

An Overview of Theatre During the Pandemic in Turkey

By Eylem Ejder

Theatre is a lively art co-created by a group of people –audience and performers- gathering in a certain place and time. The components of this definition were interrupted in the pandemic. Because of the social distance rules and lockdown, it was almost impossible to make theatre. This led practitioners to find new ways of coming together and standing in solidarity. The most important manifestations the pandemic brought into Turkish theatre can be summarized as follows: digital theatre experiments, creating forms of solidarity through and in theatre and the legal struggles of theatre makers trying to make a living. In this short essay, I will try to give an overview of the theatre life during the epidemic days in Turkey. For a more extensive discussion on what Turkish theatre has experienced during pandemic, I wrote an essay in Turkish “Tiyatro, ‘?imdi’ ve ‘Burada,” in *ArtDog*, Volume 6. For more discussions and interviews with theatre makers from different regions of Turkey, please see theatre critic Yavuz Pak’s reports which have been [periodically published in *Tiyatro Dergisi*](#)

With the pandemic, theatre in Turkey, as in everywhere began to change its form. Many of the world’s leading companies have shared performance archives online. Festivals have turned into online. Despite the discussions of difficulties on making theatre during a pandemic, the annual ?stanbul International Theatre Festival has been organized this November with seven online performances. A large number of theatre companies have explored the possibilities of making theatre in a virtual environment. Despite negative reactions to digital theatre (including the recording of performance) and questions about whether digital theatre is really theatre, the possibilities of experiencing "here and now" in the digital environment were experienced with some reasonably successful examples. Among these one might mention BGST’s production *A Case for Each Day (Her G?üne Bir Vaka)*, Onur Karao?lu’s videolog series on Youtube *Read Subtitles Aloud*, Duygu Dalyano?lu’s sound theatre *The Voice of K, ?ule Ate?’ Quarantine2020 Video Performance Series*, and Platform Tiyatro’s *Map to Utopia*.

The pandemic prompted actors to experiment with new forms of storytelling to come together with audience. However, when economic problems were added to this, the anxiety of producing art turned into a struggle to survive. Life was completely suspended, but taxes, rents, and bills did not stop. Theatres and venues were about to collapse, one by one. With the pandemic, more than two thousand theatre workers were unemployed. Although it is said that the Ministry of Culture will provide support to private theatres that are deprived of government subsidize, theatre makers argue that the support is project-oriented and will not solve the problem in the long run. In addition, many groups on the black list cannot benefit.



Tiyatromuz Ya?as?n ?nisiyatifi (Lets Make Theatre Live ?nitiative). Photo: yeniyasamgazetesi.com.

There is, however, another side of the coin. The economic crisis opened the way for a network of solidarity among the theatre companies. In May, a solidarity campaign, called "100 Poems of Solidarity/Poetry, the Face of Solidarity" initiated by theatre artists to support theatre workers financially. Likewise, from different regions of Turkey, different theatre makers and groups, who perhaps never come together, united under the initiative of "Tiyatromuz Ya?as?n" (Let Our Theatre Live). When the petition circulated, more than thirty thousand signatures were collected in the first four days. The signature campaign initiated by the "Tiyatromuz Ya?as?n Initiative" helped the theatre actors and their audience to fight back and establish new organizations in their own city. Theatre makers began to work on a "Theatre Law" that would recognize professional legal rights. The Theatre Cooperative, which set out with similar intentions, still continues its activities and struggles for the rights of theatre makers during the pandemic.

How do theatre actors evaluate this process? What kind of theatre awaits us in the new season, where almost all festivals and many performances are organized online? To what extent and how is this process carried out by the actors in the field? What are the suggestions within the theatre for this crisis? These are only few questions which we need to discuss more in near future. Apparently, this situation will lead to significant changes in the way we make theatre. But it may be an opportunity for a dialogue to re-think this art together and to create a new dramaturgy and a new theatre language for this time, even while theatre workers face with the danger of unemployment, loss of income and closure of some theatres.

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