus is ‘inevitable’.¹⁶ Conversely, when lockdowns were lifted and events were allowed to go ahead, festival goers experienced both a sense of euphoria and trepidation. The intense isolation and restriction of freedoms left many hungry for social interactions, emotions, and leisure that festivals are uniquely placed to provide. A BBC report on Latitude Festival in August 2021 describes the mode: ‘there’s a carefree abandon that’s oddly reminiscent of a bygone era (i.e. 2019)’ and a sense of ‘breaking the rules’ even when COVID-19 guidelines were followed.¹⁷ One festival goer simply explained: ‘I need to live my life’.¹⁸ This summarises the conflicting social, behavioural, and psychological attitudes to festivals in the age of COVID. Whether these conceptions might hold sway over how festivals are organised and how festival goers behave in the long run is yet to be seen.

Organisational Reflections – Transformations?

This crisis-induced interregnum has created a space of intensified reflection about the future that in the festival sector manifested itself in how organisers responded and aimed to transform the festival format itself.¹⁹ Exploring various prognoses for the post-COVID era in theatre institutions, Balme argues that because institutional change is very challenging and slow, this COVID-related disruption might in fact not lead to substantial institutional change but mean nothing other than a pause: ‘[w]hen the majority of institutional stakeholders see no immediate advantage in changing the pre-existing regime then it is unlikely this will happen because the opportunity costs of substantive institutional change are too high or the political fallout too onerous’.²⁰ Operating under COVID rules had certainly necessitated both positive and negative changes in how festivals are organised and run. What is unclear is whether these changes might survive once and if the pandemic subsides or whether organisational processes will retain their pre-COVID status quo.

Many festivals have taken the time to pause and reflect on their philosophy and think structurally and organisationally about how best to meet the new challenges presented by COVID and evaluate their

21. Shona McCarthy, quoted in Lyn Gardner, 'Shona McCarthy: "Edinburgh Fringe's philosophy has to be artist-centred"', *The Stage*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.the-stage.co.uk/features/shona-mccarthy-edinburgh-fringes-philosophy-has-to-be-artist-centred> (accessed April 11, 2022).
22. Ruth Rentschler and Boram Lee, 'COVID-19 and Arts Festivals: Whither Transformation?', *Journal of Arts and Cultural Management* 14, no. 1 (2021): 35–54, <https://doi.org/10.15333/ACM.2021.7.30.35>.
23. Giverny, 'Fifty Cancelled Vault Festival Shows Find New Homes'.
24. Gardner, Lyn, 'UK Theatre Festivals are Flooding Back in 2021 – But What Will They Look Like Now?', *The Stage*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.the-stage.co.uk/long-reads/uk-theatre-festivals-are-flooding-back-in-2021-but-what-will-they-look-like-now> (accessed April 12, 2022).
25. Giverny, 'Fifty Cancelled Vault Festival Shows Find New Homes'.
26. *Theaterkompass*, 'Performing Arts Festival Berlin – Conquering New Spaces Together with the Independent Scene', *theaterkompass.de*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.theaterkompass.de/bei-traege/performing-arts-festival-berlin-gemeinsam-mit-der-freien-szene-neue-raeume-erobern-55313> (accessed April 11, 2022).
- practice and, crucially, the artists they serve. Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society's chief executive Shona McCarthy comments, 'In many ways, this moment of pause and this breathing space, while it has probably been the most stressful and challenging time, has also been time to rethink and reset'.²¹ In their study on the transformations brought by COVID-19 on Arts Festivals in South Australia, Ruth Rentschler and Boram Lee noted three distinctive trends: 1) a shift from a national and international focus to 'localism' with more opportunities for local artists within local geographical parameters, 2) a shift from 'competition to collaboration', and 3) digital innovations.²² There are signs that support a sense of optimism for a more collaborative spirit in the sector. For example, after the cancellation of the 2022 Vault Festivals, a number of UK venues offered to host at least 50 shows of the original 500 plus.²³ Similarly, Vault Festival organisers thought of the 2021 cancellation as a potential 'silver lining' forcing them to reflect on what they can do better beyond the 8 weeks format to serve the artists that rely on Vault as a launchpad.²⁴ What followed was an offer of free programmes to develop opportunities for artists who were affected by the cancellation of Vault Festival in 2021.²⁵
- Digitalisation in the performing arts has been a much discussed idea for some time, but pre-COVID it was inconceivable to carry out a festival digitally. This is because a digital model destabilises the traditional understanding of what festivals are – the coming together of people, the direct exchange between performers and live audiences co-creating together a moment that is fundamentally temporal and site-specific. But, change came and necessity brought innovations that were both experimental, daring, hopeful, and inevitably challenging. The 2021 performing arts festival, Szene, in Berlin experimented with digital spaces as a place of encounter, innovation, and an opportunity for the independent performing arts to reclaim what it has lost in the previous year. The festival adapted and engaged fully in formats such as audio walks, interactive online exhibitions, and digital performances.²⁶ The Lessingtage Theatre Festival was held online in 2021 enabling a homage to Europe's celebrated performers and classic plays by Brecht, Schiller, Ibsen, and others. In a review of the festival, A. J. Goldmann declares: 'When it comes to recorded theater, great acting translates to video much better than elaborate productions with complex concepts or intricate sets'.²⁷ The crisis seems to have forced the maturation of these formats in a way that might not have been possible otherwise.
- One concern that might have been overlooked in the flurry of other challenges facing the sector is the issue of diversity. This concern is particularly pertinent at the intersection of COVID and the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020, which led to calls for increased diversity in the Cultural and Creative Industries in general. Despite commitments by many cultural organisations to increase Black and ethnically diverse representations, a recent report shows that a rise in paid or voluntary opportunities for ethnically diverse cultural workers remain marginal.²⁸ There certainly is the sense that there is thinking

27. A. J. Goldmann, 'Great Stage Acting Shines Through, Even From a Laptop Screen; Theater Review', *The New York Times*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/28/theater/les-singtage-digital-thalia-theater-hamburg.html> (accessed April 11, 2022).
28. Ali et al., *The Impact of Covid-19 and BLM on Black, Asian and Ethnically Diverse Creatives and Cultural Workers*.
29. Will Chalk and Abbie McCarthy, 'Wolf Alice: "Festival Line-Ups Are Still Playing it Safe"', *BBC News*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-58329657> (accessed April 11, 2022).

outside the box in terms of experimentation and innovation, but in terms of decisions made about who and what is scheduled, the thinking remains resolutely contained 'in the box'. Even though the pandemic has forced the industry in the short interim of COVID travel restrictions to shift its attention towards local or national artists, thus offering opportunities to shake up the status quo, this trend is still in doubt and may soon be overturned. A member of the Mercury Prize-winning band Wolf Alice band summarises this concern: 'For the most part, British festival line-ups are still male-dominated and if the pandemic does encourage bookers to "play it safe", this becomes less likely to change'.²⁹ The rush to resort to old-established artists and cultural products has a broader impact on diversity in the industry.

The fast-changing COVID-19 pandemic makes it all but impossible to convey with any certainty the future of festivals or the lasting transformations that were forcefully introduced. There is no doubt that the sector has witnessed intense organisational reflections and considerations. Whether these will prove ultimately in service of capital or artist remains to be seen. Might there be a future vision for festivals where artists, especially emerging ones, might not be sacrificed for the sake of capital?

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