

IDENTIFYING AN EPIDEMIC-RESISTANT THEATRE TO AVOID SHUTTING DOWN THEATRE DURING A PANDEMIC

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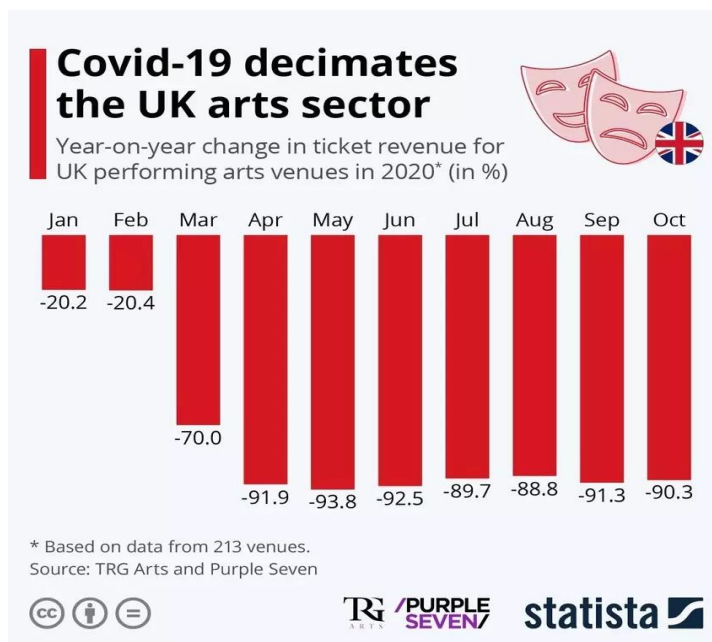
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INTRODUCTION

Postmodernist thinker “Jean-François Lyotard” (1977) says that the decades since 1970 have seen more uncertainty about the future than ever before in human history. The main reason for this, Lyotard sees, is the uncertainty that people face in the persistent economic crises. If Lyotard's statement goes any further, the covid pandemic has succeeded in bringing our very existence to the pinnacle of uncertainty at this very moment. The crisis faced by the performing arts, during the covid pandemic is critical. Broadway theaters in the United States and West End theaters in the United Kingdom, which relied on big capital, decided to close, while other theaters around the world closed without a date for reopening.

“During the quarter ending in September, when the overall unemployment rate averaged 8.5 percent, 52 percent of actors, 55 percent of dancers and 27 percent of musicians were out of work, according to the National Endowment for the Arts.”(Patricia, C. (2020, December 26). *‘Great Cultural Depression’ Looms for Legions of Unemployed Performers*.www.nytimes.com.)

The table below shows how the average ticket sales in the UK have declined.



(Source: <https://www.weforum.org/>)

The damage of the covid often is calculated in an economic approach. But the damage done to the spectatorship cannot be underestimated. That will be an invaluable loss.

“I didn’t even care what movie was going to play. I just wanted to get back to the movies,” Ken Ruiz, an audience member at the El Capitan.” (Watson, R. T. (2021, March 21). *Movie Fans Returning to Los Angeles Theaters Find Thrill in Just Showing Up*. WSJ.)

Before the pandemic, the audience had a choice of which show is going to see. But the frustrations which they experienced without theatre make them go to the theatre without any pre-selection.

As a solution to this crisis, many theater companies resorted to presenting plays through online apps that were only used for messaging and meeting each other online.

“Plenty of people, starved for theater, are gorging on it digitally. But to feel its full force, you have to be there — to absorb it physically.”– (Collins-Hughes, L. (2020, July 8). *Digital Theater Isn’t Theater. It’s a Way to Mourn Its Absence*. www.nytimes.com)

The theatre is a live art. Liveliness is not just about performing and enjoying a play at the same time but meeting actors and audience in the same space. The complaint against digital theater for today is the audience has lost their physical interaction in the virtual space. According to “Hans-Thies Lehmann”, the physical gathering is a must need to the Theater.

“Theatre is the site not only of ‘heavy’ bodies but also of a real gathering, a place where a unique intersection of aesthetically organized and everyday real life takes place.”– (Lehmann, H. K. J. (2007). *By Hans-Thies Lehmann - Postdramatic Theatre: 1st (first) Edition*. Taylor & Francis, Inc.)

METHODOLOGY, DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

There are significant research and discussions are currently happening in the world on how to continue the theatre during the epidemic season without closure. These studies are dominated by many performing arts companies around the world. As a result of research, the German theater company “Berlin Ensemble” recently removed about 70% of the seats in “Theater am Schiffbauerdamm” and relocated the seats to keep the social distance of the audience.



“Theater am Schiffbauerdamm” in German (source: Berlin Ensemble FB page)



“The evidence is very clear that outdoor spaces are safer than indoors” - Prof Chris Whitty, the UK's chief medical officer (Shukman, B. D. (2021, April 22). *Covid: Can you catch the virus outside?* BBC News. www.bbc.com)

According to a report of the “BBC, the Chief Medical Officer of the United Kingdom” has said the risk of contracting the Covid virus is lower in the open environment than in the interior. The BBC also reported that the virus is more likely to die outdoors.

“Five studies in their analysis determined that less than 10% of reported global SARS-CoV-2 infections have occurred outdoors and that the odds of indoor transmission were 18.7 times higher in comparison to outdoor transmission (95% CI, 6-57.9)”. (Transmission of respiratory illnesses outdoors ‘definitely happens’ but less than indoors (2020, December 8) www.healio.com)

“Nooshin Razani, MD, MPH, director of the Center for Nature and Health at the University of California”, says that although the virus may be active in the outside environment, it has a low value relative to the inside environment.

“In the context of COVID-19, airborne transmission may be possible in specific circumstances and settings in which procedures or support treatments that generate aerosols are performed;”. (*Modes of transmission of virus causing COVID-19: implications for IPC precaution recommendations.* (2020, March 29). www.who.int.)

World Health Organization has confirmed that the virus travels in the air only when it contacts another person. Therefore, maintaining the required distance reduces this risk. Although there are various hypotheses that the virus travels through the air, it has not yet been confirmed by research. The World Health Organization says the virus has been in the air for a long time, but it does not travel through the air.

This scientific research confirms that staging a play in a theater can spread the virus, even if the seats are arranged with social distance. Thus, using open space to stage a play would be safer than inside a theatre.

The interaction of historical Greek theatres with the natural environment is a significant factor for this research. “The Greek Dionysus Theater”, for example, was built in an isolated jungle, and such an environment was resistant to the spread of an epidemic. Also, the large space of this theatre is a great help to keep the social distance.

“With these associations in mind, I suggest again that the placement of the Asklepieion immediately above the Theater of Dionysus is not a mere coincidence, but rather it arises first from archaic associations between poetry and healing that became more urgent because of the plague”. (Mitchell-Boyask, R. (2011). *Plague and the Athenian Imagination: Drama, History, and the Cult of Asclepius* (Reprint ed.). Cambridge University Press.p.109)

The research of “Robin Michel Boyask” about the great plague in Athens(430BC), and the medical background of historical Greek theatre focused on why Athenians set up a healing center called ‘Acapolins’ near the ‘Dionysus Theater’. The name Acapolins comes from a place that, according to Greek mythology, is reminiscent of the first physician, Acapolis. Athenians believed that Greek poetry had the power to cure disease. The purpose of building a hospital next to the theater is evidence that theatre has healing power in addition to the medical treatment available at the hospital during an epidemic. These findings reveal that theatre was kept open during the plague of Athens for medical purposes.

“The ritual and the medical, as well as the political, do in fact overlap in the language of Greek drama, as we have seen in this study, and thus drama acts as a form of social medicine, a pharmakon for the polis. In the pharmacy of the Theater, Asclepius is never far away.” (*The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* by Kirk, G. S., Raven, J. E., Schofield, M. (February 24, 1984) Paperback. (2021). Cambridge University Press. p.260)



(An ancient Greek theatre, Source: Internet image)

CONCLUSION

The above findings are significant to this research which seeks to identify an epidemic-resistant theater model in Sri Lanka. There are a number of open theaters in Sri Lanka, such as the “Sarachchandra open theater” at University of Peradeniya and the open theater at University of Sabaragamuwa. These theatres are important here because their architectures and locations are similar to ancient Greek theatre. Most of these theaters have accessibilities for a large audience. “The Sarachchandra open theater” can usually hold between 3000 and 4000 audience at a time. Therefore, instead of closing theatres, these open theatres can be used to continue the theatre plays during a pandemic. Also, it is important to keep these open theatres architecture as a model for new theatre construction to avoid shutting down theatres in a future pandemic.



(Sarachchandra Open Theatre, University of Peradeniya, Source: Internet)

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