

DECEMBER 2021

Pandemic Narratives: Regional Disparities in the Experiences of Theatre Freelancers during the COVID-19 Pandemic



James Rowson

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	5
PROJECT TIMELINE.....	6
APPROACH.....	7
RELATIONSHIPS WITH BUILDINGS AND FREELANCERS.....	9
Institutional Support and Transparency.....	9
The Turn to Localism.....	10
Future Pathways and Expectations.....	11
ADVOCACY.....	12
Freelance Lead Support Systems.....	12
Regional and National Networks.....	13
CREATIVE PRACTICES AND REGIONAL DISPARITIES.....	15
Move Towards Community.....	15
National Outlooks.....	16
Pandemic Stories.....	17
Mid-pandemic Theatre Practice: Viability and the Digital.....	18
CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD.....	19



Executive Summary

The analysis in this report is based a series of 17 regions focus group interviews.

Freelancers in the Dark (July 2020 – March 2022) is an 20 month research project funded by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It is led by Dr Holly Maples at the University of Essex, in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University and Queen's University, Belfast. The project investigates the social, economic, and cultural impact of COVID-19 on the work, livelihood and practice of independent theatre workers across the UK, providing a rapid academic response to the severe challenges faced by the theatre industry in the wake of the pandemic. The global COVID-19 pandemic has brought new attention to the precarity faced by freelancer workers and the wider notion of what has become known as the 'gig economy' in the UK. The theatre sector has been no different, with successive national lockdowns highlighting the industry's long-standing reliance on a diverse freelance workforce. Freelancers make up the majority of the UK's theatre ecology and the sector relies of a workforce that is 88% self-employed or freelance. Moreover, this has been exacerbated by the fact that job vacancies in arts and entertainment [have fallen as low as 79%](#) since the start of the pandemic since March 2020.

Our research analyses and investigates the experiences of freelancers and reports back and evaluates the data collected from throughout the UK. It traces the changing attitudes towards the theatre industry throughout the pandemic articulated by independent theatre workers and charts their fluctuant future aspirations and expectations for sector recovery. Our aim is to not only document the collective strategies of freelancers during and in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19, but also help the sector develop a plan to address the challenges facing freelancers in 2021 and beyond, facilitate communication with support networks across the UK and increase resilience in the sector. The project draws on responses from freelancer theatre workers in order to reposition their experiences of working in the theatre industry both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as wider questions that arise about the complexities and challenges presented by the ongoing public health crisis. Our research specifically investigates the responses of theatre workers based around the UK to show how their careers and practice have been shaped by the health measures taken by Boris Johnson's Conservative Government.

As Jen Harvie astutely observes in her book *Staging the UK*, prioritising creative artists (or theatre-makers as opposed to theatre-workers) ‘betrays ideological commitments to the (privileged) individual over the (less privileged) group and to a romanticised sense of expression as spontaneous over recognising it as time-consuming labour’.¹ Our study has therefore taken a broad approach and our participants extend across a diverse range of freelancers in the theatre sectors, including actors, directors, playwrights, theatre makers, community-based practitioners, producers, stage managers, lighting and sound designers and technicians. Moreover, *Freelancers in the Dark* draws new light on the fault lines between the commercial theatre sector, such as London’s West End, large subsidized theatres, and smaller companies who have adopted localised working practices to engage in vital dialogues with their local communities.

¹ Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 116-117

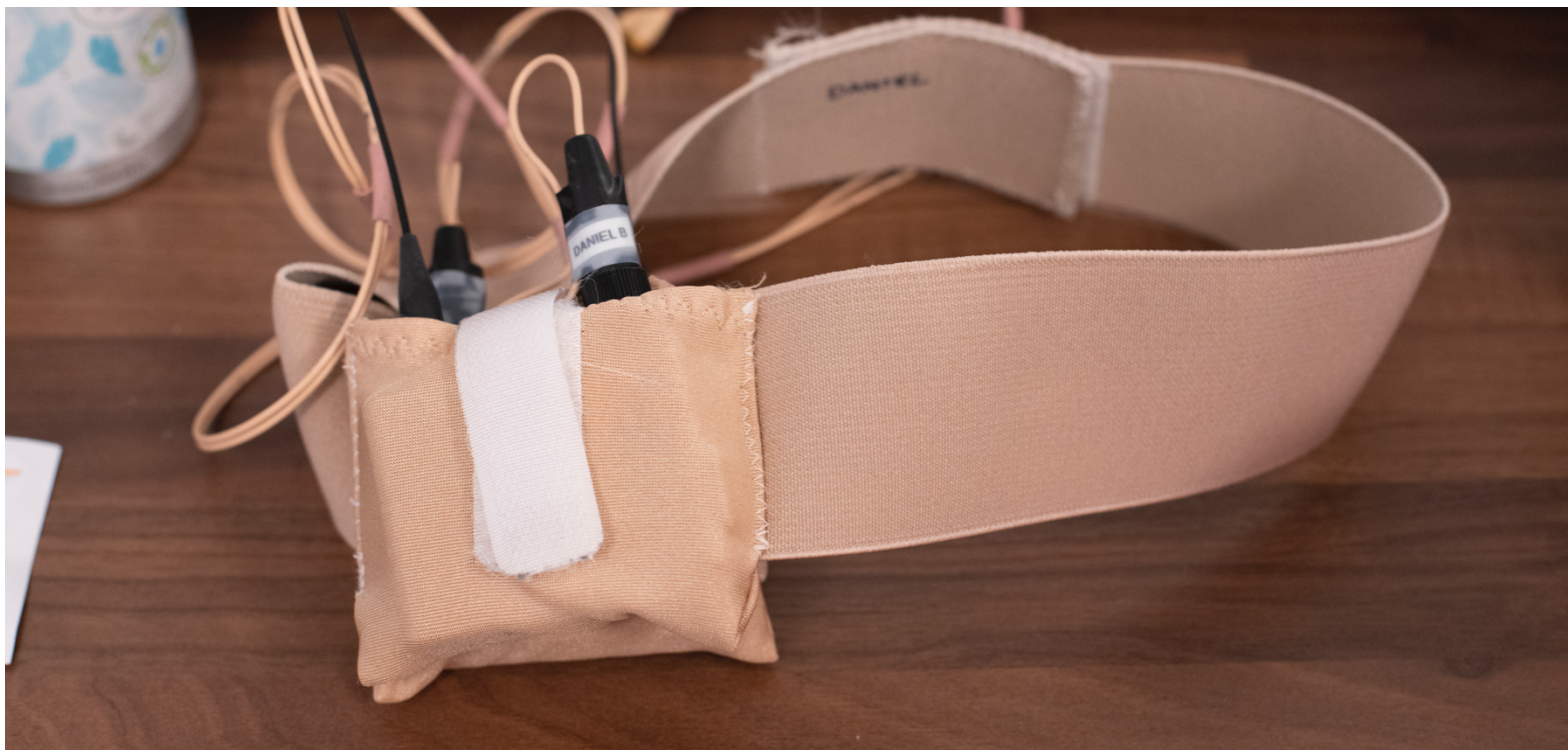
Introduction



Freelancers in the Dark is a research project investigating the social, cultural, and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on independent arts workers across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

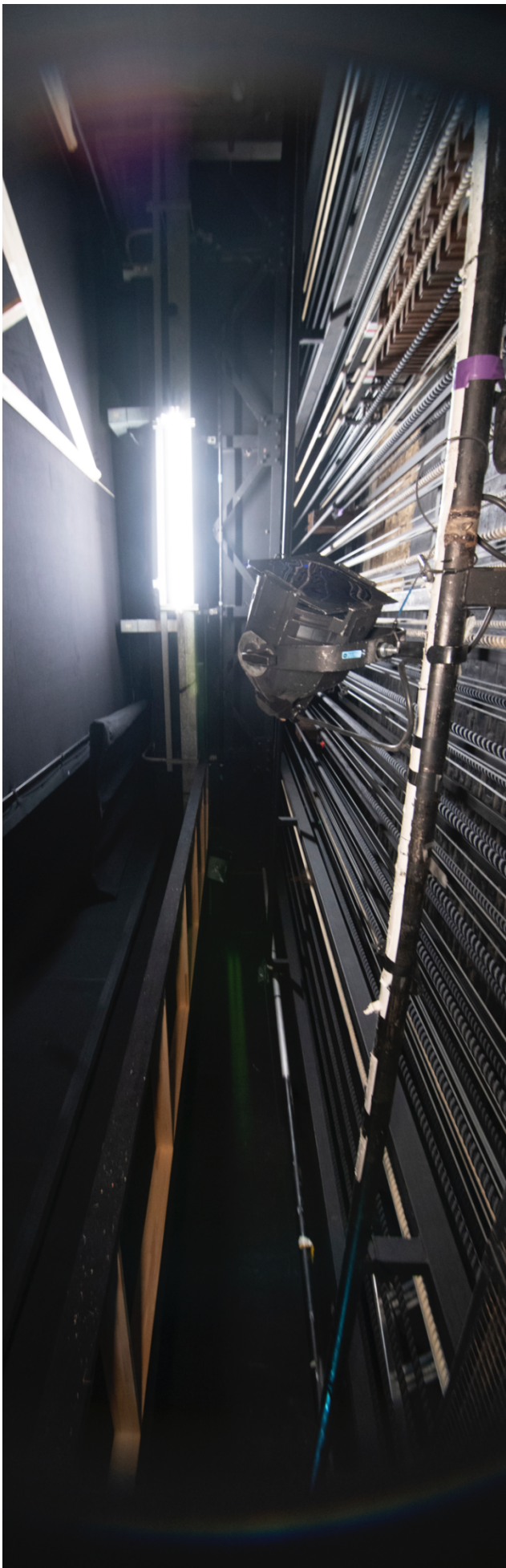
This Interim Report asks how theatre freelancer's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have varied regionally across the whole of the UK, as well as the regional differences between the levels of support they have received and the relationships with the theatre buildings in their area. The theatre ecology in the UK has wide geographical divergences and disparities between practice, funding and theatre workers' relationship with local communities. The dichotomy between regional and metropolitan theatre has been re-conceptualised during the pandemic as theatre workers have taken to using digital platforms to engage and create multi-regional work with their peers in both a national and international level with far greater prevalence than before. Likewise, freelancers have also turned to online, virtual spheres to advocate for industry change and to establish discipline led support groups. This report documents the findings of our investigation into how the pandemic has shifted theatre workers connection to their local area and their ability to create work there. It will also ask if freelancers have been provided with support within their local area, both from theatre buildings and organisations and local policy makers.

In doing so, it will draw on a series of 17 regional focus group interviews conducted with 90 professional freelancer theatre workers between March and November 2021. It illustrates and reveals the regional impact of the pandemic on theatre freelancers. It provides a crucial voice to more marginalised theatre communities in the UK who have been excluded from the wider public discourse on how the arts have responded to the challenges of the past 18 months, which has instead tended to privilege the experience of larger commercialised intuitions over independent theatre workers.



Project Timeline

	START DATE	END DATE
Interviews	September 2020	April 2021
Surveys	December 2020	March 2021
Focus Groups	March 2021	November 2021
Creative Reflection Workshops	October 2021	November 2021
End of Project Evaluation Events	March 2022	
Final Report Publication		



Approach

Freelancers in the Dark employs a mixed-methods approach to collecting a detailed and varied response to how freelancer theatre workers have navigated the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. We have collected qualitative and quantitative data that has been gathered through online surveys, personal interviews, focus groups and creative micro commissions.

This report documents the findings of our regionally based focus groups with independent theatre workers. These sessions were conducted over Zoom in compliance with the strict social distancing laws that have been in place in the UK for the majority of the past year and a half and took place with a group of between 4-6 freelancers. On average they lasted around one hour and took a semi-structured approach. Within the framework of the sessions, we designed our questions to be open to interpretation. They were framed to invite participants to articulate their own lived experiences of navigating both regional and localised challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and reflect on how their outlook on the theatre industry has shifted since March 2020. The participatory and communal nature of conducting focus group interviews with theatre works was particularly generative due to the often collaborative nature of theatre workers. Our participants regularly fed off of each other and interviewing them in an interactive, dialogic environment often produced more generative results.

The structure of the Freelancers in the Dark focus groups were designed to focus respondents on our area of research in regional divergences in arts policy and institutional support and tested the proposition that there had been a resurgence of localised theatre



practice that had emerged since March 2020. While existing interviews and surveys of the pandemic and its consequences on theatre workers have primarily had a national focus, our participants' responses provided us with crucial opportunity to explore the significance of geographical variations in the COVID-19s crisis in the context of the UK theatre ecosystem. Although coming from broad theatrical backgrounds that included directors, writers, actors and designers, the participants tended to have an experienced working knowledge of local and national funding streams and support. This reflected that, in part, our focus groups asked our participants to discuss regional issues involving their relationships with local and national government and funding issues.

As often occurs in the process of conducting focus groups, some participants gave fuller answers to some questions than others. The sessions differed in the extent to which they developed respondents' first answers with follow-up questions and pursued digressions when relevant to our underlying research questions, sometimes altering the order when respondents pre-empted later questions. There are several examples where the respondents returned in the final section of the focus groups to elaborate on an earlier question relating to aspects of personal experience of how the pandemic had impacted on their relationship with employers and funding streams, as well as their perceived value as theatre workers.

Relationships with Building and Funders

The COVID-19 pandemic forced theatres across the UK to shut their doors indefinitely during both 2020 and 2021. These industry closures have had a profound impact on how theatre freelancers see their professional relationships with buildings and institutions, and our research was interested in exploring how this had changed on a regional level. We wanted to know if freelancers felt supported by their employers during the pandemic? How important have these relationships been in both helping them navigate the crisis as well as providing creative opportunities throughout successive lockdowns? Will there be a long-term change in the relationships between freelancers and buildings?

“One thing would be to stop giving that loads of money to the big portfolio organizations and make the pot bigger for freelancers and small companies, so that we get more of an opportunity to work and show our work.”

Theatre-maker, mid-career, West of England.

Institutional Support and Transparency

To many of our focus group participants the auspices of theatre institutions had been vital to their identity as freelancers before the pandemic. While many of them expressed that they were aware that theatre buildings had experienced onerous challenges throughout the pandemic, a diverse range of theatre workers from within our focus groups highlighted that they felt there had been a lack of transparency and dialogue between theatre buildings and freelancers. They reported that they felt marginalised from vital conversation about how the theatre industry should respond to urgent challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis, as well as a recovery plan as the UK emerged out of the pandemic. This was articulated by one mid-career theatre director from Glasgow, who contended that ‘response from buildings and organisations to help freelancers with financial support was panicked and un-strategic’. The same participant from Glasgow went on to mention that in their view, ‘we had discrepancies happening between people wanting to support the freelance community and knowing how best to do it. The funds that were appearing didn't necessarily translate into desire to help freelancers and small companies and I know there's a lot of people feel like they've fallen through the cracks because of this’. Many other theatre workers we spoke to suggested there had

“With touring theatre, you have to get confirmation from the theatre first, then you tell the arts Council, and then they give you money. So you're always the one at risk and that doesn't entirely seem fair. It would just be great to have ongoing support for companies who are a bit smaller scale, who don't have that status that some of the theatres have and are getting ongoing funding.”

Producer, mid-career, South-East England.

been a paucity of support when it came to buildings and intuitions offering their freelancers guidance after they had lost work due to COVID-19 restrictions. Moreover, they also spoke of how it had become significantly harder to establish new contacts with theatre institutions or artistic directors, and build creative relationships with them in this way.

This lack of transparency was also reported regarding regional and national funding streams for freelancers in 2020 and 2021. In our Manchester focus group all of our participants articulated that there was a lack of clarity regarding how to obtain funding at local level during the pandemic and how much money was actually being made available by funding streams. In Liverpool, some practitioners also made it clear that when producing new work they primarily looked towards national funding streams such as Arts Council England (ACE) rather than local ones because they were unsure where to look for regionally based funding. It was also observed by our participants in Liverpool that there was little transparency for how cultural decisions are made and how the arts are funded in the city.

“The transparency and accessibility of conversation between freelancers and the institutions that's just something that just needs to improve so much more [...] I feel like the conversation between and freelancers and and organizations just needs to be much clearer and much more open and easier to understand.”
Actor, early-career, South-West England.

“We've got to have creative pathways out of development on to main stages.”
Theatre-maker, late-career, Edinburgh.

The Turn to Localism

In contrast to this, however, we also saw some examples in certain regions where freelancers felt more supported by buildings and employers they had previously worked with. In the South-West of England one participant mentioned that they felt it had been much easier for them as a freelancer artist to keep pre-existing dialogues open with theatres in the area as opposed to in London, although they did still note that the pandemic had made it problematic to build new relationships with potential employers. Other participants also expressed solidarity with theatres, suggesting that they understood the pressures they faced and had solidarity with them. In Glasgow, one theatre-maker told us that the problem was not the venues in the city who were at fault. Instead they highlighted the fact they had had their funding repeatedly slashed in the years leading up to the COVID-19 outbreak, which meant that they were under ‘huge pressure’ financially during the pandemic. This sentiment was shared by a playwright in our South-East focus group, who responded that: ‘some of the theatres have reacted extremely creatively to the situation, and some have virtually disappeared in terms of their public profile’.

One impact of this that has been reported, is that more freelancers have sought to create contacts with smaller, local institutions outside of the big cities. As noted above in the previous section, our questions have illuminated a return to more localised ways of working. It is clear that this, in part, has been shaped by larger theatres placing their staff on furlough and making their organisation less accessible. This was in contrast to small regional spaces that remained more welcoming to dialogue during the lockdowns and opened up faster as restrictions were lifted. This was noted by an actor based on the Isle of Wight who offered an account of how: ‘You know all the all the big theatres are shut. And so it's things like the Ventnor Fringe festival [that is producing new work], because there's more space, smaller populations and everything's more spread out. I get the impression they've been able to start things up, not easily necessarily, but probably more easily’.

Future Pathways and Expectations

The data produced by our focus groups underscores that freelancers view the pandemic as a vital opportunity to re-think the way the industry works and the relationship between cultural intuitions and their freelancer employees. This has been expressed by a variety of theatre-makers and practitioners across all of the UK in the regions where we conducted our focus groups. There is a hope that as theatres start to re-open in the wake of the pandemic that buildings and organisations will prioritize creating accessible pathways for career progression both for established artists and those entering the industry. There is also an optimism that buildings across the UK – and not only in large cities - will provided further opportunities for training and development, working in collaboration with freelancers across the performing arts sector. As a producer in Edinburgh told us: ‘It feels like one size doesn't fit all and that's kind of how it's always been. There has to be career opportunities and funding opportunities for people who are needing progression and are ambitious to show their work in bigger spaces’.

While it is clear that the pandemic has condensed and exacerbated the anxieties of many theatre workers about the industry's precarious working practices, there remains a strong optimism that in the medium to long term it will bring about a positive change in the relationships between freelancers and buildings. There is further potential for the inclusion of freelancers on boards, as well as including them as part of the decision making process and as a voice in the crucial discussions of how theatre is produced in a post-COVID UK. There is also a need to re-think the scale of influence of freelancers more generally and how state policy supports those working outside of buildings to avoid the recent precarity they have experienced.

“There are some people that are clinging on to buildings and they would put them before people, and I think we've got to put people before buildings.”

*Theatre-maker,
Edinburgh.*

Advocacy

Our study was interested to investigate ways in which theatre workers had engaged in forms of advocacy and support with their freelance peers since the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic. We wanted to know if new forms of localised support between theatre freelancers had been mobilised during the crisis? What sort of form had these networks taken? How have freelancers articulated their thoughts and concerns within the artistic community during the pandemic? Did their geographical location contribute to the decisions they made and the support bubbles they created during this time? How connected did they feel to their local area as artists and theatre workers? In other words, how important was their local and regional artistic network in creating new forms of peer led advocacy amongst freelancers during the pandemic?

Freelance Lead Support Systems

Notably, throughout our regional focus groups, there was one experience, one reflection, that the majority of our participants appear to have shared. This is that the vibrancy of social networks within the theatre industry, relationships with colleagues and peer-to-peer support have had to have been renegotiated and redefined. These findings point towards what Glasgow based theatre director underscored as their hope for the emergence of wider support networks in the UK theatre community: 'If I could see something change when we all emerge out of this, it would be about making it easier for artists [to support] each other'.

Our research has demonstrated that one of the biggest consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the paralytic disruption of established networks and regionally based forms of advocacy for theatre workers around the UK. Our focus groups have demonstrated wide geographical divergences in how freelancers see new opportunities for networking during the pandemic and mixed optimism about how this will develop over the coming months and years. For example, one mid-career freelancer theatre director from our Manchester session reported that 'there's not necessarily a suitable structure for advocacy within Manchester at the moment. And I don't think the things that we've got are necessarily fit for purpose, and I think that that's something that could be re-interrogated and examined and developed'. This was echoed by another freelance theatre-maker in the group, who commented that 'there are some really, really strong networks [across the UK], but I don't think the networks always necessarily support each other and talk to each other, and I would like to see that change'.

“What's interesting is that the experience of being a freelancers is so different, if you like. It is very varied how we work in different parts of the sector. We live in different places, we work in different ways, engage with the community differently, and earn very different amounts. That's why it's quite hard to bring us all together and turn this into a political force where we can advocate for ourselves.” Director, late-career, North Wales

Regional and National Networks

A similar pessimism about the lack of opportunities for local networking and building advocacy and support groups was articulated by participants in West Yorkshire in the north of England. For example, one Leeds based theatre-worker explained the difficulties in creating localised networks within the region due to the necessitated transience of their work: ‘As freelance artists there is so little relationship to the area you're in as a general rule. It's structurally made that way because you have to go to the places who happen to be supporting artists. [...] If you're going to be independent artist [in West Yorkshire] you are not working locally [...] To me there is a massive issue there’. A focus group with theatre freelancers from the Tees Valley area in the north-west of England, however, provided contrasting experiences of networking and support based platforms that had emerged during the pandemic highlighting the region’s ‘strong sense of community and localism’ and artists’ sense of ‘connection’ to the area as reasons for this.

“I think what needs to happen is that advocacy needs to be put in the hands of the artists and the smaller the independent sector.”

Producer, mid-career, West Midlands.

These complex, localised responses suggest that one of the key medium to long term challenges facing the UK theatre industry as we emerge from the pandemic, is the ways in which theatre workers can connect and serve their local communities, while simultaneously finding crucial points of connection with peers, employees and funders. Our findings highlight that regardless of regional location, many participants in our focus groups reflected on the fact that the pandemic provided a break that allowed for them to re-conceptualise the way that they supported, worked and collaborated with other theatre freelancers both in their local region and more widely across the UK. Moreover, it also opened a door to freelancers to re-connect with their local areas during national lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, which indicates that the pandemic has, in many ways, had an impact on the way in which theatre workers connected with localised artistic support systems and engaged in forms of advocacy with their peers. What we have also seen is that outside of large metropolitan areas, peer-to-peer

support and advocacy amongst freelancers has been more localised. Participants in areas such as Tees Valley, the South-West of England and North Wales tended to look towards localised support systems, while those in major cities including London and Manchester focused more on national networks and online advocacy.

Creative Practice and Regional Disparities

After March 2020, theatre work moved online creating wider opportunities for practitioners to experiment with intermedial digital projects and new ways of engaging with both local and national audiences. This was significant not only because it allowed many theatre freelancers who had lost work (in many cases overnight) to continue their creative output, but it also provoked them to re-evaluate their wider creative practice and aesthetics. This paradigm shift has been significant in that it has not only provided an outlet for artists to urgently regain a vital sense of agency, but also opened up important new avenues for creating work locally in their communities.

For this reason, one of the key questions we wanted to ask was how theatre freelancers' work and practice had changed over the course of the pandemic. Keeping their diverse range of experience and training in mind during our interviews, we asked our participants how their ways of working had changed since March 2020. We inquired into what they had been doing during this time and if they acquired any new creative skills that they found to be particularly generative or productive. We also wanted to know if their practice had changed dramatically over the 18 months since the outbreak of COVID-19 and if they had found new artistic ways of reflecting the local communities they lived and worked in, as well as wider communities across the UK. Finally, we also asked if new, digital creative platforms had influenced their work and if the move towards broadcast theatre had re-conceptualised their relationships with their current or former employers.

Responses to this line of questioning were unsurprisingly varied but, there were certain patterns that offer important insight into how the legacy of the pandemic is playing out how theatre freelancers' view the shifting theatre ecology in the country. It is interesting to point out that there was a high degree of regional diversity that arose during our conversations when considering how their work had changed in light of the restrictions imposed since the outbreak of the pandemic.

Move Towards Community

In London, our focus group participants reported that one of the immediate positive impacts on the pandemic has been an upsurge in localised community theatre practice. As one London-based playwright stated: 'as someone with a background in applied and participatory theatre, I thought it was really exciting when the pandemic hit and suddenly everyone discovered that they could do Community work or work with young people. So I think there's been some really exciting stuff that's come out of the pandemic'. This was echoed by another participant in the group who commented that 'one of the biggest things I probably learned in the last six months [since March 2021] is how important those community relationships are'. The participants of our London group suggested that they felt this was the case

specifically in the London area due to the existence of theatres with a longstanding history of supporting community work, such as the Albany Theatre in Deptford and the Bush Theatre in Shepherds Bush. The only fear voiced by our participants in this group was that as restrictions continued to be scaled back over the coming months, this community ethos that had been highlighted in the London theatre scene throughout the pandemic would be dropped, as theatre workers returned to larger-scale commercial projects.

Our focus groups revealed that the support provided by theatre venues and companies to freelancers played an important role in the work they produced during the pandemic. Like in London, participants in both Edinburgh and Glasgow reported being given both financial and artistic support meant that they were able to experiment with new forms of practice, including digital productions, which fed back into the local area through their promotion by local community theatres.

“Local is the only way to go at the moment.”
Creative Producer,
mid-career, Edinburgh.

National Outlooks Pandemic Stories

These experiences contrasted with data from other regional focus groups, however, particularly where participants reported a lack of support from regional theatres and local government authorities. In our focus group with theatre-makers in Manchester, participants answered that although they felt supported by the local theatre scene during the pandemic, they explicitly stated that the work they had been creating was not indented to specifically engage with local communities. Instead, they stated that they saw their practice as part of the national and international theatre ecology. As one theatre-maker put it: ‘Greater Manchester is really close to loads of other great cities. We’re an hour away from Leeds, or an hour away from Sheffield, we’re an hour away from Liverpool, an hour away from Birmingham. It’s not that far to get up to Newcastle and Edinburgh, and all these cities are making great work. Can we think about that? I make almost as much work in Liverpool as in Manchester’.

“As freelance artists there so little relationship to the area you’re in as a general rule. It’s structurally made that way like because you have to go to the places who happen to be supporting artists. [...] I am always on the train like that. If you’re going to be independent artist [in West Yorkshire] you are not working locally [...] To me there is a massive issue there.”
Producer, West Yorkshire

In Liverpool, it was argued that while there had been funding provided for local commissions, the lack of money (£200 per individual) and support offered for these projects had deterred theatre artists from creating work with within the local community during the pandemic. Elsewhere, participants in areas such as Kent and

Tees Valley, reflected that due to the lack of opportunities in their local regions, the work they had made during the pandemic would not be viable if it spoke only to local communities as it needed to engage a wider national audience, through either online distribution or future tours.

Pandemic Stories

“There was a coinciding with the pandemic and me moving to focus in and wanting to focus more on the hyper local.” Director, South-East England.

We also saw that theatre workers from across the UK expressed a desire to tell local narratives and stories in their recent work, especially around the collective trauma experienced during the pandemic. Participants underscored that they wanted to use this moment in time to focus on both their local connections as well as using their practice to articulate marginalised discourses and narratives from their local communities. One actor based in Bristol reported that he felt that the pandemic had opened up new opportunities for local community work and that he had developed connections with more local theatre companies in the South-West area. This was also echoed in both of our focus groups in Wales, where one Cardiff based theatre-maker stated that her recent work had been influenced by ‘being able to tell our own stories from our own point of view, because I feel like Welsh people are portrayed in a certain light in the UK, how like I see on TV, like you know, *Gavin and Stacey*’.

“I feel like generally I used to spend less than half my time here [north Wales] [...] but I think this last year, partly because of lockdown, it's made me have a lot more connections to work in Wales and specifically Welsh language stuff I didn't really know about. But not only in the theatre, but also writers, poets, dancers. So different disciplines to acting or theatre-makers. And I've really enjoyed that so that's been that sort of silver lining to it personally and creatively.”

Director, North Wales.

Our line of questioning in the focus groups also aimed to illuminate what new ways of working they had found especially generative. Interesting, few participants described their practice moving away from theatre and live performance, despite the impact on the pandemic on the industry. Instead, many reported experimenting with work produced in non-traditional performance spaces, such as a playwright who staged a Christmas show in December 2020 in a museum in Oxford. Other participants discussed how during the pandemic their work had moved online, which provided a crucial outlet for them to regain a vital sense of agency and continue to create new work during the national lockdowns in 2020 and 2021.

Mid-pandemic Theatre Practice: Viability and the Digital

While many focus group participants found the move to the online practice that was precipitated by the outbreak on the pandemic to be an opportunity to diversify their skill sets and establish new relationships with both theatre buildings and audiences, others meanwhile found that the rapid transference of practice to online virtual spheres, had instead entrenched hierarchical structures in place in the theatre industry, as well as hegemonic modes of practice. In addition, notions of digital fatigue and frustration with virtual ways of working have been cited by a number of our respondents in our study, which was a strong theme running through all our strands of research on the Freelancers in the Dark project.

While it is clear that digital and hybrid show have allowed innovative practitioners to experiment with ground-breaking new technologies that challenge expectations of how theatre and performance can be made, as a whole it is also apparent that a number of independent theatre workers across the UK have vocalised experiences of exclusion and marginalisation from the use of digital platforms. This can be seen both for creating work as well as establishing vital dialogues and networking opportunities within the industry. Understanding the motivation for freelancer theatre workers' focus on more community based projects and their shift towards work that foregrounds hyper localised narratives and voices is crucial in re-framing the relationship between theatre freelancers, their employers and funders for the long-term future of the UK theatre industry as it emerges from the wake of the pandemic.



Conclusion: Moving Forward

Our regional focus groups for the Freelancers in the Dark project aimed to investigate the geographical impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on theatre workers across the UK, shedding important new light on the lived experiences of freelancers since March 2020.

Findings and Results

The enlivened and articulate responses of our participants has demonstrated that there is an integral, and arguably overlooked, regional dynamic to how the pandemic has affected the working practices of the freelancer theatre workforce. Our findings suggest organisation and public bodies need to consider strategies that move beyond thinking on a national level, and instead focus on building collaborative relationships at local levels. In doing so, it will allow policy to be build around the understanding of the manifold anxieties and challenges that have been articulated by freelancers in different regions.

Notably, our focus group suggests that while the vast network of freelancer theatre workers in the UK have found new and diverse ways of peer-to-peer support and advocacy during the pandemic, there are still wide regional disparities to how supported and connected freelancers feel in their local area. This can be seen by how freelancers have included feeling detached from both communities and the wider theatre ecology where they live, as well as highlighting the lack of local support networks for theatre workers during the pandemic. In additions, our finding suggest there is strong desire among freelancers to produce more localised work that engages in close dialogue and engagement with local communities. The pandemic has provided a motivation for theatre artists to re-think the way local voices are heard and articulated on stage and are finding new ways to explore how alternative discourses and narratives can be heard in a post-COVID theatre. However, support and guidance from local organisations and public bodies remains vital for freelancers to be able engage in these localised community projects and productions.

Future Practice

The demands posed by the pandemic will arguably remain at the forefront of how theatre is produced and consumed. As the UK continues to grapple with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the precarity faced by freelance workers in the theatre industry remain a pertinent anxiety that has been foregrounded by the profound shock dealt by the social distancing measures that were put in place between 2020 and 2021. Our focus groups for the Freelancers in the Dark project have shown the importance of continuing networks, dialogue and advocacy between freelancers is integral in allowing them to have a crucial voice in the decision making process of how the UK theatre industry negotiates how it exits from the pandemic, as well as in the wider discussions about how theatre will be made and produced.

While it is important to acknowledged that theatre buildings and organisations have been severely impacted by the pandemic themselves, it is also vital for them articulate and make visible opportunities moving forward as well as entering into productive and supportive narratives with their regional freelance work force. Examples are already emerging of organisations confronting and re-envisaging their approach to their freelancer workforce and foregrounding the role of local

independent theatre workers. The Battersea Arts Centre in South West London recently outlined a bold agenda that will put freelancers at the forefront of their proposed working model, including pledging part of their Culture Recovery Funding to support artists and freelancers. Similarly, in 2023 new writing venue Theatre503 will open a new studio space named Studio503, with the aim to support emerging freelance theatre workers and well as serving as a wider locus of creative engagement for the local community.

These dynamic models show the nascent potential of theatre organisations to both amplify and enable the work of theatre freelancers in the post-COVID UK theatre world, while simultaneously acknowledging core anxieties that have been articulated by freelancers. As our initial research has illustrated, these reciprocal relationships between freelancers and organisations needs to be at forefront of industry recovery as theatre regenerates and emerges from the pandemic.

Freelancers in the Dark is the public name of the project, 'The Economic, Social, and Cultural Impact of COVID-19 on Independent Art Workers in UK Theatre'. This project has been funded by the ESRC through their emergency funding for projects addressing COVID-19. The project is based at University of Essex, East 15 School of Acting and is a collaboration between University of Essex, Manchester Metropolitan University and Queen's University Belfast.

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Holly Maples, University of Essex, East 15 School of Acting

Co-Investigators:

Professor Rosie Klich, University of Essex
Dr Joshua Edelman, Manchester Metropolitan University
Dr Kurt Taroff, Queen's University Belfast
Dr Ali FitzGibbon, Queen's University Belfast

Research Associates:

Dr James Rowson, University of Essex
Dr Laura Harris, Manchester Metropolitan University

Project Officer:

Dr Allie Young, University of Essex

Thank you to Nina Dunn and the Dark Theatres project for the images used in the report, and to Marek Jagoda for our main project image.

If you would like to request a copy of this report or the information in it in an accessible format please contact IAWsCOVID-19@essex.ac.uk. To cite: Rowson, J. (2021) *Pandemic Narratives: Regional Disparities in the Experiences of Theatre Freelancers during the COVID-19 Pandemic*. [Online]. Essex: University of Essex. Available at: