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RECEIVED 04 May 2022

ACCEPTED 01 December 2022

PUBLISHED 16 December 2022

CITATION

Dragičević Šešić M and Stefanović M
(2022), Theatre production and cultural
policy during the pandemic: Leadership
and memory narratives.*Eur. J. Cult. Manag. Polic.* 12:11082.
doi: 10.3389/ejcmp.2022.11082

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Theatre production and cultural policy during the pandemic: Leadership and memory narratives

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The pandemic showed that theatres are able to adapt, re-position and re-focus their work, through digital means and by using diverse social media tools, in order to stay present and active during periods in which their models of traditional production and existence are limited. The research explores the rationale behind so called “pandemic production,” digital narratives and main approaches of managers and leaders in the public theatres during the pandemic phase, while noting the lack of cultural policy leadership. The roles of theatre managers was of the most importance and the pace of adaptation depended on their skills and talent. For all stakeholders, the new reality caused by the pandemic opened the horizons of ethics and aesthetics of solidarity, empathy, care, and critical reflections (within theatres and among independent theatre practitioners), while cultural policymakers chose to act as bureaucrats, missing the opportunity to step in with more vision and leadership, which led to the downgrading of their role to pure administration.

KEYWORDS

institutional memory, leadership, memory policy, culture of solidarity, digital memory collection

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis disclosed many neglected aspects of theatre management, especially the relevance and importance of digital collections. This can be said for all cultural institutions, Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums (GLAM), Music Halls and Theatres, but also for festivals and different types of manifestations, which could find methods of operation using digital collections in the changed cultural realm during the pandemic. Festivals could offer to their audiences an overview of past editions, recordings of events, documentaries, and interviews with actors and critics¹, with some new digital products, created during pandemic, that would complement existing collections and offer

1 Festival “Nušićijada in exile” offered the festival on TV channel Nova S and on its own YouTube channel, where the audience could see documentaries from previous editions, discussions, stand-up comedians, etc. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65QMh_5aUKA.

at least in part the illusion that “the new edition” exists. GLAM institutions were in the heart of public attention, as media and audiences developed expectations of exploring their resources in a digital realm (Dragičević Šešić and Stefanović 2021). Thus, the institutions and organisations who did have policies regarding digital memory and archive practices were among the first to offer their audience primary products *via* different platforms, like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, etc.

Digital embodiment of institutional memory is a relatively recent phenomenon, as it mostly concerned with archiving art works and cultural products (research reports, books, analysis, photos) that cultural institutions had produced. Individual and collective memories were rarely part of digital institutional memory. The key thesis of this research is that the “pandemic production” relied on specific leadership and/or management approaches, while the digitalisation of institutional memory and narratives depends on present leadership of cultural institutions (or on the awareness of the importance of the present identity of the institution).

This research is partially based in organisational memory studies (OMS) that focus on the use of memory from a managerial point of view (Feldman and Feldman, 2006; Cohen 2014) and on cultural policies and its recommendations (Dragičević Šešić, 2013; Banks and O’Connor, 2020). It further explores research results from COURAGE (Courage, Horizon 2020 project) and (unpublished) results from the national research project Identity and memory (178012) that was finished just before the pandemic. Focus is on the digitalisation of cultural organisations’ memories, (comprising digitalisation of art production, but not exclusively), analysis of structures of digital archives, practice and policies of its use and analysis of policies and methods of “pandemic production” and archiving during the recent crisis caused by global pandemic.

Some of these questions we have already researched (Dragičević Šešić and Stefanović 2013; 2017a; 2017b) will be discussed in this text also, such as organisational memory, leadership (Caust 2012, 2018), participative decision making, crisis management (Antonacopoulou and Zachary 2014), organisational cultures and learning (Argote, L. 1999), and programming and digitalisation policies (organisational mission and vision). Thus, this research will be a cross-disciplinary endeavour taking its notions and vocabulary from different disciplines (Wessel and Moulds, 2008), i.e., key terms of cultural memory studies (Connerton 1989, 2008; Assmann 2006, 2011) would be in “dialogue” with organisational memory studies (Casey 1997; Casey and Olivera 2011), cultural policy (Jancovich 2017; Dupin-Meynard and Négrier, 2020) and cultural/theatre management (Jancovich 2015; Bonet and Schargorodsky, 2018; King and Schramme, 2019; Durrer and Henze, 2020). Methods of research include semi-structured interviews with theatre leaders; narrative analysis of programs and pandemic production; content analysis of media texts dealing with theatre production. The research will focus on data related to the theatre work during pandemic, as well as to organisational memory policies and types of digitalisation

of institutional memory. The goal of the empirical research was to analyse structures and models of digital archives that theatre have, but also to investigate practices and policies of its use during the recent crisis caused by global pandemics. In addition, we tried to explore if changes in the policies of digitalisation of content and institutional memory preservation will be happening after the crisis and if the management has perceived the crisis as an opportunity to introduce some new policies or practices in the sphere of digitalization. Furthermore, we tried identifying approaches by the management teams or leaders, the priorities, the preferences, and models for reaching out to the audiences that could not be present in closed theatre spaces. New reality forced cultural stakeholders that cultural experience defined by directness of contact to explore and find possible ways to communicate and to stay alive without basic conditions: being in place—to create theatre experience “on demand” in the digital realm.

The research questions are directly linked to COVID-19 chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981): what are the models of production and narratives during the pandemic; what is the purpose for digitalisation of institutional cultural capital; what is the role of leadership or shared tea leadership in regards to practices of digitalisation and pandemic production; and would theatre leaders consider a need for digitalisation policies to be adapted or redefined after the COVID-19 crisis. The interviews were held in July and August 2020, with directors or top management of the following public theatres in Belgrade: Belgrade Drama Theatre, Atelje 212 and Bitef Theatre.

Thus, the theatres we selected for research are city theatres, diverse in their repertoire policy, but also different when it comes to organisational model, mission and the role they play in the Belgrade cultural scene. What is a common denominator, besides being funded by city of Belgrade, could be described as absolute focus on standard production and repertory policy as the key way of “theatre identification” within Belgrade, Serbian and regional cultural realm, keeping their profile in spite of managerial (politically induced) changes. However, all selected theatres have shown certain flexibility and offered its stage to different initiatives, ready to enter in partnerships with independent companies, to let their younger staff to experiment. Furthermore, they had certain approaches to digitalisation that went beyond just a video-taping of shows (i.e., Bitef digitalisation of BITEF theatre posters, interviews with former actors but also with cultural opinion leaders, etc.). On the other hand, it is important to note, that our research sample did not include children or youth city theatres, as well as Yugoslav Drama Theatre, not willing to be part of the research.

“Pandemic production” or what happens when show cannot go on

Before we discuss the pandemic and digital production during the crisis period, it is important to note several things

regarding the setting, and context in which public theatres operate. Even before the pandemic, the model of public theatres, inherited from socialist system that heavily supported and subsidised public culture, was not sustainable, and more or less, it was always in some state of crisis and transition: “the institutions are forced to turn towards the market, since they receive funds for their operating costs and funding for the new productions decreases. In addition to that, because of the imposed policy of non-employment in the public sector, public theatres must work with the “older” company members. Furthermore, there is no specific law on theatre, although the National Council on Culture asked the Ministry of Culture to start a public debate about this much needed law. This means that public theatres navigate between the various laws and regulations concerned with public institutions and administration” (Stefanović 2016: 8). Furthermore, many internal stakeholders claim the marginalisation of theatres was just a consequence of the state of democracy in Serbia, and social and political context that did not favour free speech and public criticism of different social phenomenon’s, political elites, etc.

All three selected theatres are “public theatres with in-house production,” and they all seek to achieve the following goals (Bonet and Schargorodsky, 2018: 51): offering a quality programme that facilitates access to the broadest diversity of citizens possible, regardless of their income level, following the cultural democratisation model (Belgrade Drama Theatre, Atelje 212); being the performing arts reference in its territory (Bitef Theatre); recovering and highlighting classical or national performing arts heritage (Atelje 212); providing opportunities for emerging performing arts professionals and offering the right conditions to professionals so that they can develop major projects while seeking artistic excellence (Bitef Theatre, Atelje 212).

Furthermore, if we use the orientation as a tool to define each one of the theatres, we can say that Belgrade Drama Theatre and Atelje 212 are both blend of customer orientation theatres and social prestige orientation: “aesthetic line, sometimes quite eclectic, is marked by the attending audiences, and the main aim is filling all the seats. They do not specifically seek to bring in revenue, though that is clearly beneficial, but to meet the demands of the theatre’s customers. They seek to incorporate recognised titles, productions of proven success as well as the participation of celebrity artists” (Bonet and Schargorodsky, 2018: 79). The social prestige orientation can be seen and described aimed both at cultivating their recognition as a social space (a meeting place for the elites) and at the earning of awards and of a reputation among the critics, while inviting artists of prestige.

On the other hand, Bitef Theatre, the orientation is artistic: “corresponds to theatres that present a programme that prioritises aesthetic exploration. Their management staff have close relationships with artistic schools and workshops. They assume risks in relation to the audience, which is mainly

composed of people with previous experience. As a general rule, their most daring programme features are presented at relatively small venues” (Bonet and Schargorodsky, 2018:78).

Thus, when the pandemic started, indoor theatres were in a specific position. Due to their organisational model, which includes having the audience present in a closed location (on average 450 seats), the only option was to close the doors and to cancel rehearsals for upcoming productions. After first weeks of shock and adaptation, when literally theatres stayed silent, the theatre management teams decided to offer performances that would be transmitted digitally, or those that would not include more than 10 persons in one physical spot. These models were in place during the lockdown and curfews that lasted for about 2 months.

Overall, during 5 months of having different measures of social and physical distancing, theatre managers offered mostly digital content as a temporary substitute for the core theatre products. Addressing cultural needs of the audience while keeping the theatre brands alive and present at least in a digital world was an ongoing task. The social media outlets that were used the most, with the biggest promotional impact were Instagram for announcements and spreading the word about timetable and online repertoire schedule, while YouTube channel was used for transmission. It is important to note, that a number of plays that had been available on YouTube, were on theatre’s YouTube profiles for many years. Thus, for some theatres, this practice was not new, but the promotion, scheduling and announcements was a new promotional instrument.

Thus, we classified types of “pandemic production” that has been offered by institutional theatres in Belgrade:

Video recordings of plays distributed via social media outlets in scheduled time

This model of distribution was easiest and the most obvious option that was offered by most theatres. Since most of the theatres had archives of recorded plays, each theatre created its own digital repertoire during the lockdown period. However, the technical quality of available recorded plays differed, and there were two types: professional recordings and recordings for internal use that were of poor quality. One other issue was raised by some managers as a problematic and source of administrative limits for distributing plays online; and it concerns intellectual property rights. When original plays were created, the contracts with artists (like composers, or writers) did not cover necessarily rights for transmission and distribution of artwork. Thus, during new circumstances, managers needed to cover this legal aspect, and to formally have additional agreements with artists or YouTube.

Two theatres, Belgrade Drama Theatre and Atelje 212, focused on transmitting recorded plays, with announcements

and promotion on social media platforms. Some of their digital contents were announced as “digital premiers,” although it was not the real case, but it was used in cases when such a digital transmission was offered exclusive timing, and whose digital transmission was for the first time announced.

Belgrade Drama Theatre had simple reasoning that determined the concept of online distribution and broadcasting of performances during curfews. Basically, the quality of recording was a primary criterion when choosing “online repertoire” from their digital repositorium. Afterwards, the second criteria was choosing plays that are not performed on stage anymore. Finally, the order of plays that was broadcasted was chronological. Thus, the first one was the oldest recorded play that Belgrade Drama Theatre has in its archive, from the sixties, until the plays from recent years. Only three plays that are still “alive” or performed nowadays were available on YouTube.

The communication with the audience was mainly through comments left *via* tools like the chat box, or *via* Instagram messages. The data about the audience was not possible to track, and the feedback was ranging from excitement to dissatisfaction with the quality of sound, as stated by the interviewed managers.

On the other hand, Atelje 212’s approach to broadcasting showed that did not have any specific criteria for selection of the plays, and, basically, this was decided based on the quality of the recorded material. Most of the plays were previously available on YouTube with a high number of views, especially iconic plays like “Radovan III” (one version on YouTube has more than 210.000 views). However, when broadcasting was announced *via* social media outlets, the audience recalled some of the iconic titles and were attracted again to follow plays in specific timings, especially at the beginning of the pandemics. Using plays that provoke nostalgia and feelings of unity, someone on Facebook also stated that it was Yugo-nostalgic part of the repertory, Atelje 212, maybe without intention, caused reactions that could be described as encouraging, positive, humoristic, and all those were needed during the lockdown.

Performances for smaller audiences

During the period when the main restriction measure was related to the number of people per square metre, Atelje 212 under the title “Lonely Planet”, offered series of joint reflections about the future of theatre under and after pandemic for the audience of 10 persons. Belgrade Drama Theatre, on the other hand, organised “live reading” or public rehearsal of the text “Reader”, whose premiere was planned for the 2020/2021 season. There were about 50 persons at the audience, respecting physical distance. However, due to the constant changes regarding the number of people allowed to

be gathered at one place, performances with limited numbers in the audience were difficult to plan and execute. When the measures were lifted, most of the theatres downsized the number of audiences present.

Online discussions and “in house” video productions

The Bitef Theatre focused on offering a platform for debate and discussion while sharing experiences about “new normal”. Both projects that Bitef Theatre implemented, “Philosophical Theatre” and “Extraordinary performing arts scene” had a form of online discussions. The audience for both projects included mainly professionals from the field of theatre. While “Philosophical Theatre” was a continuation of an independent project that were presented in some other theatres before, “Extraordinary performing arts scene” was the Bitef Theatre initiative.

The “Philosophical Theatre” started its digital version on April 9th, with discussion between Oliver Frlić the director, and Srećko Horvat philosopher, concluding that the corona crisis will not be the end of the theatres but rather a new start, questioning the concept of live performances and possibility of audience seating with at least 2 m distance. Frlić reflected about the phenomenon of YouTube plays, only as a bridge until live theatres will be possible again. He believes that the recordings of plays have another purpose, which is not to be a theatre as it should, and authentic and real experience, and underlined that the online theatre means that actors cannot look the audience in the eyes, while the “level of disinfection” in online versions is very high on many levels. The emigration to the online world, means also a high level of social control that would be difficult to size down, once the pandemic ends. Stefan Kaegi, Milo Rau, Anja Suša, were some of the other participants in the following editions. Thus, the Bitef theatre continued its online programme in May with debates focusing on contemporary dance issues. All debates are recorded for the theatre archive, possibly to be retrieved and later used again in a digital realm.

On the other hand, Belgrade Drama Theatre’s “Theatre Bards” project was initiated before the pandemic, and it presents an unusual initiative for an institutional theatre. The idea was to use an independent TV production for creating TV forms that would be offered to different cable operators. By restarting Theatre Bards, which was iconic TV show 20 years ago, the general manager of Belgrade Drama Theatre (since 2019) introduced “entrepreneurial” leadership style, that inclines towards the market-oriented practice with the narrative of visibility, accessibility and vicinity to the audience not residing in Belgrade. During pandemics, they broadcasted the old shows on its own YouTube channel.

Narratives during pandemic production

The managers usually perceive the difference between two types of narratives that are created in theatres: official ones and unofficial ones. Official or formal narratives that are chosen to present the wanted story of a theatre are created and nurtured, supported by promotion. The official theatre narratives are chosen to present a certain theatre in line with its repertoire concept, marketing approach and notion of how the theatre should be positioned in the future.

“Informal” or unofficial are created by theatre workers as individuals, that share among themselves their memories, and this process is un-curated and depends to a large extent from the self-identification of the theatre workers with the institution. Sometimes these narratives are not in line with the official story, and still are important for the identity of certain organisation.

Theatre narratives can be described twofold. One part was influenced by the feeling of betrayal by cultural policymakers and founders, and the other, dominant narrative was the narrative of adaptation, digitalisation and solidarity.

Atelje 212 has chosen adaptation to a “new normal” as its first reaction, which later was followed by the narrative of accessibility and solidarity. Solidarity was primarily with colleges that needed help, since the level of care for the others was higher than in normal circumstances. However, the concept of solidarity did not go beyond the care and help to direct stakeholders, and this situation did not cause wider debate about the model of institutional theatres, artists and cultural workers who do not have “jobs for life” as the ones who are part of the institutional system. The position of cultural workers without long term contracts in institutional theatres (or some other cultural organisations) is fragile and dependent on short term jobs.

On the other hand, Atelje 212 does not have recordings of all performances, so the pandemic accelerated the need for further digitalisation of content. Thus, Atelje 212 recently started the project, supported by the Ministry of Culture, that will digitise and make available all recorded plays. Systematization of data and knowledge for the institutional memory purposes does not exist in a structured way, and so far, it has been part of ad hoc decision making and short-term planning. Strategic approach would envisage specific knowledge, skills and manpower, which is not available at this moment for all theatres that were included in this analysis.

The Bitef theatre, after the period of “shock” started with tactics of transformation which included narrative of adaptation, in order to bridge the gap until after the pandemic. For Bitef Theatre, the narrative of adaptation meant offering relevant topics in a digital frame. This approach actually relates to the theatre’s recent announcement that they will be shifting and repositioning as a “platform for new theatrical tendencies” which will get them closer to the Bitef Festival. In that sense, offering new forms *via* their platform like Philosophical Theatre and

online discussions “Lets continue from the beginning,” were adequate choices.

Bitef theatre invested more thoughts in their archiving process—partially because due to the importance of the festival, they were aware of quality of their “documents”, and partially because Jovan Ćirilov as artistic director of the Festival, “imposed” that archiving practice also on Bitef Theatre, wishing to memorise in this way a significant contribution of Mira Trailović to Serbian culture. Bitef Theatre archive is deposited in the City Archive of Belgrade, and it encompasses different artefacts and memorabilia, from posters, photos and brochures, monographs to audio and video materials, all accessible *via* University Library platform. In the last 10 years, all production has been recorded, however, that was not the practice before that period. The institutional memory underlines important dates like anniversaries (30 years of the Bitef theatre was celebrated) and the main tool for keeping memories are (interactive) exhibitions and printed materials like monographs.

Belgrade Drama Theatre concept and narrative was the continuity, and fulfilling the plans regarding co-productions, festivals and tours across the region as soon as the lockdown ended. Furthermore, solidarity with associates who did not have long term contracts with theatre, was preserved. The numbers show that for 40 plays, BDT relied on 35 actors with permanent contract (theatre ensemble), 32 associates and 180 visiting actors. This number for visiting actors was drastically lowered, while they tried keeping the associates. Although the official narrative was solidarity, in practice this could not be fulfilled completely. The funding of public theatres was scarce even before the pandemic, and fundraising during the pandemic was not a realistic option. Besides the narrative of solidarity, Belgrade Drama Theatre has chosen the narrative of availability, accessibility, and digital possibilities. With developing plans on how to offer plays with “pay per view”, this theatre is looking beyond the pandemic, and choosing commercial and market approaches for the coming period.

Belgrade Drama Theatre does not have a special archiving policy. Its archive is partially at the theatre, while the part is held at the Theatre Museum of Serbia. The process of archiving started around 2010, and managers realized that plays and data from the first years were more carefully saved, comparing to the plays from the nineties.

Disconnect between cultural policymakers and leadership (or how the crisis showed the level of readiness to adapt and lead)—missed opportunity

Digitisation as part of the cultural policy and institutional memory policies, has been already for 10 years on the agenda of

the Ministry of Culture and Media and the Government of Serbia. Museums and libraries had been at the forefront of these actions, as they had both inner motivation and outside (governmental) attention and support, willing to use digitised artefacts in the cultural and digital diplomacy (Dragičević Šešić and Stefanović 2021). In theatres, the situation has been a little bit different. The inner motivation was present, while the support was partial, and for some theatres, like Atelje 212, the support came just during the pandemic when the need was urgent and obvious.

The Ministry of Culture and city secretariat for culture seemed to be very inactive during the pandemic, offering no instructions, consultancy, training, or any kind of help to management or staff. The cultural institutions “obeyed” general regulations that were imposed for all organisations in the public sector (i.e., work from home for monthly income). The Ministry of Culture and Media did not have any written or verbal instructions with cultural policy guidance—except weekly distribution of masks and gloves through the Ministry of Culture and Media for “National” institutions. Altogether, it seems that pandemic period was not used by the cultural policy creators to develop discussions about future policies and (common) practices and developmental strategies, and that the policy and decision makers did not approach institutions proactively with any kind of assistance and help in regard to the continuation of core activities.

However, The Ministry of Culture and Media initiated “Digital solidarity” platform—webpage <https://www.digitalnasolidarnost.gov.rs/#digitalnasolidarnost> with the intention of collecting and gathering all information about different cultural products that have been accessible for free, from free books, movies, music, theatre plays, etc. Solidarity here was meant to be solidarity with the population, but not solidarity with artists that stayed without possibilities to work (especially it was traumatic for performing artists that are part of collective artistic expressions). After all, for the wider audiences, the technical and visual experience for most of the webpage links offered is non-inspiring, on the contrary. It seems the investment in digitalisation of cultural products in order to make them attractive needs to be developed, since the customer experience should offer something that could substitute the excitement of life theatre dynamics.

The other initiative in which actors from public theatres participated, was a social awareness campaign about the pandemic and the need to “stay home.” The campaign was initiated by the Regional Government of Vojvodina.

In June 2020, when it seemed the epidemiological situation got better, and it was announced that the virus is under control, Belgrade city managers decided to open performances to public and to offer to city theatres the summer stage at Tašmajdan (public venue and park). All public theatres were invited to perform on that stage. The “summer repertoire” started with musical “Mama Mia” by the Terazije Theatre, but after two

performances that were attended by more than thousand people, actors publicly stated that they feel unsafe and that the number of people at one location, even outside, presents a health risk for all. Actually, this request coincided with the rise of the number of people diagnosed with COVID-19. Thus, after two more performances by Belgrade Drama Theatre (about 300 persons in the audience), the decision was to stop with performances in the summer stage until further notice.

As mentioned, the founder (city government and Secretariat for culture) of analysed theatres during a pandemic did not have an active approach towards the theatres, and that its role was purely administrative—controlling. All recommendations imposed to the theatres were related to the security of staff and health standards while the content, or production work was not part of the official or unofficial communications and discussions. Theatre leaders and managers were left to themselves to decide and to implement, if possible, any kind of content. On one hand, this was beneficial for theatres because they had an opportunity to act independently and to adapt according to their values, mission, and assessment of the situation and sources available. On the other hand, the founder missed the opportunity to facilitate, to lead and to create better conditions for the theatre stakeholders, by offering new venues, models, new tools and additional support for creation and distribution of cultural products.

Cultural policies, leadership and governance paradoxes (instead of a conclusion)

Even cultural policies during the crisis lacked leadership. The Minister of Culture and Media, as well as the City secretary for the Culture were pretty invisible during first few months of the pandemic, and, what is more important, missed to use the crises as an opportunity for the development of integrative public policy (Dragičević Šešić 2006), at least on the city level. It was a bottom-up cultural policy that started to be developed through different solidarity and advocacy actions, led by the Association of Drama Artists of Serbia and the Association Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia, as well by other actors within civil society, that were questioning reasons of the lack or huge delay of cultural policy measures². However, public discourse and debate during the COVID-19 crisis was directed towards the medical issues and support to medical workers, thus overall, the cultural sector did not receive much of an attention or support.

2 On 27th May the NGO Creative Serbia had organised a debate at Dorćol plac, “Culture after COVID-19,” addressing a public appeal to the Prime Minister, as it seemed that all previous appeals to the Ministry of Culture had not have any results. <https://antivirus.in.rs/debata-u-dorcol-placu-i-pismo-intelektulaca-ani-brnabic/>.

Leadership during crises is at numerous challenges (Antonacopoulou and Zachary, 2014; Caust 2018), as it has to concentrate on solving immediate problems, to focus on issues that demand urgent reactions and for whom there are no procedures or routines. It both reflects internal organisation of the working process as well as repertory policies—ways of relating to stakeholders and audiences.

Thus, when we observed and analysed the leadership during this pandemic crisis, in most of interviews and other data (collected from daily press), it was clear that the director (who has a lot of authority according to the Law on Culture, 2011), had to initiate a process of reflections and decision making during the pandemic phase in an unusual way, as regular meetings and procedures had been cancelled. But, most of boards of cultural organisations did not meet during the pandemic. It is obvious that boards in Serbia are seen as (Dragičević-Šešić and Mihaljinac, 2019) formal, representative bodies, appointed by the founder, that are gathering once or maximum twice a year for their regular duties (approving the report for previous and the plan for the next year), and that management of cultural organisations, including theatres, had not thought about their possible role in the situation of crisis. There were no attempts to include users in a reflection, even less in a decision-making process (Jancovich 2015, 2017), or to engage its own staff, stakeholders or other relevant opinion-makers in the cultural realm, to identify possible ideas or solutions to continue its work in a digital realm. This COVID-19 chronotope offered the unique opportunity to test intersectoral partnership with IT companies and companies active in the creative industries, what was done within the civil and private sector, but public cultural institutions have not tried to make any new entrepreneurial move.

Having in mind that the orientation of two theatres, described as blend of customer oriented and social prestige, it was also expected to have immediate policies that would first try to answer main customer needs and interests. Second goal was again to show capability to fast adapting and to draw a picture of a theatre that is keeping social prestige in the digital sphere as well.

The theatre with artistic orientation kept an “artistic” approach by creating critical thinking programs and projects, only in digital form.

All leaders needed to find a balance between fulfilling prescribed administrative measures and substituting shows that could not go on for now. But, from institution to institution the rules have been different and the level of self-initiative, engagement and responsibility of the employees have been different. In all previous cases of pandemic production, it appears that team spirit prevailed and influenced the decision making, and that the “leaders” delegated adapting approaches to the higher management. The crisis reunited teams who were quite small (two to five people) and that joint reflections and reasoning influenced the final decision on pandemic modalities of production, and the narrative creation.

But the announcement of the Belgrade city secretariat initiative of joint stage (in Tašmajdan park) had prevented each theatre to develop its own, specific response, and to use its own resources, such as squares in front of theatres and courtyards that some of them are having. There were no stimulants to explore cultural heritage sites and parks for performances, or encouragements to work in ateliers (workshops) on specific projects of applied or community theatre. It seems that evident advantage of having systemic and complex digital theatre archive had not inspired leadership to create new digital theatre projects, from those related to memory digitalization, gathering individual memories, artefacts till more complex experiments that would engage artistic ensemble in story-telling productions, or experimental digital theatre projects that predominated within independent theatre collectives.

Large dissatisfaction of cultural operators working for the public sector throughout Serbia, represents the biggest challenge for each new director that comes in the organisation. This can be solved only with very innovative and different approach of the manager, that is capable to fundraise outside the public sector in Serbia (to attract European projects, etc.), developing intersectoral partnership projects, thus finding way to raise income, but also to help continuous professional education that unfortunately is completely lacking as a system in Serbia (no funds, or foreseen free days for that), to open space for inner initiatives and creativity. Digital learning tools and innovative work in a digital realm, might be a partial response to that, as well as an initiative to use digital tools for best individual stories about the history of the institution.

This research had shown that the key problem in the present theatre realm in Serbia is related to undefined cultural and theatre policy, lack of autonomy of public cultural institutions, weak leadership that feels threatened by illiberalism—partocratic political system that demands servility, introduces elements of populist communication and populist reasoning even in cultural field. Despite having excellent artistic and technical teams within theatres, their artistic, technical and intellectual capacities stayed unused—and all activities were held on minimum, while independent organisations used this period for continuous professional development, digital archiving and digital production. However, in both sectors pandemic stimulated a culture of solidarity to be developed and implemented. Thus, the long-term impact of COVID-19 crisis is yet to be evaluated and measured in the public sector in Serbia.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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