

# A Study on Changes COVID-19 Brought to the Theater and Performing Arts Industry of the Republic of China (Taiwan)

JI JIALIN(紀家琳)\*

Associate Professor, Department of Theatre Arts, Chinese Culture University

Auditor, Taiwan Association of Theatre Technology

e-mail: JIL4@ulive.pccu.edu.tw

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, the performing arts industry of the Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as "Taiwan") has experienced two rounds of cold waves that brought a figurative "winter" in arts and culture. Hit hard by the pandemic, the performing arts are in the stage of "recovery" after enduring the second wave of "disaster".

## I. Changes Amid the Pandemic

The first "winter" began in 2020. To prevent the spread of the pandemic, the Taiwanese government issued a travel warning at the end of January and announced social restrictions in March as follows:

*In order to reduce the risk of community infection, we recommend the halt of indoor public gatherings of more than 100 people and outdoor gatherings of more than 500 people. (Ministry of Health and Welfare: 2020)*

After the announcement, almost all of theater and outdoor performance events in Taiwan were suspended. In May, some large performance organizations announced that they were on the verge of bankruptcy due to liquidity crunch. However, from June, epidemic control efforts showed clear progress thanks to strict border control measures and a high level of public compliance. This resulted in the lifting of the nation-wide epidemic alert and the gradual relaxation of restrictions on performance halls. Signs of recovery emerged in artistic and cultural activity and a "honeymoon period" lasted for about ten months until April this year. During this very period, however, a sense of complacency settled in Taiwan.

The second "winter" hit the arts and culture community last April when the number of confirmed cases surged in Taiwan. The government made a mistake over border policy and failed to acquire sufficient doses of diverse vaccines for an early vaccination rollout for

the entire population. The consequence was a rapid increase in new infections<sup>1</sup> and almost every region reported new confirmed cases. The situation in Taipei City and New Taipei City in the northern region was the most serious. Coincidentally, the two cities are best known for their performing arts activity in Taiwan. All on-site performances were suspended as the epidemic alert was suddenly upgraded from Level 2 to Level 3 on May 19.<sup>2</sup>

Indoor gatherings of five or more people and outdoor gatherings of ten or more people were suspended. The government asked people to work from home, and to refrain from family or social gatherings. Schools moved to online learning and restaurants had to abandon indoor dining and switch to takeout only. On-site performances were suspended as well. The suspension brought yet another cold wave to the performing arts community. On July 27, the alert level was lowered to Level 2 with social distancing measures still kept in place as follows:

*... When artistic performances (including traditional religious performances called “Chou Shen Xi”) are run or video works are produced, actors and performers who have tested positive in a rapid antigen test or a PCR test or who received vaccination 14 days before or earlier shall not wear facemasks during the show or shooting as long as they receive a rapid antigen test every seven days during the period.*

*If audiences are allowed to attend a performance in person, theaters shall leave some seats empty between audience members, implement zig-zag seating or take other measures to keep a safe distance between audience members (companions may be seated side-by-side when needed). A standing area shall not be established and the distance between the audience in the first row and the edge of the stage or the front most part of the stage must be at least three meters apart. The movement route and space used by each performer shall be separated and shall not overlap with the movement route of the audience. (Ministry of Culture: 2021)*

From all of the above-mentioned points of time to the present, masks must be worn when people go out or when students take in-person classes. Masks must not be taken off arbitrarily and violators will be subject to large fines.

Next, let’s take a look at the laws and regulations regarding the health and safety of

---

<sup>1</sup> As of the end of July, the death toll reached 800.

<sup>2</sup> In 2021, the COVID-19 alert in Taiwan consists of four stages. Level 4 is the highest level and a lockdown is implemented. At the end of May, the severity of the situation in Taipei City and New Taipei City was close to lockdown criteria.

theater workers in Taiwan and the basic ecosystem and environment of performing arts organizations and venues.

## **II. Laws and Regulations**

Taiwan lacks specialized laws and regulations governing the safety of theater workers and performance venues. The “Workers Safety and Sanitation Act” promulgated in 1974 was the first law ever enacted to protect the safety of workers in general. The Act clearly defined the types of occupations of covered workers, and theaters were not included in the list. So, there was no legal basis for the safety of theater workers. The subsequent lack of rules on the safety and training of theater workers rendered them socially vulnerable. After three rounds of revisions, the “Workers Safety and Sanitation Act” was renamed the “Occupational Safety and Health Act” in its 4th amendment in July 2013. Article 4 of the Act on the types of occupations of covered workers was revised to include a clause that reads “This Act applies to all occupations”. This revision led to the establishment of regulations applicable to theater workers, worker safety standards and training, and employer requirements. The enforcement rules of the Act stipulate that theater workers shall receive safety and health education and training necessary to perform their duties and to prevent disasters before taking up duty and specify the number of basic training hours required for managers and workers along with penalties in case of violations.

Despite the enactment of such laws and regulations, the level of compliance is still low with performing arts technicians except in public theaters in Taiwan. In particular, according to the statistics and analysis results I put together through surveys and interviews of workers from the performing arts, although theater workers are aware of the significance of occupational safety and health and related training, they still follow the conventional work practices. There are no institutions that promote and offer regular education and training courses on occupational safety and related laws to theater workers. Furthermore, those courses are not part of curriculum at performing arts colleges or departments in Taiwan.

In consideration of this situation, the Taiwanese Association of Theater Technology (“TATT”) went beyond its main activity of promoting and offering theater technology training courses to offer basic training courses on occupational safety and health as part of its professional curriculum and include the courses in annual plans and objectives more deeply and broadly. The TATT has established itself as the sole institution in the Taiwanese theater industry that actively promotes safety education for theaters and theater workers.

## **III. Performing Arts Groups and Workers**

There are only five public performing arts organizations in Taiwan, a country with a population of about 23.48 million (Ministry of the Interior: 2021), and two of them are traditional arts performing groups affiliated with schools. There are four public musical ensembles, three of which are Western symphony orchestras and one traditional musical group. All of the modern theaters and dance troupes are run by individuals or in the form of corporations and there are no public groups. Most of performing arts groups are highly dependent on government subsidies, corporate funding, or public projects, otherwise they need ticket revenue to stay afloat. Except for a very small number of traditional theater groups, there are fewer than seven organizations in Taiwan that conform to the operating model defined by the academic community, only one of which is a dance company. According to government statistics, Taiwan had over 6,400 registered performing arts organizations in 2020 (Ministry of Culture: 2020).

Most of the workers including technicians and even administrative staff in traditional theater, modern theater, dance, music creation, design, performance and directing work on a contract basis as freelancers. It is also very rare for a performing arts group to operate as a private company. Many of equipment suppliers are too small in size to establish a union even if they are established as a corporation and they often hire independent contractors to carry out projects.

On the other hand, most of the existing theater unions are independent trade unions. Most independent unions have only a limited number of members and are having difficulties in operations. One exception is a union established in 2015 at the sole performing arts organization established as an administrative corporation in Taiwan,<sup>3</sup> and the union is still functional until today. In addition, due to lack of understanding of and compliance with relevant laws and regulations by theater workers, individualism caused by the nature of part-time work, and industrial characteristics making scale up difficult, independent unions have been unable to participate in or have a say in the directing and production process. Their roles have mostly been confined to such areas as social insurance, compensation, legal advisory, on-the-job training and skills matching.

#### **IV. Theaters Dedicated to Theatrical Works and Plays**

All of Taiwan's experimental theaters and medium and large-scale theaters dedicated to theatrical works and plays are managed, operated, or commissioned by public

---

<sup>3</sup> Its official name is the National Performing Arts Center, and the center has under its umbrella three performance halls, the National Theater & Concert Hall in the northern region opened in 1987, the National Taichung Theater in the central region opened in 2015, and the National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts – Weiwuying in the southern region opened in 2018, and the National Symphony Orchestra affiliated with the National Theater & Concert Hall. The central and southern theaters are newly opened venues.

organizations or professional schools, and have a history of at least 30 years. The most representative national performance venues are located in the three regions of northern, central and southern Taiwan. <sup>4</sup> The northern performance hall, completed first among the three, is located in Taipei City and is known for running the greatest number of performances in Taiwan. Public theaters established elsewhere are self-managed and most are multi-purpose theaters. Recently, some performance halls are outsourcing the management of front and back stage auditoriums and theater technology, in addition to planning and general operations, to external vendors on an annual contract basis. With the exception of some front desk staff and part-time stage workers, most of theater personnel including administrative staff are full-time workers.

There are very few privately run theaters in Taiwan. Currently, there are only two theaters with 300-400 seats in the northern region operated by a business and a foundation, and one of them only runs traditional Chinese plays. There are several small private theaters with 70 seats or less nationwide. Since theater workers in privately operated theaters take up a very small percentage of total theater workers in Taiwan, it is difficult to achieve industrial scale.

## **V. Changes and Current Status of the Taiwanese Theaters and Performing Arts In the Midst of the Pandemic**

### **1. Loss and Consequences**

#### **1) Performance groups**

Aside from the sharp income decline for public theaters and musical ensembles, <sup>5</sup> performances originally scheduled for the shutdown period were completely suspended or canceled. Since most theaters in Taiwan are public ones, as mentioned above, performing groups may opt to cancel performances altogether and receive a full refund according to the government's support policy for artistic and cultural groups. If the performance is postponed, performing groups can reschedule it after the shut-down is lifted, and receive massive benefits and support in venue rental. They can collect government subsidies even for recorded or live stream performances. As mentioned earlier, large amounts of public subsidies were available for the operations of large private performance organizations and the shut-down period did not last long. They were also eligible for disaster subsidies or

---

<sup>4</sup> Refer to footnote 2.

<sup>5</sup> The current annual budgets for public theater and musical groups in Taiwan are prepared in the immediately prior year and verified at the beginning of the current year. This means the current year's ticket revenue has no impact on their annual budgets or expenses. This is why public theater and musical groups have been relatively free from the effects of the pandemic in their operations.

preferential loans provided by the Ministry of Culture. In addition, small and medium-sized performance groups have only a handful of full-time employees. Therefore, there has been no news that mid-to-large performance groups went out of business.

## 2) Technicians

Performing arts technicians were one of the professionals hit hardest by COVID-19. Since most of them are freelancers, they are not protected by unions, and customarily they work without signing a contract with performance groups. In 2020 when the performances were halted by a government order, performance organizers canceled or postponed scheduled performances, leaving technicians jobless without any compensation. However, as long as they could submit documentary evidence received from performing arts groups for the cancelled or postponed work, they were able to apply for a subsidy provided by the Ministry of Culture, not the Ministry of Labor, and engage in work outside of the performing arts. According to my research, some people worked part-time at breakfast restaurants or construction sites or in areas such as building window cleaning, water supply and power works, facility maintenance and supermarket service staff. Some became full-time graphic designers. But, everyone hoped that they would be able to return to theaters when the pandemic subsides. This indicates their passion for theater art and perseverance.

## 3) Creative and equipment companies

Providing my own experience as an example, I was in charge of lighting design for a dance performance at a large theater in Taipei City last May. The performance was canceled due to the pandemic, and I was not able to collect payments for my service rendered regarding participation in planning meetings, and development of lighting blueprints and cue sheets. Not only that, people and equipment companies with whom I have finished outsourcing price negotiations apologized and said, "Let's work together on our next show!" But, they did not provide any compensation. Theater equipment companies in Taiwan cannot create a viable industrial value chain with theater-related business only, so most of them have expanded into other areas such as construction work, maintenance and repair, equipment sales, and video production. In addition, the spread of COVID-19 in Taiwan was not serious enough to require a lockdown, and the government continued to provide emergency loans and worker subsidies. As a result, no serious losses have been observed for theater equipment companies so far.

## 4) Theater operation

As mentioned above, almost all of the performance venues are public and managed

by a third party service provider selected through bidding, they have had no impact from the pandemic. Furthermore, the performance ban gave theaters a good opportunity to carry out a maintenance and repair project for their facilities and provide training to their workers. A large theater in Taipei City is scheduled to begin trial operation before an official opening **in January of next year**, and this theater is also public.

## 2. Response by Performing Arts Organizations

In line with the above, live stream performances have penetrated deeper into people's daily lives as telecommuting and online home classes are adopted to reduce people to people contact amid the pandemic. Taiwanese theaters responded to this lifestyle change by conducting training on theater technology, and safety inspection and education and by developing new forms of performances, leveraging live streaming technology. The following describes the TATT's activity in the area and real examples of new forms of performances.

### 1) Cultivating talent and skills in live stream performance platforms

Nurturing local theater technicians was one of the purposes of the TATT's establishment. Despite the outbreak of COVID-19, the TATT has continued to offer online courses and launched, in July of this year, free online courses on basic theater technology and stage management commissioned by the National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts – Weiwuying to nurture talent and skills in southern Taiwan. In August, in collaboration with the Cultural Affairs Department of New Taipei City, the TATT conducted free online skills workshops for theater technicians working on digital platform theaters. The workshop is a two-week, 48-hour online training course offered real-time to experienced theater workers. Considering the constraints of an online course, the main focus is on the combination and application of technical images to theaters, supplemented by courses on advanced theater management, sound technology, costume management, program production and emergency response. Through the operation of these online courses, the TATT has continued to contribute to the nurturing and capacity enhancement of theater workers across the country.

### 2) Dedicated theater safety diagnosis and theater worker safety training

The TATT is the only institution in Taiwan that has the authority to issue a specialized theater license, and it has gained credibility in the field of theater safety evaluation on the strength of the core team comprised of scholars and industry experts with extensive field experience in the theater industry.

During the shutdown period in 2020, the TATT recognized that performance halls

affiliated with the regional offices of the Ministry of Culture were outdated and had safety vulnerabilities and that technicians lacked safety awareness and knowledge. Based on such assessment, the TATT, for the first time in theater history, introduced a specialized theater safety diagnosis program based on Circular Quality Control (PDCA) to ensure workplace safety and health for theater workers. The TATT dispatches a team of scholars, experts, architects, and certified engineers to conduct a comprehensive diagnosis and evaluation of the safety of the building, firefighting system, heating, ventilation and air conditioning system, theater spaces, audience seats, stage spaces, equipment, personnel and work environment. To address the issue that awareness of theater workers and knowledge of relevant laws and regulations is inadequate both in the public and private sectors, the TATT provided theater workers in the southern and northern regions with basic training on workplace safety, related laws and regulations and worker rights in collaboration with the Ministry of Labor of Taiwan.

Although the theater safety diagnosis project of 2020 is still in its early stage where the evaluation and the crafting of improvement plans have been completed only for a performance center in the Yunlin County, the project enjoyed some publicity and the TATT will sign a contract with yet another theater in August or September. Cooperation with the Ministry of Labor has also been completed smoothly, and the project received recognition from the public sector and positive feedback from the representatives of participating venues and theater workers. The TATT not only accomplished its primary goal, but joined hands with the responsible government agency to promote occupational safety and provide safety training. In the future, while continuing to strive to spread the safety awareness of theater workers, the TATT will work to achieve the next goal of educating employers and vocational schools on the importance of occupational safety and safety training.

### 3) New forms of online performances and limitations

Last July, the 5th World Sinophone Drama Competition for Young Playwrights Award Ceremony and Play-Reading Festival were held online for three days in Taiwan. Performances for the three winners and post-performance symposium were live streamed. The event demonstrated how much effort the organizer, directors, and actors have put into the development of new forms of theater performances. However, it also exposed the fundamental problem of an emphasis on “on-site performance with the presence of audiences” in the definition of performing arts. Although technology has had impact on performing arts, it is not a panacea that cures every problem.

Anyone who has ever taken a live online class must have experienced technical glitches such as poor or truncated sound and video due to unstable or disrupted internet



connectivity. One of the solutions would be the use of a pre-recorded video. The performances in the Play-Reading Festival were pre-recorded and uploaded to a designated site to prevent quality issues that may arise during live streaming while the symposium was live streamed so that panelists, audience members, creators and actors can have discussions and Q&A sessions real-time. Although the performances were shown in the form of pre-recorded videos, there was an incident where the screen went black for a few seconds during playback.

It was fortunate that people were able to enjoy theater performances online during the pandemic. It is my view, however, that these performances are no different from video productions because they were produced into a video as a compromise to bypass the limitations of the current situation. The attempt itself is laudable, but it cannot be scaled because people were expecting on-site performances rather than pre-produced videos, and most of the participants were not well versed in video production.

In addition, the participants experienced difficulties in using technology for video productions and post editing. Therefore, I predict that it will be difficult for this type of pre-recorded performances to spread widely, and if on-site performances are back on stage, audiences would return to the theater wearing facemasks. If then, an online showing of a pre-recorded performance video will become a thing of the past. Nevertheless, the new attempt made during the pandemic proved once again the need for a convergence of performing arts and video technology, and that the convergence will become an irreversible trend.

In terms of the effect of an online showing of performance videos during the pandemic, videos of past theater performances provided regularly for free by three major national theaters in Taiwan were well received by online audiences in the areas of video quality, sound, camera movements, and stage effects and they met the viewing needs of theater audiences.

## **VI. Current Situation and Recovery**

Taiwan has never implemented a regional lockdown since the outbreak of COVID-19. There were times when strict restrictions were put in place, but those periods did not last more than two to three months. As mentioned above, most of Taiwan's performing arts organizations including theaters are closely tied to the public sector, making it difficult to evolve into an industry in its true sense. Another limitation of greater significance is a clear demarcation between the popular video entertainment industry and the theater industry. The theater industry has long been led by elite artists and influenced by government policy

directions, making it unapproachable by the public. I interviewed a producer of high-tech theater performances for my research project in the past, and he said that although the works he produces belong to the theater realm, he often refers to his works as “events” instead of theater performances in the marketing process. The reason was that the word “theater” evokes a sense of distance among the Taiwanese, making it difficult to attract audiences. <sup>6</sup>It was confirmed that the pandemic has brought many new phenomena to the theater and performing arts scene in Taiwan. This chapter summarizes what has been mentioned above and suggests what efforts are needed after we return to normalcy.

1. The pandemic revealed the reality of the theater and performing arts industry of Taiwan and the need for creating sound awareness of theater workers and the theater industry.

In 2020 and 2021, the Taiwanese government banned live performances to control the pandemic, but the periods were not long. Even though the first ban lasted less than two months, large performance groups announced the suspension of operations through press releases, and small and medium-sized organizations applied for government disaster subsidies as soon as live performances were halted, without even issuing press releases. According to information posted on internet communities, freelance theater workers moved to other service jobs or menial work as soon as their income shrank due to the halt of theater work. This is an indication that theater organizations have not been able to achieve industrial scale, and are vulnerable to adversities. The main reasons are that the government has consistently provided subsidies to theaters, and although subsidizing struggling theaters may be the right policy direction in the long term, the government failed to implement measures to help them become sustainable. Theaters have not established sound business relationships with other industries because of elitism prevalent in the industry and against commercial cooperation with other industries. For these reasons, the theater industry has remained underdeveloped.

The performing arts and theater operators clearly showed that they could not be free from social influences because they are highly labor-intensive, both at the industry and individual levels. This is why they could not develop into a well-established industry, and there lacks specialized laws and regulations governing them. However, the workers in the arena should endeavor to participate in the social insurance system as soon as possible and comply with applicable laws and systems so that they can be protected in terms of work hours, wages, safety and health as stipulated by law. For this, it is necessary to prepare occupational safety and training standards suitable for the theater industry, and only then

---

<sup>6</sup> The performance recorded ticket sales of NT\$28 million in 2019 and the producer did not apply for any government subsidy. This is a very rare case in Taiwanese performance history.

will the theater industry be able to receive due recognition and have an opportunity to evolve into an industry in its genuine sense. No matter how glamorous a job may be, it cannot last long if workers have to rely solely on their passion for work without the guarantee of a safe working environment. It is, therefore, necessary to push for the enactment of relevant laws and regulations and improve them gradually. This can be done only when representatives from the theater industry make continuous efforts toward it.

2. The pandemic is a crisis, but it also served as an opportunity to overhaul the environmental and health areas during the shutdown period and to create more opportunities through the use of technology and social resources.

According to the current situation in Taiwan and my personal experience and observations, if personal hygiene and a clean environment are achieved and various quarantine measures are adhered to, businesses can resume normal operations across the industries. In Taiwan, a practical performance ban and social restrictions were put in place in May-July this year, but as soon as the restrictions were eased this month, many theater operators completed preparations to put on performances at the end of the month nationwide, and many performing groups are also making reservations for theaters for next year. This shows that theater performances in Taiwan are rapidly recovering.

The halt of live performances imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 was a break needed for theaters to take a leap forward. The shutdown period was a golden opportunity for aging performance halls to conduct a comprehensive inspection of their buildings and facilities for safety and functionality. For instance, the theater safety diagnosis project carried out by the TATT last year provided a breakthrough in the raising of safety awareness in theaters although the effect of the project needs to be verified in the future. What is truly expected of theaters is that they will review and enhance their operating methods for the pandemic to derive safety inspection methods and procedures that can be implemented in normal times. From that point of view, the COVID-19 pandemic was only a trigger, and the ultimate goal of the TATT is to contribute to theater safety across Taiwan.

During the pandemic, it was witnessed that internet and video technologies have become important tools for human-to-human communication. In the past, technology was only viewed as supplementary means for theater performances and many reasoned that technological inventions and creative results had to be integrated slowly over time into the performing arts realm before they can completely replace the performing arts. But, the convergence of video technology and performing arts has become an irreversible trend. The discovery of the limitations of internet technology and new operating methods at this stage can provide both a lesson and a warning to theater workers. The pandemic also provided a

good opportunity for prospective or current theater workers by giving rise to online platforms through which social resources are hired and matched and helped theater workers recharge themselves. The TATT's business is a good example. During the pandemic, the TATT utilized the internet to maximize the effect of its education and publicity and to minimize waste time while serving its purpose as a social education provider.

The pandemic will eventually end and people will get back to normal lives. Although COVID-19 brought a crisis to Taiwanese theater workers, it was also a good opportunity to recognize the need for improvement in the working environment and the vulnerability of the theater industry and workplace safety, and to self-reflect on themselves and their work.

Finally, I would like to thank all of those who have spared no effort in preventing the spread of the virus during the pandemic, and pray for the soul of those who have died of COVID-19. I also sincerely wish all mankind a good health and peace.

## References:

Website of the Taiwanese Centers for Disease Control, the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Republic of China (2021.8.1.):

<https://www.cdc.gov.tw/Category/ListContent/EmXemht4IT-IRAPrAnyG9A?uaid=OGvZ8a1qdqdNo5mUgeaOqw>

Website of the Ministry of Culture, the Republic of China (2021.7.28.):

[https://www.moc.gov.tw/information\\_250\\_131075.html](https://www.moc.gov.tw/information_250_131075.html)

Website of the Ministry of the Interior, the Republic of China (2021.7.28.):

<https://www.ris.gov.tw/app/portal/346>

Website of a national database of laws and regulations (2021.7.25.):

<https://law.moj.gov.tw/>

LIN Ting An (2019.7.19.). “Raked NT\$28 million in revenue with “Slightly Drunk”! Secrets behind the success of the “Surprise Lab” event!. Manager Today.

<https://www.managertoday.com.tw/>

5th World Sinophone Drama Competition for Young Playwrights Award Ceremony & Play-Reading Festival (2021.7.26): <http://wsdc.ncu.edu.tw/festival>

Website of the National Performing Arts Center (2021.7.26): <https://npac-ntch.org/index.html>

Website of the Taiwanese Association of Theatre Technology (TATT) (2021.8.1.):

<https://www.tatt.org.tw/>