

Interdisciplinary Studies

Resilience of Theatrical Institutions in Pandemic Times. Excelsior Theatre in Bucharest – A Case Study

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic substantially changed the paradigm of creation and consumption of the cultural offer. New challenges rose for both the producers and the consumers. But like any other period of crises, it compelled both parties to transform the threats in opportunities, the weaknesses into strengths. It was time to put creativity and effort into the service of society and work together to overcome the greatest challenge that would permanently amend the theatre and its guild, its aesthetics, its utility and its mission.*

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Premisses

One of the main goals of a cultural institution is to create a significant cultural offer that responds to the authentic needs of its beneficiaries. In times of a global pandemic, like the COVID-19 one, the responsibility of each theatrical institution is even greater as it has to ensure and improve not only the welfare of society, but also to soothe the anxiety produced by the threat and isolation inflicted on everyone.

Facing temporary shutdown in 2020, many theatrical institutions had to reconsider their mission and activity, in order to respond to the new needs and challenges that emerged. As the physical access to the cultural offers has been temporarily suspended, virtual access had to be redefined, in order „to stay alive” and accompany, at the same time, the people through a difficult time. It was not only a question of survival, but of resilience, of finding its meaning in a period of crisis.

The main focus of the research

Now that physical spaces are no longer the priority, the cultural sector is rushing to adapt events and experiences for an entirely digital-first audience. For digital innovators, this is our moment to push the limit of our creative and technical vision, and a chance to openly experiment. For everyone else, it's a crash course in digital marketing triage (UNESCO, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the cultural sector was forced to innovate itself rapidly, with accelerated digitalisation, in order to reach and stay in touch with its audience. It is a fact that art consumption has experienced great shifts. But the main focus of this research is not the vehicle of communication during the pandemic, nor the access to culture or to its beneficiaries, but the content of the cultural offer provided by theatre institutions in this period, content that had to be adapted to the new reality and would define, from now on, its utility and meaning.

Challenges

In the first months of the pandemic crisis, the cultural sector has experienced an increasing demand for digital content directly accessible from the private households. The consumers have been eager to distract themselves and this behaviour has emphasized the importance of cultural consumption in everyday life. Consequently, the cultural institutions (the theatrical ones in particular, as they are the focus of this research), have tried to be as responsive as possible to this growing demand by engaging in digital solutions for delivering cultural content, organising at the same time the use of alternative dissemination tools of content on different online platforms: virtual tours, “Q&A” sessions with artists, online performances, free access to materials, interviews, photo or video archives, etc. The main characteristic of these alternatives was, for a period, their open and free access, that mainly aimed to ensure a dynamic alternative to their normal activity and show solidarity with the audience, at the same time.

But the sudden and compulsory digital consumption of culture has raised some issues little faced before. On one hand, the capacity or delay of some theatrical institutions to enter the digital era efficiently in terms of tools and techniques. Then, the necessity of moving cultural content without previous preparation to an exclusively online format (as well as the sustainability of such an action). We must keep in mind that many institutions did not have the financial or technical resources to develop digital projects, that the employees did not have the necessary training or skills for the use of digital technologies

and, last but not least, the fact that a great part of the cultural content was not suitable for digitization, as theatre is mostly the result of presence, generated by the live encounter between the artists and the audience. The mediation of virtual channels could definitely compromise the act of reception.

On the other hand, questions of online content, of platforms, of frequency of posts and broadcasts, of format, the video and sound quality of the cultural offer, the ability to effectively reach and interact with an online audience that needed to be built, are other issues raised by the new paradigm.

In consequence, the theatrical institutions had to change their way of creating a cultural offer and rebuild audience in challenging circumstances. Their meaning and utility were questioned, so measures had to be taken in order not only to survive, but to overcome the crisis by reinventing themselves. Kipping in mind the opportunities generated by the new reality that has suddenly opened the door to innovations for both art and artists, being able to reach at the same time new audiences, outside the theatre venues and halls.

If the first reaction to challenge was to adapt the existing cultural offer to the new exigencies (streaming online previous filmed performances, for example), the providers of cultural offer soon understood that the content had to be adapted to the new communication channels and needs, in order to be efficient and meaningful. Creativity, engagement and responsibility towards the communities they serve moulded therefor the projects and programmes developed by theatrical institutions during pandemic times. By learning the hard way, experimenting, forcing the acquirement of new skills, transforming existent resources and reinventing their art, according to the new demands.

EXCELSIOR Theatre. A case study

1. Mission

EXCELSIOR Theatre is a performing arts public institution dedicated to children and teenagers. It is a repertoire theatre that has assumed the mission of responding to the genuine needs of today's society: the lack of coherent cultural offers specially designed for youngsters. The theatre assumed an ambivalent mission: on the one hand, to use the act of culture as an engine for education in order to transform the young spectator into a "genuinely cultural being", and, on the other hand, to use education as a way of disseminating and producing culture. Through the projects and programmes that is normally running, EXCELSIOR Theatre aims to build a creative space and a discussion platform, both dedicated to youngsters. In addition, they mean to bring the new generation closer to the performing arts, in the various aesthetic forms they might take, by developing cultural projects of national and international scale which can open up new horizons for a dialogue between creativity in theatre and other related fields and supporting permanently the cultural development of the targeted audience.

The mission statement of EXCELSIOR Theatre develops on two main directions: cultural valorisation and educational redefinition, joined by other three complementary goals: social

involvement, openness to international relations and, last but not least, a direct approach to family (Teatrul EXCELSIOR, 2019).

2. *Shifting cultural offer during COVID-19 pandemic*

Normally running a dens activity that involves presence and experience exchange through a rich performance programming (having a repertoire based on valuable titles from both the universal and national literature), educational and creative programmes (such as *NEW DRAMA*, *Playwrighting contest for adolescents* or *RELIEF, a young theatre laboratory*), workshops or festivals, open guided discussions with the audience on topics concerning the sphere of their interests in relation to the subjects proposed on stage, from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, EXCELSIOR Theatre committed to respond to its duties towards its beneficiaries through a new, improved and meaningful cultural offer.

Many theatres metaphorically opened their doors with virtual tours, used their own archived materials, offered for free live streamed or pre-recorded performances. But when addressing young audience, the engagement had to preserve the participative feature, aside the cultural and educational traits that were already dictated by the theatre's mission. So, for the online cultural offer, EXCELSIOR Theatre focused on developing new projects able to attract, engage and stimulate the direct and indirect beneficiaries' interest (parents, grandparents, guardians of the minor spectator), leaving behind the „normal” activity. Subsequently, a long series of original „online shows”, produced exclusively with the artistic and technical team of the theatre, using only the existing resources was created.

Projects dedicated to children:

- ***The world behind the curtain*** (16 episodes) – an original series that took the spectators behind the scenes, to discover the theatre's secrets, guided through mysterious chambers by the most beloved characters from the children's performances. The series presented their adventures and discoveries in search of the stage, after remaining trapped inside the theatre, during lockdown. In this amusing way, the dressing rooms, the scene and costume workshops or storehouses, the electric magazines, the sound and light cabins, the stage mechanisms were revealed to the children that never before had the opportunity to see what lies behind the curtains of a theatre.
- ***The wizard knows it all*** (10 episodes) – an original series filmed on a specially designed set, build on stage, tells the story of a clumsy but witty



wizard that answers unique questions asked by children. His messengers are the most cherished characters from famous fairy-tales. The use of special effects in editing and post-production gives to this series the magical touch and modernity that children adore, transmitting at the same time educational information, not just a fun time.



- **EXCELSIOR Arts&Crafts** (43 episodes) – tutorials of „do it yourself” (games, puzzles, origami, building toys), coordinated by actors who encourage creativity and manual skills, as much as spending quality time with the family.
- **Bedtime story** (46 episodes) – filmed famous stories, illustrated and read by the theatre's actors, for children with ages between 6 and 12.
- **The afternoon story** (41 episodes) – filmed famous stories, illustrated and read by the theatre's actors, for children with ages between 4 and 8.

Projects dedicated to youngsters:

- **EXCELSIOR Podcasts** (42 episodes) – a complex 45 minutes live debate show held by 4 to 6 actors, on subjects concerning the theatrical field, the production of a play, the rehearsal period, the creation of a part or of a character, mentoring sessions for adolescents interested in pursuing a theatrical training or carrier, etc.
- **#UrbanTheatricalDictionary** (40 episodes) – an original educational-comic series specially written to reveal the theatrical vocabulary and the plurality of meanings of certain words that, in theatre receive unexpected significance. Filmed in different locations, presenting the most eccentric characters in the most uncommon situations, give a glimpse into the infinite possibilities that theatre has to offer, transmitting at the same time valuable cultural information.
- **IMPROVChallenge** (32 episodes) – an explosive improvisation show, filmed on a TV set build on stage, challenges each time the 7 actors involved to react to surprising tasks. The show stimulates both the artistic team and the spectator to open up to the unexpected.



- **Roast Gallery: EXCELSIOR Re-Act** (7 episodes) & **Two chairs and a table** (4 episodes) – two short formats meant to present in an amusing way the artists and the productions of EXCELSIOR Theatre.
- **Missing theatre** (29 episodes) și **Inside-Out** (14 de episodes) – two formats that invited the actors and the audience to present their artistic achievements from confinement, in order to stimulate their creativity and encourage a positive and productive mindset.



The strategy and goals

The online programme of EXCELSIOR Theatre focused on creating a coherent cultural offer providing an alternative form of training, complementary to formal education that aimed to improve the horizon of children and youngsters, to provide a propitious context for practicing and cultivating various inclinations, skills and abilities of the young generation. It was also conceived as a method of intervention that encourages a positive attitude, finding solutions to defend the values and principles in which the beneficiaries believe, to use art as therapy – a way to stimulate interaction, emotional intelligence, the ability to deal with emotions and increase self-esteem, especially in times of crisis. The offer also aimed to provide a framework where parents could interact directly with their own children in order to better understand their needs, and be, at the same time a reliable source of cultural information and an educational platform.

As regards the theatre's artistic and technical team, this period was used as a trial session. An internal laboratory, an experimentation and training time, when creativity and the acquirement of new skills and qualifications become a must.

Not less important were the opportunities to raise awareness and reach new audiences through the online promotion and marketing strategies that became more effective once the entire cultural offer of the theatre was moved online.

The peculiarities of the online offer, the communication channels and the results

The online programme of EXCELSIOR Theatre was transmitted on the YouTube Channel and Facebook page of the institution, with different frequency. During the lockdown, every day, from Monday to Sunday original content filmed in confinement has been posted on the two platforms, at hours that proved to be the most suitable for the audience. According to the monitorization of the online activity, more than 2.5 million people engaged or followed the cultural offer provided by the theatre from the end of March till June of 2020.

After the lockdown, still unable to open to the public, the online content was diversified and the production of each project became much more elaborated: sets were built on stage, using at the same time many outdoor or indoor filming sets around the city, special scripts were written, filmed rehearsals took place, editing the recorded video and audio materials, as well as adding special effects became a must for every featured episode. From September 2020 till March 2021, posting 3 to 5 original episodes weekly, another 4 million virtual spectators followed the online programme produced by the theatre.

The peculiarity of EXCELSIOR's online cultural offer and success is the fact every project was specially conceived for online communication, starting with the content, the topics, the aesthetics, the technical features, the way of acting, filming and editing and finishing with the designed impact calculated in relation to a studied consumption behaviour and acknowledgement of the beneficiaries needs.

The benefits of an online cultural offer

According to the National Institute for Cultural Research and Training, the benefits of an online cultural offer are (INCFC, 2020b):

- the accessibility of the cultural act: maintaining and facilitating access to artistic creation and cultural products.
- diversification of the cultural offer: watching programmes remotely, regardless of the geographical positioning of the consumer, directly in one's own home.
- visibility of cultural institutions: the public can discover new institutions, actors and directors, various interpretations of classical plays.
- the possibility of the public to easily choose and change between the cultural products consumed.

In addition, beside the creative diversification of programmes and the new audiences gained, the benefits of producing a particular and meaningful online cultural offer reflected on the team's capacity to adapt, on the skills acquired, on the confidence and feeling of purpose gained in this critical period.

Conclusions

All major crises throughout history have often been an engine of a renaissance of culture and an explosion of new forms of creativity, so vital for the progress of art and of the guild.

During the lockdown, many theatrical institutions moved old or new content online in order to keep audiences engaged and satisfied, at the same time. The increased demand for this kind of content was obvious. But in the case of culture, the needs or habits of the beneficiaries are not always well expressed or defined, so the ones who provided it, needed to create a custom of consumption. They first had to assess their beneficiaries' needs and afterwards to respond creatively, never forgetting their responsibility toward the community, their duty to elevate the cultural level of its beneficiaries, to cultivate taste and moral values, to ensure social integration by accepting differences and by educating the

citizens in his respect. And much more in this period, to show solidarity with the society and comfort those in need.

The shutdown period has also significantly affected the pattern of art consumption, due to its social and experiential dimension that was suddenly suspended. If some of these patterns have temporarily disappeared since the beginning of the crisis (physical, collective, indoor experience), some others have dramatically risen (virtual, free, private cultural experience).

According to Throsby (1994), cultural consumption is a process of accumulating knowledge and experience which affects future consumption. Customer satisfaction is crucial even in the art business, where success is mostly measured by customer's experience and participation (Anderson 2004; Hume and Sullivan Mort 2008, 2010). (Radermecker, 2020)

Consequently, this was the time for the theatrical institutions to create new compelling cultural offers, able to forge habits and „addictions” to cultural content, as their future is at stake. Resilience was the main feature of the theatrical guild in pandemic times. And its positive impact is quantifiable.

After assessing through case studies, inquiries and research the content and impact of the cultural offers provided by cultural institutions and the consumption behaviour of the audience, we are inclined to say that the COVID-19 pandemic changed all paradigms. They encouraged a more responsible, pro-cultural, pro-social, pro-environmental behaviours. They managed to ensure all this by reinventing themselves, by offering emotionally impacting narratives and by improving the audience understanding of the consequences of the major threats. And not in the least, by restoring the belief in the endless possibilities of art put into the service of humanity.

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