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FINAL REPORT

Freelancers in the dark

The Economic, Cultural, and Social Impact of Covid-19 on Theatre Freelancers

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Foreword

Photo by Nina Dunn, The Dark Theatres Project, 2020

This report captures an extraordinary moment in time for the UK theatre industry. However, as we discovered, it also reveals pre-existing issues within the industry that left the UK theatre sector vulnerable to devastating consequences for theatre workers' lives and livelihoods during Covid-19. As we have shown, those consequences greatly impacted all areas of the UK theatre industry and its freelance theatre workforce. When this project was conceived in the Spring of 2020, we had no idea that by March 2022, we would still be suffering sector uncertainty caused by wave after wave of Covid-19 variants. This report is an archive of sorts, mapping out the evolution of UK freelance theatre workers' experiences over a 2-year period beginning in February 2020. Experiences of volatility, struggle, opportunity, resilience, community, activism, and creativity are all to be found in the lived realities of the freelance theatre workforce documented in these pages. In the end, this is not solely a research study, but a co-created testament of how the pandemic shone a light on the hopes and fears of the theatre workforce (both freelance and organisations) at a moment in time where radical change was seen as possible in the midst of, arguably, the most long-term crisis to hit the UK theatre industry since the English Civil War in the 17th century. Through the honesty and generosity of our research participants, we were able to offer a reflection and analysis of all that makes the UK theatre industry to me, and the freelancers who occupy 88% of its workforce, an endless source of resilience, creative thinking, and collective support.

Dr Holly Maples, Principal Investigator, Freelancers in the Dark.

Executive Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected all levels of the UK theatre industry, particularly independent arts workers (IAWs) who are essential to the sector's sustainability and survival. The repeated closures, restrictions, and changing safety guidelines caused by the global public health crisis had wide ranging impacts upon the, largely freelance, UK theatre workforce, affecting livelihoods, working practices, and support networks.

Freelancers in the Dark (July 2020 – March 2022) is a 20-month research project funded by the UK Research and Innovation, Economic and Social Research Council, as part of a Covid-19 Rapid Response Initiative. It is led by Dr Holly Maples at the University of Essex, in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University and Queen's University, Belfast. This study maps 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.

This report investigates the experiences of freelancers through our research data collected from throughout the UK. It traces the changing attitudes towards the theatre industry during 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 Covid-19, but also help the sector develop a plan to address the challenges facing freelancers in 2022 and beyond, to facilitate communication with support networks across the UK and to increase resilience in the sector.

The focus of our research is on the UK theatre industry, and our primary intention here is to serve that context. However, what we are describing here also has wider relevance. In its reliance on freelancers and a dense network of informal, collaborative relationships, UK theatre offers a particular insight to freelancing and gig economy work both in the wider creative and cultural industries and as a growing norm in other fields as well. While some of the issues we explore here are specific to theatre as an art form, what we examine here also gives insight to the vulnerabilities and resilience of freelance working in general within a crisis.

- The global Covid-19 pandemic brought new attention to the precarity faced by freelance 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 (88% of its workforce is self-employed or freelance). 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 and the first UK lockdown in March 2020.
- Where existing research has highlighted the exclusions from support packages faced by theatre freelancers, our report findings illuminate the corresponding experiences of uncertainty, pessimism, and hope relating to future work and the future of the performing arts sector in the UK. They also show a high level of adaptiveness as theatre freelancers have diversified their skills and careers.

- From our study, the experience of this initial closure varied significantly among freelancers, but the evidence shows that freelancers were more dramatically affected than other workers in the industry. For many, the crisis they faced involved more than the loss of work; it also meant a loss of a personal identity and a place within society and social support systems. This led, at times, to the rethinking of future careers and lives. We also saw anger over the inequalities exposed and the absence of an adequate governmental and policy understanding of what was happening.
- Our research estimates a rising level of pessimism towards freelancers' future in the industry since the first UK lockdown in March 2020. Our survey noted that 72.4% of respondents felt more or much more pessimistic about their future as a theatre freelancer, while only 7.4% felt more or much more optimistic. This pessimism often appeared to be experienced as future-oriented anxiety. Our qualitative data showed many respondents feeling 'worried' or 'fearful' about their future in theatre.
- Our research indicates that Covid-relief financial assistance made available for freelancers was sporadic, with many theatre workers falling through the cracks of the system. Our survey dataset (captured between November 2020 and March 2021), estimates that only 49.1% of all respondents had received financial support from the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme. 19.1% had received financial support from an arts council (Arts Council England, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Creative Scotland, or Arts Council of Wales).
- Our research reveals a widespread move of freelancers during the pandemic, not to 'retrain', but to upskill and diversify their ability to work in creative fields. Our survey showed that freelancers with more 'creative' professions were more likely to have upskilled than those with more 'technical' professions. Amongst directors, 92% claimed to have developed new skills during the lockdowns, compared to 79% of writers, 76% of actors, 53% of stage managers and 52% of lighting specialists. Those with portfolio careers were also more likely to have upskilled than those with just one (77% to 56%).

- Our qualitative data evidenced clear frustration from theatre workers that the support offered to the arts, and specifically to creative and cultural freelancers, showed a distinct failure of the UK government to recognise the particular value of the creative industries. Many respondents also expressed a sense that all UK governments did not sufficiently 'understand' the sector and its reliance on freelance labour; an ignorance which resulted in poor policy making, and which resulted from a lack of interest in the arts.
- Our research indicates a boom of innovative practice amongst theatre freelancers over Covid-19 that responded to the closure of theatres and other restrictions by developing digitally based and/or distanced forms of audience engagement. Practitioners shifted their daily practice from the rehearsal studio to Zoom and utilised networking technologies to widen their collaborations and extend their national and international reach.
- Upon the reopening of theatres in late Summer through Autumn 2021, our research finds that the absence of unilateral regulation and the pressure to get back up and running often put freelancers and temporarily contracted crew under intense and unsafe working pressures; this was particularly noted in Autumn 2021 as both the Delta and Omicron variants spread through casts and crews daily.
- The widespread use of digital platforms during Covid-19 offered opportunities for freelance theatre workers to establish new creative relationships and collaborations with peers in the UK as well as further afield. Our research indicated an exponential increase in engagement with online social and support networks, more formally as led by organisations and sector stakeholders, and informally, through peer-to-peer and grassroots mechanisms. Many of our research participants spoke of their reliance on freelance support networks for emotional, professional, and creative support, and mobilisation of members of the workforce towards activism and change.

- Our research highlights the significance of relationships with both fellow freelancers and organisations in freelancers' feelings of optimism towards their future work. It is troubling then that there appears also to be a significant breach of trust, communication, and understanding between organisations and freelancers very early in the pandemic, made greater by a series of public policies around pandemic support and recovery. This has made it difficult not only to collaborate on solutions, but to engage in the dialogues needed for recovery and change.
- Our research estimates that freelancer-led networks, grassroots activism, and formal activist groups formed or were amplified in great numbers during Covid-19. Large scale freelancer activist groups built off of these concerns, to actively invoke dialogue with cultural organisations, public bodies, and trade unions. Further research is needed, however, to study the long-term impact of these Covid-19 developed activist networks.

Photo by Nina Dunn, The Dark Theatres Project, 2020

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Introduction

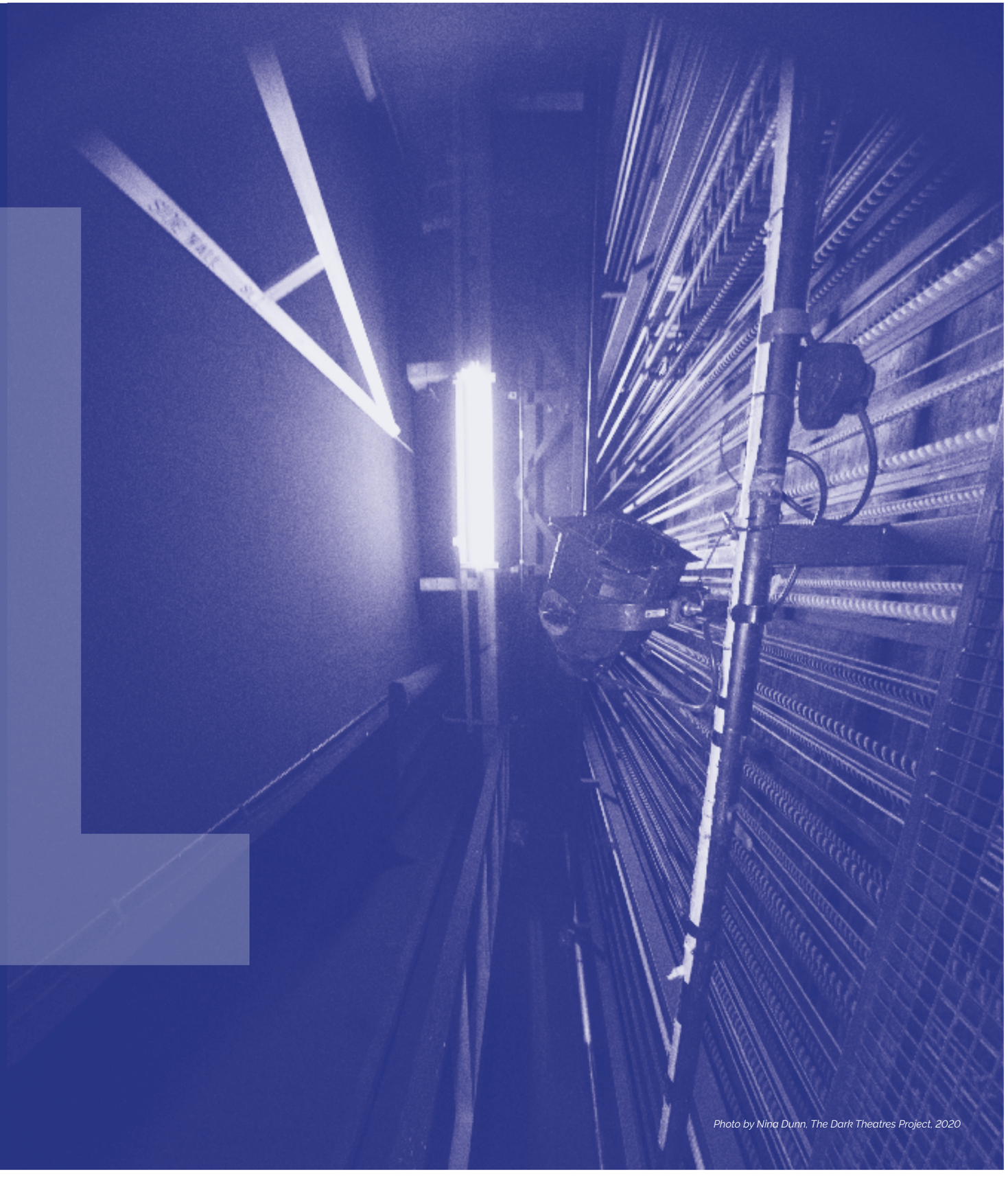


Photo by Nina Dunn, The Dark Theatres Project, 2020

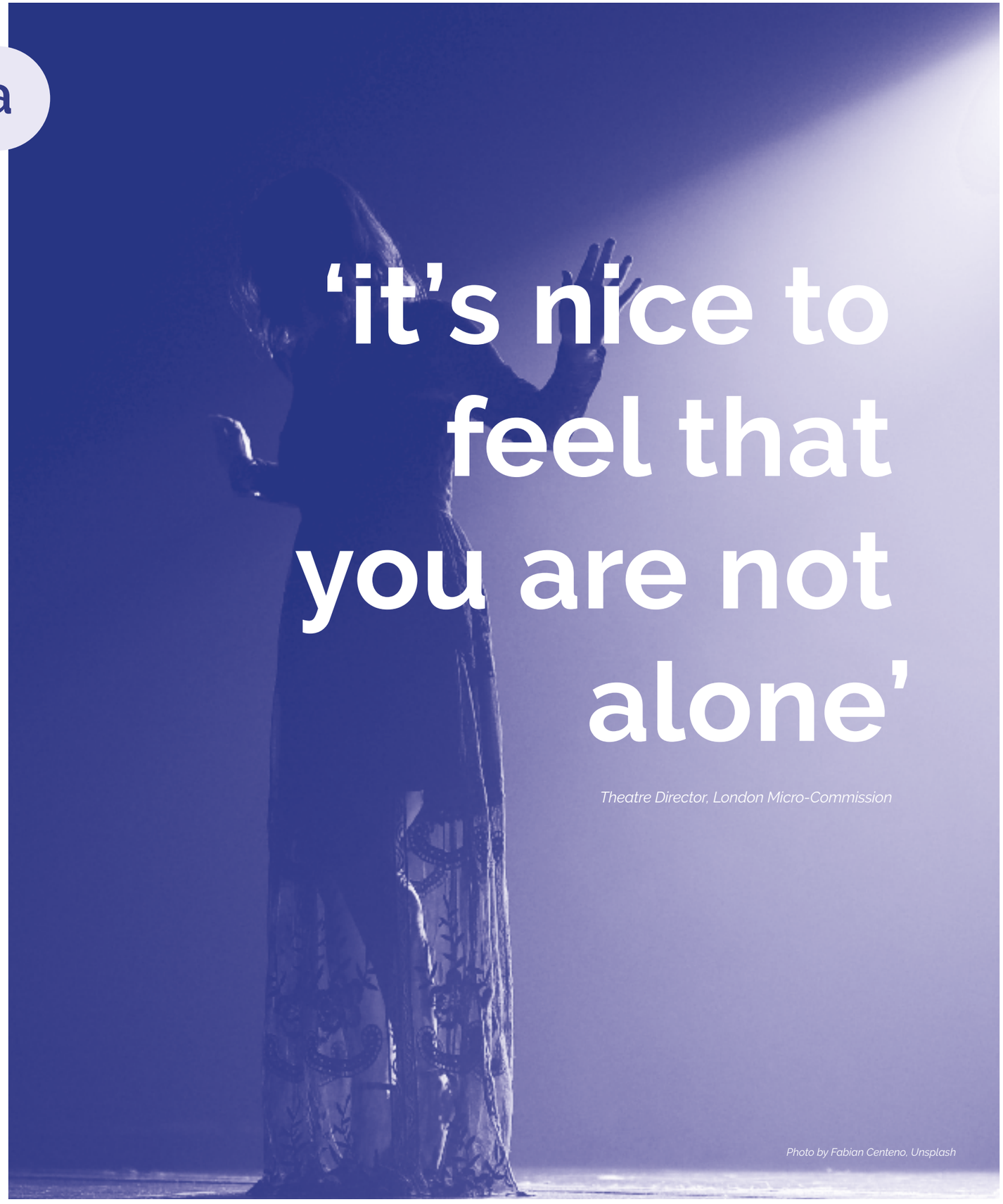
Background to the Project

a

The research project Freelancers in the Dark investigated the social, cultural, and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent theatre workers across the UK. Freelancers make up the bulk of the UK's theatre ecosystem, performing a wide variety of essential roles such as writers, actors, designers, producers, technicians, live closed caption access officers, workshop facilitators, front of house staff, and countless more. The effect of the social and physical restrictions implemented in March 2020 to curb the spread of the pandemic had immediate and severe effects on freelancers' lives, careers, and well-being that are likely to have long-term consequences for them individually and for the sector as a whole. These effects played out in a social field marked by existing inequalities; inequalities which have been exacerbated by the pandemic and state and sector level responses.

Since March 2020, the theatre industry, and the freelances that enable it, have continuously felt the effects of ever-changing policies, restrictions, and uncertainties. The project team based around the UK experienced these changes alongside the freelancers we spoke with. The constant movement of expectations and limitations meant that the research project also required adaptation, and our methods and findings evolved in response to these changes. We also recognise that the experiences revealed in this report are not unique to the theatre industry and speak to wider experiences of the pandemic, particularly for the self-employed.

This project aimed to investigate, document, and analyse the experience of theatre freelancers across the UK during the pandemic to help them and the sector develop resilience, create more effective policies and structures, and build a more supportive, inclusive, and vital theatre for all parts of the UK. The project was led by the University of Essex, in partnership with the Manchester Metropolitan University and Queen's University, Belfast. It was funded by the UKRI Economic and Social Research Council COVID-19 Rapid Response Initiative.



Data Set Summary and Methodology

b

Freelancers in the Dark used a mixed-methods approach to develop a rich picture of theatre freelancers' experiences during Covid-19 informed by qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data was gathered through interviews, survey questions, focus groups, and creative workshops. Quantitative data was gathered through surveys. The findings do not claim to be universal, but rather draw upon and highlight individual experiences, and discuss emerging trends that connect the experiences of many of the individuals that have participated in the study.

For the purpose of the Freelancers in the Dark project, a 'freelancer' was defined as any individual whose working life exists outside of formal payrolled employment (and the restrictions and protections such contracts may offer). We did not distinguished between 'self-employed' and 'freelance' and recognised that many freelancers work in multiple roles, including part-time and short-term payroll contracts. For this reason, our guiding principle for inclusion in the study was self-selection by the individual freelancers. Similarly, the study extended across all freelancers in the theatre 'sector' including those who combine work in theatre with other fields outside theatre.

Furthermore, our intersectional study included a broad demographic of freelancers across categorisations of region, age, race, gender, sexuality, disability, and economic and social class. Similar to our approach to the term 'freelancer', these demographic details were used, and are categorised in this report, only when our research participants noted them as important to their reflection on their experiences as freelancers. Our survey, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, documented what the participants felt were important in their descriptions of their experiences in the industry pre-pandemic, and during Covid-19.

Our report follows this approach, and we only reveal the intersectionality of our participants when it is important for the context of the reflection documented. We also use the term 'actor' to describe actors of any gender. However, though we acknowledge that many freelance theatre workers find employment across national and international regions, we feel that the regional differences are important to keeping a broad map of experiences across the United Kingdom. Therefore, in our report we describe the location of the freelance worker whenever possible.

'I want to look for community within the industry more, by making connections with directors who I previously found intimidating'

Playwright, London Micro-Commission

Photo by Nina Dunn, The Dark Theatres Project, 2020

Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, Birmingham Micro-Commission 2021

Interviews

Since autumn 2020, we conducted 135 one-to-one interviews with freelancers from a range of locations, disciplines, and career stages. The first 80 interviews were conducted between September-November 2020, and the remaining 55 interviews were conducted between March-April 2021. This allowed greater understanding of various moments within the pandemic; the situation changed frequently and rapidly over this timespan.

The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and were semi-structured. They covered a range of topics that included: how they got in to the industry; their experiences within the theatre industry before Covid-19; and the impact of the pandemic on their work and lives. The second group of interviews, conducted in Spring 2021, also focused on the future and the experience of the industry reopening. In Autumn 2021 we asked all interviewees follow up questions via email addressing their overall experiences of working throughout Covid-19.

Additionally, we conducted 10 interviews with representatives from various theatre organisations across the four nations of the UK. The organisations targeted were those named by freelancers as supportive, whether through their actions or through their support of movements like the Freelance Task Force. While the majority were building-based, they also included small companies, often with part-time staff.

Focus Groups

These sessions were conducted over Zoom in compliance with the strict social distancing regulations and involved groups of four to six freelancers. On average they lasted 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 shifted since March 2020. The participatory and communal nature of conducting focus group interviews was particularly generative due to the often collaborative nature of theatre workers; our participants regularly inspired and encouraged each other and interviewing them in an interactive, dialogic environment produced generative results.

Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, Cardiff Micro-Commission 2021

Creative Workshops

Our Creative Micro-Commissions took place across the UK during October and November 2021. The micro-commissions were held at 6 locations across the UK (London, Plymouth, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Newcastle). They included a three-hour virtual workshop and a two-day in-person workshop with freelancers working in small groups, devising creative practice in a studio space. At the end of the second day, participants shared scratch performances of the creative content generated.

Across the locations we worked with a range of creative freelancers including writers, directors, theatre makers, and actors; from those relatively new to the industry to those with decades of experiences within it. There were a mix of specialists from areas such as physical theatre, visual arts, and comedy, all bringing their own perspectives, skills, and approaches to the commissions. In groups of four the participants were asked to respond to one of six themes:

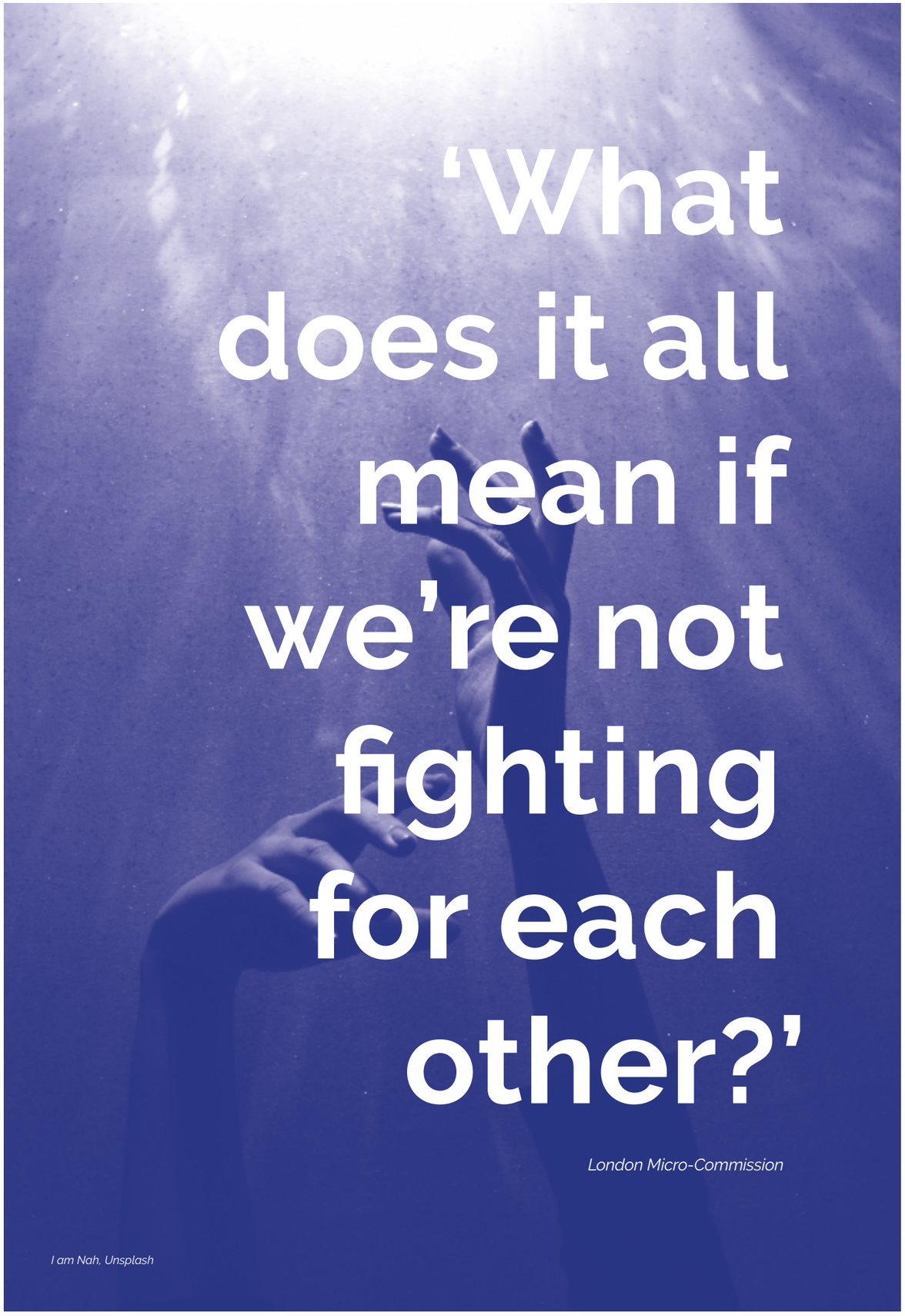
- Advocacy
- Transformation
- Giving Voice
- Identity
- Empowerment
- Collaboration

These prompts were all significant themes that had emerged in the interviews, focus groups, and surveys. They were deliberately broad, allowing the freelancers to respond with autonomy and imagination. As a result, the focus and design of each set of workshops differed, as the freelancers brought their own artistic styles and processes into the studio. The workshops allowed lots of space for exploration of the personal experiences of the pandemic and reflections on the industry, together with collective experiences and frustrations from the past 18 months.

Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, Newcastle Micro-Commission 2021

Survey

Our survey (completed by 397 theatre freelancers) launched on 23rd November 2020 and closed on 19th March 2021. The survey contained 34 questions and took an average of half an hour to complete. It was designed to provide both qualitative and quantitative data points by using a range of question formats and to inform the development of further qualitative data collection. A particular focus was placed on perceived changes in theatre freelancers' careers before and after March 2020 and their relationship to governments, public agencies, and organisations. Whilst existing surveys of this workforce at the time focused on the immediate effects of Covid-19 and related restrictions, our survey took a more future-oriented approach. While this sample is self-selected, it provides important insights into the planning and long-term thinking of freelancers since March 2020. Arising from the survey, we also assembled a timeline of key policy moments to better map the changing landscape freelancers were navigating.



I am Nah, Unsplash

Theatre and Freelancers Pre-Covid-19

C

We set the scene for the remainder of this report by outlining the situation for theatre freelancers prior to March 2020. Our background reading of sector discussions and research predating the pandemic, combined with reflections on how theatre freelancers presented the pre-existing environment through the data, is an important part of our report.

To understand how Covid-19 changed freelancers' understandings of, and experiences in, the industry, it is necessary to refer back to a pre-pandemic 'base line'. Many participants talked about the lockdowns and outbreak of Covid-19 as prompting a 'paradigm shift'. However, drawing from the September 2020 to April 2021 interviews, while this may be true in the global scale of the pandemic, in the focused subject of this report , theatre freelancers, this shift fell into a continuum of pre-existing issues and evolutions of practice.

The span of 'UK theatre' is broad and diverse in its practices, modes of production, and distribution. There is no one 'sector' just as there is no heterogenous group of theatre freelancers though there appear to be, at times, a range of overlapping and unifying voices and campaigns. Many freelancers work across a variety of disciplines and practices, while theatre varies between commercial, subsidised, regional, touring, socially engaged, and participatory modes. As a result, some of the pre-Covid features we summarise here were particular to some parts of UK theatre but not all.

Setting the Scene

To first paint the more positive picture, the period leading up to Spring 2020 saw theatre freelancers working in a richly varied field. Large mainstage productions, principally in or connected to London's West End and prominent venues saw high volumes of audience and internationally regarded, transferable work. Many of our freelancers interviewed felt proud of their work in a vibrant and varied industry pre-Covid-19. One London-based lighting designer we interviewed described his perception of the UK theatre industry as 'some of the finest storytelling and visual crafting that you'll find in the world … I think there is outstanding theatre both in the commercial and subsidised sectors, and both in London and elsewhere in the country.'

Many successful large-scale productions and the teams involved were enjoying long and sustained periods of work. The rise of interest in immersive, installation and site-specific work was capturing imaginations and fomenting ever more visible crossover with other live arts, music, cabaret, and club, attracting younger audiences. Livestreaming of performances, mainly to cinemas, was particularly the preserve of larger organisations but a range of forms of digital engagement, app-based, and livecasting were being used across the sector.

The freelance theatre workers we spoke to also found that the positive impact of the theatre industry went beyond the financial returns and audience numbers. Many shared stories of the impact of their work on individuals and communities, particularly in regional, local, and national touring companies. A musical theatre performer spoke of the service to audience members' mental health and sense of community as something 'money can't buy'. He described his work as 'almost a service to humanity.' Another writer/performer described her sense of value in the industry coming from its effect on audience members:

Photo by Davide Ragusa, Unsplash

'The audience plays a massive part in empowering the artist'

Actor, Birmingham Micro-Commission

> *I have to say, from a sort of writer/producer point of view … once you push through and you get something up on stage, people come up to you afterwards and tell you their life stories and get involved, and, you know, people [are] like crying, strangers crying in my arms. You can't put a price on that … that's the point, when you affect people, when you touch someone with something that you have done. I mean, it's just the most gratifying thing in the world.*

Community-based and socially engaged theatre workers described the growing importance of engagement not only with their collaborators within communities but with public bodies, such as arts councils, other agencies, venues, and theatre companies. Representatives from venues and companies we spoke with were, to varying degrees, increasingly aware of their responsibilities to at-risk and marginalised communities. The role of theatre buildings and arts centres as social and civic spaces was already being re-examined in a context of widening social inequalities (Doeser and Vona, 2016; Orozco, Bell and Walmsley, 2018). Many artists and companies had seen their creative relationships and practice flourish internationally, often through EU-financed co-productions as well as festival showcases and commissions. Socially engaged practice, community-embedded work, and work with, and for, children and young people was seeing visibility, recognition, and a range of positive collaborations.

Disabled and D/deaf artists and the companies they worked with were achieving ever greater visibility and developing more challenging practice. Black British and Asian artistic and cultural leaders were being appointed in greater numbers to senior roles. Freelancers we spoke to from disability arts networks, BEATS (British East & South East Asians in the Screen & Stage Industry), the British East Asian network, and others, spoke of increasing visibility in the past decade. A significant proportion of this achievement however, as our interviewees emphasised, was due to the tireless activism coming from within these communities in the face of persistent and longstanding inequities. One disabled actor/writer, who had experienced discrimination in the industry in the past, reflected on the recent attention her work had gathered:

> *You don't get nominated for an Olivier Award and go, "things haven't changed for me", of course they have. How much of the change is led by certain people or certain groups, rather than the industry as a whole, is a really good question.*

To paint the second, less positive picture, many of these changes to equality, visibility, and representation of people and practices lagged behind where they should have been by 2020. Producers were working with theatre buildings in need of repair (both 19th and early 20th century as well as post-2000 Lottery/Millennium funded capital developments), inadequate for the developments in production technology; sometimes unsafe and unfit for the needs of audiences, communities, and makers. Despite the interdependency of the theatre sector, disparities of budget and visibility were growing between large-scale and commercial/semi-commercial production, and smaller-scale, non-profit and studio productions, regional and rural touring, and work in, and by, diverse and marginalised groups. A profusion of under, and unfunded, companies and solo/independent producers in theatre masked a significant loss of stable production bases across the UK. However, the development of new producing models and production hubs was equally inhibited by under-investment (Mason, 2012; FitzGibbon, 2015; Scaffold, Keeler & Theatre Bristol, 2017).

Communicated by our research participants was a sense that much of the struggle faced by the industry was caused by austerity measures for arts and cultural budgets at national, devolved, and local government levels. However, it was not only austerity creating the problems and ethical tensions of relevance, inequality and sustainability confronting UK theatre prior to Spring 2020.

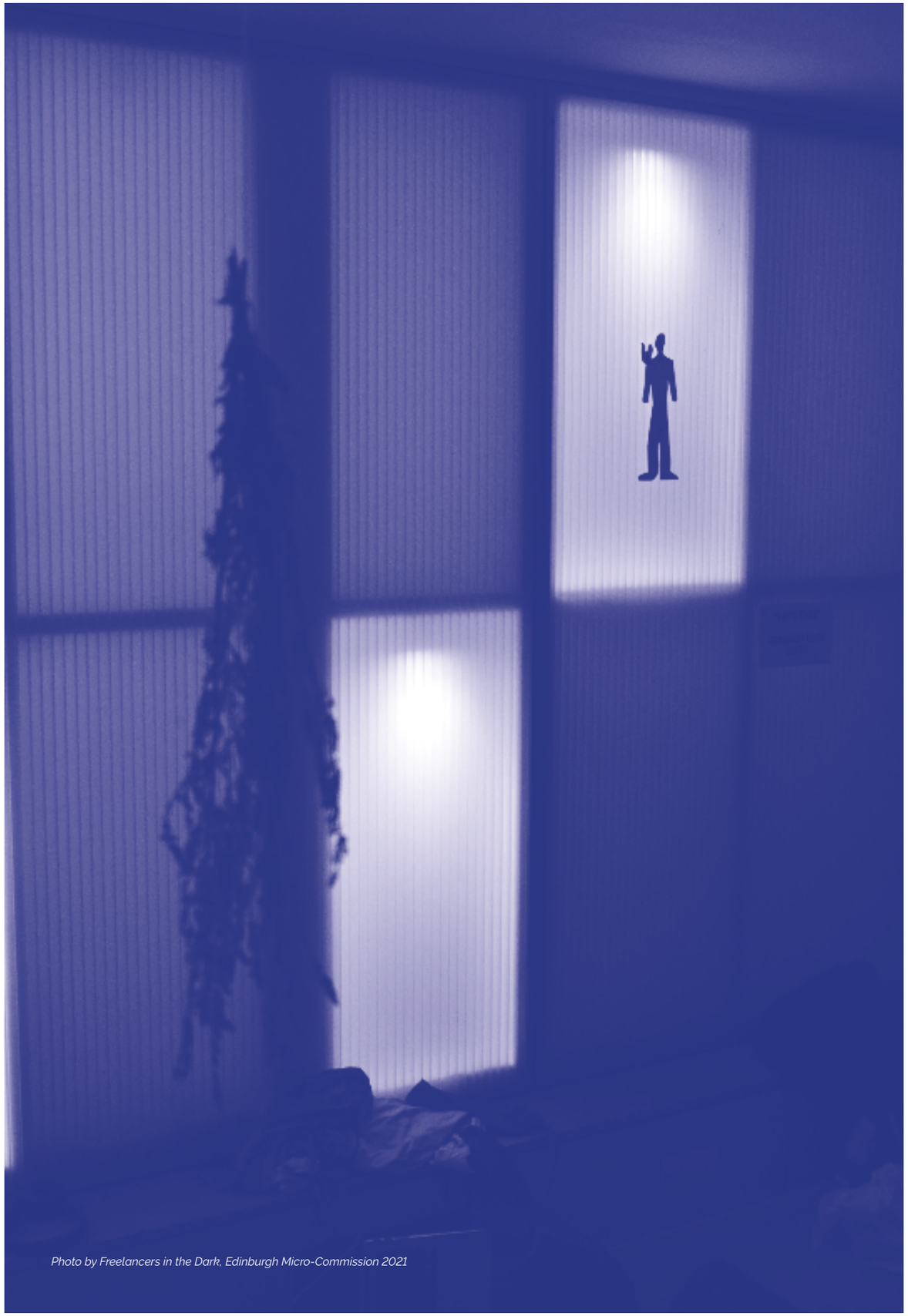


Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, Edinburgh Micro-Commission 2021

Sustainability

The mobility of theatre and its freelancers pre-Covid was both an asset and a challenge. Internal to the UK, while the theatre workforce and productions could move between the four nations, policy at national, devolved, and local government was very different and often contradictory. The theatre workforce frequently moved across disciplines and between other creative industries (events, film, TV), fuelling many of the growing success stories of UK creative and cultural industries (CCI) policy.

'What about the regions? What about people who want to save those venues?'

Yet years of successive city-driven regeneration strategies and a concentration of funding to major cities had funnelled activity and finance towards larger metropolitan areas, heightening long-standing disparities between regions, and between metropolitan and rural/smaller urban areas (Naylor et al, 2016; Hamilton & Granger, 2012; Stark, Gordon & Powell, 2013). This was leading to a drain of talent, resource, and media coverage to London and other greater metropolitan areas. Regional, small-scale, and rural touring was becoming less financially viable, with contractions of access as well as budgets and contract durations.

There were substantial challenges to the international mobility (inwards and outwards) of UK theatre programmes, its artists and crews. The 2016 referendum decision to exit the EU not only reduced access to international finance and partners but, more significantly, had not yet found resolutions for touring/visiting work permits and visas that matched theatre's working practices. Rising fuel and associated energy costs were leading to increased project and production budgets, while the available finance (public or private) to cover these costs was limited. In addition to the squeeze on wage/income levels, the impact of these costs were forcing into question the long-term environmental sustainability of the commissioning, producing, and touring models for many forms of theatre presentation.

This complex mix of conditions (austerity, gig economy, talent drain) had further marginalised groups within the sector, particularly due to economic precarity, race, and class-based issues. Austerity was especially seen amongst freelancers as removing important support for emerging and midcareer theatre workers and impacting regional, smaller, and grassroots companies. While a lack of opportunity regionally was driving workforces to London, the city was also increasingly unaffordable for most of those working or trying to work in theatre.

Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, Cardiff Micro-Commission

Regional Disparity

Reported by our interview participants, the collapse of different forms of the resident repertory theatre system particularly in England had made it more difficult to enter the theatre workforce outside London, creating an uneven and unsustainable landscape. One theatre director in his 40s, working in the Northeast of England, described the issue:

> *When I was starting ... the regional theatre system was 50% weaker than it was a decade or two decades before, but at its height the Arts Council were supporting theatres all across the country in every regional city and quite a lot of towns, doing their own work all the year round, so you had a situation where you had twelve productions being done a year with an artistic director, an associate director, and room for guest directors which meant that there was huge amounts of work for everyone really.*

While some may view the repertory system as exclusionary, it, and other models of local authority intervention, contributed to a more sustainable theatre ecology in cities across the UK during key periods from the 1960s forward. By 2020, however, this model was in significant decline replaced by highly precarious project-based delivery and increased reliance on inconsistent self-employed work (see Parkinson & Buttrick, 2017, Nordicity & Smith, 2017). According to our interviews, this trend had been particularly damaging for local communities, working-class theatre workers, and especially, for the design and technical theatre work force. These occupations relied on repertory systems to learn their trade while a steady income and base close to home encouraged recruitment from those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

‘Not only for their sake, but partly for the sake of their local economy, I think if you live in Leeds, it should be reasonable that, when you go to see a play in Leeds, the company is based in Leeds. … I think the industry is just very London–centric in this country.’

Actor/Playwright, London 2020

Image unknown

A working-class set designer/builder in his 50s described how he started as an assistant to a regional repertory theatre’s in-house design team at 16 and built his way up from there. Speaking on the loss of regional repertory theatres for the set build and design workforce, he explained;

> *I honestly don’t know how younger designers leaving college now, how they get into the industry. …I think if it’d been me leaving college now and being expected to work for nothing in fringe venues for years, I’d have not done it.*

Many of those we interviewed placed the limited resources in their region (or nation) in direct comparison to London. Austerity and the resulting loss of mobility had made theatre in their city, region, or nation ‘a closed shop’, ‘cliquey’, more competitive and survivalist, more reliant on the same small group of freelancers, than they found in London. One of our survey participants from Northern Ireland argued:

> *I firmly believe that there is a tribal atmosphere within the theatre sector in Northern Ireland and that some of our theatre companies do not feel that they have a responsibility, as recipients of public funds, to support, develop, and nurture local artists.*

These challenges were attributed by participants to increasingly economically driven programming (risk-averse, celebrity-driven) and a post-2008 environment of successive austerity budgets. However, others pointed to marginalisation and exclusion (of people and practices) across the theatre sector over decades and an increasingly distant and oppositional relationship between companies/venues and the freelance workforce. Additionally, pre-Covid-19, there had been widespread discussion about perceived ‘snobbery’ within the theatre sector towards work that found popular appeal in a range of communities and with diverse audiences; an attitude at odds with the interest in venues as ‘civic’ spaces.

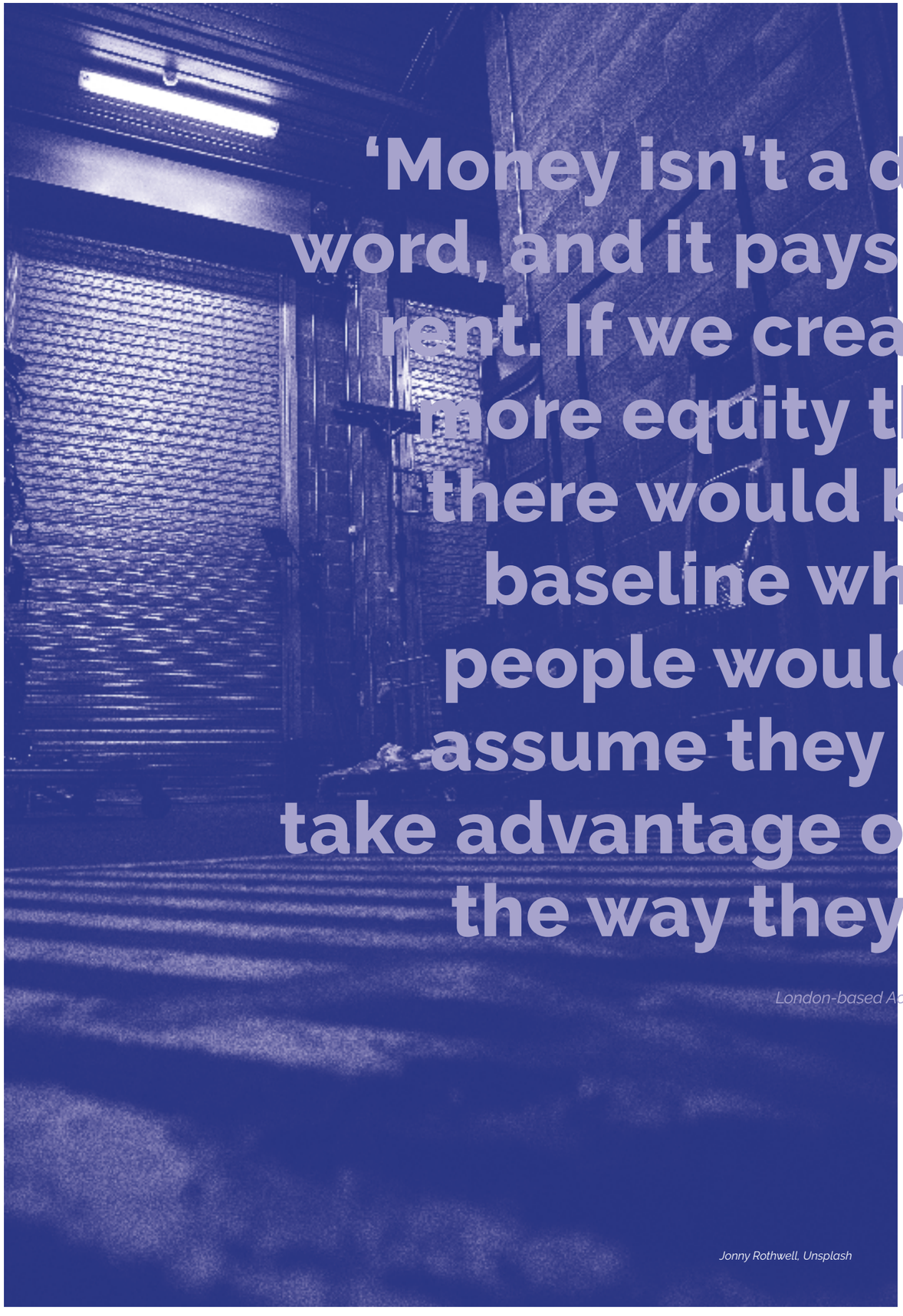
Many argued that there was also an existential crisis of relevance in theatre. Over a prolonged period, working and benefits class people, global majority and migrant people, disabled and D/deaf people, women, and trans people, had been unable to see themselves in the training, the production teams, and the programmes of theatres and companies, except as special initiatives or sidebars of discretionary programming and development. Increasingly, they also rejected the ‘pipeline’ routes to mainstage ‘success’ and wanted to construct their own definitions of achievement. Additionally, the rising costs of tickets, particularly in London and the West End, excluded many audiences and there were increasing gaps of relevance, with theatre audiences not representing the range of communities in the UK.

Poor Pay and Lack of Regulation

Regularly appearing from 'behind the scenes' were complaints of unsustainable precarity, poor and unsafe working conditions, concerns of conduct, and widespread discrimination, and inequality. None of these complaints were new and not all of them affected freelancers exclusively. By 2020, it was seven years since Bryony Kimmings' blog (2013), *You Show Me Yours*, had shown the untenable contractual terms touring theatre makers were working under. From 2015, a series of reports, campaigns, and online complaints had brought workforce concerns to the fore. Reports by Stage Directors UK, Equity, and many others showed a culture of low/no pay for both entry level and established freelancers (Harris & Keehan, 2020; Hescott & Furness, 2018, Nordicity & Smith, 2017). This rendered such careers out-of-reach for many and pushed people (often but not always unwillingly) into portfolio careers juggling multiple micro-contracts and under-financed projects.

As one of our survey participants argued, the systemic problem of low pay in the industry left freelance theatre workers vulnerable to the financial impact of the pandemic:

> *Through 'Back Up' I have read of people who have worked constantly their whole lives being left with no income and support and having to ask for charity help to keep themselves financially and mentally above the water line. It is heart breaking and brings home how we have not been properly paid with fees to protect ourselves from catastrophes like the pandemic. No holiday pay, no pension contributions unlike staff. It was a disaster waiting to happen. Freelancers have actually subsidised the organisations by being cheap, non-properly looked after, labour.*



Lack of pay regulation and wage suppression were particular points of concern amongst interviewees. Some freelancers who had been in the industry for decades felt that wages and daily rates for technical and performance staff today were the same as decades earlier. A London-based musical theatre actor in his 40s argued that 'everything has obviously gotten much more expensive in the last 30 years and I don't necessarily feel that our wages have gone up;' while a technician from Glasgow in his mid-30s described how: 'when I started, I was 22 and in Scotland I was getting 150 pounds a day. I feel, and I was talking to people, that was the same as what they were getting 10 years ago.'

Many interviewees described how the lack of regulation had led to pay disparity for the same job across the country, as well as wide ranging disparity in the way contracts were issued (despite collective agreements being in place). Technicians and designers particularly felt that producers 'don't understand' their job and described unclear communication regarding hours worked or contract terms changing. Directors remarked on how often they felt the lowest paid as other roles had stronger union representation with more regulated pay rates. Performers felt that the guidelines in Equity for minimum pay scales were often ignored with few consequences. A female lighting designer in London described how much more pay she received when working as a lighting designer for art gallery exhibitions than in the theatre industry because of the lack of clear pay scales and lack of enforcement of union rates:

> *I don't think [Equity] holds enough authority in the industry at the moment for me as a freelancer to be like, 'Oh well, this is equity minimum'... well I have to work for eight days in prep minimum and then I've got three days to watch run throughs, and then I'm on site for however many days. If you break that down to twelve hours a day, that's way less than minimum wage that you're offering.*

London Micro-Commission, 2021

Freelancers consistently described how their pay rarely included the number of actual hours one spends on a job (including pre-production meetings, preparation, and tech hours). There is a complexity to this issue, however, as the industry's overwork and low pay/no pay culture encourages or expects working beyond contract. A theatre maker/performer in London described explained:

> *The amount of jobs you've done where you get paid below minimum wage or don't get paid at all, but we go because [it's with] the people we love and we respect and we like the work that we're doing.*

Others felt that it was hard to negotiate for better pay when aware of the limited budgets the companies are working with, and many freelancers felt pressured to underpay oneself to support the industry. A London-based technician described the difficulty she found advocating for fair pay within the industry:

> *I can't really say to my producer, like, "that's not enough hours for me. That's not enough money". Because she's under pressure, because she's literally in charge of everything and is not getting enough money. I can't say that to the artist, because the artist is my friend who I've gained trust with [and] who also is doing another job on the side to get money to do this thing. And I can't say it to the institution because the institution is, like, cancelling loads of shows because they haven't got enough money to put them on.*

The low/no pay culture , according to some of our working-class interviewees, privileges those from more affluent backgrounds who can afford to do that kind of work. Working-class and other under-represented groups, however, lose those opportunities because they 'need to pay the rent' which, as some of our research participant argue, gives others an unfair advantage in the industry. Another London-based set designer in his 20s described how:

> *[Middle class designers] most o the time can afford to do a whole ton of work for free because there will be some sort o financial help backing them, which basically then means that they get to push more things into their portfolio. So, by the time a paid opportunity comes, they have all this work to show. Whereas… because I don't have any of this support, I have to work customer service jobs most of the time, you know, pub jobs, bar jobs … means that you're in situations where I have to say no to this job because even though it's exciting, it's unpaid, and I'm about to have three shifts in a shop here. And yeah, the pay, that's going to feed me.*

Across all freelance disciplines, there was a feeling that the job description and pay rate often changed between being advertised and the job offer being made, putting freelancers under pressure to accept unfavourable conditions, hours, and pay rates. A sound designer in London spoke of the real problem of an industry-wide culture of low pay and overwork:

> *We work relentlessly. The hours are ridiculous. And unless you've got someone from your union or whatever, going, 'right, now you've got to take your break', we often work round the clock, through and over the breaks, do you know what I mean?*

Untenable working conditions and hours put further pressure on freelancers. Cuts to production budgets caused pressure to work more hours as development and rehearsal periods shortened. This was particularly difficult for those from working-class backgrounds with caring responsibilities:

> *There is still a huge stigma in the arts to admit you cannot cope. All of the last few years of austerity has meant artists, who are usually the working poor, have been expected to do more with less and be even more 'resilient'! So insulting and discriminatory if you're already poor, working-class, and have multiple caring responsibilities.*

Six- day work weeks, long tech rehearsals and shorter rigging periods created physical and mental stress for workers but had become the norm. One performer in Scotland reflected on her experience pre-Covid:

> *I had a really difficult contract before lockdown, where there just wasn't an issue about there being a six-day week. And two of the team got supremely ill. One very ill with their mental health. And I think it was fobbed off as, like, "they've got mental health issues," and, you know. Then we returned to the contract in February for a fortnight and we did another six day week and I was just, like, I can't. My mental health hit rock bottom.*

Designers, technicians, and other backstage workers spoke of particularly long days, poor pay, and hectic work schedules impacting the quality of the work as well as their own physical health. A technician from Liverpool expressed the toll the job took on her:

> *It can just be a lot of time and a lot of effort. I'm not saying not for much credit, but it can get really … the rates of pay can range so much, how well you're looked after, and if you're working on different things. Every month or week it's getting to know new people all the time.… When you're there every evening, you're there 12 hours a day sometimes. I don't know if there [are] easier ways of doing [the] things I'm doing now, I don't know.*

Photo by Hailey Kean, Unsplash

Low pay created systemic issues of overwork. Many designers, technicians, and stage managers interviewed spoke of how they were forced to overbook jobs to 'make a liveable wage'. Other freelancers spoke of juggling several 'side jobs' alongside their theatre work to make ends meet. As one actor/producer described: 'Everybody has their side jobs, everyone does not only an acting job but also they have to run their own business.'

The side jobs existed both within the industry and outside. They included both jobs needed to sustain freelancers economically when out of work in the industry, as well as unpaid jobs within the industry. Side jobs were seen as essential to build industry networks, artistic collaborators, and gather new work. An actor and musical director described the constant hustle to stay afloat:

> *Hustling like … no tomorrow…. It makes me so angry thinking about all this stuff. It's just being able to hustle all the time and never, ever… that's what's so exhausting about it, … that you never stop.*

The 'hustle' of the career caused burn out for many freelancers in the industry, increasing the strain on theatre workers' mental and physical health over time.

Burnout and Mental Health

The nature of the freelancer is to bring their specialist skills to multiple businesses. There was, as a result, a need to juggle multiple jobs or types of work with multiple teams. Additionally, it was generally understood that work in theatre (and the arts) often blurs boundaries of the personal and professional in terms of identity, attribution of success, informal, and antisocial working practices. As one singer/performer from the East of England argued:

> *It's so much part of our identity. It's not a job. You can't quantify that. You can't quantify it without making it sound really up its own arse, but it is part of identity because it's you. You are the product. It's not how quickly you do a spreadsheet or how many deals you can pull or how much stuff… you are it. If you can't be your own product, what are you?*

The lack of robust workers' rights, the informal nature of work and securing work, and the absence of human resources departments or systems reinforced a culture of both over- and under-work at the same time, which discourages complaint. Pre-Covid, this led to widespread burnout and pressures on freelancers' mental health and wellbeing.

As one of our survey participants described, 'Freelancing is inherently stressful, as you are constantly looking for the next job or contract.' As a producer in the Southeast of England described, 'We live with our choice all the time, because we don't have sick pay or we have terrible wages. And that affects our whole lives.'
In our interviews, freelancers described a lack of industry support to deal with work-related concerns in their contract work with either independent companies or larger arts organisations. The lack of robust HR departments which were 'very small or non-existent in theatres' and/or lack of flexible working conditions seen in other industries (such as holiday pay, days off, flexible work structures, etc..) had put a great deal of strain on the theatre workforce.

‘We live with our choice all the time, because we don’t have sick pay or we have terrible wages. And that affects our whole lives.’

Southeast-based Creative Producer, 2021

Freelancers spoke of pressure to miss important life events like funerals, weddings, and the birth of their children. Others spoke of forced cancellations of plans and a great fear of taking holidays abroad in case they aren’t available for work.

Many of those interviewed described feelings of vulnerability and the pressure to hide any struggles with mental health in order to sustain their careers. As one West End actor argued: ‘We’re an industry that’s probably arrived with mental health issues. And the irony is that we have to hide it more than you would another profession.’ Although pre-Covid, Mental Health First Aiders were beginning to be introduced into theatre buildings, several freelances interviewed expressed a deeply entrenched culture of self-denial where you have to put your ‘best self’ forward, fearing any acknowledgement of mental health struggles would negatively impact their ‘employability in such a competitive industry’. Other research would suggest this was not only a common experience but one of growing concern both within theatre and within the wider creative industries (Equity, 2014; Shorter, O’Neill & McIlherron, 2018).

All of these pre-Covid pressures led to a culture of prioritising work needs over personal needs and added to mental health and well-being issues within the industry.

Persistent Inequality in UK Theatre

More than the issue of income were the exclusionary practices reported, the dependency of individual freelancers on the discretionary tastes of senior figures in the theatre world, and the antisocial working practices misaligned to caring responsibilities, neurodiversity, and disability. By 2020, there was also widespread understanding that with such precarity and exclusion comes a suppression of complaint, the fear that speaking out will either have no effect or risk being labelled a ‘troublemaker’ (Ahmed, 2021). High-profile cases such as Max Stafford Clark’s resignation from Out of Joint, or the allegations against Kevin Spacey following his departure from the Old Vic, drew attention to much more widespread concerns of harassment, sexual misconduct, coercion, bullying, and discrimination (Topping, 2017; BBC, 2019).

Despite some of the progress noted earlier, the lack of diversity in the industry, both onstage and behind the scenes, as well as in leadership positions and on theatre boards, was evident pre-Covid-19 (Bailey, 2017; Brook, O’Brien & Taylor, 2020; Oman, 2019; Cronin, 2021; Hamilton & White, 2020; House of Lords, 2017). This was particularly noted by a variety of workers from under-represented groups within the industry across the spectrum of race, class, gender, and disability. One multidisciplinary freelancer from Manchester emphasised the lack of diversity ‘behind the scenes’ noting how roles such as scenographers and theatre directors appeared largely ‘middle class’ and ‘male dominated’. A Black British actor/director spoke of how the theatre appeared to be getting more diverse, but ‘in a way that’s palatable still to White [culture]’. She noted that colourism was still a major factor in casting choices, while representation behind the scenes appeared limited. This significantly influenced not only the type of stories being told on the stage and the diversity of the audience, but how comfortable the industry felt for theatre workers who did not fit the dominant profile of White, Western, cis, male, and abled.

For some, the key problem facing the industry was a lack of concern over accessibility for marginalised groups in the industry. A working-class disabled theatre maker in Scotland argued;

> *I think that it can be quite isolating coming rom dierent marginalised backgrounds... I think that there was an access issue, and I think that's quite a complicated thing. I think that the tokenism of diversity, or the way that diversity is kind of like trying to be practised in certain institutions, probably isn't great. And I feel, like, is it accessible? I think that that's quite a big question. And who are we trying to make work for, who are the audience and who's coming in, and what's important to make now?*

Some of the freelancers we interviewed discussed how this impacted decisions to remain in the industry or not. A London-based Black British theatre/film director explained;

> *Back in the day, I used to beat myself up. I used to look in the mirror and be like, "Why do I look like this?" when I was younger. Now I'm like, everyone wants to claim that they're supporters of Black people and Black Lives Matter and all of this kind of business, but again it's always in a format that's palatable, and I was like, "What's the point?" Why am I going to continue to be in an environment that doesn't really appreciate Black people, in terms of their diversity, in terms of the creative different types of roles they can play?*

Lack of encouragement or recognition of disabled theatre workers had exacerbated inequality of representation in the industry. Structural issues further excluded disabled theatre workers including "gig work" not fitting with Access to Work or Disability Living Allowance compliances. While as many of our research participants described, ableist working conditions and hours hindered some disabled freelancers ability to accept work.

Our research participants emphasised the need schedule adjustments to provide access for freelance theatre workers with chronic health issues, caring responsibilities, and other work/home obligations. Such concerns had far greater impact on marginalised and disabled theatre workers. Many of the disabled and working-class artists we spoke to argued that the rigidity of the schedule for work that occurs in the theatre industry needs to become more flexible to be more inclusive.

'We're excluding disabled people by not having more flexible systems.'

As one Scottish theatre maker who self-identifies as disabled queer working-class says, she rarely sees herself or her communities represented on stage. Some of this, she believes, is due to access issues. She has made an access agreement that arts organisations have to sign in her contract which allows her to work to a schedule she needs for her health and carer responsibilities.

> *I think people see that as a barrier.... And I think because of that ... we're excluding too many people. We're excluding disabled people by not having more lexible systems, and ... working-class families.*

For some, the attention gathered around disability arts was lip service that does not go below the surface. As described by a Wales-based playwright:

> *There's quite a few of us which are part of the first wave, if you like, that came through the UK's disabled people's movement and disability arts and culture which are those of us, we're in our 50s onwards now, but have been doing this for a long time, and it's actually annoying me how people who know frankly not a lot, are actually then suddenly being, "Hey, I'm the radical important person because I'm doing this." And we're going, "You're reinventing the wheel, and there's many of us that have been doing this for decades.*

The concentration on tokenism and stereotyping representation onstage without a true equality of voice and experience behind the scenes had all further marginalised under-represented communities. One actor we spoke to from Manchester described her frustration at diversity only being trumpeted in the industry if it was easily understood and an object of display:

> *As someone who lives with an invisible disability, I feel like that's a conversation that just isn't really had very often. I think even among people who look at disabled artists, I don't think people quite know how to deal with invisible disabilities, because they don't tick the disability box. You know, you can't put someone on screen and go, "but they're disabled", because everyone goes, "Well, they don't look disabled".*

South Asian theatre workers have advocated for years that the UK industry marginalised South Asian freelancers through the stories allowed to be told. Funding streams were viewed as prioritising only selective subject matter from Asian artists. Our research participants argued that the focus on 'diversity' paradoxically allowed British White artists' funded projects to be open to any subject matter, while they were felt to marginalise South Asian and British East Asian fundable projects to ones with a focus on 'ethnic art'. One of our interviewees spoke about her desire to make a piece of theatre about the South Asian suffragette, Princess Sophia Alexandrovna Duleep Singh, in order to resist this trend and highlight complicated narratives of intersectionality in the history of feminism in Britain. 'It's never discussed. The fact that the mainstream suffragette movement wouldn't have wanted someone who looked like me.' She discussed how frustrated she was by the over-simplification of race in national historical narrative and in theatrical representations of these histories;

> *Even then when you see photographs of [Duleep Singh], she's surrounded by other women of colour. Even she was like, oh you're important enough to be allowed to be part of this movement but obviously we're going to stand you with other people who are like you, you're not standing with the White women at the front. Because they said it would "dilute the message".*

For many of our British East Asian interviewees, the marginalisation of East Asian freelancers created a systemic issue of tokenism and stereotyping of the British East Asian community. As one London-based actor described, the problem with the continuing stereotyping of their community made her, and others, question what true representation looks like:

> *Do you count, for example, … [tv] stations [with British East Asian actors] playing purely foreigners, speaking Cantonese, or not really being integrated with their society [in the production]? Or [British East Asian actors only getting work] set in Hong Kong or China? Just, that [is the opposite of] representation.*

Working-class freelancers who were often part of a variety of intersectional marginalised communities in the industry, expressed their frustration at how tokenism also limits who represents a community. One Black British actor joked about how he was attending auditions with all the same people who 'looked like him'. Others felt their work in the industry was limited because of the tick box exercise of both casting and job quotas, where they were not seen for their own individual practice, but as tokens of their community. A working-class dancer from Scotland argued:

> *At the minute with tokenism, there can be like one or two working-class artists. And then we're all competing with each other instead of looking at the system and just being like, burn it down.*

Concerns over the lack of leadership positions held by people from within the industry from under-represented backgrounds was seen as a particular barrier to real change within arts organisations. As one East Asian producer and artistic director argued:

> *How are you going to make change with the same people? I am sure anti-racism is really insightful to get an understanding of how people might be affected, but it's not the same as the lived experience. It's the same thing that I can't advocate for class because I don't understand it.*

Without representation in leadership roles, programming, and institutional boards, many of our interviewees noted that there was no possibility of real inclusion beyond tokenism. Without understanding, and/or transforming spaces and viewpoints, true engagement with diversity was hindered. As one playwright and disability activist from Wales argued, this was created through systemic issues regarding the lack of representation and implicit bias within the industry, particularly impacting disabled and D/deaf cultural workers:

> *The ableism, and racism, and ageism, and of course sexism, is at the heart of these institutions unfortunately, because it's in the heart of our society. I would also want to change it so that there was better representation, whether that's people of colour, of age, [or] people who are disabled and D/deaf. We won't have proper change until we have disabled and D/deaf cultural leaders.*

Sector bodies and public agencies had established a range of principles and policies to address many of the issues noted in this report. Arts Council England's ***Creative Case for Diversity*** placed obligations on its National Portfolio Organisations (NPO) clients and other public bodies in devolved nations reinforced equality principles. UK Theatre issued 10 principles (updated in 2021) to address bullying and harassment. Equity UK asked companies to adopt a pledge on workplace conduct.

Lawless Capture, Unsplash

INTRODUCTION

Similarly PiPa worked with companies to produce a ***Backstage Workforce Report*** (2020), which stated that 95% of respondents reported that they had concerns of poor work-life balance, while nearly half reported they are not being listened to by their employers and feel disenfranchised over their concerns in the industry. It is clear then that workforce concerns of precarity, inequality, and lack of safety or workforce protections were part of regular sector discussions and on the minds of company heads and lead officers in public arts bodies.

These ongoing concerns created greater scrutiny over the meaning of genuine representation and inclusion in the industry in recent years, which would be exacerbated throughout Covid-19 as discussed in Section 3. Yet for all these initiatives, it is also clear that in Spring 2020, such concerns were competing for attention with questions of relevance, sustainability, the prospects of further austerity, and the UK withdrawal from the European Union.

2

Covid-19 impact on UK theatre industry and freelancers

Photo by Aman Abdulalim, Unsplash

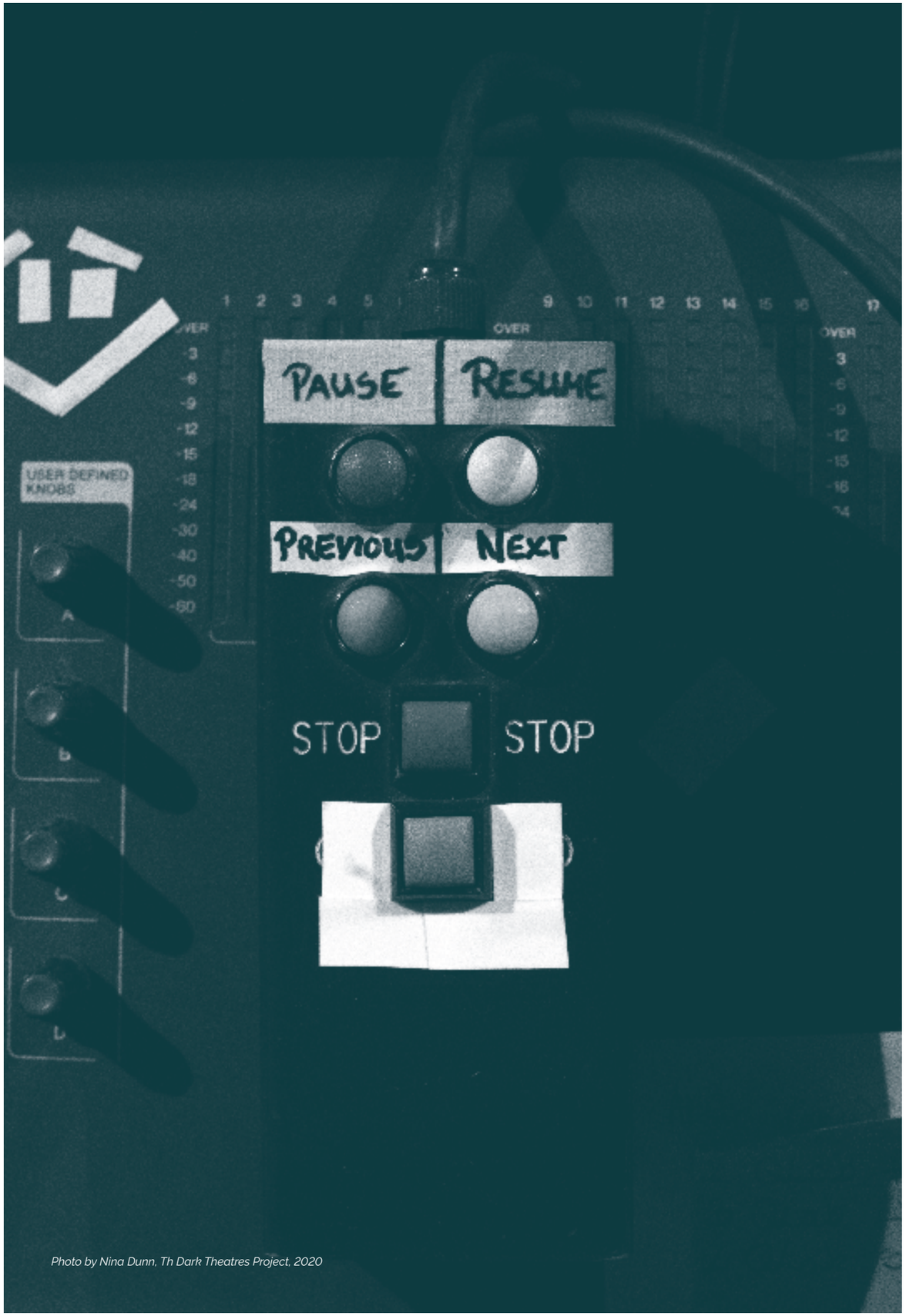


Photo by Nina Dunn, Th Dark Theatres Project, 2020

What Happened to Freelancers During Covid-19? A Snapshot of Ecosystem Disruption

a

This section describes the initial effects that Covid-19 had on freelance theatre workers. It examines how the relationship between theatre freelancers and policymakers at national and devolved levels changed during the first lockdown and in the ensuing period. We firstly examine, in practical terms, what happened to freelancers at the outset of the pandemic and document their unfolding uncertainties. We then address the particular interventions of governments (national and devolved) and public agencies, and investigate how that shaped the relationship between these bodies and freelancers. Finally, we explore the experiences, confusion, and precarity for theatre freelancers as theatres reopened, closed, and reopened again, with ever-evolving government restrictions and guidelines.

The Immediate Effects

When the pandemic hit, the effect for most theatre freelancers was dramatic and immediate. The UK theatre sector effectively shut down its public operations and production in full with only a few days' advance notice. Established theatre venues furloughed a large proportion of their staff, retaining a skeleton crew to maintain buildings. Core teams rapidly restructured to run entire organisations remotely. Many casual staff – bar staff, box office, crew – were made redundant. Hiring of freelancers stopped abruptly and nearly all existing live contracts and forward commitments were cancelled or postponed.

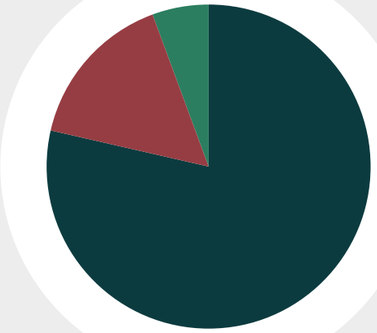
From our study, the experience of this initial closure varied significantly among freelancers, but the evidence shows that freelancers were more dramatically affected than other workers in the industry. Some felt it was an extension of earlier periods of instability, others felt the disruption dismantled their lives. The experience was unevenly felt with some occupations finding it more difficult to reorient their work during lockdowns; while pre-existing inequalities (race, class, disability, caring responsibilities, etc) were exacerbated. Hardship and the stress of uncertainty was evident and amplified over time, but for some, the initial days of lockdown allowed space and time to think about the future with 'the hustle' suspended. For many, the crisis they faced involved more than the loss of work; it also meant a loss of personal identity and value within society and social support systems. This led, at times, to the rethinking of future careers and lives. We also saw anger at the inequalities exposed and the absence of an adequate governmental and policy understanding of what was happening.

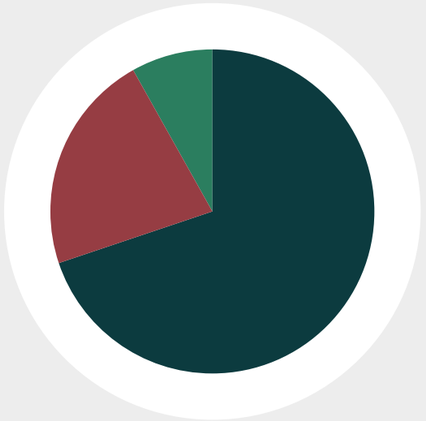
'Every morning waking up and it was another job cancelled'

How have hopes about the future work in theatre and other arts changed since March 2020?

Living in London or Greater London

- Less or much less pessimistic: 5.4%
- Neither more nor less pessimistic: 15.7%
- More or much more pessimistic: 76.2%





Not living in London or Greater London

- Less or much less pessimistic: 8%
- Neither more nor less pessimistic: 22.1%
- More or much more pessimistic: 69%

Photo by Karen Zhao, Unsplash

Balancing a portfolio career that included payroll jobs as well as freelance work posed a particular struggle for theatre freelancers during the initial months of Covid-19. Various freelancers interviewed told us that they hadn't qualified for self-employed support, or knew other freelancers who had not, because of their PAYE work. Fluctuating theatre work year to year also meant that the way the support was assessed provided additional challenges. In our interviews, a number of freelancers expressed disappointment and anger around the rigidity of the funding support and many had 'slipped through the gaps'. A digital designer from the Southeast described feeling like he had 'lost about 70% of my work for the year in one day. And it was really scary.'

One producer in the Southwest described how the feeling of being abandoned by the industry had brought increased feelings of anxiety, frustration, and anger..

> *I think it's just scary that we just don't know what's going to happen next. I have no idea if my show is going to happen, I have no idea. And I do feel like [I'm] going to start getting angry soon. I haven't got angry yet, it was really like soft, and furry, and helpful, and kind, and everyone was all squidgy and vulnerable. And I feel like we're headed for something really bleak and angry. A freelancer war, I feel.*

'The main thing for me over lockdown has been really finding myself again'

London-based, Multidisciplinary Artist, 2020

Photo by Hulki Okan Tabak, Unsplash

However, for others it wasn't until later that the anxiety over job loss kicked in. In the first lockdown, some felt that their skills in 'hustling,' as we described above, had prepared them for this type of situation. In an interview from March 2021, a working-class theatre maker from Scotland reflected back on her experience of Spring 2020:

> *There's a sense of as a freelancer [that] your life is never stable. And I think for a lot of us when lockdown happened it didn't feel as scary as it maybe did for people in like full time salaried jobs who are worried that they would lose everything, because we're almost used to that instability. I felt we all [freelancers] handled [it] maybe slightly better. So, when you're used to that constant cycle of … downtime, you're applying for funding, and you have really busy periods, and then you have down time again, so I don't feel anxious about it. I feel like it's going to be what's going to be, you know.*

Adapting to Uncertainty

A key overarching experience in the early periods of the pandemic across our datasets was pervasive uncertainty. Freelancers experienced immense uncertainty about how they would manage to rebuild their work. This caused anxiety and fear due to the very real prospect that their chosen career would be permanently derailed. As one of our survey respondents articulated, the feeling of despondency and abandonment was palpable:

> *Hopeless, unappreciated, depressed. I went to an all-girls grammar school where we were encouraged to get straight A*s and go to Oxbridge. I took a bit of a turn from wanting to study History to wanting to follow technical theatre and have been fighting to prove that it's a completely viable, reliable, and successful career for the past seven years. Being left out of all support makes it hard not to feel like a fool. Being constantly told that we are unskilled, need to retrain or get a proper job really really hurts, especially when there is no other job I can get-- partly due to being clinically extremely vulnerable, but also because I know that no other job will ever bring me the same joy or satisfaction.*

Freelance and contingent careers always carry a degree of uncertainty, and a core part of cultural freelancers' working lives is developing strategies to manage this. As these strategies themselves came under threat, uncertainty multiplied. Our survey data gave us an insight into how this uncertainty manifested. Survey responses indicated high levels of pessimism. We asked respondents how their hopes about future work in theatre and the other arts have changed since March 2020. 72.4% of respondents felt more or much more pessimistic about their future as a theatre freelancer, while only 7.4% felt more or much more optimistic. This pessimism often appeared to be experienced as future-oriented anxiety. Our qualitative data showed many respondents feeling 'worried' or 'fearful' about their future in theatre.

For many of our interviewees at all stages of their careers, work in the theatre industry takes years to build up, with many developing important relationships with buildings and other freelancers over a long period of time. As one theatre maker described, 'No matter what level the career you are at as a freelancer you've been building and building and building these contacts, and connections, and links. And so it's like a fragile net that Covid just cut!' Or, as a London-based theatre director in her 30s argued:

> *I feel like if you step away from it, you will have to build it again. Yeah, or people forget you. You know? I mean I'd like to think that there would still be a place for me [after the pandemic], but I don't know.*

As well as those that have left the sector (by choice or by circumstance), there were many more who have struggled with uncertainty about whether to stay or leave.

Our qualitative data made clear that during this period theatre freelancers were not only experiencing pervasive insecurity, but also that their emotional experiences were highly changeable. We heard accounts of shifts from optimism to pessimism on a day-to-day basis. As such, it is appropriate to characterise this period as one of pronounced and fluctuating uncertainty.

The immediate impact of the pandemic on theatre freelancers is impossible to separate from their personal experiences—such as care, loss, and isolation—that exceed sector recovery.
Theatre freelancers turned the uncertainty of the pandemic inwards. Many reported increased anxieties about their own capabilities, and many reported feeling isolated. This highlights that the pandemic did not simply press pause on theatre freelancers' careers, but it has also created significant mental barriers that freelancers will be negotiating in the much longer-term.

Photo by Nina Dunn, The Dark Theatres Project, 2020

Re-skilling and Up-Skilling

During the first lockdown, because of the suspension of normal patterns of work, many theatre freelancers, like the wider workforce, developed new skills and undertook further training. This re-skilling and up-skilling took many forms, some of it urgent for professional survival, some of it adaptive to deal with new practices and some of it personal, to realise a new capacity or try something different. We talk below about the ‘reskilling, retrain’ agenda in relation to government campaigns and, in Part 3, we discuss some of the digital practices we examined. However, here we focus on the range of upskilling uncovered in our interviews and survey. Our survey showed that freelancers with more ‘creative’ professions were more likely to have upskilled than those of more ‘technical’ professions. Amongst directors, 92% claimed to have developed new skills during the lockdowns, compared to 79% of writers, 76% of actors, 53% of stage managers, and 52% of lighting specialists. Those with portfolio careers were also more likely to have upskilled than those with just one (77% to 56%).

Our respondents talked about a widespread move, not to ‘retrain’, but to upskill and diversify their ability to work in creative fields. Many began courses in playwriting, filmmaking, digital skills, such as audio and editing, as part of a move to expand their range of work. A production manager described her desire to prepare herself for what she saw as an increasingly competitive industry: ‘I was … trying to, not retrain but upskill. Just to have more things on my CV and actually use the time.’ Others moved to increase their digital skills to help access new audiences. One theatre director described upskilling as a way to make their theatre company more resilient for the challenges facing the industry during and after the crisis:

> *‘One of the things that we knew we wanted to do is that, if we are going to upskill, we’d like to upskill on a project. Because then it’s not just upskilling, we know that the whole purpose would be something that you could then offer it to an audience. And that can help the company as well.*

One community-based facilitator and theatre maker described how her move to expand her creative skills over Covid-19 was part of a decision to make all of her work, both side jobs and artistic practice, remain within the creative fields as an act of personal empowerment and self-care. She argued:

> *My main thing is just … standing in my truth and I think realising that, you know, anything I do, if it's a side hustle or not, has to be something I enjoy doing. [laughs] I hope … loads of artists and freelancers have realised that as well.*

Others noted how the move to upskill was born out of necessity, particularly in terms of the digital skills needed to move work online, and an increase in audio skills required to engage with the boom in audio work throughout the pandemic. A filmmaker and performance artist described:

> *I think it's been a period of time where people have been made to do more [digital work], so people's skills are getting better as well. I've noticed that people are having the time and space to do that. There are people who haven't been making digital work and now have those skills. I think there's definitely going to be a shift, and because they've been forced to [go digital] their reach has been so much bigger online.*

Another survey respondent clarifies that their development of new skills came from a need to stay competitive in the pandemic, and beyond:

> *Although my skills and disciplines are in sound, I am learning new skills in video and streaming as I feel the most available opportunities that will arise will now require multi-skilled technicians.*

While for some, building their skillset felt urgent and necessary to survive in the industry post-Covid, others simlpy enjoyed the opportunity to explore areas of interest. For many, the turn to upskilling proved a shared and collaborative practice.

Accounts of undergoing training were at least matched in our dataset with accounts of offering mentorship, training, or coaching. This was often offered for free, or for reduced rates, and often saw more established practitioners looking to support new and emerging talent. This brings into focus another immediate effect of the pandemic: the development of formal and informal advocacy networks, which is detailed later in the report.

Photo by Nina Dunn, The Dark Theatres Project, 2020

Key Concerns of Mobility and Inclusion

In 2020 we noted already high levels of pessimism amongst theatre freelancers in relation to future work and the development of careers post-pandemic. This was both personal and sectoral. While pessimism was expressed as a wide-ranging professional anxiety, our interviews and survey also revealed specific concerns.

A Forced Pause for the Industry

Other reports have tried to capture the number of freelancers who have 'left the sector' as a consequence of Covid-19 and standard surveys such as the Labour Force Survey, conducted by the Office for National Statistics, are often based on a count of the number of people in employment (in a certain demographic category or industry). Our own survey, which overall focused more on the experiences of freelancers than employment statistics, asked respondents what percentage of their income came from theatre and other arts, both before and during Covid-19. These results showed a significant shift in work patterns away from the theatre towards other kinds of work.

The majority of freelancers engaged with our study had portfolio careers that included professional engagement both in and outside of theatre, however many felt that theatre work was the emotional heart of what they did. It was a 'calling' and at the core of their sense of themselves as artists and professionals. Even if theatre provided a minority of their income, it took on an outsized importance in terms of their professional identity. As such, even if freelancers were able to reorganise their portfolio of work in response to Covid-19 in a way that could maintain their income, less theatre engagement felt like a profound loss. As one of our survey respondents described:

> *I think that my over 40 years' career in the arts is hanging by a thread. The fabric of my career and my life that is completely bound up with creating theatre has been torn apart.*

Freelancers reported how the intimate ties between their sense of self and their professions added to their distress in relation to Covid-19:

> *There's one older actress that I know and have worked with, and … she's not in a good place. I think because her … sense of identity is so wrapped up … Our sense of identity is so wrapped up; before I say I'm a human being I say I'm an actor.*

For some, this loss led to reflection, with many considering their priorities more broadly and re-assessing their work-life balance. One respondent reflected on how their pre-pandemic focus on their professional life suddenly changed when theatres went dark. A community-based theatre maker and playwright intimated:

> *I think I realised that I was probably hiding, not necessarily hiding, but like prioritising my work over everything else. Because it felt like that's the only way to make a living in theatre. Like it has to be completely all encompassing. So, when that kind of fell away I had quite a big mental health crisis. Which then, much of lockdown became about addressing, sorting out, [and] prioritising other things.*

Many of the freelancers we interviewed described how the enforced 'pause' made them reflect upon what they wanted, and did not want, from their professional engagement with the industry. The desire for more agency was felt by many of our research participants. The lack of work during the pandemic led many to make a conscious decision to 'say no more' to what they did not want in the industry. As one West End actor described:

> *I think we all need to be more confident in our value, and more confident that we can say no, and more confident that we can say what we are worth and what we deserve. If we as a collective group of people are able to do that, then everybody else, the cast, the producers and the directors … won't have any choice but to go, yeah, you are worth something.*

The sense of being undervalued during the pandemic, paradoxically, made many embrace their own value and agency as individuals in the industry.

Feelings of Abandonment and Isolation

Aside from the financial precarity, many of our interviewees felt suddenly abandoned by the field and, especially, by those who had previously employed them. Even though they are technically freelancers, many of the professionals we spoke with had companies with whom they had worked regularly over the years, and they felt strong bonds to these organisations and their salaried colleagues. When theatres closed, freelancers were not treated the same way as contracted staff. While legally unsurprising, this felt like a form of betrayal by many of those we spoke with. In particular, survey respondents noted a lack of communication that made them feel unvalued and excluded, and this led to feelings of anger and distrust towards their employers. This compounded the 'Us Vs Them' tensions between organisations and freelancers in discussions about systemic change and the need for a #Reset.

More broadly, many freelancers thought that the extremely difficult situation they found themselves in was not recognised, understood, or appreciated by others, particularly by the government. The substantial loss of income was handled very differently by different companies. Freelancers were often dropped by multiple companies within weeks as each dealt with postponements and cancellations. This felt like a kind of abandonment. One performer in an established West End musical described how suddenly their jobs with certain companies were lost in ways that felt disrespectful. They were in the middle of the contract, with hopes to go back in September 2020, when 'the whole building, 150 people on a Zoom [call], were told that they'd lost their jobs.'

Throughout the interviews, freelancers repeatedly described these cancellations vividly, illustrating the distress they caused. One lost a contract for their first West End show, remembering being told to go home on their opening night, while others called the period a 'slow bleed of cancellations,' losing one contract after another over the Spring and Summer of 2020. A lighting designer described the loss of her contract with an opera company after a sustained period of furlough: 'I just don't think they could keep all of the extra opera seasonal workers on furlough, so they just had to drop us all, which was stressful.'

The rich networks of collaborators, employers, and peers with whom freelancers engaged were not just a source of income but a community, and the sudden loss of these social bonds was painful. One musician/theatre maker from Cornwall expressed her feeling of grief over the loss of her creative community due to Covid-19:

> *I feel like as freelancers I would love to have [an] opportunity for us to get together in person, or share some songs, or just really touch base and support each other because you do feel really isolated when you're a freelancer … I realised I've still got so much grief inside and that's scary. You know, I don't want to be crying all the time when I'm trying to work. So, yeah, it's almost like we freelancers need a good retreat to build ourselves up, let all those tears go, and the …. yeah … create the world again.*

'[Shows and tours] were by and large cancelled as soon as Covid happened so people that were in employment were made jobless.'

London-based Theatrical Agent, 2020

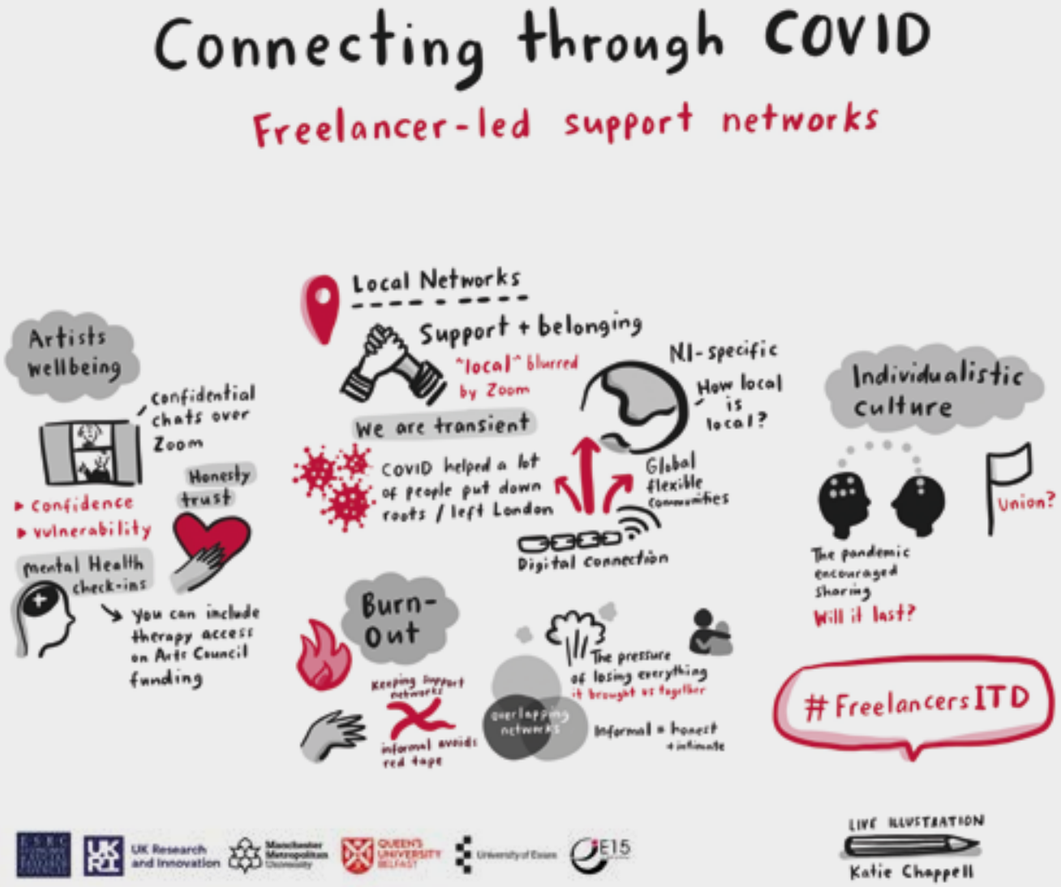
Photo by Sergi Dolcet Escrig, Unsplash

Mutual Support

A response to these vulnerabilities was the way in which theatre freelancers developed networks of mutual support to build back a sense of camaraderie. These social bonds with peers were remarkably important. In our survey, the most commonly cited source of non-financial support was 'other theatre freelancers', exceeding even 'friends and family'. We also noted in our survey responses a statistically significant correlation between those who reported feelings of closeness to other theatre freelancers and overall feelings of optimism.

Many of these networks began to emerge before any official support systems from public bodies or organisations. The formation of these networks could be understood as a reaction to the lack of communication from employers and organisations. The frustrations of dealing with governments and funding bodies at all levels led to further stresses on freelancers. The absence of communication from organisations, employers, and government produced feelings of isolation, a remedy to which emerged in the proliferation of inter-sectoral acts of care, communication, and sociality. Participants in our survey reported they 'found that talking to people in the same boat, and different ones, has been beneficial ... in terms of keeping it together'. We also heard many accounts of a shared outpouring of emotions, both negative and positive. As another survey respondent noted: '[We] commiserated together'. These acts benefited the day-to-day lives of our respondents, but, more crucially, they also provided forums wherein the ability to imagine a future that in some way continued from their past became possible.

'It's just purely communication. That's all it is, that's all people need to know, they need to know what people are thinking.'

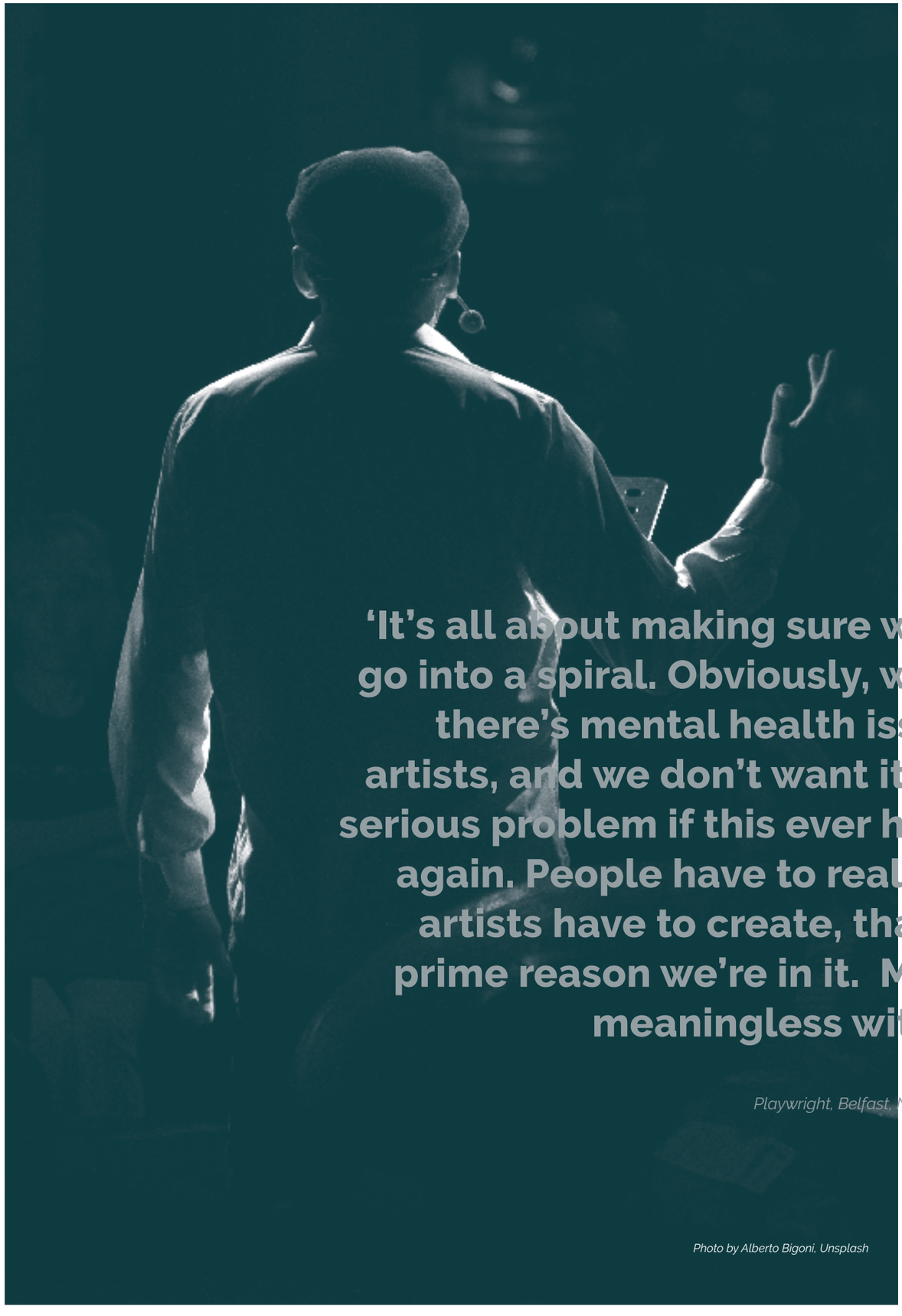


In our interviews, many freelance theatre workers spoke of their reliance on these informal networks for emotional support, which, in time, helped to mobilise many members of the workforce towards activism and change. One London-based theatre director believed that for freelancers, Covid-19 demonstrated that 'we all happen to have the time and space to kind of connect with each other'. Many of our research participants also emphasised how important industry-related social networking platforms were for developing community and confronting social isolation and mental health issues caused by the loss of work. Personal communication, WhatsApp chats, online support networks, and social media platforms were all used to share information, stories, and frustrations across freelance networks.

A theatre and event technician in Scotland described how a technical site which had been used for tech support amongst freelancers before Covid, became a site for mental health support during the pandemic:

> *In terms of things like mental health, like if [you] want to talk, there is a weekly coffee morning. So, 11 o'clock on a Tuesday one of the admins will set up a Zoom chat, and people can just pop in for an hour to just sit and talk about what's going on, or, you know, what's not going on, essentially.*

There was a new sense of support and collaboration, particularly within professions that tended to be more solitary. Costume designers and stage managers, for instance, had come together in online forums to share experiences and support one another for the first time. These new networks fostered a sense of collaboration for freelancers who previously felt like they were 'in competition with each other'. This was frequently discussed by freelancers in our interviews as a positive development, which they hoped would continue when the industry reopened.



'It's all about making sure we don't go into a spiral. Obviously, we know there's mental health issues for artists, and we don't want it to be a serious problem if this ever happens again. People have to realise that artists have to create, that is the prime reason we're in it. My life is meaningless without it.'

Playwright, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 2020

Photo by Alberto Bigoni, Unsplash

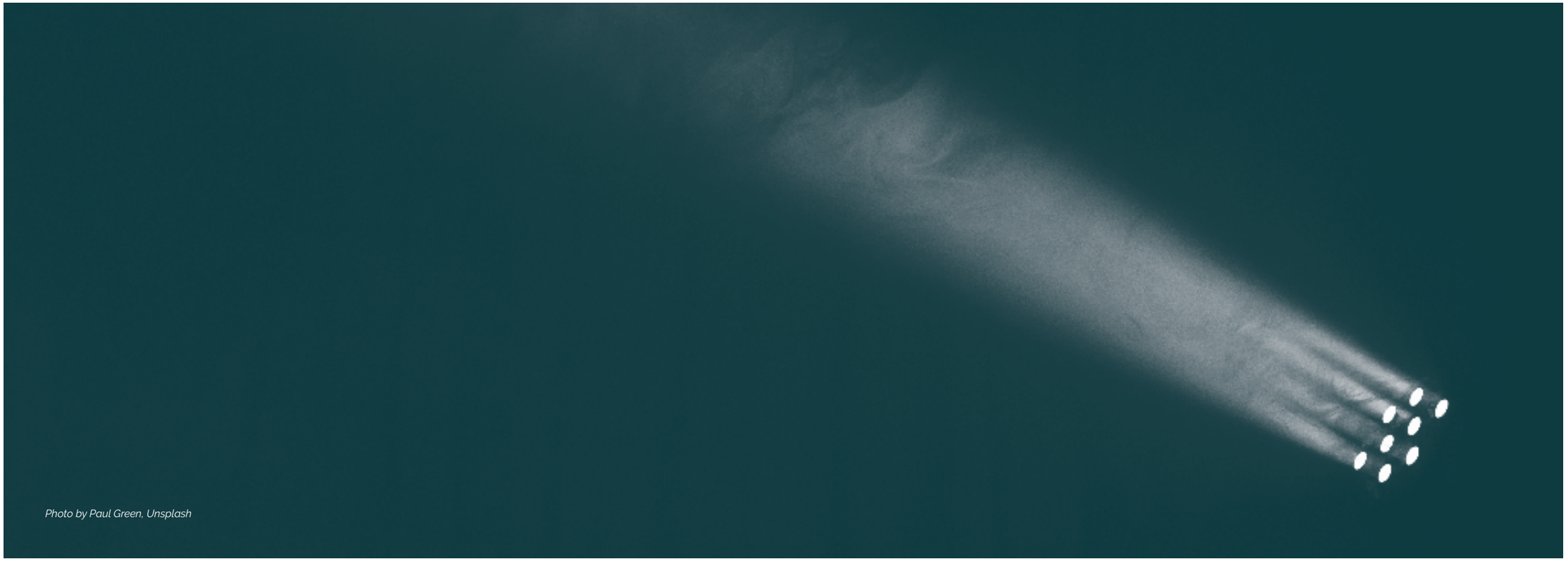


Photo by Paul Green, Unsplash

They also described how these support networks quickly turned to advocacy platforms. A working-class theatre maker from Scotland described how the community support 'coffee mornings' during lockdowns led to more specific discussions over shared experiences of inequality and transformation of the industry. She described her weekly discussions with the Working Class Artist network:

> *I was meeting up with them and having quite nice communal chats about class and about the pandemic and about language, like how to use class-based language which was quite interesting. So, I found that really nice and quite a supportive space.'*

One producer we spoke to highlighted the importance of informal digital networks to theatre freelancers as a means of generating advocacy and stimulating wider communicative practices.
A facilitator of an online company to support artists in crisis during Covid-19, this producer was clear that such networks have acted as crucial points of connection for theatre freelancers: '

> *this is such an interesting space and we didn't have this going before... I just think there's a real power in that... it's really an empowering, exciting time.*

Another working-class theatre maker and community-based artist described how the opening up for communications and networks made him feel especially optimistic about changing the industry for the better:

> *I don't want to just return to how things were before. I've actually used a lot of this time to engage in some therapy.... about my future. I think I'm in a stronger place because it's made me get over that imposter syndrome a bit.... [T]his is a tough time, but it's not going to be any easier if I make it tougher for myself.... Actually, for me, who is someone ... often intimidated to speak to other artists, this was a bit of a leveller and, actually, there [are] some artists who I never really knew, and now I talk to [them] a lot more ...Yeah, so, it's weird, it's been awful and scary, but I feel like I'm coming back stronger in a way.*

b

Freelancers' Relationships with Government and Public Bodies

Having outlined the practical circumstances and emotional responses of freelancers during the initial months of Covid-19 as it impacted on their lives, social relationships, and careers, we turn to their changing relationships with both national and devolved governments, and public agencies. Support and treatment from the political and public sector was raised frequently in interview and survey responses. Additionally, the period from March 2020 represented one of the largest state interventions in private and working lives ever seen in the UK (and indeed globally).
It is important therefore for us to look at freelancers not as 'apart' from workforces and populations, but as within them. In doing this, we contextualise the relationships between freelancers and 'governments' including public bodies who discharged government support (the Arts Councils and Creative Scotland).

We recognise the major global health, public health, and social care issues that faced populations and decision-makers in the period we examined. From the earliest moments of a governmental response in the United Kingdom, both national and devolved governments were dealing with a rapidly evolving situation with a significant number of unknown and/or competing factors. These also included the circumstances of sudden disruption to their own operations and staff, which (as for many organisations) exposed vulnerabilities in digitisation or contingency planning.

Photo by Kafai Liu Oavy, Unsplash

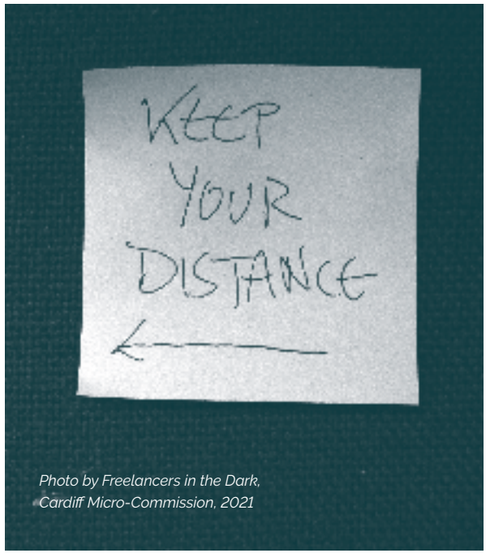


Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, Cardiff Micro-Commission, 2021

Photo by Adi Goldstein

As a result, the responses of many of the public agencies and departments could be described as improvisational, particularly during the earliest phases of lockdown and spread of the virus. However, we also see early decisions and failures of support or understanding as being in many ways repeated in successive waves of new variants, lockdowns, and in the multiple attempts to turn towards a recovery agenda. This has shaped our recommendations around the future of freelance and gig economy work in public policy and, also, how economic and cultural recovery is planned and delivered.

UK government interventions in freelancers' lives took three forms:

- Restrictions on their work, not only in the delivery of live performances and projects but also (and less visibly) on the preparation for production/delivery through rehearsal, technical planning, and assembly;
- State aid packages to account for loss of income and safeguard future viable recovery with sufficient workforce and skill sets;
- The communication (or lack thereof) of creative freelancers as a visible and valued part of a population and workforce through press announcements, campaigns, and inclusion in policy statements.

Stated versus Actual Restrictions

While freelancers were dramatically affected by lockdown restrictions in March 2020, our data showed that the advice from Boris Johnson to 'stay away' from public spaces encroached on their work much earlier. As creative freelance work is project-based, with often tricky alignment of dates across months and years, the destabilisation of 'normal' business began as early as February 2020 (as international touring began to shut down). Before lockdown began, some companies and venues began to postpone entire projects, productions, and tours that had been planned for far into the summer. Contracts for future work that were about to be signed off were rescinded as attendances plummeted and everyone waited for the inevitable actual lockdown.

Other organisations however, were unsure how to proceed. The culture of 'the show must go on' seemed to be pervasive in some of the theatre buildings and organisations our research participants worked with. One theatre director/producer we interviewed was working maternity cover in an established London theatre throughout February and March, and vividly described the uncertainty she experienced at that organisation over the period leading up to the first lockdown:

> *It was a strange privilege to be in a building at that time because I feel like I really witnessed what it was like for the leaders of that organisation and how stressful it was for them. Cause they really didn't know until the final moment when it should close. I mean, they really were in the dark…. They were so in the dark, as we all were a bit. But as an organisation, you know, the rehearsals were still on, like the upcoming shows, like all of that, it was all still happening. It literally did just happen overnight. And I don't know if that's because as artists, we've just always, we're always running at 1000 miles an hour, that we don't stop to see what's happening.*

The feeling of uncertainty amongst organisations was exacerbated by the absence of official instruction to shut down, which would have triggered at least some insurance claims or cancellation payments. Moreover, in the phases of lockdown and reopening that followed, the time-lag between announcement and permission to reopen (sometimes spanning only a day) often assumed capacity for accelerated reassembly. Alternately, other reopenings (churches, cinemas, hospitality) were announced while auditoria and live performance remained closed or simply absent from official statements. This gave the impression of ignoring theatre as a workplace and failed to consider the advance work to reassemble the (mostly freelance) workforces needed before the first ticket could be sold. Subsequently what was assumed to be a re-establishment of 'viable trading' (and a reduction in corresponding supports from government) was misaligned with the lived reality for theatre freelancers long after society had reopened for many.

'The feeling of uncertainty amongst organisations was exacerbated by the absence of official instruction to shut down.'

While a range of theatre associations, trade unions, and public bodies worked on different guidance documents, often with public health agencies, the constant evolution of restrictions and the wide variety of practices made developing an authoritative set of guidance challenging. Variations between devolved administrations on public opening rules inhibited fully comprehensive nationwide industrial guidance and created contradictory practices when projects or freelance theatre workers tried to move across devolved nation borders. When rehearsals and production finally happened, Covid-safety protocols in theatres (with knock-on additional costs) initially made workplaces safer than pre-Covid working conditions. However, the absence of unilateral regulation, and the pressure to get back up and running, often put freelancers and temporarily contracted crew under intense and unsafe working pressures; this was particularly noted in Autumn 2021 as both the Delta and Omicron variants spread through casts and crews daily.

'We're always running at 1000 miles an hour, we don't stop to see what's happening.'

Theatre Director, London, 2021

We note that freelancers often plugged gaps in official guidance through sharing their own interpretations of new restrictions or information-sharing ways of staying safe. This included informal sharing through public and private social media groups. Examples include: a Theatre Producers Network sharing examples of Covid Risk Assessments for touring and summarising what particular government announcements meant for each other; technical freelancers sharing ways to resist bad practice on Twitter threads; producers sharing advice on Verifly and international travel restrictions; a Freelancers Facebook group co-writing safety protocols for resuming youth theatre workshops. Therefore, while the restrictions were severe across most of the UK, freelancers were often left to interpret for themselves if they could work and how to work safely. This also meant freelancers from higher risk groups including Black and Asian freelancers, disabled and Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) freelancers, as well as those with vulnerable family members were left without support and forced to make their own difficult decisions between working and staying safe.

State Aid and Support from Government

Government aid in the form of the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) was slow to be announced for freelancers and self-employed, not just in the first lockdown but in subsequent extensions and variations of workforce support. Unlike the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), it was also paid out with a substantial delay and a disparity between the sums recoverable through it and the CJRS. Widely reported in Spring 2020, many freelancers fell between SEISS and CJRS because of the spread of their professional portfolio. The complications of this, however, were not uniform. Therefore, there were no real changes in eligibility or fund structure.

The National Cultural Recovery Fund (CRF) was primarily ring-fenced for organisations with an assumption of 'trickle-down' benefits that fuelled tensions between organisations and freelancers. While this placed constraints on distribution in England, the governments of Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales had freedom to redistribute as they saw fit. It is telling that in all three devolved nations, while the bulk of these funds went to organisations, significant portions of these funds were visibly ringfenced for freelancers (artists and creative practitioners). More attention is needed on why the devolved response was different. However, it is not unreasonable to see it as a reflection of dominant party political policies on labour, enterprise, and social welfare.

Prior to the first CRF in July 2020, all three Arts Councils and Creative Scotland were quick to introduce emergency hardship funds (from a hasty restructuring of their existing funding schemes) with emergency individual grant schemes announced by early April in all four nations. As the year progressed, many of these schemes were renewed, or broadened, in different forms and other companion programmes introduced. Most were delivered as micro-financing with one-off grants of around £2,500 - £5,000 being standard until Autumn 2020. In each nation, throughout 2020 and even in Autumn when many public bodies and departments spoke of 'post-Covid recovery', these individual schemes were often overwhelmed by demand.

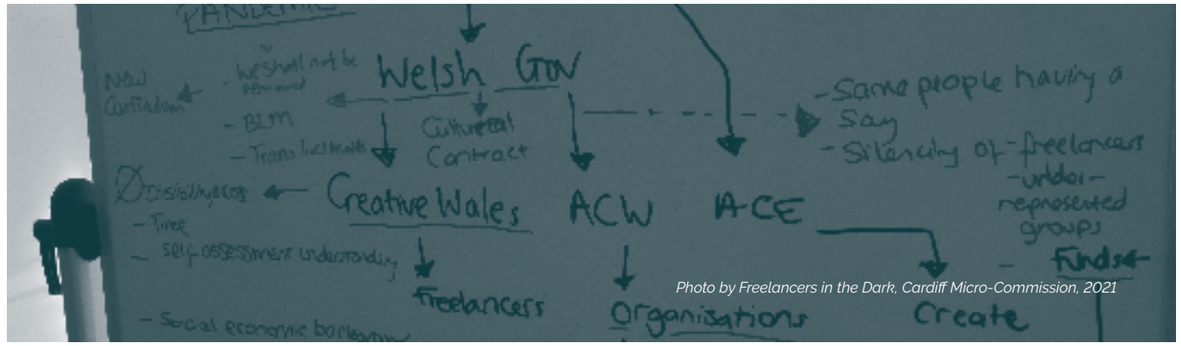


Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, Cardiff Micro-Commission, 2021

'The government should have done more to reach the freelancers falling through the cracks like myself.'

It is possible to see rapid internal discussions among public arts bodies of how to restructure and reimagine existing funding programmes unfolding during March and April 2020. However, the full understanding at policy and sector level of how sustained business interruption might be, and the full and serious impact on freelancers, did not begin to emerge until May 2020. We relate this to the retrospective nature of SEISS and the complications freelancers experienced in accessing it. However, also by May, many of the loudest outcries from freelancers had begun to mobilise, particularly directed at those public bodies and culture departments in government. From this time, it is possible to observe more substantial changes to existing programmes and a partnership approach emerges to widening eligibility and distributing support, involving sector bodies, local authorities, enterprise bodies, and third party organisations.

Theatre freelancers had a wide and varied experience of accessing and receiving state supports made available during Covid-19. This is in large part because their circumstances pre-Covid were also varied and policy did not accommodate the complexity of their working models. However, we can see that the initial lockdown had a dramatic effect on most theatre freelancers' livelihoods. From our survey, 58.7% reported earning 100% of their income from theatre before the Covid-19 outbreak in the UK; this fell to 16% after March 2020.

According to our survey and interview data, theatre freelancers accessed support through:

- Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS)
- Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS)
- Individual grants for cultural recovery/creative freelancers offered through local authorities and public bodies such as Arts Councils and Creative Scotland
- Emergency business grants through different local authorities, departments and agencies (including company grants for cultural recovery)
- Social welfare systems such as Jobseekers Allowance

While this looks like a wide and varied range of support, the sums accessible were often small and many were excluded. Again, from the survey dataset (captured between November 2020 and March 2021), only 49.1% of all respondents had received financial support from the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme. 19.1% had received financial support from an arts council (Arts Council England, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Creative Scotland, or Arts Council of Wales).

Within the dataset, we saw that financial support was unevenly distributed. Some freelancers with self-employed businesses were able to access business grants but many fell between provisions. Moreover, distribution of financial support often depended on profession. Stage managers and technicians were much less likely to receive individual artists' grants. Writers and directors were significantly more likely to receive support through a public arts body (the Arts Councils and Creative Scotland). These findings reflect the division of artistic labour and attached value that operated as public bodies adapted their existing public funding systems to emergency relief and recovery funds. Traditionally 'creative' practices, like writing and directing, were shown to be valued above more technical, administrative, or managerial roles that are nonetheless integral to theatre-making.

While some correctives to this can be seen through 2020 and 2021 (e.g., particular encouragements to apply) and the terms of these grants were often for Artists and 'Creative Practitioners', it would appear by March 2021 that freelancers who were not artists could not see themselves in these funding calls or did not feel equipped to apply.

The interconnection between disciplines in the theatre ecosystem made the gaps in funding and support for some parts of the industry have unforeseen consequences on other parts of the industry. A theatrical agent in London spoke of how devastating the loss of income was for many theatrical agent and management companies which would cause longterm consequences on actors in the industry:

> *You're looking as an agent and going, "okay, no business can survive a year with no income". You know? I just did the last quarter with 10% of what we're normally at financially. Nobody is gonna survive with that. I think as an agent, and I don't know whether it's not very popular to say it, but, you know, when people need an agent, they're really, you know, "do this for me, do that". But I think at this time, agents have struggled as much as anyone. You know, literally the industry has been ripped from underneath them. We've known agencies that are 27 years old that have closed their books. People are trimming their books, you know? We fortunately haven't had to do that, but that impacts directly on the actors.*

Other gaps in government support affectd freelancers, including the lack of financial assistance to the technical, rigging, lighting, and production companies. Furthermore, set design shops, props companies, and costume shops, all provide essential support to the industry, particularly as very few theatres have in-house production companies. The live event production companies also are the employers and suppliers for a large numbers of the technical theatre and event industry workforce.

Photo design Daisy Pearson. Emma Spearing, Whole, Colchester Arts Centre, 2022

In February 2021, the #WeMakeEvents campaign warned of the closure of half of the events production companies without government support (***Hemley, 2021***). As one technician lamented the closure of many key events production companies:

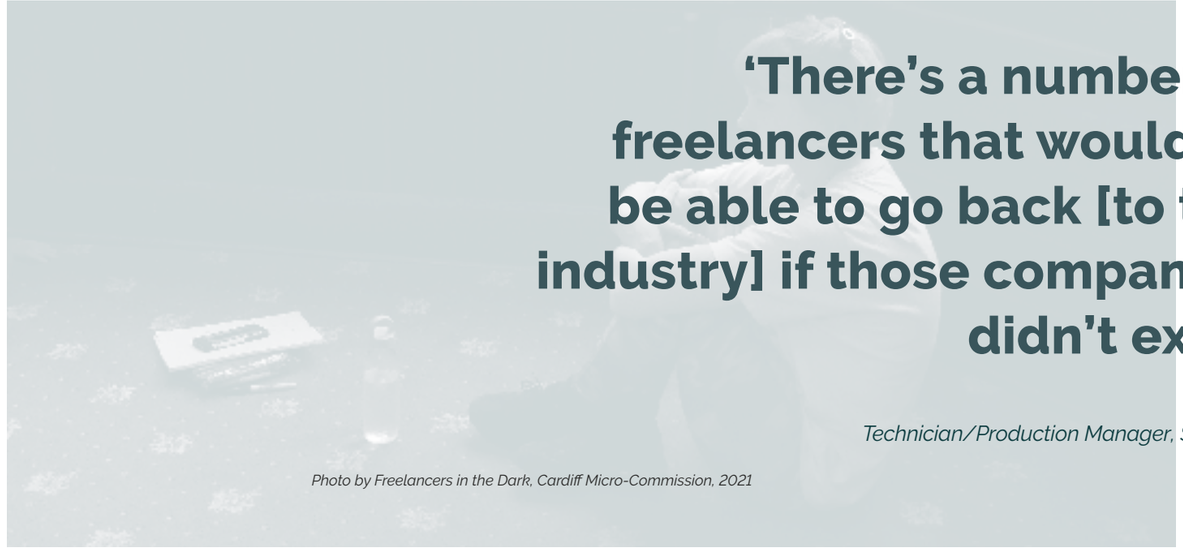
> *Those companies, they haven't had work for six months, they're not gonna work for another six months. Obviously, all they can do is get loans at the minute, not government grants, or anything. So the financial help available isn't particularly useful for a lot of companies like that. There's also a number of freelancers that wouldn't be able to go back [to the industry] if those companies didn't exist.*

The lack of clear and standardised job roles and titles, the hybridity of work, and the division of labour in the sector complicates this emerging picture, as the substantive nature of work undertaken may be called different things in different contexts.

There were also variants in policy response as the Welsh 'Freelancers Funds' were distributed through local authorities in partnership with Arts Council Wales. However, we did not see substantial numbers of freelancers discussing local government support.

The distribution and impact of financial support by March 2021 was differentiated in further ways in our survey data:

- Those who identified as D/deaf, disabled, or with a long-term illness were more likely to have received support from an arts council than from other listed sources, and this is statistically significant.
- Unsurprisingly, none of those in the first year of their theatre freelance career received SEISS, and the lack of access to SEISS remained significant until a freelancer had a five-year career behind them.
- Due many arts workers experiencing fluctuating cycles of work and income pre-pandemic, our research also found a significant number of mid- and late-career theatre freelancers excluded from SEISS, and others who received minimal payments.



'There's a number of freelancers that wouldn't be able to go back [to the industry] if those companies didn't exist.'

Technician/Production Manager, Scotland, 2020

Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, Cardiff Micro-Commission, 2021

Our interview and survey data showed that across the range of theatre freelancers, their prior experience of seeking government support was varied. While many had previously applied for social welfare assistance or tax credits, significant numbers had little to no engagement with government departments and agencies beyond HMRC. Many were in roles (e.g., acting or technical management) in which they had never been involved in grant applications while others were highly adept at this process. This produced conflicted feelings about seeking support (shame, anger, confusion) and stress in negotiating these systems. As our participant data indicated, this was compounded in some of the hardship funds by public bodies asking freelancers to apply 'only if they really needed to', leading to many expressing guilt at applying or simply not applying at all. The digital nature of applications and technical language also posed challenges for less tech-savvy freelancers and for neuro-diverse practitioners. Additionally, our study found that though some disabled practitioners embraced the digital move, others found this challenging depending on the nature of their disabilities.

'I didn't apply. I'm watching my savings dwindle now and wonder if I made a mistake there. But, I just thought, at the time, because I was sort of keeping afloat. I would rather that someone who really needed it, got it.'

As 2020 unfolded and initial emergency funds evolved into other streams, public arts bodies and sector organisations tried to support freelancers through these processes. Many agencies introduced significant simplification of application processes for grant schemes while others could not be altered at the improvisational pace required (Arts Council England's Grantium system being an example). Of particular note in dealing with this was a significant redistribution of practice knowledge shared informally between freelancers (people writing 'hack guides' for applications, sharing budget templates, or helping with SEISS claims).

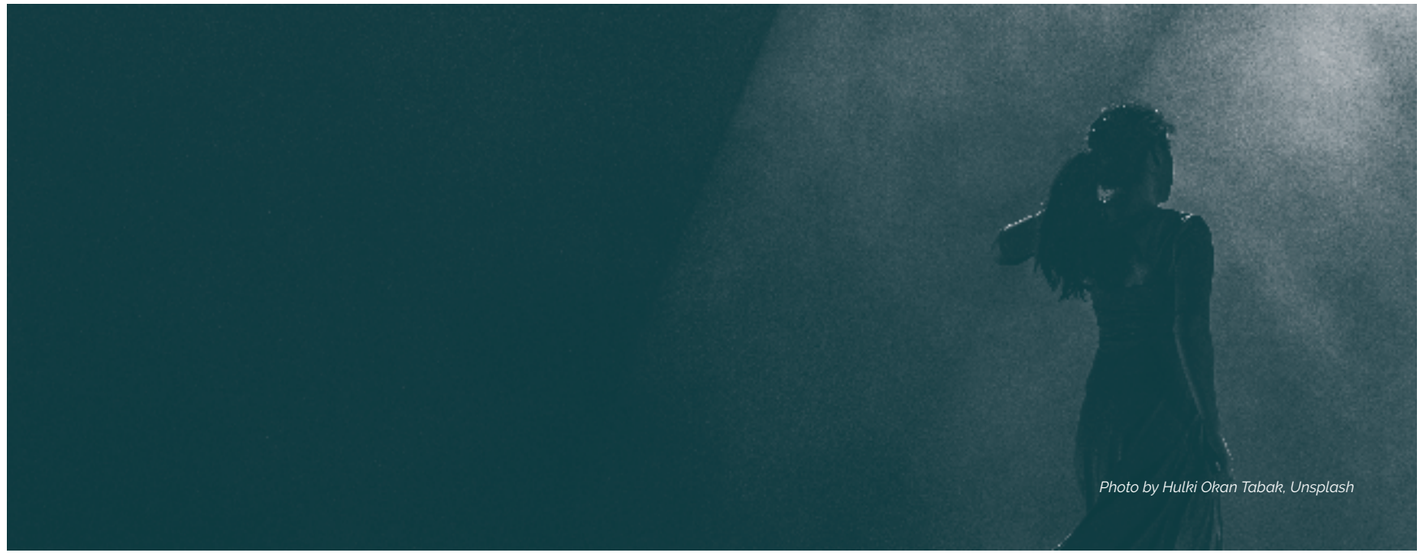


Photo by Hulki Okan Tabak, Unsplash

In this sense, it was not unusual to see those with more experience of subsidised theatre helping commercial theatre freelancers to write applications and claims. This reversed the nature of many relationships as pre-Covid professionally stable freelancers now needed help from their (previously) more precarious colleagues.

One of the paradoxes of state funding of the arts is that it serves multiple purposes. It offers necessary financial support to freelancers so that they can support themselves and do their work, but it also serves as an authorised marker of merit which theatre workers and makers appreciate and respond to. To a limited degree, we saw that in our survey. As the SEISS was a general fund, not one designated for arts workers, it carried no particular prestige or implication of merit within it. This was not the case for funds coming from the public arts bodies. So, in a sense, public arts bodies' funding could be said to do more good for freelancers than the same amount of money from the SEISS. Our survey found, for instance, that those who received funding from public arts bodies reported higher levels of optimism, skills development, and a sense of connectedness with other theatre freelancers. This pattern did not hold for those who received funds from SEISS or the furlough scheme.

Photo by Wesley Pribadi, Unsplash

We can draw a number of conclusions. SEISS did not adequately cover the needs of theatre freelancers as many could not access it sufficiently. Other grants plugged gaps, but this put freelancers at a disadvantage compared to the employed workforce. Many found the need to take on additional labour to secure lower levels of support that often required continued performance/ production/community delivery. The impact of financial support from the state, whether administered through SEISS or arts council emergency grants, was inequitable. Additionally, freelancers' prior knowledge of government/public agency systems was varied, and this produced unequal levels of knowledge, offset but not corrected by freelancers' own informal networks. While governments and public bodies attempted to address some of these issues, the response was often improvisational.

Different professions within the ecology of theatre making, as well as groups within this workforce, have had unequal access to the main instruments of financial support and this very likely has influenced their ability to remain in the sector. As many of those who could not access support have vital skill sets, the sector risks suffering from skills shortages and an uneven recovery. However, we are seeing that financial support delivered through a public arts body paid higher dividends in terms of optimism, skill development, and connectedness than those delivered through generic state instruments (SEISS and Furlough). The reasons for this require further study.

Messaging & Communication

Drawing from the policy timeline and a media review we undertook, we noted that freelancers and creative workforces were rarely mentioned in UK government national broadcasts in the earliest period. We elaborate below on some variations we observed between devolved governments, but overall, our understanding and that of theatre freelancers in our study was that they were (and felt) forgotten. Later when the circumstances of the self-employed, specifically in the live events sector, were acknowledged in governmental planning, their work and circumstances were misunderstood and later statements by the government often, once again, omitted them or delayed announcements of support.

In our interviews and other data, freelancers often distinguished between 'government' and bodies like arts councils. As we show above, the support through creative funding had more positive effects on freelancers. We speculate this may be connected to the generally negative relationship freelancers felt they had with national governmental responses, principally through the messaging and communication they had experienced. That said, the relationship between freelancers and these arts bodies was not without
its challenges.

‘The strain [Covid-19 funding] changes put on the public arts bodies’ grant systems was evident and led to knock-on confusion and miscommunication.’

During Covid-19, the public arts bodies handled substantially larger sums and ranges of grant process than usual, at a speed and volume far different from earlier periods and without the usual forward planning. Additionally, these bodies also spent considerably more time in bidding and review processes to secure additional emergency and recovery funds. They processed applications from a far wider range of organisations and freelancers with a wider range of delivery partners. They also often came into much more frequent contact with individual freelancers. The strain these changes put on the public arts bodies’ grant systems was evident and led to knock-on confusion and miscommunication. Freelancers were given contradictory information about the tax exemptions on grants, leading to unexpected repayments.

Multiple press statements about forthcoming grant streams caused confusion as to what and when support would be available while in some instances those who had self-excluded from hardship funds (as they had been asked to consider their need) then found themselves excluded from later grant rounds. There were often very short windows for application, often with little notice and clashing with other grant aid deadlines.

As cultural recovery funds were often centred on organisations (particularly in England), freelancer funding opportunities multiplied as organisations tried to redistribute funds through calls and commissions. It is evident that freelancers wearied of repeated micro-awards (from public bodies and organisations) as 2020 progressed to 2021. This compounded the stress and labour for freelancers but also added to their feelings of uncertainty and feeling unvalued.

In our survey, we asked respondents to reflect on how ‘government rhetoric about the arts, at all levels, [has] made you feel.’ This question was one of the most answered in the survey, with 92.7% of respondents choosing to answer it. This helped us to see how freelancers saw their relationship with governments. Of these, only one respondent was guardedly positive about the government’s handling of the Covid-19 crisis. All other responses expressed dissatisfaction and anger which centred on the way that theatre freelancers saw themselves (un)represented in government communications and policy.

The terms ‘unvalued,’ ‘ignored’ and ‘invisible’ recur throughout these responses, with respondents expressing dismay that both the arts and freelancers were side-lined in government communication. This was also articulated as a lack of ‘care’; a quality that our respondents propose is central to good government.

The qualitative data evidenced clear frustration that the support offered to the arts, to theatre, to freelancers, and specifically to creative and cultural freelancers showed a distinct failure of the government to recognise the particular value of the creative industries. Many respondents also expressed a sense that the UK governments did not sufficiently ‘understand’ the sector and its reliance on freelance labour; an ignorance which resulted in poor policy making, and which resulted from a lack of interest in the arts. This frustration was often articulated alongside declarations of the respondents’ understanding of the value of art.

Whether social, cultural, or economic, expressions and articulations of the value of art in our dataset were coupled with a sense that this value goes ‘ignored’ in wider social life, and especially government policy. This was amplified by a sense that art and culture were proving more vital than ever during lockdowns. As such, which ever model of value our respondents adopted, we can say with some certainty that the field of theatre freelancers surveyed feel that the value of art is underestimated or unrecognised by the wider social sphere.

Sitting at the core of this issue is that government communication (and policy) did not allow theatre freelancers to see themselves as fulfilling the crucial civic role that they believe they do within the workforce and society. This was communicated strongly within survey responses, interviews, and focus groups spanning the period from Autumn 2020 to late Summer 2021. Respondents highlighted their absence in support schemes and government announcements. Key sparks of anger came in response to Rishi Sunak's statement about supporting 'viable' jobs, challenging the government's contribution to unviability. There was also a sense that government messaging moved towards recovery and normality when freelancers' lived reality remained disrupted and uncertain.

'[Freelancers felt] the sense that their identities as artists and creatives were undermined'

Many connected their anger and frustrations at being 'invisible' in the government response to Covid-19, with the sense that their identities as artists and creatives were undermined. The implicit proposition of the 'Fatima' campaign (a ballerina's next job being 'in cyber') that artists and creative professionals should retrain was met with anger and disbelief at the lack of understanding of the skills and experiences that exist within the industry, and the precarious working conditions that are often accepted in spite of this. 'Fatima' was raised repeatedly as a cause of distress in interviews, focus groups, and the creative micro-commissions. A theatre maker from London described her anger at the government's lack of support for creative industry workers:

> *That whole [Fatima] campaign was just like, what has everyone been doing during lockdown? We've been going towards the arts for a sense of relief and a sense of entertainment. So now to tell all these talented and creative people who make our society so much richer, to change their profession, was just ridiculous to me.*

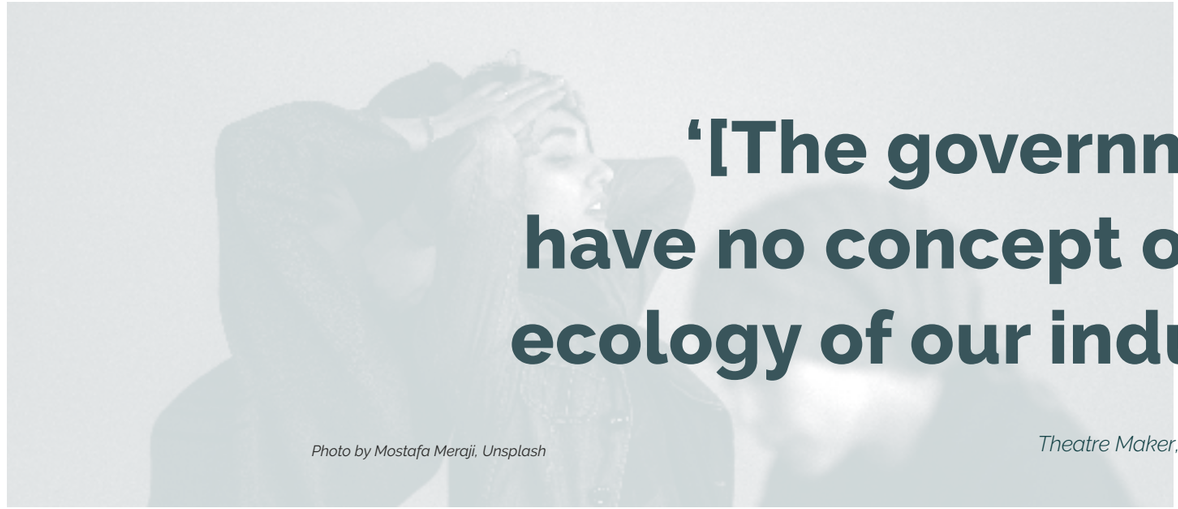


Photo by Mostafa Meraji, Unsplash

'[The government] have no concept of the ecology of our industry'

Theatre Maker, Manchester, 2020

A Manchester-based theatre maker described the push to retrain as a push to not only force freelancers out of the industry, but destroy its whole cultural ecology:

> *They [i.e., the government] have no concept of the ecology of our industry, you know, this idea of the non-viable jobs, it doesn't really have meaning in our industry, because what people do, and the variety of it, and how each bit feeds into each other bit is so complicated. If you wipe out the 'non-viable' people, you decimate the whole thing.*

The deep feelings emanating from this aspect of the survey data and surfacing throughout all our data collection makes it clear that understanding the relationship of national government with freelancers and its impact on theatre freelancers is as much a question of discourse as it is of support.

In summary, during Covid-19, many freelancers were brought into new relationships with government and public bodies they had not previously experienced. Yet throughout this, they persistently felt confused, forgotten, and devalued. Much of this can be attributed to a persistent absence in public statements and miscommunication as well as the improvised nature of the different support schemes, planning of restrictions, and messaging. Additionally, the messaging around cultural recovery, although highlighting the importance of the sector, implicitly devalued freelancers' skill sets.

Policy variation across the UK and its effect on freelancers

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‘I think it is a bit frustrating for Scottish artists, particularly freelancers to see venues opening down south. Obviously we’re delighted for artists who are down south but you’re asking the questions, is it safe or not safe? Do you know?’

Artistic Director, Scotland

Photo by Ben Tofan, Unsplash

While the nature of the study was not a comparative exercise between regions, we observed through the data we gathered that there were recognisable variations in the experience of freelancers in different parts of the UK. We look at this in 2 parts: the variation in policy responses that might have influenced freelancers’ experiences; and the lived experience of lockdown and relocation that made freelancers consider their relationship to their locale in personal, civic, and community terms.

National, Devolved and Regional Variations

As a United Kingdom of four nations, the UK has a ‘national’ parliament which also oversees policy in England and three devolved administrations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, each of which have their own parliamentary assemblies (and elections) and their own departmental structure. The UK government principally establishes national budget spending, but devolved assemblies choose how to distribute the consequential allocation (allocated by a formula known as the Barnet consequential, based on per capita population). While certain areas such as national security and foreign affairs, and most social welfare and taxation are controlled by the UK government, areas controlled at a devolved level include: social care and public health; local government and devolved economy; arts and culture. Additionally, the powers devolved to local governments vary between nations. During this period, local authorities were beginning to wield additional powers in some metropolitan areas but were also still working through austerity conditions.

Photo by Tim Mossholder, Unsplash

From the earliest stages of the Covid-19 outbreak, the variation between England and the devolved nations meant each government was responding in slightly different ways to public health restrictions and aligning themselves with different medical guidelines. While the four governments achieved unified responses through COBR meetings and sought to agree common regulations, the spread of Covid-19 and subsequent variants and the devolved nature of health policy meant divergences and disagreements emerged. Welsh, Scottish, and Northern Irish governments diverged from English policies on the severity of lockdowns and strength or duration of lockdown measures. At times, English/national government statements were issued without the devolved administrations having prior awareness of what would be said (decisions around lockdowns in Christmas 2020 for example).

The nationwide press statements issued by Prime Minister Boris Johnson often diverged from national to sub-national messages that only applied in England, while each devolved government held its own press briefings. Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish governments at times closed their internal borders to other nations within the UK or issued 'reluctant' statements of alignment (particularly around international travellers and 'red list' countries).

Reopenings of theatre and 'returns to normal' were announced in *The Stage* and national papers, while theatres in Wales or Scotland remained closed. Northern Ireland, in turn, was also negotiating alignment (and divergence) with the Republic of Ireland. Mirroring previous all-island responses to other outbreaks, such as Foot & Mouth and bovine CJD, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic Covid-19 public health policies reflected longstanding patterns in cross-border life, travel and trade. For freelancers (and populations) in devolved nations, this delivered contradictory messaging as to how and when they might return to work and required them to review multiple sources of 'national' guidance.

This divergence also played out in advocacy from the sector. 'National' industry campaigns were often driven by current policies in London or England. Freelancer-driven movements such as #FreelancersMakeTheatreWork, the Freelancers Task Force, #WeMakeEvents, #SceneChange had an uneven presence across the UK (see Section 3) and variations in the presence and membership of unions and trade bodies in different parts of the UK affected their mandate and understanding of the situation. While there were unified responses (such as the 2020 joint submission to the DCMS inquiry from theatre associations), freelancers often found themselves unable to see themselves in the campaigns and messaging depending on their location and the reopening of buildings in cities dominated in press stories.

It is impossible to ignore that these divergences were as bound up in earlier tensions between Westminster and the devolved administrations, the ongoing Brexit talks and EU alignments, Scottish independence debates, and Irish/Northern Irish unity disputes, as they were in addressing the dangers of Covid-19. This meant that while there were attempts at, and messaging around, being 'All in this together', at a national level the experience was often disunited in politics and policy, and at industry level, there was frequent misalignment that inhibited a nationwide response. As so many freelancers crossed internal and international borders for their work, or to make projects viable, they were often struggling to negotiate contradictory regimes and administrative systems and were frequently overwhelmed by the different channels of information and advocacy.

Despite the devolution of policy, the financing of national emergency and recovery monies came from Westminster. Again, this created an uneven experience for freelancers in the theatre and cultural sector more generally. The £1.5 billion Cultural Recovery Fund announced in July 2020 and subsequent additional funds were distributed as block allocations using the Barnet Consequential. While in England, the funds distributed were released more rapidly, they were ringfenced for organisations. Accordingly,

Arts Council England took steps to orient other funds towards freelancers, nevertheless, this exclusion reinforced the oppositional relationship between organisations and freelancers. By contrast, the sums allocated to the devolved nations had to be reviewed by each assembly before a decision was taken on their allocation. This gave rise to delays in distribution, changes from the stated national intention and changes in the total sum to be made available (with some clawback of devolved emergency supports). While as noted before, in the three devolved nations this redistributed funds to freelancers, it also caused extended periods of uncertainty and confusion.

'Reopening was not consistent across the UK and local government powers varied'

We observed a similar disconnect between national policy and lived realities in the area-based lockdowns in English regions (e.g., Liverpool). As reopening was not consistent across the UK and local government powers varied, nationwide schemes such as CJRS and SEISS and 'national' recovery initiatives were out of step with the sustained lockdowns either in devolved nations or in areas of higher-level restrictions. This had a negative effect on freelancers in the major metropolitan areas outside London. However, as the Metro Mayor campaigns got fully underway in early 2021, the balance shifted and pledges for cultural renewal were focused on the metropolitan areas and high streets, and more rural areas and smaller towns found themselves at a disadvantage. In Wales the local authorities were significant in the distribution of funds to creative freelancers. In Northern Ireland, however, the local authorities have quite a different remit with no history of supporting individuals and instead focused on rates relief for small businesses and high street regeneration. Some individuals were able to benefit from this policy, but many were not.

Photo by Felix Mooneeram, Unsplash

Calls for cultural recovery planning and the redress of earlier inequalities in the 'new normal' thus had to be fed into multiple administrations. The response in each nation to support creative freelancers varied and so too did the degree to which each administration acknowledged the necessity of future policy change. Official taskforces were principally composed of organisations and trade bodies with relatively little input from freelancers except through a 3rd party trade body. While the Freelance Task Force developed specific informal networks in Wales and Scotland that sought to influence policy at devolved level, by contrast, it had little to no presence in or from Northern Ireland.

However, further study is needed, however, the evidence would suggest that while much of the optimism around a great #Reset has been dampened, key initiatives such as the Culture Collective in Scotland; the Creative Workforce Pledge sought by the Metro Mayors in England; the piloting of Universal Basic Income in Wales; and the development of both the Cultural Contract and Freelancers Pledge in Wales; should all be examined more closely in how they affect future change for freelancers or could be applied nationwide. It is also worth observing that these examples all place creative freelancers in direct conversations with local and devolved governments about the nature of sustainable workforces and cultural economies in regions and cities.

The Lived Experience in Terms of Locale

In addition to their experience of regional variations of policy, we also heard variation among freelancers about their experience of the pandemic more generally based on and responding to their locale. In our survey, those living in England reported lower levels of feeling supported, and this was statistically significant. England-based respondents reported feeling 'Very' or 'Quite' unsupported by their previous employers at an almost 10% higher frequency than any other nation. Respondents in Wales reported the lowest levels of feeling unsupported, at 47.4%. Freelancers also varied (in terms of occupation and location) in how they felt about their mobility under Covid-19.

Traditionally, theatre activity in the UK has been clustered around a few major cities, and this has encouraged theatre freelancers to live in these areas, despite the higher cost of living and relative modesty of freelancers' income. Even with the urban-centric nature of work, extensive and regular travel is often a given, for touring, for production, for work pitches, and auditions. In our survey, we found that 88% of freelancers reported that they 'often' or 'sometimes' travelled across the UK for work before Covid-19, and over 63% said the same about travel across Europe. Perhaps counter-intuitively, this need for travel increases the need to live in urban centres, as most transport in the UK is highly centralised.

A key feature observed in both survey and interviews was a significant difference in attitudes between freelancers living in Greater London and those in other parts of the UK. London-based freelancers were noticeably more pessimistic than those in other regions. In some sense, this is not surprising: digital working methods opened up collaborative possibilities for those outside the capital, while the lockdown eliminated much of what makes London distinctive (except for its high cost of living, of course).

A multi-disciplinary artist in her 20s described how her entire household of freelancers moved out of London during the first lockdown:

> *I think people have realised, okay I can work from anywhere. I don't have to work from London. We're always sold that London is the hub, it's the only place that you'll work. But there's so much happening around the country, it's not limited to one place.*

Many of our interviewees who were London-based spoke of the financial difficulties of living and working in London, and yet also acknowledged the difficulty to get work as regionally-based theatre workers. An effect of Covid-19 may have been to encourage freelancers to move out of the capital, especially those with families to raise and support.

As we conducted interviews in Autumn 2020 through to Spring 2021 there was a growing pushback against the London-centric nature of the industry. A working-class producer and performance artist described moving out of London during a lockdown:

> *I was sitting in London and I was like I am never going to be able to save anything living in London. I've now been able to, I've moved somewhere half the price of what I was paying in London.*

For her, this move radically changed her feeling about the London-dominated nature of the profession, especially as a working-class artist:

> *I finished my MA and I was like I've got to be in London to make, but it killed me, it had the opposite effect on my practice, it didn't open up. It wasn't meant for me, especially with my background, I couldn't walk into spaces, I didn't feel confident walking into spaces, how can I do this and work for free, but now [that I've left London] it's the opposite.*

One technician/lighting designer from Liverpool moved back home for purely financial reasons but found the benefits made her re-think her need to live in London and encouraged her to pursue opportunities to work locally:

> *I feel like when you're in London you're just like, "No, this is it. This is everything." It's undeniable, there is so much more opportunity, but the stress of money and everything else, I just don't know. I don't know if I've hit a wall with it all now, especially [as] this is by far the longest I've been away from London since I moved there. Just having that breathing space. Even though I haven't had a lot to do in terms of work … I don't know. Do I miss the London lifestyle that much? I'm sure I can cope elsewhere. Whether it's Liverpool or somewhere else, Manchester, or whatever, there's a lot more going on round the country.*

The migration of freelance theatre workers out of London might provide unforeseen changes to the industry in future years. A Plymouth-based playwright and PR worker described how the London-centric nature of the industry might be stopping it from engaging and attracting new audiences, and her return to Plymouth was impacting the type of work she wanted to create:

> *It's been really interesting, coming back… moving back to Devon from London. Because you can see the lack of engagement sometimes from different communities. And there has to be a reason for that. And also, the kind of [theatre] spaces … I don't always think they feel welcoming. You want to feel like you can go in with your full wrap sandwich and sit on the floor. And I don't think those spaces always feel like that. So, I think that's a major problem.*

Our survey found that theatre freelancers, like many other populations, found the horizons of their day-to-day lives more localised in the months following the lockdown, and many of them (44%) reported feeling an increased sense of belonging to their local communities. This was far higher than those who reported an increased sense of belonging to national, British, European, or global communities. One dance theatre maker who moved back to Gretna Green from Edinburgh during the pandemic found the combination of freelancer activism and a return to her local community gave her a new sense of purpose to build community in the theatre industry:

> *'With Freelancers Make Theatre work I initiated freelance teabreaks. So it's just on Thursday, it's half an hour you turn up, you have a cup of tea with people. And I've delivered a couple o wellbeing sessions or different people as well. And this has made me think loads about actually, how the way I've had to work in the sector has made me disconnected from a lot of communities. That's something I'm taking forward. Where actually, that's the beauty for me from being from a working-class family … my whole family lived within seven miles of each other. Like uncles and aunties, everyone. I think I take for granted that community happens … so I never tried to build that, and I think that's had a real negative impact on my mental health where I didn't realise how much work it takes for a community to build. Because I'm just in a place where community happened.*

Additionally, many in our survey described becoming more actively involved in their local community, engaging in voluntary work, contributing to dimensions of local activism, helping others beyond their creative community. There may be parallels between the freelancers' renewed sense of local 'belonging' and what audiences express about remaining local in the future (Audience Agency, 2021).

'The way I've had to work in the sector has made me disconnected from a lot of communities'

Dance Theatre Maker, Scotland

Photo by Sebastian Mark, Unsplash

The shock of Covid-19, the realignment of life priorities, and the refusal to sustain particular work patterns may have led to freelancers' rethinking their life priorities although we know most intend to remain in or connected to theatre (see Section 3). The move away from London can be seen as part of a larger embrace of a sense of local community and civic involvement in the early stages of Covid-19. However, it remains to be seen whether those who relocated can sustain their careers and in turn how recovery is distributed across the UK, for those who relocated and those who stayed put. As lockdown restrictions loosen and we 'learn to live with Covid', this sense of localism may also fade.

Reopening: Constantly Shifting Landscapes

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The changing restrictions on theatres across 2020 and 2021 essentially split the nature of possible practice into two general timeframes. The first, whic includes much of 2020, involved the closure of theatres and ban on live audiences.

If the early days of the pandemic were marked by a shift among both freelancers and theatre organisations to crisis management mode, the months that followed were in many ways even more complicated. As the Summer of 2020 approached and parts of UK society began to reopen after the first lockdown, the performing arts stood as one of a small number of sectors of the economy (particularly in the areas of travel, hospitality, and entertainment) that were held back from reopening. Across the UK, theatres were dark and performances banned between March and July 2020.

While to different degrees, restaurants, pubs, cinemas, and arts centres were permitted to reopen from July, theatres remained closed. From July 2020, the four nations diverged in terms of forecasting reopening plans, creating different levels and stages of lockdown. Throughout all of these until January 2022, theatres remained the first to experience restrictions or be closed and the last to be permitted to reopen (in the case of Wales, this amounted to an almost 100% closure while England's theatres were much quicker to reopen for periods of performance from August 2020).

Photo by Leon Liu, Unsplash

As discussed in Section 2a, theatre closures left many freelancers with feelings of uncertainty and being in 'limbo'. As one of our survey participants noted:

> *Given how the industry has been so negatively affected by the pandemic and all but ignored by the government, it is impossible to think much about future work and risky to make decisions based on the "what" we're drowning in right now. Any thoughts about my future trajectory will wait until theatres are open again.*

This differential treatment was greeted with fears for the future of the industry and charges that national and devolved governments were indifferent to the plight of theatre organisations and those they normally employed, particularly as SEISS lagged behind continuing CJRS. The seemingly arbitrary nature of which industries were allowed to open, and which were not, furthered the feelings of frustration and abandonment amongst the theatrical community. As one technical designer, who created a charity campaign in support of freelancers in the theatre industry, described:

> *I really feel like we've fallen behind as a theatre community in the Government's eyes because we don't have the power of lobbying. And so, the airlines are open again, despite being the worst thing for the environment and despite lots of people in a confined space, but purely because they have the strength of lobbying and it has been Oliver Dowden in a meeting with somebody that is what it is. It's lobbying.… But arts are worth more than the airline industry. At least we know that now. At least we've got those stats … And like … pubs, we all know that they're way less safe than theatres… And they're not all sat down facing the front with a mask on … with ticket information where you can just email a whole audience. You even know where they were for two hours! Pinpoint them geographically into that seat.*

Theatre was not the only industry seeking clarity on how reopening would happen and under what restrictions. In succession, each government published different forms of a roadmap from June 2020, using alert levels and traffic light systems to identify permissible activities. While this enabled some activities such as rehearsals and live streamed/broadcast performances to take place at a greater scale or for core teams to re-enter buildings, the complexity and challenge of adapting each production to the different levels and the uncertainty of a rollback to greater lockdown often rendered the conditions of reopening unviable. Examples included permission to perform socially distanced outdoors, or resumption of indoor performance at 50% capacity or less, limits on live singing, and other restrictions. Most of these government plans offered at best a provisional timeline for when these steps might be permitted, and there was no unified guidance or clear safety guidelines as to how the regulations might be accomplished by theatre organisations.

Some freelancers were hesitant about the push to open theatres before safety measures were fully in place, but rather wanted the industry to lobby for more financial support for theatres to work at half-capacity instead. As one lighting designer described:

> *I absolutely don't want theatres open before it's safe. I want the government to be organizing a scheme that makes it economically viable to open the theatres. Have you come across Sam Evans and Andy Staples at One Voice Campaign? They're pushing this what they're calling 'Seat Out to Help Out' of trying to get the government to buy to basically match tickets for tickets sold. So that for every ticket you buy to go to a show at the theatre, the government would buy the empty seat next to you that can't be sold because of social distancing. That's the idea. And they're trying to campaign behind closed doors to get producers to stop pushing so hard at the "When can we open without social distancing", "When do we get to phase 5?" And instead focus on "We'll keep social distancing, make it affordable for us to open with social distancing" because they keep telling us that we can open anytime. We keep telling you we can't afford to.*

The 'Seat Out to Help Out' campaign never materialised, nor is it certain that it would have addressed the broader financial challenges of reopening. More generally the different roadmaps although clarifying what was permissible at a given moment in a region or nation, did not really clarify when reopening would happen and what financial mitigations, or business cancellation protections, would be offered to offset losses. The lack of definite timeline was perhaps understandable given the rapidly shifting infection rates, regional outbreaks, new variants of the virus, and the progress on vaccines. Nevertheless, the exposure to risk for organisations with such narrow margins was often too great. Again, the absence of common approaches between devolved nations and variations in lockdowns between regions further hampered viable reopening. This meant that many venues that might have been able to reopen were unable to do so.

'Organisations were faced with ... trepidation regarding how to welcome back audiences ... wary of returning to theatres.'

As the potential for reopening (or not) at the end of the first lockdown loomed, theatre organisations were faced with the above concerns, but also with trepidation regarding how to welcome back audiences that might be understandably wary of returning to theatres. As one theatre maker from Lancaster argued, this fear was also felt by theatre workers within the industry:

> *Yeah, I ... absolutely loving theatre, [but even] I don't relish the thought at the moment of being indoors, next to people I don't know. So I think theatre audiences ... are going to be 40, 50% [capacity] without social distancing. And I hate being negative that way, and I hope I'm wrong, but I do.*

Photo by Wesley Pribadi, Unsplash

Even for those in the industry (both freelancers and organisations) eager to get back to full reopening, there was considerable fear that the reopening needed to go smoothly; that there was considerable risk of alienating audiences who had purchased tickets only to find shows cancelled by performer illness or further government restriction. The absence of sufficient advance notice and security that the alert level/social distancing restrictions would not again change was untenable. As one PR person argued:

> *if we can't reopen the theatres because of social distancing or whatever. And we know theatres can't open on 30% capacity. It's ridiculous. Then I think there has to be financial support until we can operate again.*

These uncertainties heightened the gap between permitted reopening and what would actually be a much slower return to 'viable' reopening. As the Public Relations officer described, the impact of sustained theatre closures and social distancing policies on theatre workers' income was substantial. As 2020 rolled into 2021, the absence of clear reopening schedules or government support mitigations reinforced the views of our participants that governments did not understand, or were unconcerned, with theatre and its workforce.

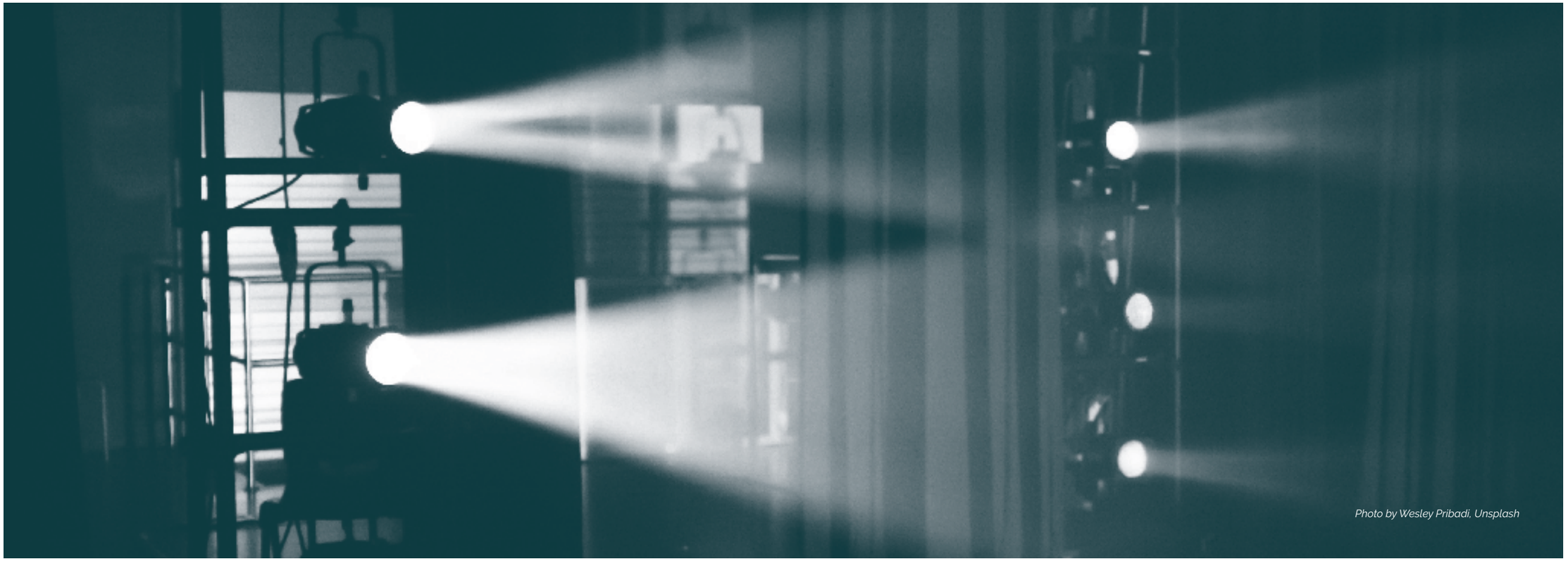

Photo by Wesley Pribadi, Unsplash

Trying to Turn the Lights Back On

With so much uncertainty, it was not until September 2020 that some theatre organisations were back in the rehearsal studio. Among the organisations and freelancers we spoke to, there was little doubt that all parties shared a desire to return to the stage and to live audiences for both artistic and economic reasons. Some guidelines for Covid-safe rehearsal practices had been developed by late summer of 2020, but such rehearsals were of little value to commercial theatres if they could not translate into stage performances that the public could, or would, want to see. Covid-safe working slowed down rehearsal and development considerably and interfered with staging and backstage planning. One stage manager spoke about the disruptive and time-consuming methods some companies put in place to keep safety measures in rehearsals:

> *A job I did over the summer ended up bringing an assistant director from another of the season's shows to be the Covid Monitor on my show as my stage management team had enough to do just getting the very busy blocking and props plots down. The Covid Monitor literally used a metre and a 2-metre stick, pausing any large group scenes and going around to make sure everyone was far enough apart. Whilst we understood that it was necessary, it slowed work down in an already tight rehearsal period and had the potential to remove some key moments from the action because singers were too close to one another for too long. The time limits we were working to were that 2 people could be within 1-2 metres of each other for a maximum of 15 minutes per show, throughout the show, and under 1 metre for a maximum of 1 minute per show, throughout the show. Now imagine that with a principal cast of 8 and a chorus of 24, and having to keep track of every single person's proximity to every other person on the stage simultaneously. Nightmare.*

For large venues, such as West End musicals, this was seen to be an impossible task. As one musical theatre actor/agent described:

> *I think they are doing everything they can. But… asking businesses to survive with no money for a period of time, which in effect they've done, is one thing, but then to ask them to open, and to lose money is another thing. So while we're socially distancing theatres, it's not viable for the producer to get a full cast of crew, an orchestra, front of house staff, acting staff, the wardrobes, the wigs, the makeup…You know, if you're socially distancing an audience at 30%, and you've budgeted a show that costs X amount of money…I think the producers are doing what they can.*

In order to continue to produce while under restrictions, some companies began to perform in alternative spaces. These non-traditional spaces, though offering a way to perform, made staging challenging and altered the experience in the early days of theatre reopenings. A playwright in Northern Ireland described the attempt to perform her play in a cinema in late summer 2020:

> *The reason it was produced at the cinema was because Northern Ireland was the slowest part of the UK to allow theatres to open, so it was safer to schedule it at a cinema when cinemas were already open. Theatres here weren't open until 27th July and we were all curious about being discriminated against. One of the big problems was that if you perform a play in a cinema, people assume that it's a filmed play, so we had very ew ticket sales until we marketed it distinctly as a 'live play'. I didn't go into rehearsals … but I attended the performance. I found the socially-distanced audience problematic for my darkly comic play as comedy is best experienced on stage as a collective event. A distanced audience will be more distanced from a play as it's proximity to others that prompts group reactions like guaws and gasps. The distancing r ules meant that the cinema couldn't hold much more than a third capacity which resulted in a lack of atmosphere. Mask-wearing also has a detrimental impact on laughter.*

The unique timelines and economics of theatres limited action in the midst of continuing uncertainty. Emerging opportunities to reopen were fraught with risk. Financial reserves were depleted or shrinking. Restaging and using alternate spaces brought additional costs, risks, and skills needs. Future funding was uncertain and calls for Covid cancellation insurance or additional supports were not addressed while the financial limits of social distanced audiences and their unpredictable response to live performance created additional box office uncertainty. One performer described:

> *I mean they've not said we can't have theatre, they just said we have to have social distancing, so therefore the amount of people you can have in there doesn't make it possible to run something. And then if you hike up the prices, then you're eliminating a whole sector of society and it becomes an elitist thing again. Right now, the weather is getting worse, so we can't have outside stuff, I don't know, I just feel really trapped in amber. I feel really inept and like I can't breathe almost; I don't know what to say about how we can move things forward.*

For some work, particularly immersive theatre, the restrictions were entirely incompatible with the nature of the form. An immersive theatre actor described how the challenges posed by the constant changing of rules and returning of restrictions were difficult to overcome:

> *There's quite a big fan base, there is the desire to play and the desire to get back to it. Whether or not they'll also enjoy it because of the Covid rules we would have to put in place and the new format…. I think it's possible, but I think it's going to take a little bit more creativity and logistics, which is a bit hard when then the information we get given is changing every five seconds.*

At one-metre social distancing, most theatres could hold around a third of their normal audiences, while generating income would normally require sales of well over half of fully available houses. Also, many venues were not designed for Covid safety measures, as described by this actor from Wales:

> *I don't think there's a simple answer, I think that's the problem.... Most theatres are not designed to do social distancing... talking to the general manager that I work with ... he's got a box office manager, he's got his assistant manager, he's got his technician, he's got to pay them. He's had to furlough them as far as humanly possible. He's done a major fundraising thing and he's raised a fair bit of money through that, but how long will that last? It's an old building, it's got to be maintained.*

It is therefore little wonder that even if legally allowable, theatres did not seem in a rush to open; though for some freelancers, the failure of theatres to jump at the opportunity was perceived as a slight. One producer we spoke to who normally schedules productions two years in advance expressed frustration with venues being unable to commit: 'I understand why, but I also understand that they've just been given nearly £1 million to work out how to reopen'. She thought there was a 'respect and a responsibility' venues owed to freelance theatre workers that they were not living up to. The lack of support during Covid-19, made her feel the whole system needed changing and she argued: 'I think getting a bit angry is probably exactly fine. I think we have been so top–down, with venues as kings, and it's just got to change'.

Photo by Dibakar Roy, Unsplash

The Impact of Ongoing Uncertainty

The prospect of opening under social distancing restrictions in 2020, both in terms of what was possible for performers in the rehearsal room and on stage, and in terms of what proportion of regular audiences could be welcomed into a space, made the decision of when to reopen a complicated one. Even the largest organisations could not sustain the uncertainty. As an example, on 21 October 2020, the National Theatre in London reopened to socially distanced audiences, seven days after Boris Johnson's announcement of a '3 tier system' of restrictions for England. Ten days later a second lockdown was announced to prevent a 'medical and moral disaster' for the NHS. When this ended in December 2020, there was a further ten days when performances might take place under restrictions before the country was once again in lockdown in response to a new variant.

'Can you imagine … a theatre … paying one person to think about Covid regulations?'

The frequent changes of guidelines, restrictions, and regulations caused havoc and made many theatres and companies, understandably, risk-averse over 2020 and 2021. If the ability to conduct socially distanced rehearsals suggested a plausible path to preparing for reopening and therefore an opportunity to begin to rehire staff and freelancers; the question of what was to be rehearsed, when it might appear, to what audiences, and with what funding remained very much open questions. The economics of socially-distanced audiences aside, no set of guidelines for rehearsal and performance could fully alleviate the possibility of performers contracting Covid.

Photo by Kevin Schmid, Unsplash

The rise of outbreaks and new variants heightened the safety concerns of theatre workers and audiences. One lighting designer described their concern at the lack of resources in the theatre for the enforcement of Covid safety policies, in comparison to that seen in the film industry:

> *I was chatting to someone in film and it's one person's job to look after Covid regulations. Can you imagine theatre having … a theatre … paying one person to think about Covid regulations? Which is probably brilliant. We probably need it. But you know, that's why I'm not prepared to not have a two-day get in. Because … safety features are really important and it's people's like literal safety. I don't want to compromise that for … money.*

Rehearsal and performance had the obvious potential to start an outbreak among an entire cast, but even if it did not, having a contingency plan for potential illness or isolation for every member of a large cast was a daunting, if not impossible, prospect.

Some theatres in England attempted to open Christmas shows when the second lockdown finished in December 2020. However, the 3-tier system triggered further closures in different regions by mid-December. One Norfolk-based theatre director spoke of the anxiety and uncertainty around preparing for a Christmas show in 2020-2021 with mixed messages from the producers:

> *You're like, you're selling tickets, but you haven't given us the green light to start casting it, to start planning it. I could pick up my details from last year and go right, we'll do the same show, but I can't because of social distancing and all the guidance. So that got later and later and finally, [we] met with them and went, look, unless you green light it today, it's not going to happen, because you want it to be a certain standard and I think all it will do is jeopardise the quality of the show.*

At least one artistic director we interviewed spoke of feeling, though ultimately rejecting, intense pressure to turn to one-person shows as a more reliable and cheaper strategy. But even if successful, this would have limited recovery for theatre freelancers.

A feature of these periods of uncertainty was the flexibility of the independent and smaller scale parts of the theatre sector in comparison to the larger/building-based organisations. Freelancers articulated an onus on them to produce work in the void left by bigger companies. Our interviewees spoke of the resourcefulness of freelancers in creating work over the pandemic and working around the many conditions hindering the larger theatre venues and organisations. Independent and grassroots companies, solo theatre makers, and other freelancers produced content in outdoor spaces, unconventional spaces, and online (discussed in Part 3).

Some felt that this represented a paradigm shift in institutional power, with organisations vying for content and freelancers providing it. A producer and theatre maker argued:

> *Because whilst the theatres have perhaps ignored freelancers, we're the ones taking the shows in there, we're the ones going in and doing the stuff. It gets very hard when we're not willing to do it. I think it's true solidarity and I do mean true solidarity, I don't mean just joining a Facebook group and not really caring about the other people in it. I think it's what can we do together? What have you got on, mate? I've got a show, I've been trialing a one person show to an audience of only 50 because of the social distancing. Right, let's promote that, let's get those 50 people in that theatre for you, let's do this. You know, whatever it takes, whatever it needs.*

To some degree this problem provided its own unfortunate solution. While there were some reopenings in the window after the first lockdown, and some later in the lead-up to Christmas, few made it to the crucial Christmas Panto season in 2020 when those theatres that had reopened were once again shut down. In the next wave of general lockdowns that ensued in December 2020 – January 2021, a key difference was that some theatres could stay open as a place of work. This enabled more theatre practitioners to produce work. While it couldn't be attended by an indoor, in-person audience, they could make use of streaming technologies and outdoor venues to share live, group-performed, in-situ theatre. This led to some inventive and resourceful creative practice, which we explore in Section 3 of this report. Cautious announcements of reopening under social distancing and capacity restrictions began again in May 2021. While social distancing rules were relaxed in England in July 2021, the ongoing uncertainty and adaptation was a constant for theatre and theatre freelancers throughout 2021.

Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, Plymouth Micro-Commission, 2021

Re-opening and Challenges in 2021

After the restricted re-opening in some parts of the UK in Spring 2021, uncertainty entered a new phase. With theatres re-opening, Covid outbreaks among casts and crews were inevitable. Staff shortages, Covid hesitant audiences, and lack of straightforward masking policies caused further financial devastation and work-safety concerns within the theatre industry. An immersive theatre actor outlined the difficulties and abuses she had seen towards freelance theatre workers by companies and producers reeling from the financial and health concerns in the wake of the pandemic:

> *I know of people bullied by the stage management to do shows even though people have tested positive because back-ups and understudies were not thought of on the show. The producers were not told cast members were positive and assumed the show could go on as normal. Companies refusing to pay actors or have in their contracts that they will get paid/ some form of reimbursement if they have to close the show due to someone testing positive … Companies not testing their casts prior to show or rehearsal, particularly if a company member was vulnerable. Companies not hiring people because they were on the vulnerable list even if vaccinated. Companies not hiring or considering making allowances for audiences to keep a reasonable distance away, to bring the risk down for the actors.*

Such concerns were not solely voiced by performers, but shared by backstage workers as well. One technician/crew worker described some of the challenges he faced as a producer and touring crew of small-scale fringe productions, explaining how organisations waiting on Cultural Recovery Funds and negotiating decreased staff capacity meant more time than usual was spent chasing venues.

Theatres faced the constant threat of being 'unable to get decent audiences in… and other areas of some buildings seem operating at overcapacity'. He spoke about the challenges of working crew on a big immersive show:

> *Though they enforced three times a week lateral flow tests before arriving at work, hardly any one bother[ed] to wear masks even though it is technically policy, while other measures, like staggering break periods and lunchtimes, was difficult to enforce for 200+ people and also created anti-social experiences in the job, which impacted crew staff morale.*

After the reopening in Spring 2021, for many in the sector, there was a lack of consistency of policy. Safety guidelines ranged from very careful outbreak procedures, with daily lateral flows, clear policies of 'cast bubbles', and clarity of fee payments in case of cancellations, to others which were much more lax, with performers being pressured to not test in order to avoid cancellations due to company members having asymptomatic Covid, and other safety policy discrepencies. As one director/performer in Cornwall described, the inconsistency of practice and the lack of guidelines added to the stress and uncertainty over returning to work:

> *From my experience, I've gone back into a few in-person rehearsals now as a performer and I think the main takeaway has been about making sure any communication about a Covid policy is really clear. A few projects haven't communicated whether or not we are expected to be masked or do a lateral flow test, and that's been quite stressful … to navigate and then you feel like you are requesting things which might put others out. So I would say the main thing is about ensuring the communication for any agreed policy is just told to everyone clearly before they get into the space.*

Technical staff and stage managers felt the brunt of the need for Covid safety guidelines, and many found they were being forced to do a job they were ill equipped for with no extra pay. One deputy stage manager described:

> *I think the biggest impact I've encountered so far is that the unenviable role of "Covid Monitor" seems to be falling to stage management, often in an unwritten and assumed way, because stage management are generally already in the room and therefore best placed to monitor proximity and the like. Well unfortunately it isn't always that simple, because most stage managers already have enough to deal with, without having to watch performers in infinitesimal detail and time exactly how long two people are within a metre of each other. This is particularly pertinent on larger shows where a chorus is involved.*

'the main thing is … ensuring the communication for any agreed policy is told to everyone clearly before they get into the space.'

Theatre Director, Cornwall, 2021

Photo by Rob Laughter, Unsplash

For some of our interviewees, developing clear Covid policies for safe practice became easier over time. One theatre maker/performer described the effectiveness of their Covid safety plan; though it took more time, it also created comfort for the company and the audiences:

> *During the process we employed a Covid supervisor who was also our stage manager. She made sure all distances were kept to and the space was cleaned at regular intervals. To be honest, we didn't have any issues. Obviously, rehearsal days took longer to get going, especially as we staggered arrival times, and we couldn't work for as long. But all cast and venue and creatives adhered to it. In terms of audience, as a performer, I have been back doing cabaret shows and most audiences have been great. There have been the odd few who don't want to wear a mask or socially distance. But I think everyone is happy to be back, so most do it.*

'I was ... wondering if I could ever get back to what I had been'

For other interviewees, concerns around reopening were less focused on matters of physical safety but caused by the time away from the theatre leading to issues over confidence and stamina. Actors noted they were 'off' (meaning not on form) due to the stress of the previous year and worried about returning to the theatre after such a long time away. One performer described remounting a successful show he had performed pre-Covid:

> *I was not in a great headspace: doubting my abilities, wondering if I could ever get back to what I had been let alone improve, wondering if I had peaked. I've had confidence issues all my adult life, and this was certainly at the lowest ebb.*

Technicians described their lack of physical stamina needed for the job after the Covid lockdowns. A lighting designer/technician described:

> *My work in particular is so physical and practical, that I, my actual wellness of my body in the way that I am, has completely declined. Because of not being able to do that work and not being able to get up and go out. And, and I think that a lot of people get into theatre because it's so practical and on your feet and stuff, technicians. That I actually don't know if I'd be able to do like a full 12 hour get-in now. I think it would be too hard for my body.*

Changing protocols, as well as fluctuating confidence on behalf of both creatives and audiences, continued to affect experiences of theatre practice as the industry reopened. As one performer/comedian described, the Edinburgh Fringe felt the change in 2021. Though the Fringe was able to reopen, it was a much more subdued affair than in previous years. One interviewee explained:

> *This year's Edinburgh Fringe was mainly concentrated on Bristo and George Square. There were audiences and people, but it was far from the normal size. Sunday-Thursday were pretty quiet outside, with Friday and Saturday being closer to a busy July day than Fringe. I did go to see shows and met with a handful of friends travelling up, but it wasn't the party energy of years gone past with lots of faces you hadn't seen. A combination of not as many people I knew plus still caution around crowds meant I really didn't embrace as much Fringe as I would normally and never quite got into the "Fringe Spirit".*

Photo by Kilyan Sockalingum, Unsplash

The Delta and Omicron waves caused continuous upheavals again creating havoc to the ostensibly 'open' industry. Covid outbreaks amongst performers and crew were particularly challenging and caused widespread show cancellations, while audience hesitancy to return to live performance over Winter 2021-2022 caused further financial losses for the industry. As one London-based actor described:

> *Omicron was like another lockdown for the arts and self-employed and delayed us being able to get fully up and running … yet again. Although this time with no government SEISS support.*

We have summarised the immediate effect of the outbreak of Covid-19 on theatre in the UK and highlighted the significant creative, social, emotional, and financial impact on theatre freelancers. We have also highlighted some of the breakdowns in trust and relationships between freelancers and organisations and between freelancers, governments, and public bodies. As we move into Spring 2022 and the second anniversary of the outbreak of Covid-19 in the UK, there is some feeling of a return to 'normalcy' but the many upheavals over the course of the pandemic have made members of the industry reluctant to plan beyond the immediate moment. Bitter experience of new variants, mixed messages from governments, fatigue at the constant replanning, and cancellation are felt by many as likely to continue into the future. Our study then sees the uncertainty of 'living' with Covid-19 and its disruptions as a significant and ongoing disruption and anxiety for theatre freelancers that will not be suppressed by any sense of a return to 'normal'.

3

Freelancer Ingenuity, Resourcefulness, and Resilience

Photo by Joshua Hanson, Unsplash

Impacts on Creative Practice

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The last two years have seen a boom of innovative practice that responded to the closure of theatres and other restrictions by developing digitally based and/or distanced forms of audience engagement. Practitioners shifted their daily practice from the rehearsal studio to Zoom and utilised networking technologies to widen their collaborations and extend their national and international reach. While some interviewees remained sceptical of the capacity for digital technologies to produce 'live' theatre and grieved the loss of embodied interaction, others looked to new forms of creative practice through which to broaden their skillset and extend their portfolio. Many did both.

The impact of theatre closures and restrictions on audience numbers over the last two years have been devastating for freelance theatre workers, yet artists have innovated, with a turn to audio and interactive technologies, game-based dramaturgies, and site-based work. While such work existed prior to the pandemic, with many practitioners already exploring performance beyond the stage, the widespread take-up of these multimedia performance practices, practices that do not rely on physical venues or a physically present audience, has entailed a blossoming of innovative, multimodal, hybrid, digital, aural, and site-based theatre practice.

'I think going forwards I wanna see a mix of digital work and physical work.'

Theatre Maker, Scotland

Photo by Dix Sept, Unsplash

Opportunities and Obstacles

The initial months of the pandemic saw the dissemination of previously recorded productions as well as online performances hurriedly created. Long before in-person rehearsals resumed, companies and artists rushed to revise and rework productions initially planned for physical spaces to work with mediated actors and spectators. Weekly performed readings by *The Show Must Go Online*, a programme created in less than a week, delivered the complete plays of Shakespeare read by a global cast of professional and amateur Shakespeare enthusiasts. As one actor illustrated, the community-building aspect of events like this were essential:

> *Every Wednesday night there was a new Shakespeare. And because they do it live stream on YouTube, we have the live chat. A lot of the time people that I've been in the shows [with], or just are fans, you live chat [with]. So you end up having this little community of people that you've never met, but you're chatting on Facebook.*

One of the most popular phenomena of the time, the National Theatre at Home, shared NT Live recordings as free, weekly, YouTube posts, garnering 15 million views for its 17 screenings across 170 countries. Journalist Arifa Akbar wrote in Guardian in September 2020, 'There is compelling evidence to suggest that the archive arm of online theatre—films of the plays—has secured an expanded place in the industry'(***Akbar, 2020***). However, this free dissemination of theatre content, though spirit-lifting, proved financially unsustainable. The National Theatre launched a subscription-based platform of the same name in December 2020, joining Shakespeare's Globe's relaunch of its Globe Player as a subscription streaming service and entering a marketplace previously occupied by the likes of Digital Theatre Plus, which since 2009 has provided high definition, professionally shot film documentation of popular theatre productions.

'Many companies … did not have the same filming resources which impacted their production value, making it challenging to compete'

While the online dissemination of quality, pre-Covid productions by large-scale theatres dominated the digital theatre space during the initial months of the pandemic, various smaller-scale theatres, companies, and independent theatre makers also attempted to disseminate pre-Covid footage of existing works. For many companies, archive productions did not have the same filming resources which impacted their production value, making it challenging to compete with National Theatre content. An actor based in Cornwall described, 'we find it hard if it's just an archive recording … the sound quality is so poor we can't quite manage it'.

Other companies and organisations however, specifically turned away from attempting to stream online content so as not to compete with National Theatre output. Rather than attempting to transfer their live, physical practice into online spaces, some practitioners turned instead to experimenting with alternate forms of practice, reworking planned theatre productions into different media such as film. Instead of leading 'Zoom rehearsals for an actual play', one theatre director interviewed discussed making a documentary film and explained that they had been 'working with some people who have only ever written plays before, but the … pandemic has inspired them … [to create] work actually for screen.'

A different theatre director however, expressed frustration with the assumption that theatre practitioners could simply transfer their expertise across media, stating that 'director[s] don't really crossover mediums.' The director asserted that directors are not trained to do this and that there is a 'naivety or arrogance' on behalf of both the directors and the people that employ them to assume they can do what they usually do in a totally different way. This thinking 'misunderstands what it is that we do, but I think really devalues as well what it is that we've sort of dedicated our professional lives to crafting'.

Some companies felt that moving online would jeopardise the reputation of their company and took the time and care to develop new digital content. A representative from a Norfolk-based company argued:

> *I'm really glad that we have actually taken time and we haven't rushed into anything digital. Because I do feel like when this is released … I think it will be of the quality and standard that we want it to be of.*

While somewhat out of their comfort zone, other theatre freelancers saw the transition to online performance and the opportunity to experiment with alternate media as a means of reconceptualising their practice and enhancing their portfolio. A London-based theatre director reflected on her move to digital performance platforms as a space to both remain creative and advance a new set of skills. The director, in collaboration with a television producer, organised a series of short films with a group of actors, writers, and a film editor. She and the other creatives on the project did it 'as an ode to the theatre' and to 'stay sane' during lockdown. The transferral to the digital space allowed her to both develop new artistic skills and assert her own identity as a creative during a time of social and work-related depravation. However, she acknowledged that this work, which received exposure via organisations such as the BBC, remained difficult to monetise:

> *I feel like that's the tricky thing with digital content … The National Theatre put up loads of content online, but for donations.... I'm not sure how the freelance artists who are part of those got financially supported during that time.... I feel like it was great … for us to be creative and do stuff, but it's not financially stable.*

Photo by Compare Fibre, Unsplash

Many of our respondents felt that the free streaming made available by the larger cultural institutions created barriers for smaller companies to attract paying audiences to their online performances.

Freelancers also found the arrangements with venues regarding distributing digital content complicated to negotiate. A theatre maker who reworked some of their company's productions into a series of short films for children, describes venues being 'desperate to put it on their websites because they wanted to have something out for families', and as having 'bit our hands off for content, good family content'. While the venues supplied support in the form of social media promotion, the films were offered for free, and the theatre maker describes lacking the confidence to try and sell the films for any kind of financial compensation.

Evolving Pandemic Practices

In the second half of 2020, companies and freelance theatre makers began to develop confidence in finding financial benefit from digital content. As the National Theatre and Globe released their subscription services, smaller companies, who had developed their digital skills through the initial months of the pandemic, began to develop more sophisticated online performances specifically designed for the medium in which they were performed and charged ticket prices for their work. One improv company who normally work above a small pub on the outskirts of London, found their online audience grew exponentially, and, surprisingly, that the company's profit margin was larger than when they held live events. As the artistic director described, they worked hard to keep the communal aspect of the production going online through Facebook Chat Box:

> *We do an after-show Zoom call after every show where we have drinks and the audience comes and we talk about the show. It's the next best thing to being in the pub afterwards. We had this wonderful woman after one of our shows who was in Liverpool, and she was like, "I would never have been able to see your show. I've been watching so much online, my ten-year-old is asleep upstairs. I laughed so loudly I woke him up and he came downstairs and I sent him back up to bed." She said, "This is the first show that I've watched online that I felt like I hadn't been alone watching it, but part of a community watching it." [We] incorporate [Facebook Chat Box] into our performance … endeavouring to remove the fourth wall between us and the audience [when] we've literally got a plate of glass between us…. Trying to keep [the show] alive and interact through that medium as well, is … an added flavour to what we're making.*

Online festivals provided platforms to support digital practice. Existing digital performance festivals such as NEoN Digital Arts Festival based out of Scotland, which formed in 2009, and the International Online Theatre Festival, which had its inaugural season in 2019, seemed ahead of their time. Additionally, new festivals formed specifically in response to the pandemic, such as the RE-CONNECT online festival, Living Record Festival, Electric Dreams Online Festival, and the Online Fringe Festival amongst others. Online festivals were an important platform not only for UK theatre makers to show their practice, but for UK audiences to access national and international artistic practice otherwise inaccessible.

The move online drew attention to the inequality in access to live performancefor some communities. Many disabled theatre workers, as well as audience members, found the move online provided them a lot more engagement with artistic content, dialogue, and arts spaces than they normally have access to.
As one of our survey participants argued:

> *On the connection subject - I live with long term MH issues and a chronic health condition that comes with fatigue. Physically attending even local events regularly can be very challenging. Having things online has allowed me to talk to and work with people from all over the UK and even internationally in a way I couldn't have done in person. For people living with these kinds of challenges going digital has been a leveller that has had real benefits.*

Smaller companies with limited reach of audiences also found their work gained greater exposure through online streaming. One disabled theatre maker in London found a production she had created at a small fringe venue gained international attention over Covid, leading to an online theatre award and an article in the New York Times.

Photo by Nina Dunn, The Dark Theatre Project, 2020

'fringe theatres ran their own live-streaming platforms.'

In early 2021, when theatres were open but not to live audiences, fringe theatres ran their own live-streaming platforms, with broadcast performances continuing throughout the year. The Southwark Playhouse in London live-streamed performances each night in the first half of 2021, as well as offering on-demand recordings of previous productions. The Camden People's Theatre (CPT) provided a large source of support for small-scale and emerging artists to create virtual work during the pandemic; CPT commissioned online festivals and celebrated digital performance work with a featured platform supporting and commissioning hybrid virtual and live performance. As one Scottish-based theatre maker described, CPT offered a variety of support for freelancers over the pandemic:

> *They were able to open things up a little bit. They provided … rehearsal space for people and had those … conversations and talks about works going online … and CPT did do a run of online stuff, and live on Instagram things and pieces.*

In February 2021, the Orange Tree Theatre in South London announced a series of live-streamed performances of new plays under the banner 'INSIDE/OUTSIDE' on their 'OT On Screen' digital project. HOME Manchester and National Theatre Wales also provided vibrant platforms for independent theatre workers. Responses to the pandemic by theatre-makers working with local communities represented an important alternative to the digital dominance of commercialised, star-studded productions, such as the Old Vic's broadcast performances of *Lungs* (2020) and *A Christmas Carol* (2020).

Zoom Fatigue and Digital Hierarchies

Amongst our interviewees, some remained sceptical about, and even resistant to, working with digital formats. This hesitance can be partly attributed to the phenomenon of 'Zoom fatigue'. Frustration with virtual ways of working was cited by a number of our respondents; one interviewee articulated this experience:

> *I think everyone feels… burnout … about too much online stuff. [I'm] trying to desperately keep up with it, but I don't feel like my brain is quite connecting with it in the same way it did prior to lockdown.*

The emotional impact of the pandemic was also a contributing factor to a resistance to undertaking virtual and online practice; one playwright interviewed in our focus groups described realising an opportunity to start 'thinking about film and TV and it opened things up, but … I had a bit of a paralyzing fear of writing during the lockdown'. A number of freelancers described not necessarily wanting to immediately turn to the digital, but to use the opportunity to, as one director from our focus groups described it, 'get off the treadmill for a bit'. Another director described how they appreciated 'stepping back and being quite happy to step back'.

For some freelancers interviewed, online performance 'just isn't theatre'. They missed the embodied experience of in-person, face-to-face performance practice and expressed frustration with online working. One director talked about no longer being able to do those things that made them feel good at directing, which is to 'support people to feel excited and safe in the work' and that online this 'just wasn't possible or it felt less possible.' Another director in our focus groups describes not being able to get a 'sense of the temperature in a room, which is really hard to do on Zoom'. They explained: 'I think I rely so heavily on the feeling in a space that I found it impossible, and frustrating, and difficult to be able to read people [on Zoom]'.

After the first lockdown, once freelance practitioners were able to return to in-person working briefly mid 2020, the immense contrast of what it felt like to work back in physical spaces with human interaction was particularly noted.

One director described the thrill of returning to the rehearsal room:

> *I was very lucky to be a part of an R&D in October, that was in person, in between lockdowns and hopefully we're going to have one again in a few weeks … I'd completely forgotten how much I love this process of rehearsing, devising, and creating in a room with people. And not online … Online is just everything that live theatre isn't. It's … I used to say to people "I love the smell of live theatre." You know? That moment before things start there is a certain anticipation, you can feel it, you can almost smell it. And it's that, that I miss, and it can't be created online. Online is an experience, absolutely. But it's a different thing. It's not theatre. It's a different format.*

Community-based performance work also had mixed experiences of digital content. For some, the shift to online workshops and digital practice with communities happened quickly and allowed community-based practitioners to work throughout the pandemic. As one East London community-based theatre maker and facilitator described: 'So March, yeah we immediately went into lockdown and we went straight online'. However, he felt the online workshops early in the pandemic were 'much lighter' while as the pandemic progressed, the pressure also increased to work outside of his skillset: 'now the goalpost has changed, and now you've got to create, almost a film'.

‘The local element of what we want to achieve is definitely [hard] with the digital side of things.’

Community-Based Artist, Wales

Photo by Nina Dunn, The Dark Theatre Project, 2020

Others found that the move online allowed them to experiment with different types of community engagement. A playwright who works on community-based projects was part of an initiative in Wales trying to engage members of the community in artistic practice while they remained in lockdown isolation:

> *We worked with four families across Wales, to make a piece of theatre in their living room. So they created the story and outline, and then I wrote the script. And then we the director worked with them in their house. And then we had a set designer and a lighting designer who taught them how to use their lighting in their house in a theatrical way. And how to use the things, the props that they have in their house.*

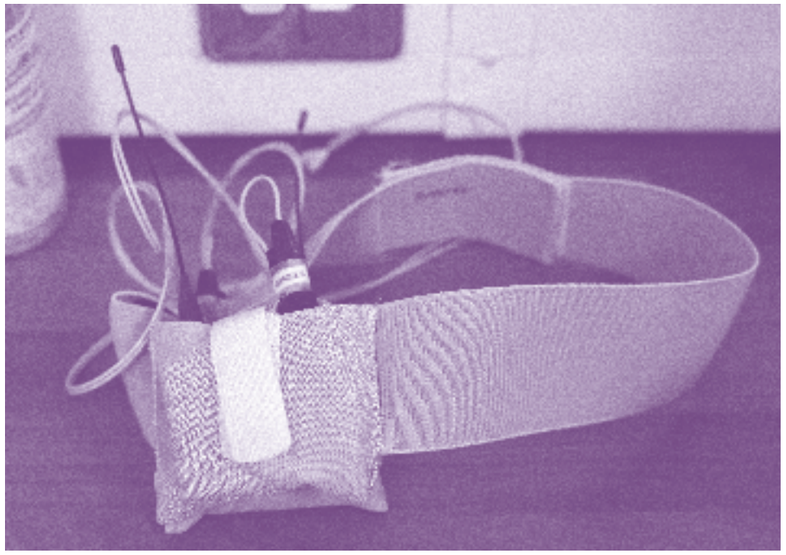
Some community-based theatre workers however, found the digital poverty amongst their community groups, as well as the lack of digital knowledge for some of the communities they work with, made it more challenging to engage over the pandemic. As one physical theatre community-based theatre maker in Wales noted:

> *The local element of what we want to achieve is definitely [hard] with the digital side of things. Especially because we have an ageing population here … and because so many of our young people don't have the [digital resources]. You can probably hear my laptop is like whirling in the background, it needs replacing.*

The other problem with the move to digital content has been the lack of support and work for technical theatre workers, left out of the digital wave over the pandemic. As one of our survey respondents noted:

> *As a technician I have felt at a loss to be useful or give back in a practical way as companies move online as my skills aren't required when streaming existing footage or directors and performers are hosting webinars etc.*

Analysis across our interviews and focus group data points towards the fact that often it was the respondents who had previously experimented with digital theatre or engaged widely in social media before the pandemic who welcomed the shift to online practice most enthusiastically. In contrast, those who were used to working face-to-face found the shutdown of all live theatre and performance challenging and were less prepared for the unique demands posed by working online.



Photos by Freelancers in the Dark, Edinburgh Micro-Commission, 2021

One participant in our parents and carers focus group, an early-career theatre director from London, suggested:

> *I noticed that social media networking had increased in value three-old, and I think my career will suffer hugely as a result of the fact that I'm not social media savvy and that I dislike that orm o connectivity. I find it actively like going against my practice o why I'm in theatre in the first place. I'm a political theatre maker that's not how I want to engage with my audience; that's not my practice. I suspect that will continue to be the way people get work and I will be left behind until I kind o pull my socks up and train mysel and learn that new skill set. And that makes me very fearful.*

Across our data, a number of participants also expressed a concern that those who were already skilled in using social media and digital technology, had a vital head start on those who didn't when it came to making and promoting online work. An early career director and parent commented:

> *Even though producing work online has the allure of being accessible for all, it doesn't actually. It's still the same sets of people who I see getting themselves heard, because they are provocative, or they've got a certain identity card that means they can really engage with particular kind of topic.*

Others felt that the move to the digital space for performance cut out the fundamental community building aspect of live performance. The theatre lobby and other 'in between' spaces which promote audience discussion were found hard to replicate in online spaces. As one theatre maker from the East of England argued, the connection between audience and performer is challenging on digital platforms:

> *We always described our work as epic within a small frame and the small frame is the relationship between performer and audience. We do intimate. We always do the sort of intimate look-you-in-the eyes relationship with the audience so digital is not exactly a natural medium for us.*

Other issues with an over-reliance on online platforms articulated by theatre workers, include internet connectivity issues greatly impacting more geographically marginalised and working-class communities, difficulties for the elderly and non-digital natives to engage with online platforms, and the lack of socialising etiquette for many in navigating online spaces. Some theatre makers have attempted to solve this issue by including after show discussion and breakout groups to give the participants and audience members time to speak amongst themselves, but many found that aspect of live performance and facilitation to be absent in the virtual space.

Virtual Collaborations

While the enjoyment of in-person theatre was much missed, the notable benefits of online and digital theatre practices recognised by the interviewees included the possibility to reach beyond geographical limitations. Interviewees described their digital work reaching new audiences and publics; a theatre maker in Liverpool described their enjoyment of digital work due to the 'possibilities of further international audiences for the festival and our own work.'

'Online and digital theatre practices … included the possibility to reach beyond geographical limitations.'

One organisation representative spoke about running workshops online and co-creating spaces with young people: 'co-designing…with the machine running all the time' and being able to 'reach other young people probably further across [the region] than we would have, necessarily.' Another interviewee talks about their digital programme. Despite their organisation only working with 43% of their workforce, they still managed to engage over five million impressions online, 'playing quite well, randomly, in Germany and also in America.'

Real-time digital interaction also enabled new collaborations between practitioners unrestrained by geography, with freelancers forming new networks and new working relationships with their peers both nationally and internationally. In some cases, this enabled more diverse casting for productions, as producers were able to recruit beyond their immediate locale. One of the organisational representatives we interviewed noted:

> *One of the kind of real pluses for us during the pandemic was … being able to have more diverse casting than, you know, we had striven to do in [nearest city] and not been able to really achieve … that's been a real positive.*

Photo by Charles Deluvio, Unsplash

Interviewees also noted the capacity of digital theatre to address issues of access. A director from our focus groups spoke with enthusiasm about increased access:

> *'I've seen work that I would never have seen otherwise. People who can't leave their home, or who can't use public transport … it gives them access to work online or YouTube. Fantastic.*

Another actor/writer in London spoke of her appreciation of the accessibility afforded by digital streaming:

> *'I think accessibility is one of the biggest things. I think the fact that people that can't get to the theatre, get to London, hear or see … all of these questions have been answered during this time. It's doable we just haven't been doing it which is quite sad. It's quite sad that it's taken this for people to realise that theatre can and should be accessible. There should be BSL all the time, there should be closed captions…. There should be a streamed version as well as a live version because actually lying in my bed and watching a one man show recently was really cool. I was like okay, I'm just in bed watching a one man show, I'm cosy, the actor isn't stressing looking me in the eye, I don't have to worry about anything, that was really nice. I think it should be more of a choice how we experience theatre.*

In some cases, online working led to more of a spread of projects for freelancers in real-space when lockdown restrictions were eased. One director from our focus groups describes doing,

> *'A lot of Zoom R&Ds during that time in locations that weren't in London, and now they've turned into physical development periods in different cities so now I'm travelling a lot more than I normally would have and that feels really exciting, and that's because the seeds were planted during the pandemic, so now I've got projects in Manchester an Leeds and Bristol.'*

'I've seen work that I would never have seen otherwise. People who can't leave their home, or who can't use public transport … it gives them access to work online or YouTube. Fantastic.'

London-based Theatre Director

Photo by Reynier Carl, Unsplash

The flexibility and speed provided by online working was also appreciated by both freelance theatre workers and organisations, with an organisation representative explaining:

> *'What I've loved about…digital is the speed of it, and the autonomy of it. The fact that I don't need to arrange, I don't need to book a theatre, or arrange a space, or submit a risk assessment. I can just say in two weeks' time we're doing a thing that I think people will enjoy.*

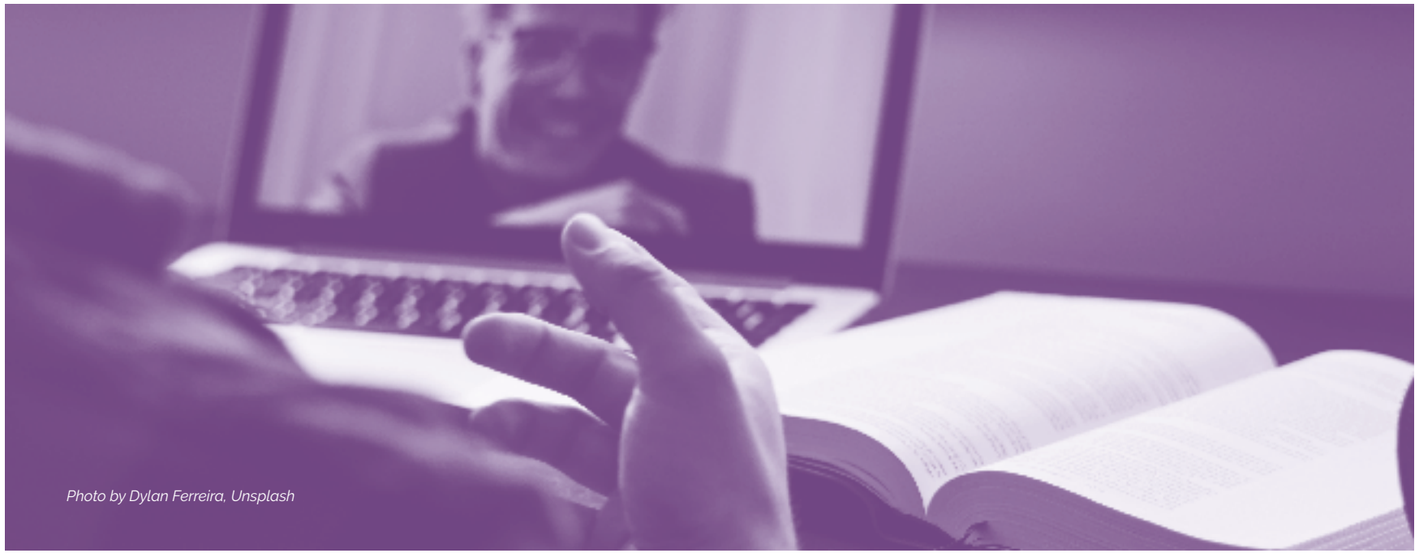


Photo by Dylan Ferreira, Unsplash

While the benefits of distant collaboration and public engagement were consistently expressed, a key area of contention mentioned by actors, directors, producers, and organisations related to the rise of online and 'self-taped auditions'. These practices existed before Covid but during the pandemic, became the norm, and our demographic expressed differing opinions about the value of digital auditions and their existence post-pandemic. Some interviewees acknowledged the increased accessibility provided by online auditions, while one director warned about this assumption as:

> *For some people it does, it means that they don't have to get childcare … But I think for some people … if they don't live somewhere where it's really easy to shut the door and have a Zoom meeting, then it can actually make it more difficult.*

This interviewee explained that, in future, they will undertake initial meetings with performers on Zoom, but facilitate all 'recalls' in person, or give auditionees the option. They also described Zoom auditions as effective in assessing the most and least appropriate actors for a role, but ineffective at assessing the 'middle ground of actors' as the subtlety and nuance of an actor's performance is difficult to grasp on a small screen via a computer camera.

A further challenge in requiring online auditions and rehearsals relates to an assumption of technical aptitude on behalf of the participants. A representative from a theatre venue talked about actors suffering because of lack of technical knowledge and there being an onus on institutions and employing organisations to train actors in using the required technical systems:

> *I think I thought everyone would be able to kind of sparkle over Zoom. But, you know, it doesn't work for everybody... there's been actors that I love working with, but they are so unconfident technically.... I was also determined that this wouldn't just become a kind of young person's techie world … I'm really keen that we bring artists with us who are not as kind of fluent in technical ability.*

For others freelancers, the benefits of Zoom rehearsals include savings of time, money, and social dramas. One established playwright explained that he enjoyed working on Zoom with younger theatre workers as, for him, meeting on an online platform minimalised any potential social awkwardness created by an age barrier and allowed for breaking the ice more quickly. Online Zoom rehearsals also meant saving money on conventional rehearsal spaces and eliminated additional administrative work and travel expenses when planning a project. A composer and sound designer in the West of England reflected:

> *As much as I miss going in and physically seeing those people with the rise of Zoom it's just made it so much easier to hold those regular meetings and rehearsals. I still have to do a lot of work at home because of Covid guidelines, so I don't know, maybe it will change when I have to be in person, but it's just made it a lot easier for now.*

Multimedia Performance and Audience Engagement

While some aspects of digital theatre such as online auditions, online performances, and streamed documentation drew variations in their appreciation and uptake, the relentless capacity for innovation demonstrated by freelancers working across digital, site-based, and audio platforms has been universally commended. As well as returning to old media and familiar formats, such as radio dramas and audio plays, theatre freelancers have challenged the constraints of theatrical staging and nimbly turned their attention to exploring and advancing forms of multimedia performance such as interactive online performance, role playing dramas, headphone theatre, game-based dramaturgies, and performances using augmented and virtual reality.

While streaming live or documented productions has no doubt been a key form of digital theatre over the past two years, many freelancers and companies have wanted to avoid attempting to digitally replicate the usually live and in-person experience of theatre, and have instead embraced the affordances of the new media at their disposal. One organisational representative from a Northern Irish producing company explained:

> *I suppose I'm not interested in digital as a copy of a live event…That doesn't mean it shouldn't happen and you know, people are doing very well at that. I can't get interested in that. I'm much more interested in…remote audience being able to talk to the audience here, being able to turn the lights on, being able to tell them that they can see a camera feed from outside… I'm much more interested in those dynamics.*

This desire to reach out and connect with audiences in a tangible way, motivated freelancers to harness the interactivity of platforms such as Zoom to develop immersive and participatory dramaturgies and formats.

Companies already specialist in such practice were well-positioned to supply performance opportunities during the pandemic. A company well versed in creating innovative, multimedia theatre since 2008, the British-based ***Fast Familiar***, use digital technologies 'as a kind of magic cloak of invisibility. We use it to get out of the way so that you as an audience member can have more meaningful interactions with other people'.

Photo by Edwin Andrade, Unsplash

The show *The Evidence Chamber*, originally shown in Oct 2019 but reworked for Zoom in July 2020, was described by the New York Times as an 'especially successful way for theater to be enjoyed from a laptop'(***Soloski, 2020***); the show invites online audience members to perform the role of a jury deciding the fate of an accused murderer.

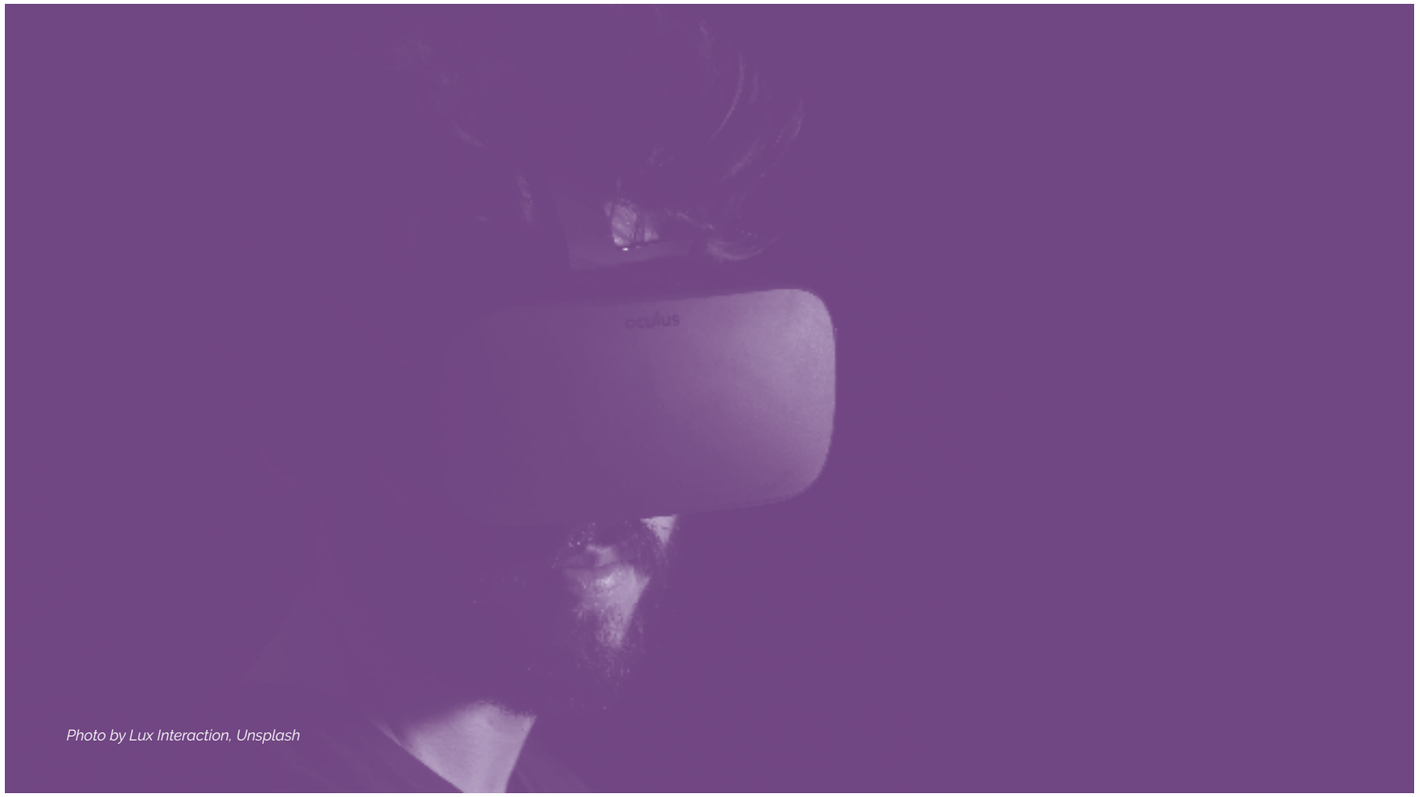


Photo by Lux Interaction, Unsplash

This type of playful audience experience formed the basis of shows by companies that drew on game-based dramaturgies or, even more overtly, gaming formats, to create interactive, digital productions. London-based Parabolic Theatre collaborated with a games designer to move their participatory immersive shows, *England Expects* and *We Have a Situation* to a hybrid online platform in 2020. Encouraged by the success of these ventures, in March 2021 they made an elaborate website narrative game with live performance elements in an adaptation of *The Cenci.*

The Cambridge Junction in March 2021 experimented with an online interactive game performance, *The House Never Wins*, by the company Kill the Cat Theatre, exploring the thorny ground of Western society's handling of the climate crisis.

Offering online immersive games using live professional actors, the company Jury Games use escape-room-esque game mechanics; their first production, *Jury Duty*, is based on a similar premise to *The Evidence Chamber*, with strangers gathered as a hypothetical jury to determine the outcome of the accused. Their follow up shows *The Inquest* and *The Office Party* have also received critical acclaim and challenge audiences to examine evidence and information to untangle a mystery and solve a crime.

While some theatremakers made best use of existing networking technologies and platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp, others experimented with the latest in AR and VR technologies to create new forms of digital theatre and reach new audiences. Using motion capture technologies, gaming formats, and virtual reality imagery, The RSC's live online performance *Dream*, premiered in March 2021. An ambitious re-working of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Dream* presented live actors in motion capture suits triggering both the soundscape and the movement of character/avatars in a virtual forest. Audience members were represented as fireflies in the virtual world and their movements served to 'guide' Puck through the forest, creating an element of real-time interaction.

The National Theatre weren't the only company experimenting with VR technologies during the pandemic, with smaller and mid-scale companies also working with VR and other immersive tools. Companies such as Manchester's ThickSkin and Oxford's Creation Theatre made the pivot away from conventional stage productions and produced fully immersive VR-based productions. ThickSkin's *Petrichor* could be watched online or in a theatre using headsets and played with the audience's sense of immersion in an alternate world as part of both the form and content of the show.
These companies and many others have been harnessing the capacity of digital theatre, from live streaming, to WhatsApp plays, to choose-your-own adventure dramas such as Caroline Horton's *All of Me: The Twine*, to experimental VR-based immersive experiences, to engage with wider audiences in new ways.

Outdoor performance

Alongside the pervasion of digital theatre, open-air and site-specific theatre increased as theatre makers creatively navigated social distancing measures. A theatre director we interviewed from Manchester explained:

> *With the first lockdown there was a huge rush for people to make outdoors theatre. There are many fantastic companies all across the UK [that] make great outdoors theatre and a lot of companies could have a good go at it, but there was a sudden surge to respond by just programming as much theatre outside as possible.*

As a number of our participants made clear, outdoor performances were frequently programmed due to uncertainty over possible further, future restrictions . An established theatre maker from West Yorkshire told us:

> *most people were thinking about how they could do outdoor work this Summer [2021] that broke audiences down into smaller groups, rather than having large groups together. This was partly because we don't have a map of lockdown [in March 2021].*

Photo by Prasanta Kr Dutta, Unsplash

Photo by Nadim Merrikh, Unsplash

It is interesting to note that this flourishing of open-air performance often took place outside of large urban areas, in locations that could flexibly accommodate outdoor audiences, to allow for the social distancing measures. This was yet another phenomenon that resulted in freelancers re-thinking strategies for how and where they look for employment. An early career actor from the Isle of Wight explained her thinking around where her future opportunities might lie:

> *In some ways my need to work in London has actually reduced because of the pandemic. Not because there's more stu on the Isle o Wight, but because there's nothing in London right now [July 2021]. You know all the big theatres are shut or they're forced to operating on smaller margins. So it's open air things like the Ventnor Fringe Festival where everything's more spread out, who I get the impression have been able to start things up, not easily necessarily, but probably more easily.*

Headphone Theatre and Aural Dramaturgy

Operating through a very different modality of participation, the field of sound-based or headphone theatre was another area of innovative practice that came to the fore during the pandemic as theatre makers and performers 'turned to audio' in a big way. Audio and headphone theatre have a long history of development with a particular growth period over the last ten years, however, these forms have experienced a renaissance during the pandemic. Many performers and theatre makers consulted during the study have found podcasts, audio walking tours, and headphone theatre a useful way to work in a time of Zoom fatigue, preferring audio to visuals. One director describes finding working with audio 'really positive' as it felt:

> *a natural way to work online, because it was about listening and you could just turn everything off, and … just lie on the bed … being a mess and just put my headphones in and direct people.*

Forms of audio and headphone theatre over the last two years have varied from site specific installations to immersive 'auto-theatre'. Many works have used binaural sound recording technologies, which reproduce sound the way it is heard by human ears; soundscapes are naturalistically located in a quasi-physical space and experienced in three dimensions as in the real world. Narrated by Juliet Stevenson and using binaural sound, Simon Stephen's adaption of Jose Saramago's Blindness, with sound design by Ben and Max Ringham, offered the Donmar's in-person, socially distant audience a light and sound installation accessed via headphones. The show took place when the theatre was open to live audiences for a month in August 2020.

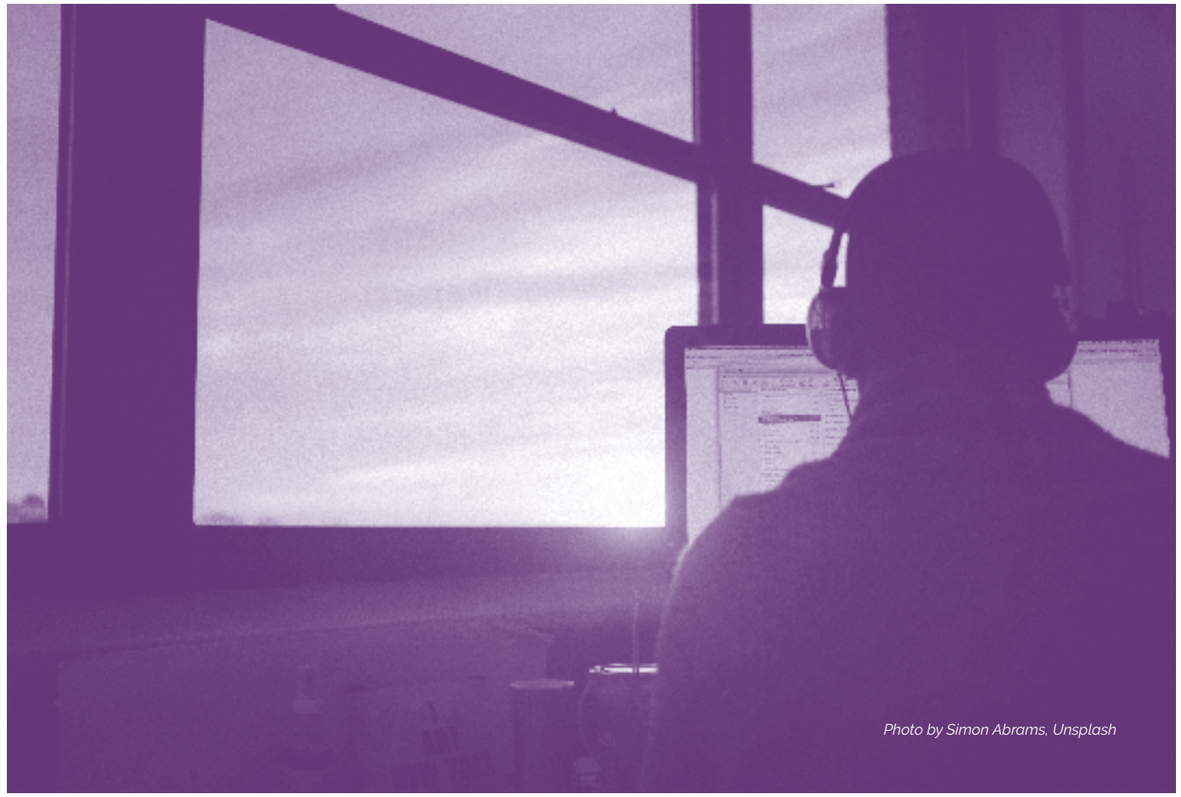


Photo by Simon Abrams, Unsplash

Other freelancers made use of the mobility of headphone listening, creating projects during the third lockdown such as the Royal & Derngate Theatre's audio walking tour The Whisper Tree (2021), which combined live embodied immersion with an aural soundscape to create an interactive digital adventures for young audiences to re-connect with their local areas. Shoreditch Town Hall's Curse of the Crackles! (2021) similarly engaged young audiences using sound technologies accessed via headphones, but while The Whisper Tree is site-specific, Curse of the Crackles! could be experienced at home. Both site-specific and at home, Silvia Mercuriali's Swimming Home, premiering in Oct 2020, guided audience members to perform the production themselves either in the bath or shower wearing a swimming costume and goggles. At a time when physical touch amongst strangers was banned and interaction with the world beyond the front door was kept to a minimum, headphone theatre deployed the specific mediality of sound and audio technologies to offer listeners an embodied, intimate, and sensorially stimulating immersive experience.

Summary

The 'turn to audio' and the rise of digital theatre will impact the work of practitioners long into the future, as exposure to, and training for, these forms by practitioners and companies have broadened skillsets and increased awareness of new technical and sensory possibilities. Future productions will, hopefully, not only push the boundaries of innovative artistic practice, but also provide potential opportunities to establish new audiences and the creation of new theatre publics. One interviewee, an artistic director, explained, 'I don't know if we'll ever not have a digital element' and asserted:

> *Lyn Gardner did a podcast recently, where she was saying she went to see a show, it was in the tree house, and you had to stay overnight or something and people were going, "but is that theatre?", and she said, "we need to ask what can theatre possibly be." That really kind of makes my heart sing… it's about connection, and it's about story…. Rather than, do we have to buy a ticket and be in a venue?*

Photo by Clark Tibbs, Unsplash

'the shift to online working practices … saw a blossoming of new theatre networks organised and facilitated by freelancers.'

The skills acquired during the pandemic by many of our respondents have allowed for further experimentation with audience engagement and interaction that will hopefully provide potential opportunities to establish new theatregoers through multidisciplinary forms of socially-engaged artistic practice. Our study also points to how the shift to online working practices necessitated by the series of lockdowns across 2020 and 2021 saw a blossoming of new theatre networks organised and facilitated by freelancers. These nascent cyber communities provided crucial opportunities for theatre workers to navigate industry closure and support one another during the pandemic, as well as advocate for freelancer rights as buildings and live performance re-started.

Many respondents included in this study, however, made a point of highlighting that the rise of digital working practices across the theatre industry in the UK left some freelancers feeling marginalised from what they saw as urgent online debates about sector recovery in a post-Covid world. This anxiety was frequently articulated by theatre workers from lower socioeconomic groups, or rural communities, who spoke of 'digital poverty', as well as freelancers whose artistic backgrounds meant they had limited experience of online work or using digital technology to promote themselves.

Nonetheless, our research indicates that many freelance theatre makers we spoke to viewed the turn to the digital as one of the primary consequences of the pandemic on the theatre industry. The relationship of live performance with digital technologies has been consolidated and theatre's reliance on physical theatre venues has been destabilised. UK freelance theatre workers have proven their capacity to be responsive, to act with urgency, and nimbly move across previous disciplinary and geographic boundaries. They have side-stepped usual commissioning protocols, touring costs, and festival circuits and invented flexible platforms for showcasing work, with venues no longer the gatekeepers for new practice.

Support Networks and Grassroots Activism

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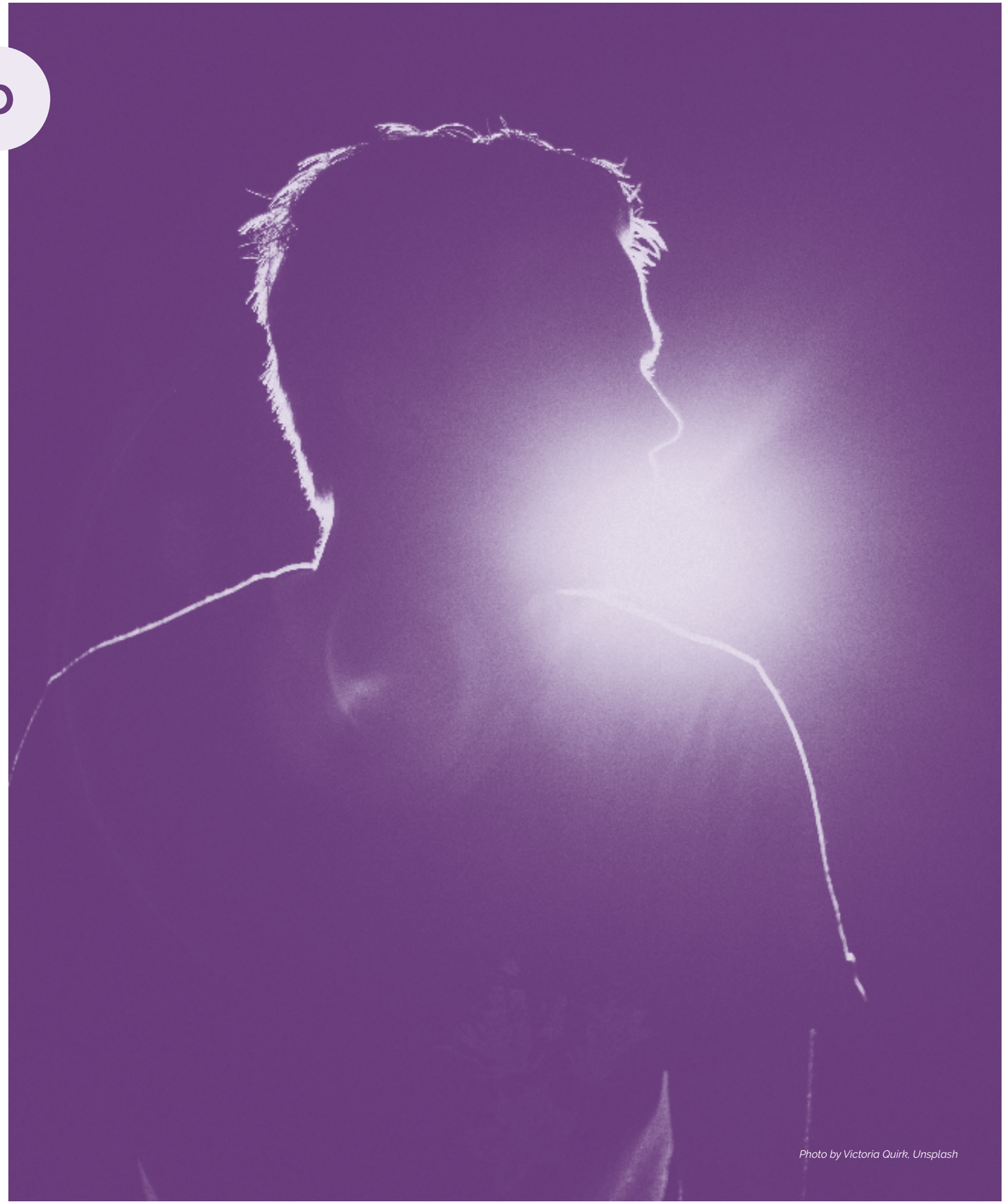


Photo by Victoria Quirk, Unsplash

The widespread use of digital platforms during Covid-19 offered opportunities for freelance theatre workers to establish new creative relationships and collaborations with peers in the UK as well as further afield. These platforms also extended opportunities for theatre workers to engage with online social and support networks, more formally, as led by organisations and sector stakeholders, and informally, through peer-to-peer and grassroots mechanisms. Many interviewees spoke of their reliance on freelance support networks for emotional, professional, and creative support. Interviewees also described how engagement with these support networks mobilised members of the workforce towards activism and change.

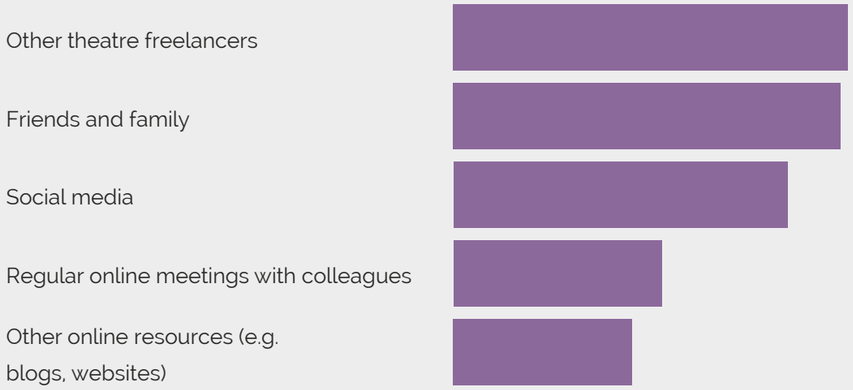
One producer we spoke to foregrounded the importance of informal digital networks to freelance theatre workers as a means of generating advocacy and stimulating wider communicative practices within the theatre industry. A facilitator of an online company to support freelancers in crisis during the pandemic, this producer was clear that such networks have acted as crucial points of connection for theatre freelancers:

> *This is such an interesting space and we didn't have this going before … I just think there's a real power in that. There's a real power at the moment … it's really an empowering, exciting time.*

Our survey data illustrated how wide ranging the support networks were utilised by freelancers during the pandemic:

Since March 2020, where have you turned to for non-financial support as a freelancer in theatre and other arts?

(Displaying top 5 answers only)



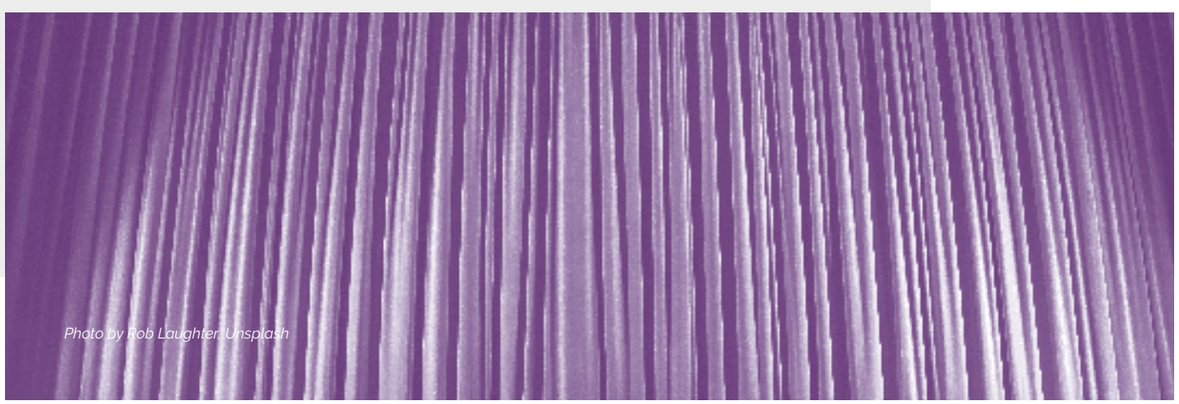


Photo by Rob Laughter, Unsplash

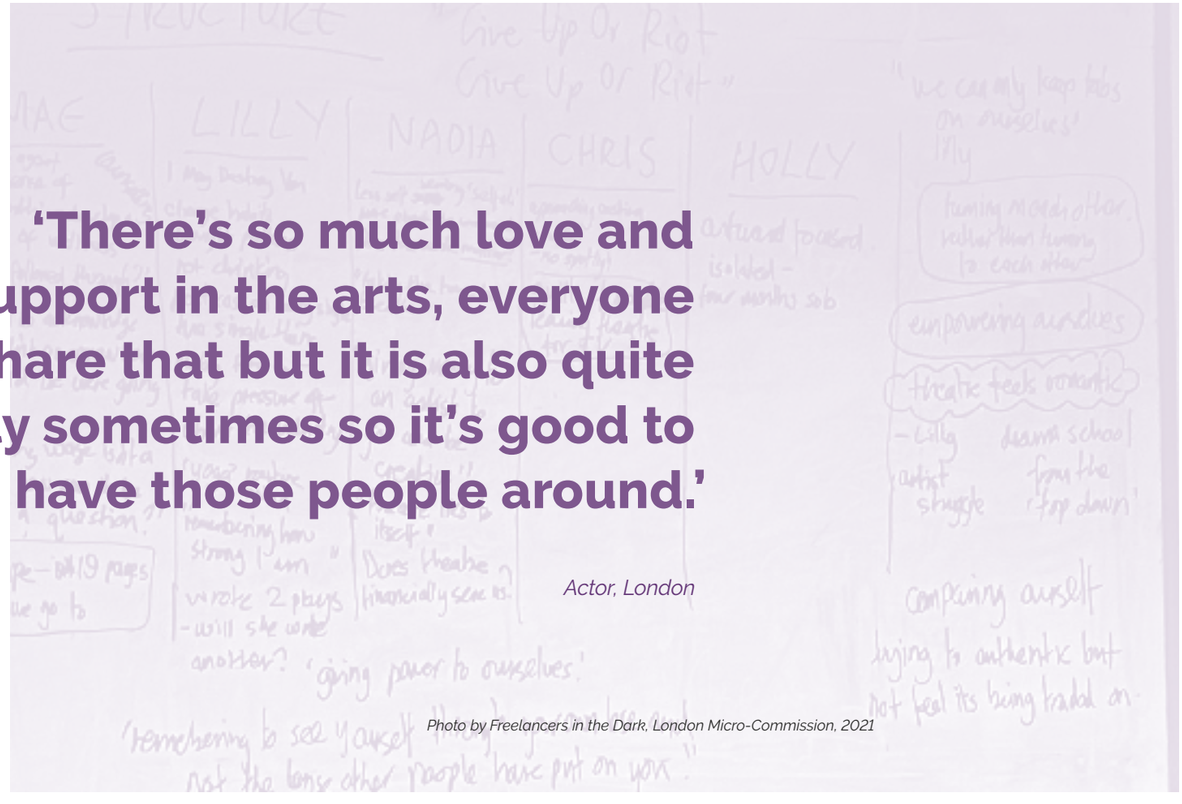
Coffee Mornings and Sector Specific Networks

Emotional and mental health support was key in online industry networks and grassroot theatre worker Facebook pages.
Our study found that, particularly for stage managers, technicians, and designers for whom work had been hard to generate since March 2020, these platforms provided support that was found to be essential for providing self-care and community support. The Stage Management Association (SMA) had a number of Zoom meetings to connect freelance stage managers during Covid and share information on funding opportunities and mentorship meetings. Stage managers and technicians used these platforms to share their concerns about exclusion from artist support schemes and the pressure of being the frontline for covid-safe practices. A stage manager interviewed described how, before Covid, she felt she had little connection with others working in the discipline, because of a feeling of 'competing for jobs'. On attending one Zoom session with SMA on Covid safety practices over Covid, however, she expressed a feeling of solidarity and understanding within her discipline:

> *I was actually quite glad I'd done that because that was just interesting hearing from stage managers in other parts of the world as well, and it's comforting to know that most of us were going, "Okay, we don't feel we have capacity to be the ones monitoring the Covid … whether people are following the guidelines.*

Another stage manager working across Scotland and the Midlands spoke of the importance of SMA Zoom chats and coffee mornings to bring stage managers together for emotional support and mentoring:

> *So the Scottish SMA branch were doing Tuesday mornings and Thursday mornings I think for a while … I know that the Welsh one have had a few catch ups. It's just for a bit of a chinwag really and they usually have a vague theme of what they want to talk about. So you know sometimes it's been, "tell us about the craziest prop you've made", or "a nightmare show you worked on", or that kind of thing. So it just gives people a topic to start chatting. And I know the SMA also launched their buddies scheme. So, basically, if you want to chat to another stage manager, you swap phone numbers and you work out when you want to call and you have a chat and that's that, you know. So just kind of keeping up with all of them, at whatever level each person wants to keep up with.*



'There's so much love and support in the arts, everyone will share that but it is also quite lonely sometimes so it's good to have those people around.'

Actor, London

Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, London Micro-Commission, 2021

Intersectional Communities and Support Networks

Other support networks specific to groups that feel marginalised within the theatre industry developed via social media, including those from working-class communities, disabled artist networks, Black and Global Majority, trans and LGBTQ+ rights activists. Many pre-existing networks gained traction over Covid-19 as they were discovered by more theatre workers reaching out for connection, communication, and support, worried over the loss of their industry and having more time to spend with others online. A London-based, Asian American theatre director described her discovery of the Migrants and Theatre network:

> *The best thing to come out of it for me was a group called "Migrants and Theatre" that has kind of exploded as a result of Covid just in terms of we all happen to have the time and space to kind of connect with each other and 'Migrant' is a really interesting … there's no Arts Council tick box or irst generation migrant, as you know. (Laughs) …It's kind of become friends in a way, because it's like trying to igure out how to identiy. Because I'm really lucky, right? Because my mom's Japanese so I've always been welcomed into the British East Asian arts community, and I can articulate my dierence that way. But I think for me personally what was really exciting about coming together with this Migrants group is it's not about feeling like I'm not home in my home. It's about feeling like me being from somewhere else isn't valued here.*

FREELANCER INGENUITY, RESOURCEFULNESS, AND RESILIENCE

‘Larger activist groups like Freelancers Make Theatre Work had ‘repoliticised’ many members of the industry, which in turn allowed grassroots organisations like themselves to have a larger platform for change.’

We spoke with one of the founders of the Migrants in Theatre group who said, though the group had started two years before Covid-19, ‘talking amongst ourselves of several immigrant theatre companies and people’, they began to hold Zoom sessions during Covid and increased their network over this time. She felt that the movement of larger activist groups like Freelancers Make Theatre Work had ‘repoliticised’ many members of the industry, which in turn allowed grassroots organisations like themselves to have a larger platform for change.

Another grassroots organisation, the Working Class Artists group, also found themselves expanding their platform and conversations over Covid-19. Using their Twitter account, early in the pandemic they began sharing communication and support for each other which furthered discussion on the conditions and experiences of working-class theatre workers in the industry. In July 2020 the group published a statement online particularly addressing the needs of working-class artists:

> *We are a collective of 32 members from across the UK - we stand in solidarity with our peers and colleagues affected by the decision making of those in power and will begin to set out our own roadmap to a better, fairer sector.*

Through their Twitter feed, they offered support to others and shared calls for funding, media reports on the pandemic, and further information to develop their practice.

WhatsApp and Informal Support Platforms

Platforms beyond Zoom and Facebook were also useful for freelancers to share information. WhatsApp became a powerful tool for actors, companies, and industry communities to share support and continue a dialogue after what felt like a sudden and traumatic end to the industry in March 2020. Many of the Freelancers in the Dark research participants who were involved in productions or rehearsals before the first lockdown found themselves using production-based WhatsApp groups to offer emotional support and share information about funding, self-employment benefits, and other resources. One musical theatre performer in a West End production cancelled during the first lockdown described communicating with his former cast members throughout the pandemic:

> *We have a WhatsApp group where everyone talks, and you know, still to this day people put something on there if they think it's of interest or reach out and see if people are okay. We had a couple of company Zooms after we'd found out about it and then, as with any job I've kept in contact with the people that meant most to me on that job … That's the great thing about social media is that if you need to reach out, you can do it, and there are people that you can talk to you need to do it. Certainly our WhatsApp group is still live.*

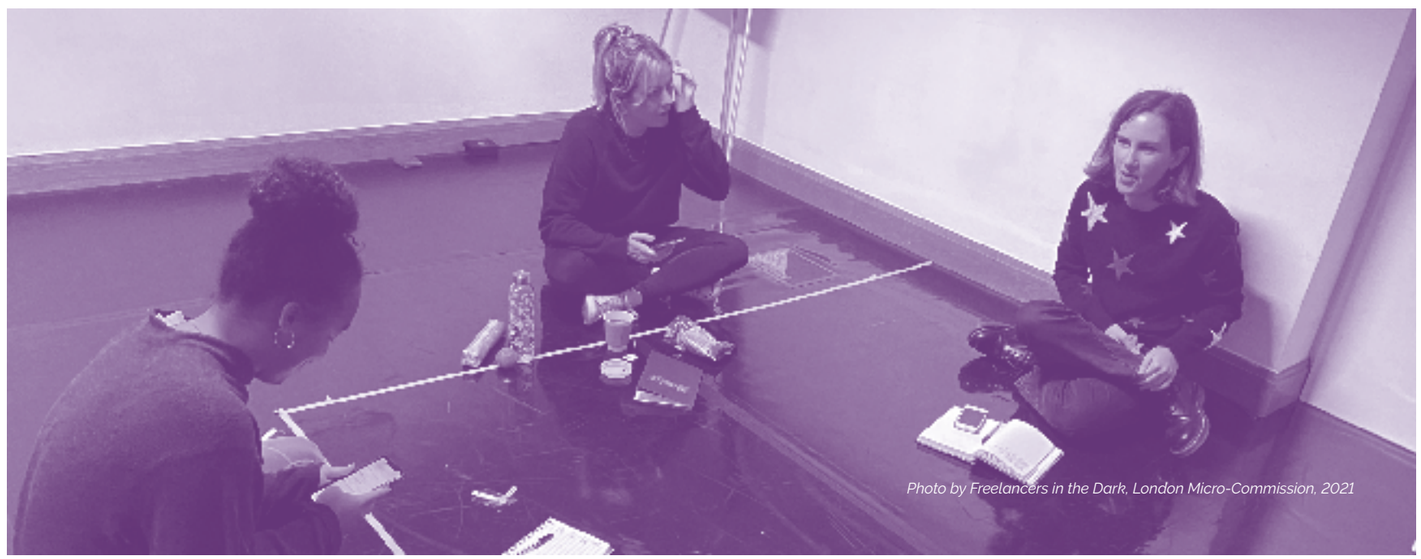


Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, London Micro-Commission, 2021

The increasing use of WhatsApp also provided an important lobbying and advocacy tool to stimulate collective action, particularly for West End theatre workers who found themselves left out of production discussions in the wake of theatre closures. Another West End musical theatre artist described his company-based Equity WhatsApp group:

> *It was really good that I was an Equity member at that point because even though I just wanted to go to bed for the rest of my life and never get up again, every few days there was a new Zoom call with Equity or something to communicate to our cast members and I had to do stuff for other people, so that was really helpful. We've got a little WhatsApp Equity group. Not everybody's in Equity in our cast, some of them are people who earn a lot of money and don't really feel the need to be in Equity, but those that are, the cast and crew, you know, I was in contact with them and the other guy that was also an Equity dep, I was talking to a lot, which was really good to have that other person.*

Others found support through forums designed to discuss active strategies to improve industry conditions developing over the pandemic. A British East Asian director talked about her involvement with a variety of support networks that were 'popping up' throughout the pandemic, facilitating discussions on intersectional issues, and strategizing for more leadership possibilities for women in the arts. She explained:

> *WhatsApp group support groups were popping up so I became part of this Southeast Asian women's group which is lovely. In a separate thing, a British East Asian/Southeast Asian Women's Leadership Group has emerged which is funded by the Arts Council. So, there's been a lot of like, yeah support groups and networks that have been created through this as well. Yes, definitely [I] have been in touch with people and I think also because of Bridge the Gap, because of Leaders of Tomorrow, because of my job, because that was still ongoing, I feel like I got a lot of links to opportunities.*

'The movement to openly discuss challenges to the industry has created a new wave of industry-related advocacy around working conditions, racial, gender, and class-based inequities.'

Photo by Kyle Head, Unsplash

The movement to openly discuss challenges to the industry has created a new wave of industry-related advocacy around working conditions, racial, gender, disability, and class-based inequities. This has been allied with an animated call for more dialogue between creative workers and the arts organisations and funding bodies of the UK arts industries. As the above interviewee emphasised:

> *[Before Covid] it never felt as coherently open and discursive and collaborative and transparent. The discussions between unions and professional bodies and members, and in some cases producers, all discussing together what has gone wrong, what needs to happen next, that's one of the things that I hope will be maintained after Covid.*

Photo by Alex Mo, Unsplash

Inclusion and Representation

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The grassroots movements amongst the theatre community were greatly impacted by wider socio-political events over the course of the pandemic. The protests staged by Black Lives Matters UK (BLM) in May and June 2020 following the killing of George Floyd in the United States accelerated the emergence of an explosive new kind of engagement for the UK theatre community. As one late-career playwright shared with us in a focus group:

> *The response to Black Lives Matter in the theatre community has been incredibly energised [...] Black Lives Matter and Covid happening at the same time has been so revolutionary.*

Through the act of sharing information and re-tweeting links, a number of our participants noted that the engagement in new forms of cyber activism and advocacy provoked a crucial reinterpretation of contemporary theatre ecology in the UK.

Reports of Covid-19's devastating impact on racial and class-based inequality was compounded by the June 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and demonstrations over the Sarah Everard murder in the spring of 2021. These tragedies increased sector-led scrutiny over the UK theatre industry's policies towards access, diversity, and inclusion. A Black British actor argued:

> *It's just that thing where as soon as it's in common conversation, it can never quite go back to what it was before, it just can't. And that for me is terribly exciting because then you've got Black Lives Matter, you'll start seeing people talking about mental health and disability and so all these things, the theatre whatever it touches, feels like it's breaking the ground and achieving amazing things. It's just attempting to have the conversations actually we should be having all the time anyway.*

In addition, the spotlight placed on the BLM movement and the demonstrations in the UK during the initial stage of the pandemic during the first national lockdown in 2020, coincided with an explosion of new online theatre that was often recorded expeditiously over Zoom and uploaded directly to YouTube. Some of the most powerful and provocative of these online pieces directly addressed the murder of Floyd and foregrounded the BLM Movement, including the audio play 846 created by Roy Williams and the Theatre Royal Stratford East in July 2020 and *The Protest Series* produced by the Bush Theatre in west London. These vital responses represented a new digital form of political theatre and activism that was able to rapidly intervene in the public sphere, engaging with the topical and urgent events that emerged during the early stages of the pandemic in the UK.

Solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement from within the industry drew criticisms of the lack of diversity within the very cultural organisations voicing their support. As one set designer from London complained:

> *And that's something like I actually put up on my Instagram around the BLM Protest is I've started seeing companies that I have personally worked for you know, jump on the, I hate calling it, but it was a trend, as far as marketing goes, it was a trend for a lot of companies. And I hated seeing people that were like, "oh yeah, we support the movement", but I've been to their oices and there wasn't a single person o colour working there. You know, it's much easier to support people of colour. Just employ them. You don't put anything on Instagram, just employ them.*

Unfortunately, many feared the advocacy surrounding Black Lives Matter would be short lived, as it was in 2015. Furthermore, advocacy doesn't always lead to action. A recent study from Manchester University on the impact of Covid-19 and BLM on diversity in the creative workforce discovered that 'only 17% of ethnically diverse respondents agreed that more unpaid/voluntary opportunities had become available as a response to BLM and only 14% agreed that more paid opportunities had become available'(Ali, et al., 2021).

The response to the BLM protests across the UK galvanised freelancers in the theatre sector to harness digital platforms to renegotiate an alternative artistic narrative of the pandemic. A London-based lighting designer described his participation in a number of such forums which developed over the summer of 2020, in the wake of the protests:

> *I [took] part in a lot of Zoom discussions with the Association of Lighting Designers, and with Equity and Bectu [Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union] and Freelancers Make Theatre Work and various individual venues, including The Bush and The Gate and The Orange Tree, just joining in Zoom discussions, that they mostly called them then "town hall forums" of being able to discuss, kind of, you know, where we go next … How should theatre be better? What do we want from the government and from our own industry?*

The pandemic highlighted pre-existing problems in the industry that have limited diversity. Many of the freelancers interviewed felt the funding cuts and lack of regulated pay scales are in themselves exclusionary practices within the industry. As a working-class set designer based in north-west England argued, 'until we get an industry that working in it is respected and it has some job security, and you get paid reasonably well, then you're not going to get the diversity of people wanting to work in it'.

Wider debates over societal inequality combined with concerns over the plight of freelancers in the creative industries during Covid-19 sparked continuing scrutiny over diversity in the industry. As one British East Asian actor and playwright argued, many of the arts organisations wanted to voice their support 'without actually substantively or structurally or institutionally implementing change to ensure that diversity.' Public scrutiny in the press, and vocalised by activists, began industry-wide discussions around representation and access within the sector.

Rather than insecurities being limited to the pandemic, Covid-19 highlighted pre-existing precarity and provided space for reflection within cultural organisations and the freelance workforce that fill them. Activist groups increased debates over existing bias within the industry which actively disadvantages marginalised communities in terms of disability, class, ethnic and racial minority groups, as well as gender-bias and LGBTQ+ communities. One multidisciplinary theatre maker noted:

> *I mean so many huge events have happened in our time in lockdown…The Black Lives Matter fight for justice last year and then things that have been happening in this country with, you know Reclaim the Night and Sarah Everard, that I think because we've had, we can't dilute. We can't turn away from stuff because our lives aren't filled the way they were before, so we have to really reflect. And people have and I think it is changing and people want that voice and are using their voice in support as well. And that I think will change our industry as well. And it is.'*

Concerns over leadership and management positions within cultural organisations and theatre buildings was a particular point of contention for many. A working-class dancer and facilitator from Scotland argued:

> *That is a huge class thing, actually. Because I think, fundamentally, some people don't want working-class artists in their buildings. They don't want the tone to drop down. And then that obviously stems into queer politics and race politics and issues with the hostile environment for migrants, and all of those things, I think, stems from that same place where it's just about bringing the tone down, or changing the tone. So the question for me is like who gets to set the tone, and why? I'm so into it with boards, but I'm like why are boards full of people who, who are wealthy enough to be on them?*

Some of the freelancers interviewed voiced their skepticism at the motivation of the industry towards real change. A British East Asian producer and artistic director of a theatre company was worried that all the attention to racial diversity was actually a barrier to true inclusion in the industry:

> *I am concerned that accessibility and most of it is going to be focused mainly on race, even though there is gender, there is class, there is so much more. And it doesn't come to be the flavour of the month, like environment was last year or the year before.*

Photo by Bogomil Mihaylov, Unsplash

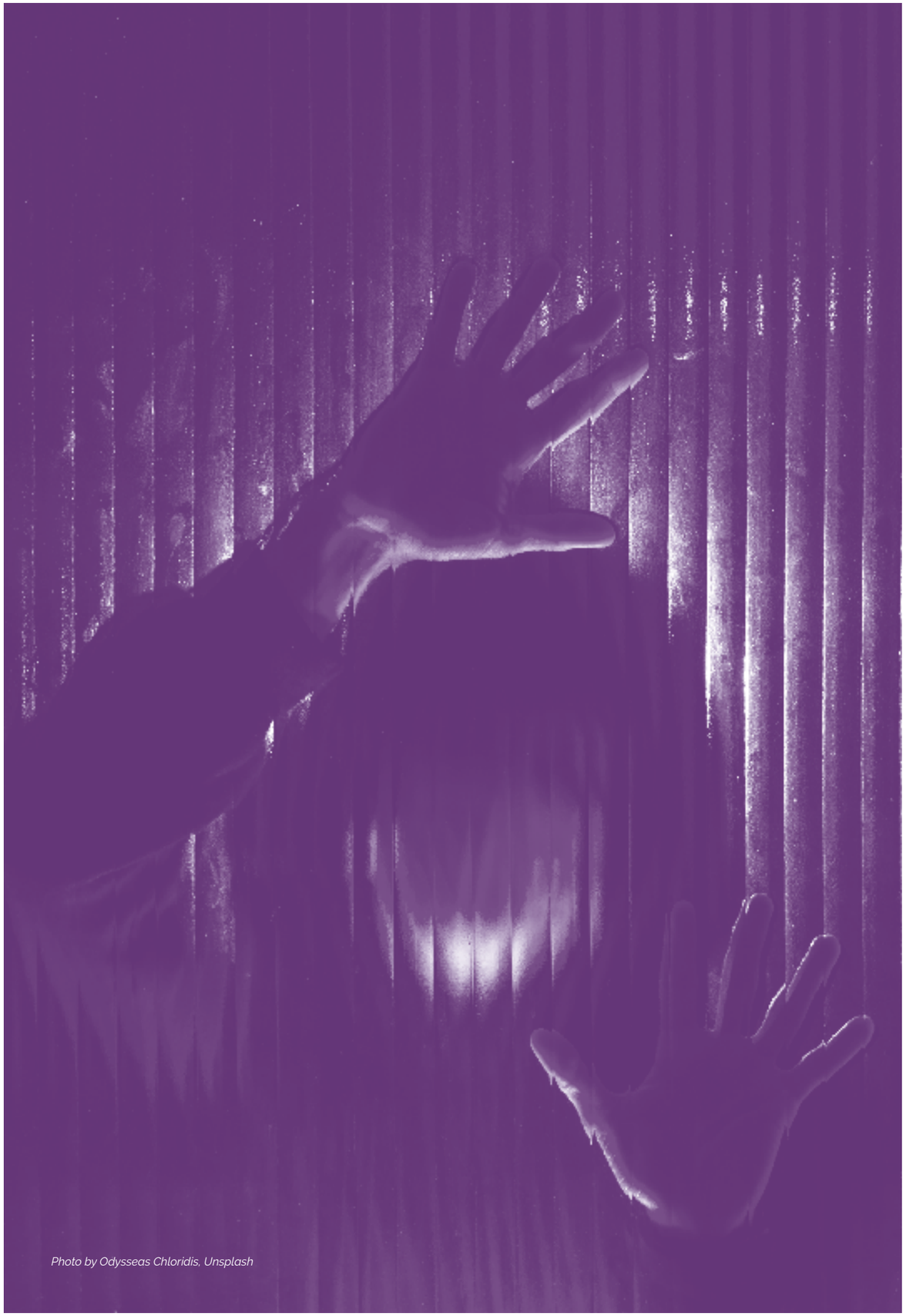

Photo by Odysseas Chloridis, Unsplash

As the producer argued, there are many intersectional cross-overs within these categories, which illustrate the complex and challenging concerns over what makes meaningful inclusion within the industry, and what are felt to be the successes, and limits, of the pandemic wave of 'progress for diversity' trumpeted by arts organisations.

Freelancers found themselves important voices for change over the pandemic, particularly in relation to diversity and inclusion. A Black British working-class theatre director and producer of young artist programmes in London described feeling empowered by his position as a catalyst for change in the sector:

> *I think it's really important that we are involved in the conversations because we are a part of them buildings and create work, output, for them buildings and represent them buildings, and for them buildings to keep moving forward in, in this day and age, I think they need to include us in them conversations. Because we are at the moment their diversity, their representation.*

A disabled actor and playwright in London felt that 'the disabled people I know who get the most work are fairly bullish, headstrong folk' who remained productive and proactive during Covid-19 because, as he argued, 'they respond proactively to fear and anger and anxiety'. He felt that their continuing anger over the marginalisation of disability arts in the industry increasingly found a voice and a platform over the pandemic, creating a positive time for him and other disabled artists:

> *One of the plus sides about being disabled is that it is now opening some doors. There is a really good group called 'Disabled Artists' Networking Community', DANC, and they organise and continue to organise, I have to say, a lot of webinars. And through one of those, actually, I got a casting general meeting with the casting director.*

Some theatre workers coming from under-represented communities within the industry found their work being sought out over Covid due to the increased criticism and scrutiny over the lack of diversity and inclusion within the industry. One non-binary actor who joined Equity's LGBTQ+ committee wrote a set of guidelines for the industry on best practice of working with LGBTQ+ performers.

Scrutiny over the pandemic of unpaid emotional labour and the dependency on freelancers from marginalised groups to 'teach the industry' how to be more inclusive led them to create a consultancy business over Covid to monetise their practice and expertise:

> *I'm being sought out for trans casting consultancy. People who are looking for actors who identify as LGBT+, people who are worried about what language to use and how to be inclusive. How to write a breakdown and how to approach people and how to reach people in an inclusive way … I was realising that it was taking up an awful lot of my time unpaid, and I just thought I've got to at least charge something for this…well since lockdown I've started charging.*

The global and domestic events of 2020 posed a series of questions that challenged entrenched cultural values in the UK and urge the need to repudiated the return to rigid hierarchical divides in the theatre industry moving forward. Central to this activism was the speed at which conversations could be held across virtual platforms. Freelancers who felt excluded from public space and the 'official' response to the pandemic promoted by theatre buildings and organisations, used social media and other digital platforms to renegotiate an alternative artistic narrative of the pandemic. In doing so, they politicised freelancers' roles and experiences during the pandemic, staking a fresh claim to public discourse. Through the act of sharing information and re-tweeting links, they created new forms of cyber activism and advocacy that revised theatrical ways of working and provoked a crucial reinterpretation of the contemporary theatre ecology in the UK.

Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, Cardiff Micro-Commission, 2021

'They created new forms of cyber activism and advocacy that revise theatrical ways of working and provoked a crucial reinterpretation of contemporary theatre ecology in the UK.'

Freelancer-led networks, grassroots activism, and formal activist groups formed or were amplified in great numbers during Covid-19. Powerful movements, such as The Freelance Task Force (FTF) and Freelancers Make Theatre Work (FMTW), built off of these concerns, as seen in the next section, to actively invoke dialogue with cultural organisations, public bodies, trade unions such as Equity. To varying degrees, they also lobbied government at different levels for more representation from under-represented backgrounds. It remains to be seen however, whether it will effect change across organisations and their management structures/production models or in public policies around the support of freelancers.

Activism

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Photo by Reynier Carl, Unsplash

Large Advocacy Groups

Grassroots activism and the wide-scale protests led to more formalised freelance theatre worker advocacy groups and freelancer-led campaigns in the UK, aiming to give them a collective voice in shaping the future of arts and culture as the theatre industry attempted to respond, stabilise, and reset in the wake of the pandemic. The Freelancers Task Force and Freelancers Make Theatre Work both emerged as substantive movements in the alliance of freelance theatre workers during the first national lockdown and continued to articulate the expectations and anxieties of self-employed theatre workers throughout the pandemic.

The Freelance Task Force was founded by members of Fuel, a London-based independent theatre producing company, in April 2020. Initially the concept was to create a weekly event on Zoom for freelancers to engage with their peers and share collective experiences of the lockdown. In May 2020, the FTF penned an open letter to freelance theatre workers in the UK that was signed by 150 theatre buildings, organisations, and associations. This letter called for the inclusion of freelancers' voices in the emerging discourse on the future theatre industry as it emerged from the pandemic. Each signatory organisation of the letter also pledged to provide their auspices to a freelance member of the Task Force, paying them for their time and feedback. These 169 freelancers who comprised the FTF worked together from June to September 2020, before a final report was published in December 2020.

The Freelance Task Force and Freelancers Make Theatre Work used online platforms to create dialogue with fellow theatre workers throughout the UK and designed websites as essential spaces to share information and promote activism around issues including better working conditions within the industry as a whole.

The virtue of the online platform allowed for a wider range of participants and attendance that would not have been possible in a live space. An active member of the South West Freelance Task Force described the participation:

> *It's quite a large group … organising, mutually supporting, covering the whole sort of span of age ranges, and a really diverse group, and a diverse group of practices as well from kind of movement directors and choreographers through performers to the artists and producers. So a really good sort of sector-wide view.*

The Freelancers Make Theatre Work campaign was similarly established during the first national lockdown, launching on 16 June 2020 with the aim 'to listen to, advocate for and amplify the voices of freelancers'. Unlike the FTF, the group was open to a much larger number of participants, who were asked to feed into the wider dialogue by taking part in a series of studies and surveys throughout 2020. In June 2020, FMTW ran 'The Big Freelancer Survey', which was followed by the campaign's initial report 'Covid-19: Routes to Recovery' in the same month. Later in the year, FMTW also established a programme of conversations between freelancers and theatre organisations named 'Future Labs' with the aim to find creative and long-term strategies to supporting freelancers as the live arts sector began its initial recovery. FMTW's 'The Big Freelancer Report' was published in March 2021. It aimed to identify the 'core problems facing the workforce', as well as 'making practical recommendations for change' including the creation of a federation of performing arts freelancers (FMTW, 2021). Since the publication of this report, FMTW has continued to engage with and campaign for freelancers in the theatre sector, such as organising a series of free digital workshops for freelancers, and initiating a new Big Freelancer Survey in March 2022 in partnership with Curtain Call and the University of Essex.

The Freelance Task Force, Freelancers Make Theatre Work and the Public Campaign for the Arts became large voices in the debates surrounding the freelance theatre workforce in in the industry, both for Covid-19 related issues and wider debates on industry change. Their freelance-led nature meant working groups could be formed around specific practices as well as sector-wide issues.
While largely focused on English/Westminster policies, their presence in Wales and Scotland led to a range of devolved policy engagement and, in Wales, the establishment of a new network, Wales Cultural Freelancers.

Some freelancers found their voice as activists through their involvement in these networks over the course of the pandemic. A British East Asian Actor found himself involved in all three of the large advocacy organisations, illustrating the interconnection of activist freelance networks:

> *At the same time as the Task Force got set up, an advocacy group of volunteers called Freelancers Make Theatre Work got set up. And I think it's really important that both those things existed in parallel, because the Task Force was paid work. And there's a real value in that. And volunteerism is great, but by nature of it being volunteerism it excludes certain people and those are probably the voices that we really need to hear. And over the past few weeks as the Task Force was coming to an end, Freelancers Make Theatre Work invited me to work with them. So I now do a lot of work with them as well. And just before the Task Force got set up … I started joining the Public Campaign for the Arts… Alongside those there are other groups that have tried to bring all of the various campaigns together; I have quite often been representing one or all of those groups that I'm involved with at those meetings. There's other things like the 'Monday group', which I've only been to a couple of times.… I presume you also know about 'shadowing Tuesday group', which was revealed, I think, maybe in the penultimate week of the task force. I actually got invited, one time only, to the Tuesday group and I felt like I'd reached the inal level o a video game. [laughs]*

Photo by Stewart Munro, Unsplash

Photo by Alex Av, Unsplash

One solo artist/producer within the Working Class Artist Group became active during the early stages of Covid-19 in sharing communication about funding and other financial assistance for many of those excluded from the government schemes. She developed the Women Working Class Artist group designed to offer mentorship and discussion to 'deconstruct hierarchies of space in the landscape of art by sharing our experiences and strategies, dreams and schemes, theories and knowhow' (*WWA, 2022*). The producer found that the pandemic greatly changed her approach to her work and has allowed her to reach a wider group of working-class artists across the country with a concentration on mentorship, community sharing, and developing a platform for change. An East London based community artist described the importance of the Working Class Artists group network for his mental health and feeling of community:

> *I think the Working Class Artists was a major space to be in because there was a lot of stuff that kind of happened as a group, that sort of stuff and the discussions around freelance. That was really nice because after that initial feeling of calm, I had quite a difficult time of it last year.'*

These networks, plus other sector specific, regional, and local online groups were able to foster a collaborative intersectional dialogue arguably not seen before in the industry. For many theatre freelancers consulted in our study, the growth of industry networks and advocacy groups is the main positive change caused by the pandemic.

Activism as Building Communities

For some who were reluctant to join the larger activist freelance networks, they decided instead to embed themselves in their communities, whether looking to the hyper-local, or thinking of intersectional communities they belong to in the industry. As one British-Iranian theatre maker argued, 'I've just joined a mentor scheme for British South-East and East-Asian artists, so … I think that's where my activism lies, it's building those communities.' Another working-class theatre maker and facilitator from Essex got involved with the Working Class Artist Group. For him, it just 'felt really accessible' where he felt 'you could feed in in a smaller way.' He said:

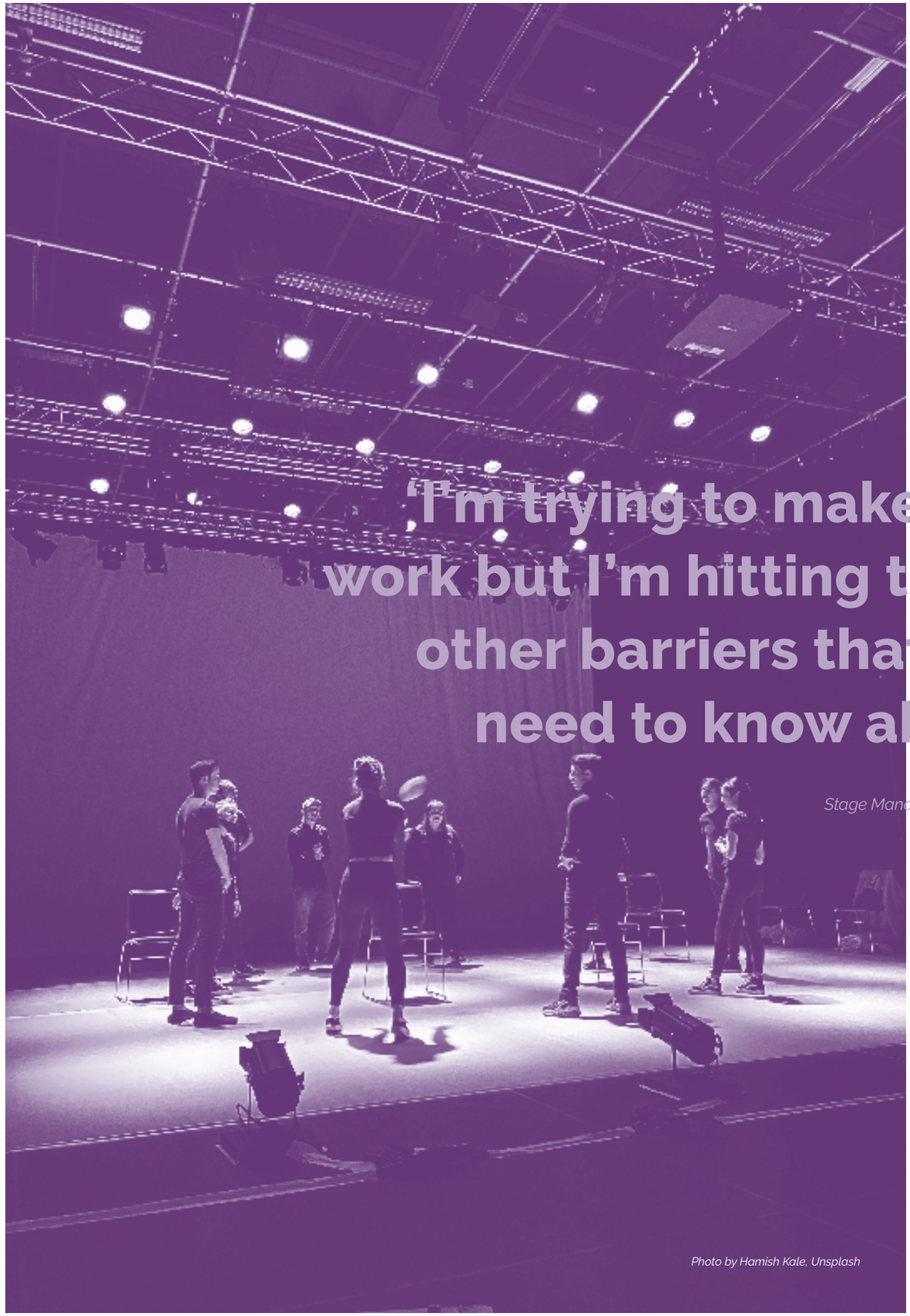
> *I think that's something I've really taken away from this is that actually, I'm not someone who thrives in this thing of having to react quite quickly. I much prefer, I think, to look at what people are saying, and yes, that might lead me to go, "yeah, this is what I feel, and I agree with this. This is what we need." I think sometimes, especially in the creative industry and the arts, there can feel like this pressure from, I think we probably put it on ourselves but it's that, I must be the one saying this stuff, I must be… It's like actually there's many ways to involved that don't mean you have to be the one who's like, quick with the thinking of what we're doing, you know?'*

The need to react slowly rather than quickly was seen as a barrier even within some of the larger activist networks. A British East Asian actor involved in one of the larger activist networks, described the challenge of accessibility when the pressure for quick reactions and strong opinions from within the activist platform made it harder for some of the participants. He argued:

> *We wanted to work at an incredibly fast pace. But how can you work at incredibly fast pace for people who don't have fast, very fast processing brains? My kind of resolution to that is that I would work at an incredibly fast pace, I would have to dedicate most of that time to doing stuff to supporting those people who couldn't work at a very fast pace because I think that's how you start to recognise your privilege and use it in a way that's beneficial.*

Others in this large activist network felt themselves being shut out of some of the discussions because of these very issues of hierarchy. As one working-class theatre maker from Scotland, involved in several of the large activist networks, and in conversations with the government, argued, it is hard, even with good intentions, to not have elitism within the industry impact the dynamic of what she called 'platform activism' which she felt made people from her background particularly struggle in large activist networks:

> *Some people who I have now witnessed talking about non-hierarchical structure, were the individuals trying to impose that hierarchical structure. Self-selected steering group. Um, I have a lot of questions, and I want to be open to everyone changing their mind, but there was a lot of harm done, through that … I think it relates to the working-class thing for me where I think, I think that is the elitism in the arts, the notion that there can be only one, and it's all a competition and that's what pushes working-class artists out.*



'I'm trying to make this work but I'm hitting these other barriers that you need to know about.'

Stage Manager, London, 2021

Photo by Hamish Kale, Unsplash

Photo by Darius Soodmand, Unsplash

Grassroots Activism

The large activist movements created a feeling of positive change for some of the freelancers we interviewed, as one Black British working-class theatre maker/community-based artist in London suggested: 'I was happy to see all of the activism going on, and all of the conversations going on, in a much rawer way than it'd ever happened before I feel, in my lifetime.' However, in contrast to these large-scale organisations, many of our interviewees mobilised smaller, or more localised, communities and set up their own activist networks outside of the larger industry-wide activist groups. One writer and PR worker created a petition early in the first lockdown:

> *I set up a petition originally, so that when [a London theatre festival] first shut down, it was before lockdown was announced, so it was that kind of week where the government were like, "don't go to the theatre, don't go to pubs" but weren't officially closing anything, which was awful, because everyone was panicking. We were like, we can't claim anything on insurance it's just really bad, a really stressful week. I set up a petition for government help for venues, which actually had a week of doing really well and collected about 6,000 signatures, which is amazing.*

Another actor and theatre director based in Norfolk who lost 80% of his year's income from Covid-19 cancellations, rallied a network to voice their concerns for freelancers excluded from government schemes in May 2020:

> *Back in May, because I got very impassioned about [freelancers rights]. All I was seeing at the time was people talking about saving London theatre, saving West End and I went, "What about everyone else who earns a living, what about freelancers?" I set up Creative Performance Protest which is a group of 17,000 members from the arts, across the UK. We've continuously campaigned the government and we're going live again on the 30th September with public and social media campaigns and a petition.*

Activism Hesitancy

Though there were many freelancers we spoke to who set up their own support networks and actively joined campaigns for a variety of issues within the industry, others felt hesitant to join the various types of activism occurring over the pandemic. Some found them too strident and the negative focus of the campaigns for the plight of freelancers was having a detrimental impact on their mental health. While others felt reluctant to join in out of feelings of fear due to their precarious position in the industry, feeling that such vocal activism might have negative consequences to their careers post-pandemic. A Black British working-class theatre maker/actor described:

> *I went to a couple of the freelancers Zooms, there were quite a few, weren't there? I went to a few of those, but I remember thinking, and I remember explicitly talking to another theatre person, I remember thinking, I'm not getting involved in this, I don't feel safe in this, this doesn't feel like this would work for me. If I've got issues and I had some issues, I will email those people directly, I will say, "I hope you're thinking about freelancers when you make this decision, I hope you've seen the stuff that's happening on Twitter at the moment. Can you let me know if you've been actioning the things that you promised a year ago?" I can do the one-to-one things with people I've got relationships with but I'm definitely not going to go on social media and call anyone out because I don't feel safe as a freelancer that I will have a job after that.*

For some, the pressure voiced by the dominant activist groups over Covid-19 made them feel left out of the industry due to the potential for activism to become a form of self-advertisement. As one queer working-class theatre maker argued:

> *I think I'm just a bit confused about how I feel about it all. I feel like there's a lot at the moment, like I can't keep up with it all. I feel like I have to have an opinion on everything. And I don't feel like I do. Like, I'm not a massively opinionated person. So it means that compared to the more opinionated people in the industry, who are brilliant and are there for a reason and are great activists.... I kind of just like to turn up, make something, and leave. Do you know what I mean? There's definitely activism within it. And I definitely like talking to people, like talking about stuff, but sometimes I just feel like, I just wish that I sometimes could be a bit quiet in the corner. But to get work at the moment, you kind of can't be that person. It's very conflicting.'*

Others found the stress on them over the pandemic made them want to look to personal care rather than activism. One theatre maker called the activism notifications onlin 'a dark hole downwards'. Another working-class artist who said she struggled with doubts about her ability to stay in the profession even before Covid, found the anger online hard for her to take and 'stay [emotionally] afloat in the industry'. Some felt the industry activism they saw online was dominated by White, middle-class voices. A working-class actor/writer described her feelings:

> *it all felt very White and very showy and just not quite who I am and what I'm about. It's just the representation of some of these theatre groups. There was that video that came out with all the dancers and they were like, 'Get Our Theatres Back', and there was literally not one person of colour. It's just showing, what, the West End is white? And that's it. It kind of just leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I'm a White person but I'm not seeing anything diverse, I'm not hearing any different voices than RP. It rubs me up the wrong way a little bit, you know?*

Photo by Abi Ismail, Unsplash

Some freelancers voiced their concern that the large activist networks like Freelance Task Force and Freelancers Make Theatre Work were 'not for them' because they didn't feel they were 'the right person' due to either feeling more grassroots or 'on the margins' of the sector. For many who opted out of the larger activist networks, they decided to think of activism more as a personal, or company-based act of change. A producer/artistic director from the North East of England described her company's type of activism as 'doing things differently'. She explained:

> *There are different ways of doing activism. One is the very public facing, like, this is us, this is our manifesto, and you're either with us or you're against us. This kind of dynamic. And I'm not judging, I'm not qualifying it at all... We really are making a conscious effort to do almost like a silent activism, by doing things differently to the mainstream even... I wasn't campaigning, like "Yeah, where are the Freelancers rights", whatever. Apart from maybe tweeting about it once or twice, or retweeting rather. What we did, because I'm not indifferent to it because that is me, that could be me, if I had a slightly more shit situation. So my response to that was, when the funding opportunity appeared, I made sure that in their funding bid I created two roles for freelancers who could be employed. So this is what I'm doing, as a producer for this arts organisation.*

Other independent theatre workers also found their form of activism in personal agency and the support of other freelancers. A theatre maker/actor in London described the move to create her own work, and support those around her, as her form of activism:

> *For me, the form that my activism, if you want to call it that, took was "no, I'm investing in me and in the artists around me". I'm going to stop forgoing this hope, this dream over here, hoping that one of these people up here above me will see me. I give up. I'm here. My feet are on the ground, this is where I'm at, and so are the people around me. And this is what we're doing, and that's it. I know so many theatre artists who have, in the same way, they've stopped waiting. They've started crowdfunding for their own projects, and they've started – I see a lot more proactivity from my fellow artists, which I find quite exciting.*

'There are different ways of doing activism.'

Producer/Artistic Director, North East of England

Photo by Kevin Grieve, Unsplash

Freelancers' Relationships with Organisations

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'[The] breakdown of trust, communication and understanding has significant implications in the rebuilding and recovery of theatre and theatre freelancers' lives as UK and global theatre reopens.'

Photo by Theatre in the Dark, Edinburgh Micro-Commission, 2021

Despite these many freelancer activist groups lobbying for a voice, we feel that it is important as part of this study to also consider the theatres' (both venues and organisations) points-of-view.
Noted in Section 2 and seen in some freelancer advocacy platforms, the relationship between organisations and freelancers became oppositional in terms of access to funding and notice by the government. This added to, or enhanced, pre-existing feelings of an 'Us vs Them' culture between theatre organisations and individuals. However, across our interviews, surveys, and focus groups, the relationships described were more complex, interdependent, and often interpersonal. As one executive producer put it, 'There is not one section of this ecology that isn't being impacted.'

Our data shows how the pandemic heightened the significance of these relationships with organisations for freelancers. It also revealed that the breakdown of trust pre-Covid was amplified in the first months of Covid-19 and highlighted a struggle to find common understanding in addressing the issues, as exemplified by this theatre director from the Northeast:

> *'At the moment, the culture about buildings is that no one trusts artistic directors anymore and that's what's happened over the last few decades.*

This breakdown of trust, communication and understanding has significant implications in the rebuilding and recovery of theatre and theatre freelancers' lives as UK and global theatre reopens.

Freelancers recognised organisations had been 'firefighting', dealing with show and tour cancellations, funding agreements in disarray, threats of mass redundancy, and potential insolvency.
Yet at the same time, there was widespread discontent. Leadership teams were accused of protecting themselves, forgetting about freelancers and sacrificing the zero hours and project staff (often also freelancers) early in the pandemic. This frustration extended to the perpetuation of longstanding issues of inequality, precarity, and poor working conditions discussed in Section 1 and a real fear that without change these would all become much worse.

While some of this frustration was focused on the precarity and uneven sharing of power between organisations and freelancers dimensions of other equality debates also came up in relation to gender, class, and in the case of this interviewee, race:

> *I think there needs to be a broad representation in these management positions, in the frontline positions, and not just only in the cleaning team, but across the board. Because that's when different voices will be able to influence the change that is needed to be made … it's not always needing to come from a Black voice. But it's important that different voices are around them tables and having that voice heard.*

The strength of feeling and collectivism fueled through the activist networks had mobilised many freelancers to speak up about problems, often in more vocal or public ways than before. Interviewees were keen to remind that '[T]he institutions and buildings are shells. They're nothing without the artists who work in there.'

Many of the organisation leads we interviewed recognised there had been a gap in communication in Spring 2020 as they struggled to understand what needed to happen. As one artistic director put it:

> *I can talk about the reasons why that was [that we hadn't talked to freelancers] because we were in this kind of moment of complete [exploding gesture]. We're just trying to figure out how we would survive.*

They recognised this had been an error, albeit one they felt was human, as they too had felt in the dark about restrictions and what was to come. They described looking after their 'family' of freelancers, (those with informal and contractual current and future commitments to their organisation), then turning their attention to 'organisation-adjacent' people and networks.

Only after this initial activity had they been able to look at their part in supporting a wider ecology. Many noted the 'hidden freelancers', technicians, designers, project managers, access officers, and others, who had been left out of early efforts to extend support.

'Freelancers and organisation leads described longstanding collaborations and interpersonal relationships.'

A feature of the interviews was the crossover of freelancers and those in salaried roles. The nature of the work meant many freelancers and organisation leads described longstanding collaborations and interpersonal relationships. Many of the interviewees had been freelancers before going into an organisation (and vice versa) or they continued to combine the two. Such 'hybrid' working had hit many freelancers with a 'double-whammy' – loss of two incomes or exclusion from multiple support schemes – but it also made the responses more complex. Some 'hybrid' organisation leads described their own dissonance, feeling they understood what was happening to freelancers but were not always able to respond as demanded in their company role. They recognised why some of the freelance campaigns had been so aggressively anti-organisation or anti-management but also felt this denied the skillsets and people inside companies and venues.

This period during 2020 and 2021 was not, in their view, the time or the place to speak about their own stress, workload or their hurt at some of the accusations. As one artistic director and former freelancer put it:

> *You know freelancers make theatre work? Well so did we. Or we thought we did and we thought we were doing this together.*

They felt pigeon-holed by the 'Us vs Them' styling of rescue packages. As one executive director said, 'Trickle-down isn't the panacea they'd [the government] hoped it would be.' They also felt aggrieved at being styled by government as well as some theatre-led campaigns and freelancer networks as 'closed for business' when in reality, they had been working on skeleton teams repeatedly replanning what might be viable, renegotiating funding or financing, ensuring policy compliance, trying to be part of sector debates, and at the same time identifying what support they could offer and what was needed.

Freelancers were one, but not the only constituency they had to deal with; as one Artistic Director explained: 'We have a responsibility to our audiences, as much as to our artists'. More generally, many had become alert during 2020 to a wider social and community agenda that had fundamentally changed their understanding of who they served and how this affected or reflected back their purpose as both creative and civic organisations. Alongside rethinking how they engaged with freelancers on a range of levels (contracts, working conditions, and protections, board membership, decision-making, and programming were all mentioned), they described re-structuring capital development plans, merging artistic and community/ research programmes, engaging with other civic bodies and local authorities. It is clear that production companies without buildings had been able to adapt more quickly but were also often too small scale to effect the more widespread change being sought. Those in buildings often commanded a more visible presence and potential impact but their response was slowed by greater demands on their resource and more complex management and governance structures.

Photo by Nina Dunn, Dark Theatre Project, 2020

Covid-19 and the first lockdown ruptured an already unstable trust between organisations and freelancers. Yet many believed at least until June 2020 that this was a temporary disruption and issues would be resolved. Over the life of this project, the constant uncertainty and extended restrictions and lockdowns meant organisations and freelancers were continually experiencing new levels of existential crisis even into Winter 2021 as they repeatedly found themselves unable to work or making plans only to have them cancelled. There was evidence of intense fatigue as they tried to handle the short-term emergency concerns and the bigger long-term issues of system change at the same time. In relation to these longer-term systemic issues and grappling with change, we highlight the misunderstanding and miscommunication that poses a real threat for the recovery of theatre and theatre freelancers.

‘It was really difficult to be just getting this repeated narrative of, everything you do and the way in which you do it is terrible’

From our data, the rupture of trust around the first lockdown set the tone for how future change was discussed. While we particularly spoke to organisations that had been named as supportive by freelancers or had supported one of the networks, these organisations recognised that stepping up in this way had not been a uniform response across the industry. They expressed surprise at how many organisations had done very little to support freelancers or noted there had been a big disparity between outwardly visible and invisible labour with a certain amount of ‘virtue signalling’ by some venues. Still the organisations we interviewed often felt anonymised in the wider ‘system’ complaints which erased where good practice might have been happening. This, however, was not something they felt they could raise as this artistic director described:

> *that was difficult to take, and it was difficult in a moment where it felt like we were really fighting for our lives. It was really difficult to be just getting this repeated narrative of, of “everything you do and the way in which you do it is terrible” and, “we need to press the reset button”. And that feeling of “I thought some of what we did was all right, and can we please not throw the baby out with the bathwater?” … we couldn’t call people on some of the stuff. You know, there were some things being said where you wanted to go, “no, hold on a minute” and it absolutely wasn’t a time or a place where it was possible to really actually have a proper conversation, because we were evil and freelancers were good. And any kind of defense of how we might work or had been working was only further proof of how evil we were.*

While feeling in the firing line, all the organisations we interviewed for this project recognised the issues raised such as the persistent inequalities, the structural problems and poor working conditions, the challenges of returning to work for everyone in a sustainable, inclusive, and safe way. Many we spoke to described putting in place internal systems to buddy staff with freelancers, change staffing structures to incorporate more people in associate roles, establish codes of conduct and establish open door and open call/hire policies to make themselves more porous and transparent.

A dominant feeling that came through the interviews with organisations was that discussions were often one-sided, with the problems established in blogs or meeting notes with little done to arrive at solutions, or some of the activist networks proposing unrealistic and contradictory solutions. As one executive director put it:

> *[There is] the question of how we give away power. If you give away power overnight, you’re heading for trouble. Right? Give away all your power overnight, there’ll be chaos.*

Some freelancers we interviewed expressed how they wanted to be part of company decisions but also did not want to be employees. While our organisational interviewees felt some of the demands of freelance activists over being involved in organisation decision making showed a lack of understanding of company structures and compliances. Freelancers wanted budgets to be re-drawn but often without really knowing what the costs were, or without wanting to discuss the other demands from funders, local authorities, and others. At the same time, freelancers were often frustrated by what seemed to be a lack of understanding from the organisations of the challenges of being a freelancer in the industry. Organisational leads and freelancers both described a mutual lack of understanding of what all these different roles, salaried and freelance, did in the shared experience of making theatre and theatre projects. This was such that, too often, discussions became a dispute between employees and freelancers, rather than a shared conversation about how the roles should operate together.

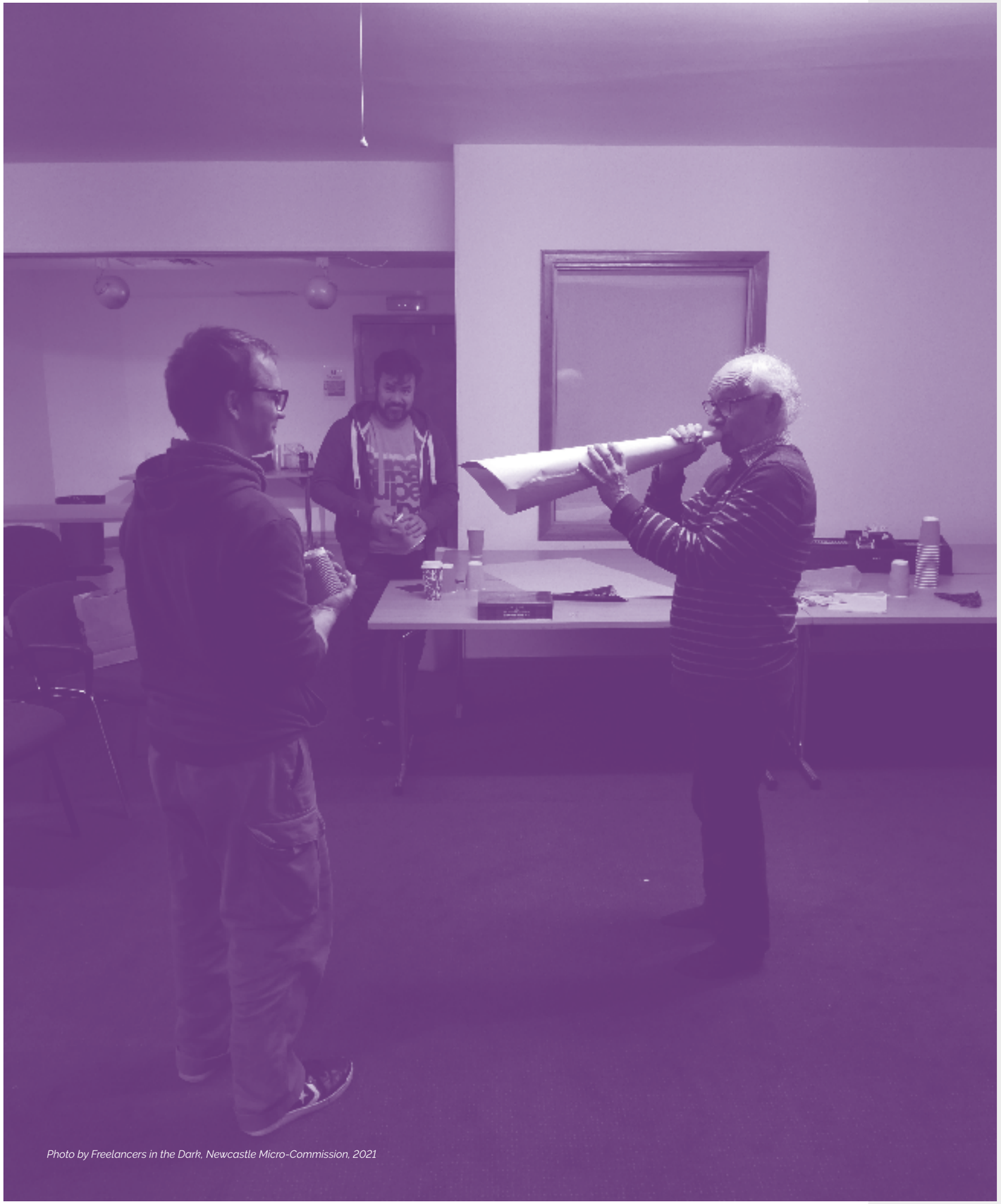

Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, Newcastle Micro-Commission, 2021

A final issue that fuelled miscommunication and misunderstanding was the transitory nature of many of the activist groups speaking for freelancers. Many freelancers involved in different movements across the UK had stepped back after the initial Freelance Task Force mobilisation or reporting. Some who had been part of sectoral campaigns stepped away as they felt they were too dominated by organisational interests. Many networks were spontaneous, intuitively informed by freelance experience, organic and at times hard to follow or communicate with. Some splintered shortly after forming or diverged to become more focused on one part of the sector or a region not least because of the heterogeneity of the sector and the lack of a common context. Many of the freelancers or spontaneous groups also felt that once they had made a contribution such as a meeting, a blog series, or a letter, they had nothing further to offer or had been emotionally exhausted by the experience. Exceptions to this included Cultural Freelancers Wales and Wales Culture Alliance and some of the existing groups which had become more robust. Yet many informal networks simply petered out, or membership changed, or they never produced an agreed way forward that could be actioned. Where this affected regulatory systems or pay and working conditions, this left organisations with the challenge of who they would negotiate with and who 'represented' freelancers. As many of the Covid-19 response movements had sprung up parallel to official associations and trade unions, this raised questions about mandates, collective bargaining, or how to enforce codes of conduct.

While there were legitimate reasons for freelancers to step away from representation groups and activist movements, not least limiting the emotional and often voluntary labour they, and other freelancers, undertook in these movements, it also created an impasse. The work they had generated was not sufficiently picked up or passed on to formalise and collectivise material and systemic change. Therefore, while the networks were among the most positive experiences of the pandemic for freelancers, their potential remained under-realised by Spring 2022.

Fears For the Future

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Our initial interview data and survey suggested that those freelancers who had been contacted by, or offered emotional/ moral support from, both other freelancers and organisations felt more positive about the future. We signaled in July 2021 that, from our initial data, despite the grim state of freelancers' lives, many expressed hope for a reset and more inclusive future.
Many distinguished between their own personal hopes and aspirations and a wider sectoral hope. As we moved to complete our data collection in focus groups and organisation interviews during Summer to Autumn 2021, we saw these expressions of hope change.

Our interviews with organisation representatives conducted between June and August 2021 indicated what they believed was coming in terms of their own organisational as well as industry direction. Many had hopes that they, as organisations, were preparing for new approaches, a fairer, more inclusive organisation with a more civic agenda. Many were positive about how digital hybridity, new approaches to artistic programming (indoor, outdoor) and new alignments of their community-oriented and 'mainstage' work would be more adaptive and inclusive. Many felt more 'pandemic-proof' than previously. However, they felt extremely pessimistic about the post-pandemic economy. Most predicted that change and widening access (for all) would be limited by future austerity budgets as the UK and devolved governments began to pay off the debts accumulated.

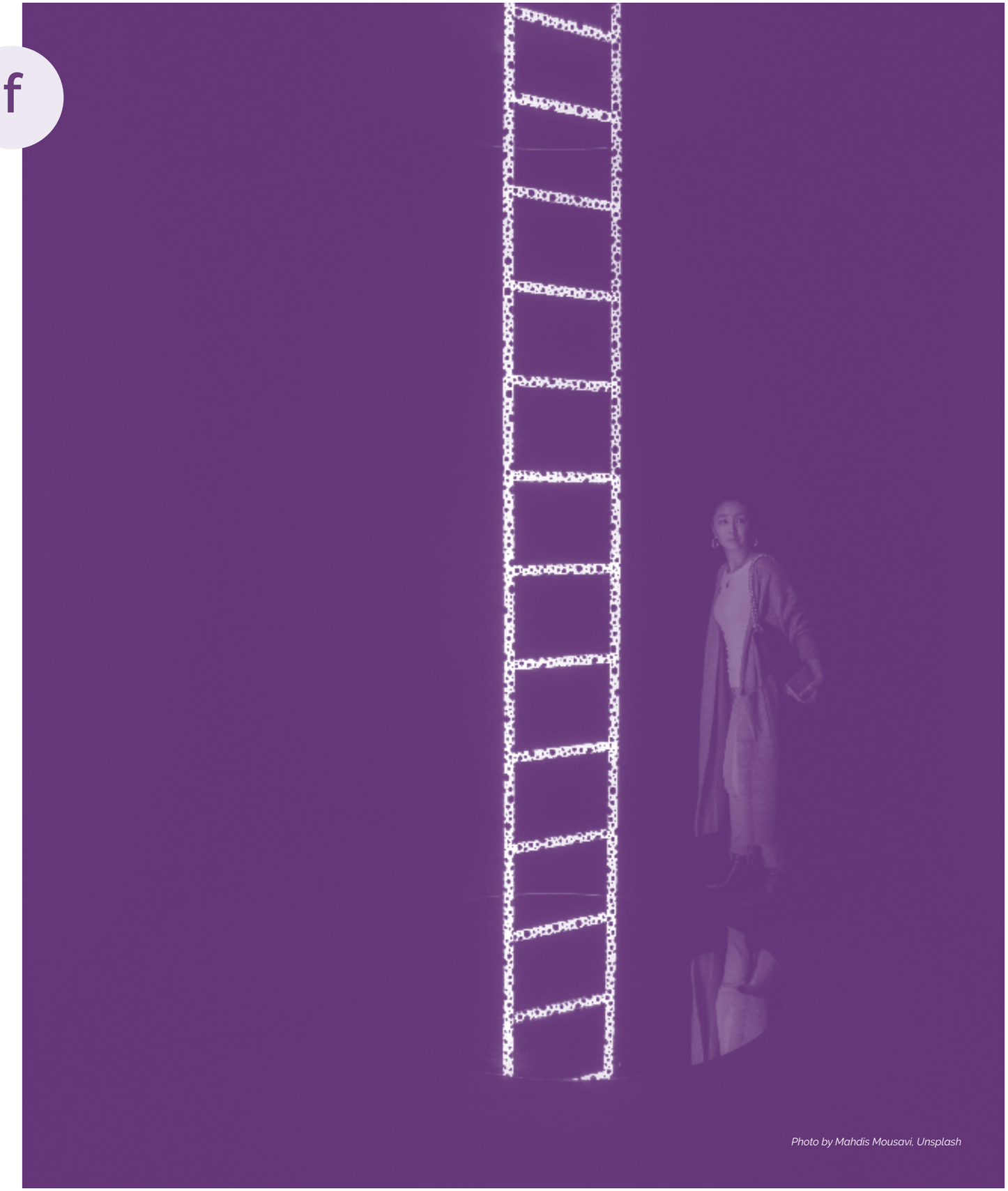

Photo by Mahdis Mousavi, Unsplash

Our interviews continued to explore the important theme of how individuals were feeling about their futures in the industry. Despite narratives of 'droves of individuals leaving the industry for other jobs', this was not reflected in our interviews. Where some were considering shifting away from the industry entirely, this was due to reflections on the fundamental concerns within the industry as a whole, including precarious and devalued work, rather than being an outcome of the pandemic alone. Others had paused in their careers or taken on different jobs during the pandemic due to necessity, but were still continuing to plan for their return when able to.

There was often a cautious optimism that things would change within the industry. As one Scottish theatre maker described, the pause of the pandemic might help freelancers advocate for better, and more sustainable, working conditions as theatres reopen:

> *I'm hoping that there'll be a change, it wasn't pre-pandemic, but I'm hoping post-pandemic we'll really get to grips with our working practices. I'd spend forever before the pandemic just being like, 'I'd like to work a 4 day week'. I don't know why I need to work a six day week unless it's a tech week. It's … not wanting to put a shift in, but getting to grips with the fact that if we're rested, we will work better.*

The collective moment of reflection, freelancer activism, and broader activism during this period, meant there was a great deal of discussion and reflection around not only worker conditions, but inclusion, access, and what needed to change in the industry. A designer and Equity representative in Northern Ireland suggested:

> *there's lots of opportunity for us to go: "right what worked during that time where things were difficult? And what was wrong before Covid that we can take this opportunity to improve?" So there's lots of positives about it as well as all the negatives.*

Again, the pause had been a moment for reflection for many (if not all), and a cautious optimism was expressed about the potential for change. A Black British choreographer and movement director argued for the continued need for both change and industry-wide scrutiny after Covid:

> *What are we going back to? And because what was there, we all just did it…that's how it is. But the opportunity that this pandemic has offered us, and everything that's happened within the pandemic; the reflection. The people speaking their truth about certain things, you know, it makes us realise that, Okay, it wasn't perfect. And how can we? Are we going to rebuild? What [are] we're going to change?'*

At the same time, the crisis of the pandemic also meant that there was a degree of apprehension around the industry reverting to how it was before, without any changes. As one director/choreographer from South West articulated the problem: 'I'm nervous that, because it's sort of happened with our economy anyway, that shows that as soon as we hit go we revert back to our old patterns'. In particular, the expected financial pressure will push theatre producers and companies to focus on what is seen as more profitable areas of theatre at the expense of diversity and risk-taking.

A Welsh working-class theatre maker voiced her anxiety about the future limiting opportunities for under-represented groups in the industry:

> *I worry that the priority will be opening up and making some money, and then we'll get to all the inclusion stuff, and I just can't, I don't think I have the heart to watch that happen again.*

This was a concern amongst many of our freelance interviewees from marginalised communities in the creative sector. A disabled theatre maker from Manchester argued:

> *I think there is a very real danger that coming back from this, we're going to see a lot of very White heteronormative ableist work going through because it's an easy sell. And I think, and I don't have a great deal of faith in a lot of big companies to challenge that. I hope I get proved wrong.*

The continuous debates relating to the status of and responsibilities towards freelancer theatre workers over the pandemic made some freelancers hopeful that their position will have more importance to the theatre organisations they work for because, many argued, the self-employed within the sector are more diverse than the workforce of the organisations.

Photo by Kyle Head, Unsplash

A Move for Change

As we look beyond Covid-19, we, and the industry, are asking how we might learn from the pandemic and make meaningful change?

Changes in working culture and cultural norms are difficult and it should be admitted that this will be a lengthy and ongoing process. Freelancers from under-represented backgrounds highlighted that while the industry may think it knows how to be more diverse and inclusive, less progress has been made than some may have thought. Our research participants argue that fundamental changes need to be made, not solely to what is seen onstage, but to organisational structures and decision-making, rehearsal rooms, and backstage spaces.

Ongoing lack of evidence of governmental support for freelancers, lack of change as theatres reopened in some parts of the UK, and new stages of lockdown and restrictions, all eroded freelancers' hopes for future change within the industry. By the end of Summer 2021, talk of a great #Reset had diminished. In focus groups, tones around inclusion signaled that Covid-19 would not be the great leveler of past discriminations and individual freelancers articulated their return to work as defined by the same systems as before – competitive, precarious, and often unsafe.

However, as a freelance theatre director and one of the founders of Migrants in Theatre argues: 'change is not linear'. They explain: 'I think a lot of brains have been steered, and if you know, if 10% of that sticks, it is already 10% that we didn't have before.' The conversations continuing from such movements as Freelancers Make Theatre Work and within organisations and networks are continuing, if not as radically as hoped for.

4

Conclusions and Future Recommendations

Photo by Ron Smith, Unsplash

Conclusions

Our research into the experiences of freelance theatre workers over the previous 20 months has revealed diverse insights into the current state of the UK's theatre sector as we continue to deal with the unprecedented ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic.
We contend that the impact of Covid-19 on the theatre industry in the UK has been widely understated in public discourse due to an ongoing devaluation of the live arts that began long before the start of the pandemic. The UK Government's response to the pandemic failed to recognise how live theatre operates and in many ways ignored, or took for granted, the ways in which theatre and live arts make contributions to society and economy.

Theatre and its freelancers were significantly adversely affected by elements of government policy which excluded many of the self employed from the provisions of Covid-19 rescue/recovery support for UK workers and businesses. Furthermore, the absence of national and devolved alignment of government policies towards Covid-19 public health guidelines, lockdowns, and funding support heightened communication issues within the industry. The sustained uncertainty throughout Covid lasted longer for theatre freelancers, the live entertainment, and leisure sectors than most other industries. This has had a long lasting impact on freelance theatre workers and their ability to trust government and organisational support.

From our interviews, focus groups, creative workshops, and survey data, pre-existing precarities and inequalities were highlighted during Covid-19, illustrating concerns over working conditions, inequity, and lack of equal access amongst workers. Poor communication between freelancers, public bodies, and organisations further exascerbated the precarity of support networks within an industry that relies heavily on a freelance workforce.

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'The impact of Covid-19 on the theatre industry in the UK has been widely understated in public discourse due to an ongoing devaluation of the live arts that began long before the start of the pandemic.'

Photo by Freelancers in the Dark, London Micro-Commission, 2021

Over the pandemic, wide-ranging activism and advocacy for better support for freelancers was seen as a positive outcome of the pandemic. We have found that early in the pandemic there was hope amongst theatre freelancers that the disruption of work in the theatre industry would create a catalyst for change. However, the continuing waves of outbreaks from new variants and long-term instability to the performing arts sector made these early moves to change less appealing to an industry which will take years of financial, cultural, and institutional recovery. The 'great reset' is now seen as a failed possibility and there is fear amongst freelancers that inequities in the industry will deepen over time.

Fears of a 'Return to Normal'

As the pandemic in the UK evolved and shifted through different stages, so did the fears and anxieties of the freelancers we spoke to. Reflecting on the first national lockdown between March and Summer 2020, the respondents to our survey revealed feelings of 'worry' and 'fear' about the future of the industry and their role in it. Our qualitative data about this period demonstrated that while there was hope for a future 'Reset' (as above), 72.4% of participants in our survey felt more or much more pessimistic about their future as theatre freelancers. These anxieties about the future of the industry and their own careers were exacerbated by the uncertainty surrounding the re-opening of buildings, delays, and gaps in government support, as well as a perceived lack of dialogue between theatre organisations and the freelancers they employed. In addition, many artists also voiced fear about how the extra burden of childcare would impact on their career as the pandemic forced schools to close and required parents and carers to take on extra responsibilities at home.

Ongoing uncertainty in the sector has also challenged our research participants' resilience and caused further fears and anxieties about their professions. An actor in our London Creative Micro-Commission in October 2021 described this succinctly: 'the situation feels malleable. Things are changing but they don't feel linear anymore'. This has continued into 2022, as the rise of the Omicron caused the cancellation of a number of high profile West End productions, the VAULT Festival in London, and a range of productions across the UK.

The lack of perceived value of the arts over Covid, by both the government and the general public, has had a profound impact on freelance theatre workers who struggle with work-based precarity. The need to lobby for the importance of the arts to the UK, both economically and through societal benefits, is seen as essential to help bridge the gap of perceived value of the arts on society.

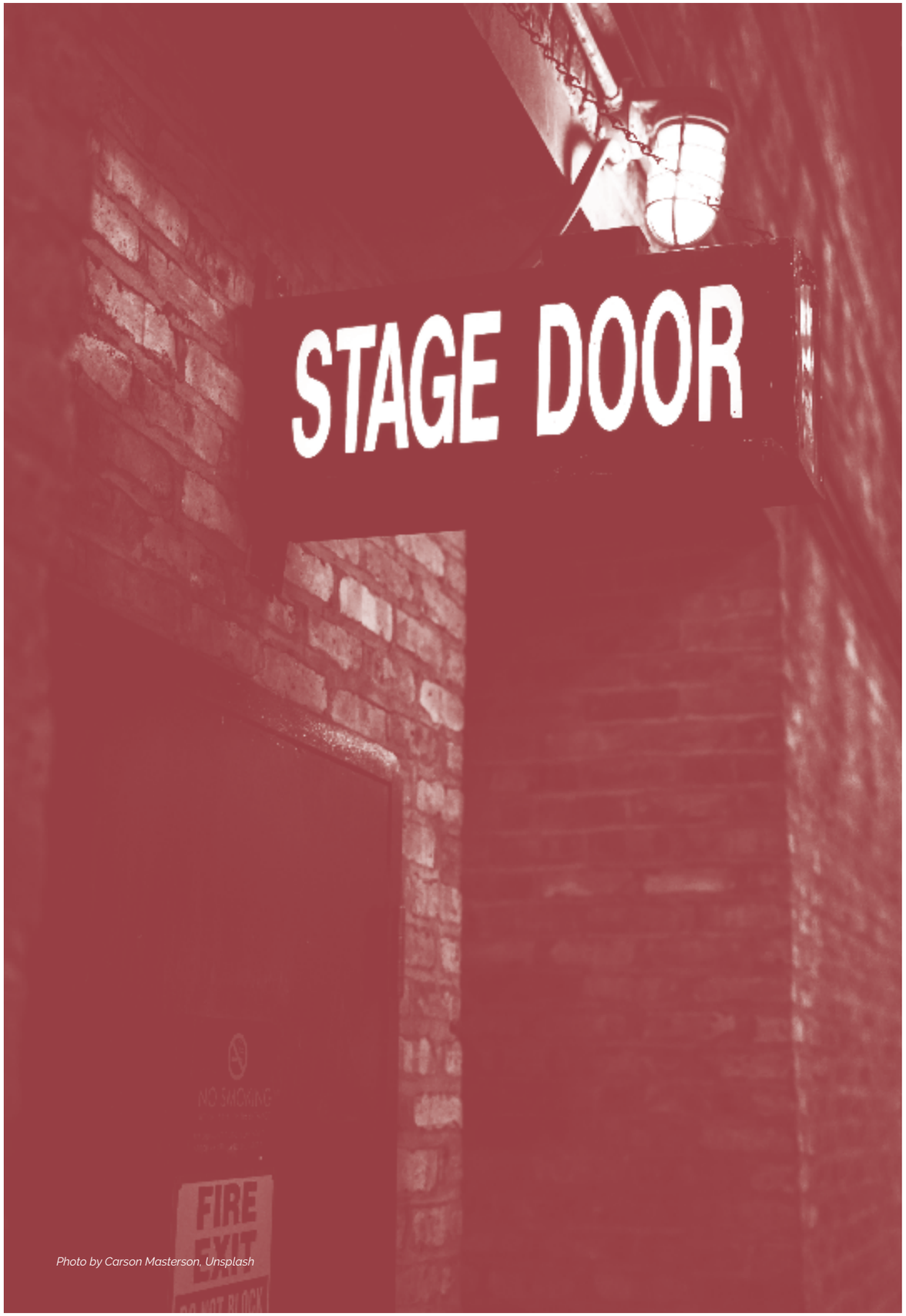
Photo by Yiran Ding, Unsplash

Feelings of abandonment from both organisations and political/public sector spheres led many freelancers to acquire new skills during the initial stage of the pandemic, which they hoped would diversify and expand their theatre practice. However, there was also a degree of concern that the wider theatre industry would return to previous pre-pandemic patterns and forms of working. There were fears that changes to the industry implemented during the pandemic would be lost or not brought about at all, which would have an impact on experimental practice and new ways of working.

Moreover, more needs to be done to highlight the benefits of the UK's creative industries on the wider population's wellbeing and mental health by providing entertainment and engagement during the national lockdowns and beyond. Our freelancer participants have also pointed out the value of live theatre and creativity in society in their responses, including one interviewee who summarised that the arts could not simply be seen as a disposable commodity. The benefits brought by theatre and performance to a communal sense of wellbeing and identity in the UK is therefore vital in understanding the role of freelancers in the theatre industry. The UK theatre sector relies on a workforce that is 88% self-employed or freelance, rendering the benefits of the artform and industry in the public and social spheres as reliant on a healthy and thriving freelance workforce.

Photo by Alex Av, Unsplash

Covid-19 did not happen in total isolation. Factors affecting the future of freelance theatre workers pre-Covid have continued to develop. Increasing environmental concerns, regional disparities and the urban/rural divide, the prospect of recession/rising inflation remain challenges to a sustainable future for this group (and the theatre sector as
a whole). Additionally, the ongoing challenges of negotiating and renegotiating the complex impacts of the UK's exit from the European Union have persisted and continue. While this significantly affects those reliant on international touring/hosting (including UK-based festivals and venues), it has more widely affected the viability of theatre due to rising costs of goods and services, and the availability of talent.



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Key recommendations

b

There is an urgent need to continue to work towards change in the industry, challenging sector norms. There was a feeling from our research participants that the UK theatre industry was not only unprepared for a crisis of this magnitude but had been building up practices of precarity over several decades, caused by funding cuts, an over-dependence on a freelance workforce, and accepted practices of precarious working conditions. There is an urgent need for the sector, both freelancers and organisations, to put into place safeguards against future crises impacting the theatre industry by building up a margin of crisis management.

This does not suggest freelancers need to 'become' employees to be protected but that the protections and regulations afforded to workers need to be supplied to freelancers. This has wider implications for the regulation and protection of workforces, and approaches to taxation and social welfare.

We suggest the following recommendations...

Lobbying and Government Support

There was a feeling amongst many of our research participants that the UK theatre industry needed more strategic, and better, lobbying power in relation to different parts of government and the public sector. The cultural sector was not being seen as having enough value (before or during Covid-19) within Government for its level of economic and cultural benefits to the nation.

The pandemic highlighted the real problems of freelancers being seen or treated as workers. In any plans to '#BuildBackBetter' not just for theatre freelancers but all freelancers, there should be greater scrutiny of the 'PAYE as default' culture at odds with contemporary working practices. This has implications for freelancers' rights, entitlements, and benefits as workers.

The nature of social welfare assessments, minimum terms agreements negotiated by trade unions, as well as clear and strategic plans within the industry for future disruptions and crises all need to be priorities of post-pandemic recovery policies and practices within the arts and cultural sector and wider creative industries.

Key successes would appear to be where freelancers became part of local, regional, and national recovery. However, there is a problem with the informality of networks, and a misalignment with industry/trade union representation, that leaves gaps in these 'solution-finding' strategies.

There is urgent need for more clear communication between organisations, trade unions, public bodies, and the government to safeguard the industry from any future crises.

Communication

The opening of virtual spaces for dialogue, communication, and sharing over Covid were seen as essential to many members of the industry, both freelancers and those in organisations. Freelancers felt they needed to 'fight' for a place to communicate with others. It is urgent that cultural institutions, organisations, and grassroots networks continue to provide virtual, and in person, centres allowing theatre workers to 'make contact with and communicate with other artists'. It is essential that such spaces continue beyond the pandemic, particularly to support mental health and career development, and to facilitate industry dialogue.

The support networks among freelancers built up over the pandemic were seen as especially positive by many of our research participants. There is a fear that these spaces for networking, communication, mentoring, and support will be lost as the industry opens up post-pandemic. The competitive nature of an industry with too little resources has been seen over the pandemic as detrimental for a robust and resilient workforce. Greater attention is needed to the ways these networks can be supported in the future to represent the array of instersectional and localised interests among freelance and other theatre workers.

Our survey data and interviews highlight the significance of relationships with both fellow freelancers and organisations in encouraging freelancers' feelings of optimism towards their future work. It is troubling then that there also appears to have been a significant breach of trust, communication, and understanding between organisations and freelancers very early in the pandemic, made greater by a series of public policies around pandemic support and recovery. This has made it difficult not only to collaborate on solutions, but to engage in the dialogues needed for recovery and change. A key recommendation going forward is to consider how this breakdown can be rebuilt so that many of the changes we highlight can be delivered.

Dialogue between organisations and freelance theatre workers is seen as especially important as we continue as an industry beyond Covid. Being able to have honest discussions about what is working, and what could be done differently, was perceived by many of our research participants as a positive movement within the pandemic, and it is essential to keep those communication channels open post-Covid.

Industry Support and Funding

Freelancers were unfairly affected by the inadequacy of general Covid support schemes. This made their relationship to discrete and specialist arts public funding schemes more significant. While no one would wish to work at the accelerated and improvised pace of 2020, Covid-19 highlighted how certain processes such as public funding systems could be simplified and streamlined. It also highlighted how obscure these processes were to those unfamiliar with them already. This has significant implications for future public distribution of grant aid and enterprise investment, but perhaps of equal or greater importance, it shows how 'habit' and bureaucracy are part of systemic exclusion.

The 'trickle-down' approach of cultural recovery funds and some of the resulting efforts by cultural organisations to help freelancers added to the volume of unpaid labour and raised questions about the efficiency and fairness of micro-commissioning/micro-financing. This placed particular disadvantages on key occupations and also on marginalised groups, those with less familiarity of application systems.

Our participants felt that the pre-existing funding streams create inequality in the industry. There is a growing need to make funding application platforms easier and less labour intensive. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for platforms providing peer-on-peer support and mentorship for how to write a funding application which would allow for more diversity in the types of work being awarded arts funding.

'Freelancers welcomed the move in response to Covid-19 towards creative development and open artist funding … for creative development grants and open artist funding.'

Photo by Mercey Eric, Unsplash

That said, some of the approach to funds distribution via delivery partners could represent new models of partnership and pooling of resources. Freelancers welcomed the move in response to Covid-19 towards creative development and open artist funding from the Arts Councils and Creative Scotland, (as well as other funders such as Jerwood Arts). This was seen as incredibly beneficial to creating work and supporting artists and other freelancers' because it moved funding away from being project-based, to being individual based. In doing so, it provided theatre workers with greater flexibility on what they could use the funding for and the ability to use it over a prolonged period of time. Notwithstanding the labour concerns, micro-commissions for small project pots by theatre buildings and arts organisations were also seen as positive by our participants. These new funding models allow for more growing relationships between freelancers and organisations and small commissions, more access to open and development funds without the need for laborious funding applications.

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Mental Health and Well Being

Covid-19 has created a widespread mental health crisis across all areas of society. Feelings of a lack of value and the exclusion from many supports had been disheartening and damaged the mental health of theatre freelancers. It is urgent that the theatre industry takes this time to address underlying conditions within the industry that impact the mental health of freelancers within the sector and safeguard theatre workers' wellbeing. In our datasets, freelancers reflected that one of the positive aspects of Covid-19 was that it allowed for more open conversations about mental health within the industry. It is urgent that the industry address concerns over mental health amongst theatre workers as a continuing practice beyond the pandemic.

There is a need to take away the stigma of mental health in the theatre industry and allow for safe spaces of open dialogue over mental health and wellbeing in arts organisations. The fear of being labelled as 'a problem', being stigmatised, and therefore unemployable, made many of our participants reluctant to seek out pre-existing help available within arts organisations pre-pandemic. Freelancers also felt that organisations should have in place independent mental health first aiders and other safe and independent points of contact for mental health support should be put in place through organisations, trade unions, and networks.

Working Conditions

Clear pay-scales and regulations on working hours, sick, holiday, and overtime pay are essential to safeguard better working conditions within the industry; both creating a more resilient workforce and safeguard freelancers' wellbeing.

Many of our participants spoke of job requirements and pay changing at the interview stage, leaving freelancers pressured to accept unfair working conditions and pay. There is urgent need for more transparency of job postings and regulations of pay within the sector. Alongside that, advertised jobs with clear duty requirements and payscales need to be adhered to.

There is also need for more flexible working conditions and contracts to accommodate theatre workers access needs. Some of our participants recommended a clear practice in the industry for access accommodations within contracts. allowing for flexible hours and guidelines to accommodate the needs of freelance theatre workers with disabilities and/or parenting/caring responsibilities.

Access and Inclusion

There is urgent need of more funding for the arts in schools. For many working-class theatre workers, experiences of arts education were beneficial, not just as entries into the profession, but to support their mental health, academic achievements, socialisation, and wellbeing. The funding cuts to arts education will have a profoundly negative impact on these communities.

Furthermore, the benefits of the arts go beyond economic value, and it is urgent that the cultural sector increase pressure on the government to restore the arts in schools at all levels of education.

There is need for not only more access support for BSL and ISL and live captioning in theatre venues but access officers in our study emphasised that they need to be integrated in the culture of institutions and arts organisations. For true accessibility, access workers need to be integrated into arts organisations, and not seen as separate from the artistic work produced on stage.

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Photo by Qim Manifester, Unsplash

Diversity

There is an urgent need for more diversity throughout organisations and cultural institutions. There is a sense amongst many of our research participants that diversity should follow the 'aesthetics of access' guidelines, 'the ways in which accessibility concerns are not simply last-minute add-ons but actually influence and shape the work in wonderful, unexpected ways' (***Disability Arts International, 2017***). Greater diversity is needed across all technical, artistic, management, and backstage roles to ensure the workforce is adequately represented and inclusive.

Need forr more diverse representation in leadership positions in the industry is essential to foster meaningful inclusion in working spaces in terms of working and behavioural styles. There is a feeling amongst many of our respondents coming from marginalised groups that arts organisations and companies want diversity expressed on the stage but not in the rehearsal room, which stays clearly following British White middle-class norms of behaviour and social etiquette. More diversity within an organisation would help combat this problem.

Cultural Innovation

The advances in digital and hybrid theatre, online streaming platforms, and new forms of audio dramaturgy during the pandemic, demonstrates the need for a more inventive and flexible approach to how theatre can be made. In doing so, buildings and theatre organisations will, hopefully, not only push the boundaries of innovative artistic practice, but also provide potential opportunities to establish new audiences but also encourage the creation of new theatre publics.

There is also an urgent need for organisations to recognise the need for their work to be accessible to new audiences and artists, helping to secure a stable and sustainable future for the UK theatre industry as we continue to emerge from the pandemic.

The move towards staging performance in unconventional spaces and open-air performances outside of large urban areas has allowed for more direct engagement with local communities and provided opportunities for engaging new audiences. It is crucial this is taken into consideration and not overlooked in a post-pandemic theatre ecology.

In addition, 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.

Flexible opportunities for freelancers to explore new projects and diversify their practice through creative development grants, open artist funding, and creative micro-commissions can provide theatre workers with greater flexibility and allows for a more inclusive relationships between artists and organisations.

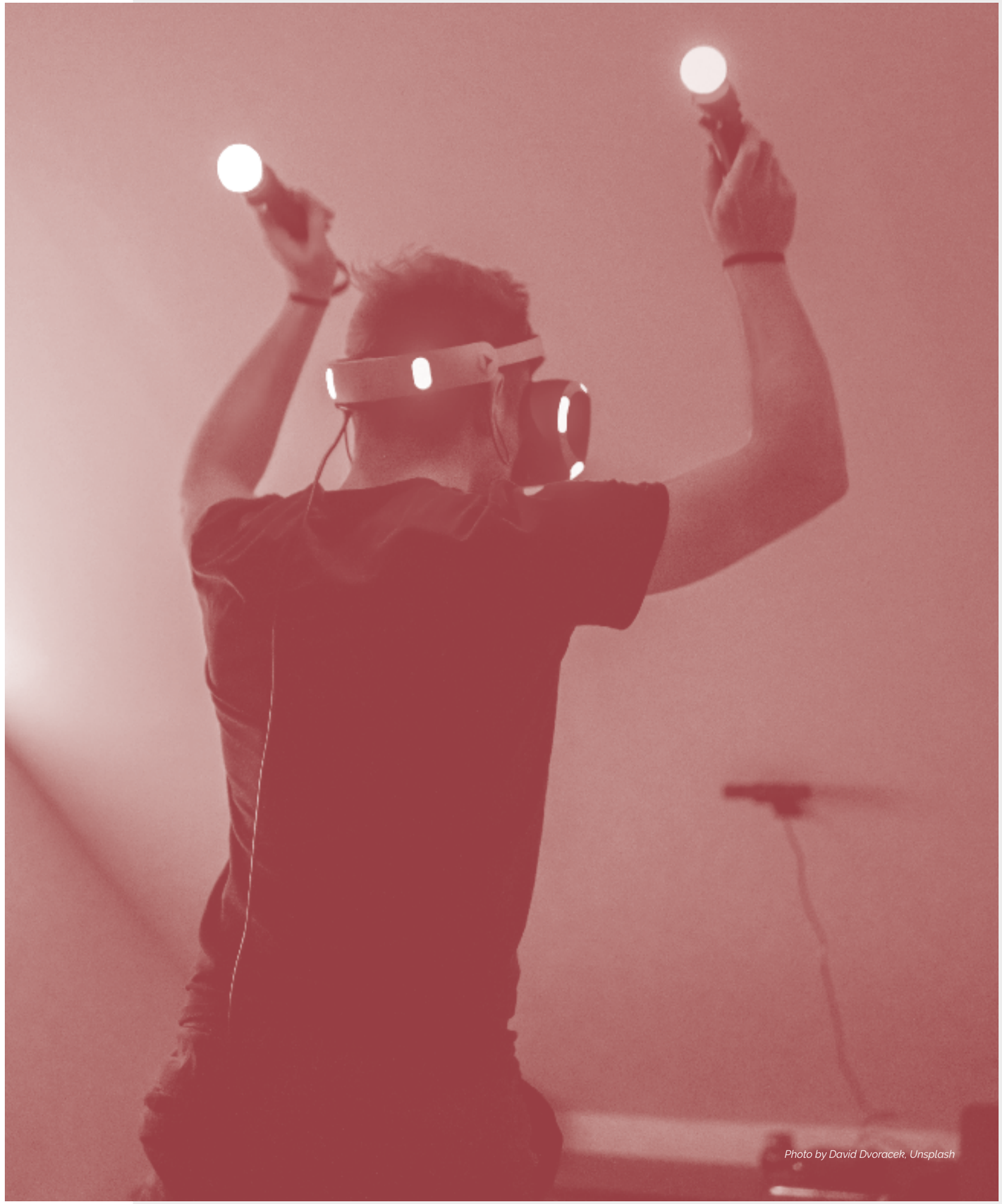

Photo by David Dvoracek, Unsplash

Appendices

Photo by Muhammed Nishal, Unsplash

Appendix A

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Appendix B

Micro-Commission Performances

How Much Am I Worth?, created and performed by Lilly Driscoll, Nadia Papachronopoulou, Mae Munuo, and Chris Woodley, Theatre Deli, London, October 2021.

Who Am I?, created and performed by Harry Harrington, Safiyya Ingar, Cat Robey, and Julie Tsang, Theatre Deli, London, October 2021.

I Forgot to Say Fuck Off, created and performed by Suzy Bennett, Philippa Gunning, Laura Horton, and Phoebe Rhodes, University of Plymouth, October 2021.

Wholesome Lockdown Gardening, created and performed by Oliver Hudson Wood, Amber Jarvis, Jaime Lock, and Sam Nancarrow, University of Plymouth, October 2021.

You're on Mute, created and performed by Amber Gollay, Sebastian H-W, Amy Sandford, Balraj Singh Somal, Crescent Theatre, Birmingham, October 2021.

What's Next?, created and performed by Selwin Hulme-Teague, Ciara Lane, Ruth Mestel, Rachel Sambrooks, Crescent Theatre, Birmingham, October 2021.

A Duty to Perform, created and performed by James Beagon, Lily Forsyth, Sophie Harris, and Mark Kydd, Out of the Blue, Edinburgh, October 2021.

The Museum of Empowerment, created and performed by Matthew Hall, Estlin Love, Fiona Oliver-Larkin, and Lewis Sherlock, Out of the Blue, Edinburgh, October 2021.

Here's a Knocking Indeed/Lying on the Floor, created and performed by Kevin Dyer, Gemma Prangle, Terry Victor, and Evelyn Weldon, Cardiff University, November 2021.

The Alchemist and the Prince, created and performed by Matthew Bool, Eric Hayden, Christopher Lambert, and Rachel Pedley, Cardiff University, November 2021.

Untitled, created and performed by John Cobb, Aron De Casmaker, and Charles Doherty, Newcastle Arts Centre, Newcastle, November 2021.

Untitled, created and performed by Sally Anderson, Jamie Brown, Dolores Porretta, and Imogen Stirling, Newcastle Arts Centre, Newcastle, November 2021.

Appendix C

Research Participant Demographics

As a mixed methods study, there was no standard demographic capture for the research participants in our survey, focus group, and one-on-one interviews. The nature of and approach to the focus groups meant little data of this type could be captured and in the survey respondents could choose not to volunteer that information. Therefore there is no overarching table to give a clear demographic breakdown of participants in the project across all the processes used. However, we have included below the existing information on our participants from each dataset. One notable addition is that many of our participants worked across disciplines, so though we have separated the numbers, some participants are recorded in more than one entry.

Table 1:
Research Participants (by age)

Age	Focus Group Participants	One on One interview Participants	Creative Workshop Participants	Organisational Interviews
20s	28	29	Not Recorded	Not Recorded
30s	41	57	Not Recorded	Not Recorded
40s	25	26	Not Recorded	Not Recorded
50s	8	14	Not Recorded	Not Recorded
60s	3	5	Not Recorded	Not Recorded
70s	0	3	Not Recorded	Not Recorded
80s	0	1	Not Recorded	Not Recorded

Age	Survey Participants
18-24	22
25-34	149
35-44	104
45-54	66
55-64	41
65+	12

Table 1:
Research Participants (by self-defined intersectional demographics)

Demographics	Survey Participants	Focus Group Participants	One on One interview Participants	Creative Workshop Participants	Organisation Interviews
Male	163	39	96	20	5
Female	217	71	39	28	5
Non-Binary	8	2	3	0	Not Recorded
LGBTQ+	Not recorded	5	15	6	Not Recorded
Neurodiversity	14	2	20	7	Not Recorded
Disabled/Deaf	46	0	13	2	Not Recorded
Working Class	69	3	25	8	Not Recorded
Race/Ethnicity					
White British	291	99	93	36	8
White Other	71	3	11	4	2
Black British	4	6	15	3	0
British Asian	10	3	10	5	0
Mixed Race	6	0	4	1	0
Middle Eastern	4	1	2	0	0

Table 2:

Research Participants (by occupation)

Discipline	Survey Participants	Focus Group Participants	One on One Interviews
Access	5	0	2
Actor/Performer	80	29	75
Artistic Director	0	18	6
Community	3	1	9
Company Manager	4	0	1
Creative Director	0	1	1
Costume	22	0	1
Designer	16	0	9
Director	48	36	24
Dramaturg	9	0	2
Front of House	5	0	5
Lighting	64	0	7
Music Director/Musician	0	0	7
Movement/Choreographer	6	2	4
Playwright	43	29	25
Performance Art	0	4	9
PR/Marketing	6	0	4
Props	4	0	2
Producer	23	17	14
Production Manager	13	0	3
Set	14	0	3
Sound/Composer	40	1	2
Stage Hand	1	0	3
Stage Manager	74	0	18
Technician	43	2	18
Teacher/Facilitator	34	3	14
Theatre Administrator	0	1	4
Theatre Maker	0	26	32
Video	8	0	3
Vocal Coach	1	0	0
Voiceover Artist	7	0	Phi
Wardrobe	12	0	3

Table 3:

Research Participants (by region)

Region	Survey	Focus Group	One on One Interviews	Micro-Commissions	Organisation Interviews
England	322	85	114	33	3
Greater London	153	30	61	8	1
South East	36	6	12	0	0
East of England	21	6	8	0	1
North East	22	11	4	8	0
North West	26	9	7	0	0
South West	25	17	16	9	1
Midlands	39	6	6	8	0
Scotland	29	12	11	8	4
Northern Ireland	17	6	4	0	1
Wales	19	9	6	7	2

Appendix D

Acknowledgements and Credits

We would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) for their generous funding of this research. We would like to thank the support and guidance of our Steering Committee for their assistance in the development of this report, and our survey testers. This project could not have been accomplished without the generosity and support of all of our interview, focus group, survey, and micro-commission participants who gave us their time, their insights, and their honesty in the midst of a global health crisis. We would like to thank our final project event speakers for helping facilitate further dialogue and discussion amongst the broader UK theatre industry and cultural researchers. This project would also not have been possible without the tireless support, organisational skills, artistic, and research contributions of our Project Officer, Allie Young. Her fortitude and determination to keep our research project, and team, on task during an ongoing pandemic could not be overstated.

We would also like to thank the collaborative spirit of other research studies investigating Covid-19's impact on the UK Theatre and Cultural Sector, including the Centre for Cultural Value, Trevor Macfarlaine and Culture Commons, and the Creative Industries Federation. We would like to thank the guidance and support of our university research offices, the University of Essex REO officers Kai Yin Low and Nicola Fitton, the Knowledge Exchange Officer, Stephanie Humphries, and the East 15 finance officer, Ian Thompson, as well as friends and family of the research team.

Freelancers in the Dark Project Team

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 UKRI ESRC through their rapid response funding for projects addressing COVID-19.

The project is based at University of Essex, East 15 Acting School and is a collaboration between University of Essex, Manchester Metropolitan University and Queen's University Belfast.

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Co-Investigators:

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- Dr Joshua Edelman, Manchester Metropolitan University
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- Postdoctoral Research Associates:
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- Dr Laura Harris, Manchester Metropolitan University

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- Dr Alexandra Young, University of Essex

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Freelancers in the dark

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