

# A Community in Quarantine: The Social Worlds of Alternative Theater During the Pandemic

**Katarzyna Kalinowska**   
Educational Research Institute, Poland

**Katarzyna Kułakowska**   
Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland

**Maria Babicka**   
Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Warsaw, Poland

**Michał Bargielski**   
Independent Researcher

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**Abstract:** The article describes the functioning of alternative theater community during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical framework of analysis is determined by the social worlds theory, allowing us to capture the processual nature of reconstructing the social world of alternative theater in the era of COVID-19. We explore the ways in which independent theater is coping with the threat to its practice, understood as a tool for building a community “here and now,” i.e. its main technology, values, and the primary activity that organizes communication within the social worlds of alternative theater. We take into account changes brought on by the pandemic (the inability to build relationships via direct interaction with audience members/participants) and the constant, everyday experiences of people working in alternative theater (their ability to function in a crisis). Our analysis is based on empirical data collected in the course of socio-anthropological studies into: (1) the working conditions of Polish theater workers during the pandemic, carried out by the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute in Warsaw; and (2) the *modus operandi* of the Węgajty Theater from the perspective of its participants’ experiences.

**Katarzyna Kalinowska**, PhD, sociologist. She works as an assistant professor at the Educational Research Institute in Warsaw. Author of the monograph titled *Flirt and Pickup Practices: A Study in the Microsociology of Emotions*. Her research interests include the sociology of emotions and love, qualitative research methodology, research ethics, and the anthropology

of school and youth. She also researches theater education and theater pedagogy in Poland.

## Contact details:

Educational Research Institute  
ul. Górczewska 8, 01-180 Warsaw  
email address: k.kalinowska@wp.pl

**Katarzyna Kułakowska**, PhD, cultural scientist, cultural anthropologist, social researcher. Currently works as an assistant professor at the Institute of Art at the Polish Academy of Sciences, where she studies the working method of the Węgajty Theater on the basis of the experiences of its participants. She has published two monographs: *Gender City: The Lover's Discourse of Maria Peszek* (Warsaw 2010) and *Jestresses: The Women of Polish Theatrical Counterculture* (Warsaw 2017). Her research interests include the specificity of female experience in the Polish theater; gender, body, and sexuality. She is working on expanding Polish theater studies with feminist perspective.

**Contact details:**

Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences  
ul. Długa 26/28, 00-950 Warsaw  
email address: katarzyna.kulakowska@ispan.pl

**Maria Babicka**, MA, graduate of sociology and social anthropology, theater pedagogue, PhD student and member

of the Department of Culture Research Methods in the Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Warsaw. She works in the Department of Theater Pedagogy at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute. Her research interests include amateur theater, theater education in Poland, and family educational practices of participating in theater life. She is a member of the Theatre Pedagogues' Association.

**Contact details:**

Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Warsaw,  
ul. Nowy Świat 69, 00-927 Warsaw  
email address: m.babicka@uw.edu.pl

**Michał Bargielski**, MA, sociologist, independent researcher. Specializes in public policy evaluation research and cultural animation. Currently working on the role of cultural and artistic projects in the development of local societies.

**Contact details:**

Independent Researcher  
email address: michal.bargielski@op.pl

## Theater Life and the Pandemic

When the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11th, 2020, the Polish Governmental Crisis Management Team made the decision to order a temporary closure of all cultural institutions, libraries, local cultural centers, philharmonics, art galleries, cinemas, museums, operas, operettas, theaters, as well as schools, universities, and art education institutions. Every theater in Poland, regardless of its statute, character, or organizational structure, faced the consequences of that sudden decision. The 'freezing' of the cultural sector – and in particular those areas that operate in direct contact with audiences – should be considered both in terms of economic losses and the weakening of relationships with audiences, of-

ten fostered over a number of years. Theaters faced a twofold challenge: to stay afloat and maintain financial liquidity on the one hand, and maintain contact with their audiences, perhaps even attracting new ones, on the other. The analysis of the first months of theater closures around the world conducted by Krystyna Mogilnicka (2020) shows that despite many differences across theater structures in individual countries, there are many similarities in the functioning of the theater sector during the pandemic. As a result of limiting offline activities, both globally and in Poland, previously unpopular (or viewed skeptically) initiatives appeared online. These included making archival recordings of performances available online, premiere screenings of video recordings of performances from recent seasons, live broadcasts of performances played to

an empty audience, talks with artists, viral campaigns, serialized plays, readings, performances, and online workshops. This proves that during the pandemic, some theaters – often reluctantly and rarely enthusiastically – transferred some of their activities online. Mogilnicka also writes about the common universe of concerns shared by various institutions: “Theaters are being re-opened in the final phase of easing the so-called lockdown, accompanied by a sense of great social responsibility and uncertainty about the possibility of maintaining old practices or artistic shape of performances, as well as profitability when forced to apply the recommended security measures” (2020).

More than two months after restrictions on cultural institutions had been imposed, on May 19, 2020, guidelines were given for the reopening of theaters, operas, and philharmonics. This phase assumed a gradual resuming of activities, at first without the participation of the public, in order to create safe conditions for the resumption of administrative work and rehearsals. The guidelines allowed the organization of events with audience participation at a later stage and only under certain sanitary conditions. At the end of August 2020, when this article was written, one could see various strategies for resuming artistic activity of theaters. Some theaters have just reintroduced live performances. These usually take place outdoors and with a reduced number of audience members. While the unexpected but essentially quite short phase of total lockdown leveled the circumstances of various theaters, generating similar emotions, difficulties, and doubts, the return to offline activities seems to largely depend on organizational capabilities of particular institutions, their technical facilities, legal issues, and ways of financing their activities.

The latest data recorded by the Documentation Laboratory of the Theater Institute showed that there are 909 active theaters in Poland – theater institutions and organizations of different statutes, character, or organizational structure. According to the *Teatr w Polsce [Theatre in Poland]*, public theaters and departments of municipal and communal cultural institutions account for 26,7% of all theaters in Poland; private theaters account for 19,3%; theaters operating as foundations and associations account for 47,1%; and informal groups are estimated at 6,9% of all theaters (Buchwald 2019:XXVIII–LV). The vague definition of *alternative theaters*, which are the subject of our research, does not allow us to clearly define which sectors of the economy they belong to. The original non-institutional character of alternative theaters ceased to be their dominant feature when some of them gained the status of cultural institutions. However, this is a rare occurrence and the alternative character should be sought mainly among theaters from the third sector or independent groups. As the data shows, this is quite a large and diverse sector of the Polish theatre.

Because of lockdown and safety restrictions, alternative theaters appear to find themselves in an extremely worrying predicament. The reasons for this are threefold. First of all, resuming events with the participation of the audience is more difficult for theaters that, more often than not, lack their own premises, are traveling theaters, are constantly “on the move,” do not perform in large enough venues where it is possible to seat viewers at a safe distance, and usually do not have back-up technical facilities enabling the registration of artistic events. For alternative theaters, sanitary restrictions sometimes mean a complete end to their activities, both offline and online. The second reason concerns financing. In most cases, alternative theaters do not have ac-

cess to permanent subsidies. They are dependent on grants, ticket sales or public fundraising, as well as the fees for performances and artistic events. Because they have to rely on such precarious sources of income (i.e. sources that are less stable than a permanent subsidy), the beginning of March 2020 and the prolonged suspension of artistic activity is even more severe for artists working in alternative theater. The last issue, and perhaps the most important from the point of view of our analysis, is related to the fact that it is considerably difficult or even impossible to carry out activities that constitute the alternative and simultaneously distinguish the initiative from non-alternative theater. In the new, pandemic-struck reality, it is difficult to create an alternative by practicing theater within the community and for the community – and this is what the members of the alternative theater movement do on a daily basis.

### Alternative Theater – the theater of dreamers

What is the dividing line, as Jan Kłossowicz wrote, between “normal” theater and its “alternative” if, from its very beginning. “its path cannot be determined in any meaningful way” (1987:67)? How can one understand this difference, especially now that the boundaries of alternative theater are not merely blurred, but impossible to define? What distinguishes alternative theater from other kinds of theatre results directly from a different way of *being-in-the-world* – understood, in phenomenology, as conscious presence that encompasses both an understanding of one’s own existence and that of the surrounding world (Heidegger 1962).

The discussion on the definition of alternative theater has been running continuously since the end of the

1980s, although the adjective ‘alternative’ – attempting to capture the essence of this movement – first came into use at the end of the 1970s and gained peak popularity in the 1990s (Ostrowska and Tyszka 2008:7). At that time, alternative theater was mainly recognized for its **organizational and ideological differences**, distinguishing it from the “subsidized repertoire theater” dominant in the Polish theater life (Gołaczyńska 2002:13). Tomasz Kubikowski wrote about the alternative movement in the following way: “The gesture of disconnecting from the «mainstream» in the name of certain values and the institutional separateness resulting from this gesture should be considered as [its] necessary (although also vague) and fundamental distinguishing feature” (2000:227–248). With time, when the non-institutional nature of the alternative began to be questioned<sup>1</sup>, researchers began to treat it primarily as part of the cultural project of an alternative society, emphasizing its **opposition to the existing socio-cultural reality** and a simultaneous belief that this reality could change. The conviction that it is indeed possible to arrange this world in a better manner – both in terms of political and economic systems and interpersonal relations, and thus making a definite **move beyond theater** – became the main distinguishing feature of alternative theaters, making them something “more than just theater” (Jawłowska 1988).

One of the most important sources of inspiration for the Polish alternative theater were social move-

<sup>1</sup> With time, some alternative theaters gained the status of cultural institutions. A good example is the legendary alternative theatre called the ‘Theater of the Eighth Day’ in Poznań. It has been a municipal cultural institution for almost thirty years, yet still cultivates the idea of independence, open politics, and countercultural attitudes – both in professional life and in personal life. Another example is the ‘Kana Theater’ in Szczecin, which gained the status of a cultural institution in 2007 and continues with the notion of an alternative, culture-forming center, established in the 1970s by Zygmunt Duczyński.

ments – active in the West in the 1960s and in Poland in the early 1970s – that used academic community theatre as the most obvious area of their activities. According to Aldona Jawłowska, the Polish alternative theater – striving to effect a profound change on the existing reality – has certainly transformed into a social movement that became a significant element of cultural change (1988:19). Jawłowska based her diagnosis on Alain Touraine’s concept of conflict as one of the basic elements of the social reality understood as a struggle for models of culture that define the framework of cognitive activity, productivity, and morality within each community (Touraine 1985:749–787). Therefore, alternative theater could only be **engaged theater**. “Theater that does not progress and does not strive to fulfill dreams of an ideal world in its (artistic and everyday) activities, is not alternative theater” – emphasized the researchers (Ostrowska and Tyszcza 2008:9). Simultaneously, they noted the two extremes of countercultural activities – broadly understood **politics** on the one hand, and **anthropology** on the other (Kornaś 2007:4). Groups that clearly opposed the existing order, expressing disagreement in their performances, were quickly identified as “one of the most sensitive social seismographs” (Puzyna 1974:169). Groups that refused to participate in the field of dominant culture undertook “paratheatrical” activities outside that field. Despite the choice of various paths of countercultural contestation, themes such as opposition to the existing social relations and conventions, a critical diagnosis of the social reality, and a sense of being responsible for the world as well as the belief that it is possible to rearrange it have remained common among alternative artists. “They are people who, through theater, pursue the dream of building their own lives. A theater of the different, then? Of dreamers?” (Barba 1979:161).

An important feature of the early stages of alternative theater was the fact that it based all its activities on the idea of the **inseparability of life and art**. In organizational terms, this definitely distinguished it from institutional theater. In alternative theater, “there is no difference between a personal and professional life, since how theater is made takes precedence over what is produced” (Watson 1993:21). Thus, theatrical alternative constructed not only an alternative model of work, but above all – an alternative model of life that required adopting a creative attitude in terms of “being with others,” rejecting the existing stereotypes, and undertaking creative explorations that would make the “succession of taboos, conventions, and sacred values tremble” (Grotowski 2012:223). Efforts to alter behavioral patterns in interpersonal relationships and to establish new forms of relations were made during workshops and the acting training, which was based on the belief that **self-improvement is only possible within the community**.

It is worth noting that what distinguishes the alternative is the practice of a kind of **countercultural ethos**. It consists of three activities that stem from, and drive, one another: (1) the creative contestation of the surrounding reality; (2) the need to drive a social change in order to (3) create a space where the unity of thought and action is possible, understood as the ‘authenticity’ of the individual. Thus, the aim is to implement a new vision of culture and society, in which an individual could develop as a fully integrated, ‘authentic’ being, avoiding being torn between values and performed roles, reflecting on customs and forms adopted in culture, with a strong sense of identity and their own way of being present in the world that is consistent with their inner voice (Jawłowska 1988:6). The practice of countercultural ethos is, therefore, not so much an **alternative to the**

**system** (Kolankiewicz 2002:55) as a **path leading toward revolution**.

Some researchers see the alternative as generational theater, and thus a **one-off episode in the history of theater** (Dziewulska 1994; Gramont 1998; Nyczek 2001). However, subsequent generations (heirs) in the Polish theater still value the origins of that alternative, i.e. activities based on the search for individual forms of creativity and life. Toward the end of the previous century, Tadeusz Kornaś wrote that this milieu was defined by “fewer common values, more and more heterogeneity, and increasing ideological chaos and age differences between individual theaters” (1999:10). And yet, in the first two decades of the 21st century, the alternative is still active; remains “alternative in terms of organization, program, and artistic content” (Semil and Wysińska 1980); forces the viewer “to evaluate oneself, one’s attitude towards life and the surrounding world, and liberates [them] from the daily routine” (Jawłowska 1988:16); is keenly interested in “human existence in the «here and now»” (Ostrowska and Tyszka 2008:88); is an alternative whose goals go far beyond artistic activity, one that wants to act “through theater – beyond theater” (Kosiński 2010:206); and is focused not only on practicing art, but, above all, on “social action, stimulating activity, expanding of social and political consciousness of one’s own circles” (Jawłowska 1981:11).

Understood in this way, alternative theater appears to be a **particular type of cultural center** that aims to implement its program through activities that go beyond performances, and prioritizes “working on the ground” with the community rather than creating new artistic forms. “[A]ny attempt to define the scope of the theatrical «alternative» will inevitably [...] be arbitrary” (Kubikowski 2000:227), but close

to the alternative worldview, whose “statements and life practices are oriented toward re-education, growth, and self-actualization of a human being, and as a result – restoring their autonomy and inner-control” (Wyka 1990:49). It seems, however, that these aspirations are much less utopian than that of the generation associated with the birth of the Polish counterculture. “It is never possible to be «outside society». One can only diverge from its norms,” as Eugenio Barba wrote in the late 1970s (1979:168). His words were eventually fully understood by the various heirs of the 1970s alternative (such as ‘Komuna Warszawa’, ‘Teatr Brama’ from Goleniow, ‘Teatr Krzyk’ from Maszewo, Warsaw’s ‘Teatr Remus’ and ‘Teatr Akt’, Poznań-based theaters such as: ‘Teatr Porwaczy Ciało’ or ‘Usta Usta Republika), or its veterans (such as the ‘Teatr Ósmego Dnia’ in Poznań, ‘Teatr Kana’ in Szczecin, ‘Teatr ZAR’ in Wrocław, and ‘Teatr Pieśń Kozła’, ‘Chorea’ in Łódź, or theaters named after the places where they operate, e.g. ‘Teatr Węgajty’, ‘Teatr Gardzienice’).

### Social worlds of alternative theater

The above brief ideological history of the alternative theater movement in Poland indicates a number of processes that have been taking place for several decades. It appears to be a diverse field of culture with indistinct borders, full of internal disputes about its own identity, simultaneously adjacent to values proclaimed by its founders and far removed from its historical roots. The independent theater environment is characterized by an intense internal dynamics and a continually evolving socio-cultural environment. In our study, we wanted to take into account this processual nature of this particular field, as well as its distinctiveness from other spaces of the contemporary Polish culture and art. In order to explain the crisis faced by

alternative theater as a result of the pandemic, we reached for the **social worlds theory** (Cressey 1932; Strauss 1978; Becker 1982; Clarke 1991; Kacperczyk 2016), which makes it possible to describe both the variability and the specificity of fragments of social reality, and simultaneously provides well-established analytical tools to explain the ontological status of cultural trends and formations, as well as to study identity processes that take place in artistic environments.<sup>2</sup>

According to Anselm Strauss, the basic feature of a social world is the fact that among the numerous activities undertaken by its members, there is one key activity – the so-called **primary activity** – that enables effective communication and organizes all processes in this particular world. It is then possible to distinguish a social world (Strauss 1978:22), understood very broadly as a set of practices, processes, and interactions focused around this particular activity. All other analytical categories described by theorists of social worlds are subordinated to the maintenance of that primary activity (cf. Kacperczyk 2016:34–57): **technologies** (means enabling the activity to be performed in a particular manner), **arenas** (spaces of various debates around different problems existing in the world), **boundaries** (fluid dividing lines; their precarity can be seen in how the social world intersects with other formal subjects and social structures), **values** (unique and

bonding ideas that construct discourses and patterns of behavior), **commitment** (identifying with the world that strengthens the participants' dedication to discourses and upholding values), and **auxiliary activities** (sub-processes that ensure the evolutionary character of the social world). The constant development and changeability of each world is described by four specific sub-processes: budding off, segmentation, intersection, and legitimation. As part of these processes, there are attempts to specify and define the boundaries of social sub-worlds. However, the **primary activity** is constitutive in nature, which means that a social world exists as long as the primary activity can be performed. With all this into account, the very central activity that constitutes the world of the theater alternative is under serious threat under the current circumstances. This is because the main focus of alternative theater is not on providing audiences with entertainment, providing an encounter with culture or spiritual experiences, or creating new artistic qualities (which could be considered as the main aspiration of non-alternative theaters, either public or private). Rather, the central activity around which the social world of alternative theatre is organized is the production of alternative models of culture and community life in opposition to the formalized, de-subjectified relations within contemporary societies. It is about creating a new model of authentic, intimate relationships on a micro-social level as well as taking responsibility for the community in the macro-social terms. The way to achieve this goal – i.e. the main technology that sustains the existence of alternative social worlds – is through theatrical and para-theatrical activities based on building close, profound bonds with the participants of theatrical events. Similarly to primary activity, this technology is under threat during the pandemic. It is difficult to practice theater that 'weaves' an alternative

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the theory of social worlds was created during research focusing on artistic cultures. It was Paul G. Cressey who – describing the milieu of dance school participants as “a separate social world” – coined the very phrase (Cressey 1932:31). Later, Howard S. Becker used the theory of social worlds to describe the functioning of artistic circles. He defined the art world as “the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produce(s) the kind of art works that art world is noted for” (Becker 1982:X). His view of art as a collective product is considered seminal in the study of social worlds.

order of social bonds. The way in which the representatives of this environment function in the pandemic turns out to be focused on, above all, a struggle to preserve the boundaries of the social world of the alternative theater movement and the identity of its participants. When it comes to alternative theater, the struggle to survive the pandemic is not just about financial or organizational 'staying afloat', but also about maintaining its countercultural distinctiveness and harnessing the current crisis into the mechanisms of producing alternatives.

This article is the first study to focus on the organizational nature of the social worlds of the theatre alternative during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>3</sup>, thus making an original contribution to the literature on the subject. Our research goal is to find out **how these worlds function and how they are constructed when it is difficult to do theater as a tool for producing alternatives in relationships, community, and being together in the 'here and now'**. We discuss the activities and processes taking place within the studied environment in relation to the theory of social worlds, which allows us to capture the processual nature of reconstructing the elements that make up the social worlds of the alternative. In our study, we look at the changes brought on by the pandemic and lockdown (the inability to build relationships during direct encounters with viewers/participants, the loss of basic technologies supporting the primary activity), as well as continual elements of everyday life of people working in alternative theater, i.e. those areas that did not undergo any significant change during the pandemic (sense of uncertainty, lack of control,

<sup>3</sup> Based on the same research, we also wrote an article on selected online and offline initiatives undertaken by "the social theaters of ambulatory care" during the pandemic (Kułakowska et al. 2020).

security; a tendency to rebel, fight, and disagree). We focus on the tactics that help maintain consistency within the alternative theater movement. We also point to new and old arenas responsible for the processes of segmentation taking place in the field of alternative theater. The result of our research is a set of hypotheses concerning the further development of the theater alternative in Poland.

### About the research

At the end of April 2020, the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute initiated a series of studies on the functioning of the theater life during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the project was to paint a broad picture of the Polish theater in 2020. This article is based on data collected during one of the seven modules forming that research project<sup>4</sup> – a study of the experiences of theater staff during the pandemic – part of which was an analysis of circumstances faced by those working within the alternative theater movement.<sup>5</sup> The study was qualitative, and we used sociological and anthropological methods and fieldwork techniques, including: open participant observation (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Lofland and Lofland 1995), netnography (Kozinets 2010), in-depth interviews conducted individually or in groups, inspired by the formula of comprehensive interview proposed by

<sup>4</sup> The project included research into: (1) the situation and strategies of theaters as seen by people managing theater institutions and organizations in Poland; (2) the experiences of theatre employees and collaborators; (3) the online presence of theaters; (4) the changing practices and preferences of audience members – a survey conducted shortly after all the theater closures; (5) the amateur theater movement; (6) theatrical artists; and (7) theatrical critics as well as writing about theater during the pandemic. Each of the studies had its own methodology and a separate research team.

<sup>5</sup> The research project was carried out by the team composed of: Michał Bargielski, Anna Buchner, Katarzyna Kalinowska, Katarzyna Kułakowska, and Maria Wierzbicka. Maria Babicka joined the team at the stage of analysis and writing the article.

Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2007), as well as an analysis of the existing data (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) and a qualitative Internet survey (Braun et al. 2020). The objectives and research questions were aimed at capturing the views of people working in different theaters, describing their experiences, emotions, difficulties, concerns, and tactics during the pandemic. We focused on identifying changes that took place in the theater world during the lockdown. We asked about the professional work of theater employees during the pandemic, about how their everyday life has changed, and about emotions accompanying the professional changes they experienced. Our research included all professional groups working in theaters, namely: actors, other artists (directors, stage designers, choreographers, composers), administration, producers, technical staff, box office and customer service employees, promotion, education, and archive departments. The respondents worked in various types of theaters (public, private, and alternative) and at the time of conducting the research they had been employed for several to several dozen years. In this article, we analyze the data collected from people involved in the alternative theater movement. Most of the respondents are 'one-man orchestras' who know the theater life inside out and often take on multiple roles – from administrative work and fundraising, through technical, marketing, and promotional tasks, to artistic activity.

From mid-May until the end of July 2020, we conducted **field research** among people working in alternative theaters. These included **online and telephone research** activities (three individual interviews and one group interview conducted via instant messaging tools; six individual telephone interviews; ongoing netnographic observations in the social media channels of twenty alternative

theaters), and **offline research** (five participant observations in theater groups, during face-to-face meetings, numerous ethnographic interviews accompanying the observations, and two individual in-depth interviews). The sample selection was purposive; our intention was to include different sub-worlds of alternative theater. We conducted research among different groups: from strictly theater-oriented and para-theatrical groups working with circus pedagogy or dance, through musical theaters – both traditional and contemporary – to visual theaters which engage contemporary art practices. The respondents included representatives of groups operating in the non-governmental sector and theaters with the status of cultural institutions, as well as completely independent creators orbiting different theater formations.

The field research was accompanied by the collection of **the existing online data** on the functioning of independent theaters in the pandemic. We collected and analyzed articles and analyses at various stages of the pandemic in Poland. We also sent out a **qualitative online survey**, which was carried out among theater employees (all professional groups) in June 2020. Most of the questions were open-ended; we asked the respondents to describe their daily tasks both prior to and during the pandemic. We also asked them about the difficulties they faced as a result of the new situation, and about their expectations for their professional future. Altogether, we collected and analyzed 39 questionnaires completed by members of alternative theaters. The data from the surveys and the analysis of online resources made it possible to capture initiatives launched by theaters and make an initial diagnosis of different approaches to the pandemic, which helped collect a qualitatively diverse sample during the field research.

An additional source of data included fourteen free-form targeted interviews (Konecki 2000:170) conducted during the pandemic as part of the project titled 'The Węgałty Theater – 35 Years of Anthropological Theater and of Social and Cultural Exploration'.<sup>6</sup> Although the research is devoted to the Węgałty's original method of work – described from the perspective of the experiences of the participants of the Theater's undertakings – the interviews conducted as part of grant between March and June 2020 turned out to be a unique source of knowledge about the situation of the alternative world during the pandemic. The interlocutors involved in the workshops and expeditions of the Węgałty Theater often conduct their own artistic activity within the framework of broadly understood Polish independent theater, and as such have an insight into various areas of the theater alternative. The **intensive interview technique** used in the research (Lofland and Lofland 1995:17–18; Charmaz 2006:25–30) begins with a free-form exploration of topics that are of interest to the researcher and ends with them asking focused questions. The flexible formula of the interview allowed us to use the current professional situation of artists – which changed dramatically during the lockdown – as the starting point. We used the themes raised in the first phase of the interviews in the initial mapping of the problems and reactions of alternative theaters during the pandemic.

Conducting qualitative research during the pandemic was challenging from the methodological and ethical point of view (Lupton 2020). For safety reasons, in order not to endanger the health of the

researchers and research participants, we decided to conduct most of the interviews remotely, adjusting the choice of online communication tools/platforms and interview times to suit the interviewees. Apart from logistical problems (the elusiveness of some interlocutors) and technical problems (the quality of equipment, the range, and the Internet connection), we were concerned that we would not be able to create an atmosphere of intimacy and trust, and that we would lack the freedom of expression that is characteristic of face-to-face conversations. However, we were positively surprised by the open-minded, easy-going nature of the exchanges. We even had the impression that our interviewees enjoyed participating in the research, were keen to share their experiences, and that some of them felt as the facilitators of the interviews. This helped to overcome the initial doubts related to online research. We believe that despite the inconveniences, we managed to hear and understand all the stories; some of them were comforting, others full of sadness and difficult emotions. Owing to personal and professional relationships of one of our research team members, we were able to carry out some research face to face during meetings and activities undertaken by some alternative theater groups following the end of lockdown. The anthropological insight and the sharing of pandemic experiences and emotions with alternative theater crews were really valuable to us. Physically accompanying the respondents during this difficult time helped us feel the atmosphere among the theater alternative.

We analyzed the materials using the coding paradigm used in the process of generating grounded theory (Konecki 2000:47–57), taking into account all its elements: the causal conditions (historical background, dynamics of development) of the studied phenomenon (social worlds of the theater alternative),

<sup>6</sup> Research financed by National Science Center in Poland under the project no. 2017/26/E/ HS2/00357, carried out by the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences from April 2018. The interviews were conducted by Katarzyna Kułakowska.

the current context, i.e. the pandemic and other intervening conditions (lockdown, national quarantine, restrictions in the cultural sector, sanitary regime, etc.), as well as the strategies and tactics of alternative theaters' artists during the pandemic, and the consequences of their choices. An important factor in our analysis was the time dimension of the processes taking place within the social worlds of the alternative. In our interpretation, both the past of the independent theater movement and the current (pandemic-related) fate of alternative theatre were important. The subsequent stages of the coding process were subordinated to the dynamics of conducting research during the pandemic. The consecutive months of research fell on different phases of the pandemic-related reactions and policies concerning theaters, which was constantly revealing new circumstances to the respondents, and also to us. We believe that the coding paradigm proved to be the right analytical framework for conducting research during such a crisis. On the one hand, owing to being disciplined when collecting and segregating data, we managed not to 'lose' any interpretations that continuously appeared and disappeared, while on the other hand, it allowed us to be flexible when generating theories.

### **An alternative in the pandemic – *Everyday Life and To Be or Not To Be***

"Alternative theater was born of the spirit of rebellion [...]. It had a certain ethos embedded in its practice – struggle, resistance, transformation, defeat," wrote Lech Raczak (2004:64), the founder of the Theater of the Eighth Day [Pol. *Teatr Ósmego Dnia*], whose performances expressed direct disagreement with the reality of the totalitarian state of the People's Republic of Poland. From the very beginning, searching for an answer to the world's crises was part of the activity of countercultural theatrical groups. The

horizon of their activities – both in life and in art – was determined by the struggle with the crisis of the state and society, and the resultant crisis of individual freedom. The alternative has been established as a remedy for neglect in the field of social relations, the weakness of interpersonal relationships, and the problems of the dominant culture. This is also the case today, but something else now affects community and freedom: not the communist system, but the capitalist one, as it tests humanity and undermines mutual trust (Jawłowska 1975). The crises affecting individuals and communities are the *genesis* of alternative theaters. Socio-cultural crises do not absorb the alternative; on the contrary, i.e. they feed it, provide it with topics, mobilize it to a counterattack, and justify its existence.

Similarly, the crisis brought on by the pandemic is perceived by some as an **opportunity** to reflect on the foundations and the condition of contemporary culture – as something actually **desirable**, because it reveals the true condition of the human existence. A crisis can be turned into something good; acknowledging and processing it creatively can bring people closer to reevaluating their lives so that they can move closer to visions of the world that countercultural theater communities strive to realize. The artists we interviewed referred to the current situation as follows:

In truth, the pandemic with all this "pause for a moment, look at yourself, think" in a sense can be treated as a threat, as a curse, but on the other hand it can be seen as the confirmation of this crisis faced by the world and humanity. (IDI\_5)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The quotations are identified by codes referring to the given kind of research activity (IDI – in-depth individual interview, FGI – focus group interview, ETNO – notes from observations, NET – online accounts, A – survey) as well as numbers as-

The need to stop made people realize how fast they are going. It was necessary to slow down, the world slowed down, the street slowed down, consumption slowed down. The priorities of what people consider important have changed. (FGI\_1)

Observations of the world, one mired in various crises during the pandemic, were – for some theaters – an awakening, a **driving force for new initiatives**. After all:

The driving force behind all art (and especially theater) is crisis, threat, and conflict. It's just that much more often a crisis occurs in the conditions of alternative theater. Maybe it is easier for alternative theater to deal with crisis, because if it fails to deal with the crisis, it will not survive? [...] Maybe now, in theater, we are on a rising wave? We have something to fight against. (IDI\_6)

This natural – or innate, as one might say – inclination toward the crisis shaping a “particular **crisis identity**” (ETNO\_3) of the theater alternative was also expressed in the declarations concerning the need, or even the necessity, to enter into the pandemic crisis in order to **learn from it**, and “to turn defeat into a gain” (IDI\_11):

The pandemic was too short-lived to force people to step out of their comfort zone; after all, it wasn't enough of a shock. We are now acting as if the pandemic is gone, as if it were a closed chapter. Maybe the second wave is about to come and that will be a real shock? (IDI\_6)

For the alternative, being in a crisis is something normal, also in terms of organizing artistic work. In the past, this crisis manifested itself in a constant

fight against censorship, efforts to obtain permission to participate in international student theater festivals, day-to-day struggles with the lack of space for rehearsals, and, finally, surveillance and harassment by security services. Nowadays – i.e. before the pandemic – the ‘crisis identity’ of independent groups was associated with the lack of stable employment and thus the necessity to constantly apply for new (most often short-term) grants, constantly being on the road, struggling on a daily basis to find a rehearsal space and create conditions for encounters with the audience, everyday tensions around technical difficulties, underfunding, bureaucracy, as well as “managing the mess, the difficult art of bilocation and reading tea leaves...” (ETNO\_1). **The normalization of chaos** – this is what the Polish alternative theater is facing today.

“I would risk saying that we are prepared for a crisis, because we simply live in a constant crisis” (IDI\_7) – this declaration shows that crisis is not only an **identity feature** of the alternative resulting from some adopted ethos, but also a **familiar, everyday occurrence** brought on by working at the intersection of culture and non-governmental activities. The strategies of coping with crisis developed over the years – flexibility, openness to constantly redefine one's work, tendency to experiment with the used tools, and, finally, the cunning ‘armor’ in the form of courage and persistence in constantly starting anew – can be used as a proven **weapon** during the pandemic. As one interviewee said: “The creativity of these people when finding themselves in difficult situations has always been part of their job” (IDI\_2). One's ability to function in a world that constantly makes surprises and the ability to circumvent everyday absurdities and fight for each smallest thing turned out to be a valuable **capital** of alternative theatrical circles:

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signed to subsequent materials collected within a particular category.

In such situations, we cope better than institutions or permanently employed actors. We are more resourceful, more self-reliant, more inventive, we are used to the fact that there are times when there is nothing – and you just have to grit your teeth and wait, and in the meantime really think about what to do next... (IDI\_3)

I had to resort to a series of tricks to survive this pandemic. And I received the anti-crisis shield [government support for businesses – K.K.], but [...] I had to describe my circumstances in such a way, so that I would get it, otherwise I would not have survived. In the cultural sector, we sign the contract on the day of finalizing the project or even later, nobody signs the contract earlier. I have a lot of friends, theater artists, who couldn't access the shield because of this.<sup>8</sup> (IDI\_6)

The organizational crisis related to the lockdown was also seen as a trial – i.e. a time **to test oneself** under new circumstances – and the awareness of being able to cope during the crisis made our respondents feel stronger:

The situation forced us to become a bit more flexible, to find something new, a new path and some new tools. I am proud of what we have achieved. (IDI\_6)

Paradoxically, the pandemic gave us a sense of security that if something bad happened, some people would be able to act and do it differently than in the

theater. This does not have to be a pandemic situation; it can be different situations, for example no room, no space, temporary renovation. We do not have to be afraid of it; we do not have to stop working, because we have tools to deal with this. (IDI\_4)

If so – if the crisis is an identity experience and a daily occurrence – why would a pandemic crisis threaten alternative theater? Despite the positive – reflective and creative – dimension of hardships and struggles in the narratives (which have been accompanying the researched alternative theater members since the beginning of lockdown), the dark side of the current situation cannot be overlooked. The pandemic is a big blow to the alternative in two dimensions: existential (i.e. the economic survival of both the institutions and the artists' livelihood) and symbolic (i.e. the essence of the alternative-theater culture).

Firstly, the crisis seriously **strained the budgets** of most groups and threatened the existence of others, i.e. those which are the most niche, local, non-institutional theaters in a worse financial situation, without the possibility to access the government or local government support programs. "The economic basis of alternative theater is presenting performances at festivals and these, as we know, have been canceled" (FGI\_1); "The pandemic has taken away our performances, and that's how we make money, we live on this" (IDI\_3); "Our tours and co-productions have been canceled, so our income will fall massively this year" (IDI\_1) – such statements peppered almost every interview. On the other hand, after the restrictions had been partially lifted, the lucky ones who returned to work stated: "We perform in this [sanitary] regime and can sell 50% of tickets, which is difficult" (IDI\_1). In the face of the systemic lack of financial security, artists creating outside insti-

<sup>8</sup> "In order for a contractor or the performer to be entitled to the payment, they must prove that the contract was concluded before February 1, 2020" – this provision from the "anti-crisis shield" does not take into account situations where the contract is signed not in advance, but, rather, after or immediately before an artistic event. See: *Postojowe w czasie epidemii. Kto i ile dostanie? Dla kogo elastyczny czas pracy?* [Furlough during the epidemic. Who is entitled to what?] <https://www.gov.pl/web/tarczaantykrzysowa/postojowe-w-czasie-epidemii-kto-i-ile-dostanie-dla-kogo-elastyczny-czas-pracy>, 28.03.2020.

tutions, without permanent employment and no steady income, felt “a great **fear** related to financial stability” (IDI\_4) and “a lot of **frustration** [connected with being] treated unfairly” (IDI\_6); they had “a feeling of being last in terms of the pandemic **losses**” (IDI\_1). Some said: “the **defeat** is imminent, because we live on an island ... and it is about to sink” (ETNO\_4). Sometimes, alternative artists were simply forced to completely and definitively suspend their theater activities:

Because one has to make a living in a different situation, in which a) there are no performances, no new projects; b) you cannot carry out workshops that are a significant source of income, you have to think about finding another job. (IDI\_11)

Thus, the pandemic threatened the existence of some on the alternative scene, and it **threatened the very essence** of the alternative environment – that which constitutes the symbolic layer of its social world. Alternative theater has its own, unique **geography of relations**. The processes initiated during theatrical and para-theatrical events are organized around meetings, being together, physical contact, building intimacy, sharing space – all this happens in direct contact when a person is close to another person, they can feel their presence, spend a moment together, share experiences. Here, there is often no sharp division between the stage and the audience; most of the activities do not take into account anything such as ‘distance’ between the participants. This is what the alternative geography of relations is all about – bringing people closer, initiating contact, and using shared space, the **proxemics of intimacy**. Theater-related instruments, which are the primary technology in the social world of alternative theatre, recognize neither safe distances between people nor the new sanitary regime. Therefore, the pandemic

brought on “**the end of the world of alternative theater**” (ETNO\_4). Poignantly, our interlocutors made statements such as:

[...] The lockdown took away the opportunity to meet, and without that there is virtually no theater (IDI\_7)

The pandemic took away the opportunity to play shows, the opportunity to speak out, it took people away from me on this physical level. (IDI\_6)

[...] Contact with another person; the actor-audience relationship is what is the most painful to lose. (IDI\_5)

I struggled with the thought that I have to accept the fact that this entire year is a write-off. (IDI\_6)

They also spoke about the emotional effects of the lack of closeness in theater – about resignation, torpor, fears, longing, and frustration:

The inability to work with people in real life results in a loss of energy. (A\_20)

Frustration is the emotion of this year. Something was planned and someone canceled it, on all levels. (IDI\_7)

### The pandemic arenas – old and new dilemmas faced by the alternative

The sudden change in the conditions of making theater and not being able to follow the previously chosen ideological and artistic path initiated a series of changes and divisions within the social world of alternative theater. The pandemic prompted artists to seek, yet again, new answers to old questions and to pose completely new and unexpected questions – questions about how to live and make art during

the pandemic. Some of the problems that came to the fore at different stages of the development of the social world of alternative theater seemed to have been resolved a long time ago, or at least seemed to have ended with a generally accepted compromise (e.g. reactions to the marketization of culture, combining theater work and personal life, or being independent from institutions). Meanwhile, we have observed that some of these seemingly 'muted' debates have returned as arenas of heated disputes, helping to redefine the boundaries of the social worlds of alternative theater. At the same time, new arenas have emerged – new areas of discussion (such as the need to make a stand on online activities) that are further dividing this social world. Old and new dilemmas present the theater alternative as a mosaic of various sub-worlds.

In this chapter, we discuss the major arenas created by the social world of the theater alternative during the pandemic. The role of the arenas is to create a space to argue, (re)define, negotiate, and discuss. They arise out of a disagreement with the established way of behaving in the social world. The pandemic 'checks' the alternative identity choices made so far; it revises the paths followed by theater artists operating outside the mainstream. It is a time to reconsider the fundamental values of alternative theater, the most important of which involve: "fraternity, equality, freedom, authenticity, community, bond, direct democracy, shared decision-making and responsibility, a search for new forms of social organization, the coexistence of different cultures and ideologies, reconciling the individual with the community, a unity of life and art, freedom of all forms of expression, and a harmonious development of [one's] personality" (Szpakowska 1983:280). The point is to stay true to these values, and the pandemic arenas of the social world of the alternative theater movement are created around their upkeep.

### How to save a community in times of social distancing?

Małgorzata Szpakowska reduces the above-mentioned catalog of common tendencies and slogans – repeated in the programs of alternative theaters from the beginning of their existence – to a common denominator, which she considers to be a "**break with the contemporary crisis of social ties**" (1983:281). Although almost forty years have passed since that diagnosis, this is one of the key tasks that the alternative sets itself today, especially in view of the need to maintain social distancing measures, when it is impossible to apply the existing means of supporting the community. The sense of being responsible for the isolated theater community at every stage has set the basis for reflection and explorations:

We must re-learn intimacy which will take safety into account. How to trust yourself and be more careful at the same time? (FGI\_1)

We cannot say: "we cannot implement the project now and we're going on vacation for two months." (IDI\_7)

A human being always came first for us, so the question arose: What do we have to do in order not to lose him/her, to stay in touch with him/her, to be with him/her? (IDI\_4)

The main dividing lines between strategies adopted by theaters in the pandemic were drawn by two variables. The first is the attitude to **online activities** (reluctance toward online communication or an attempt to learn and use digital tools for theatrical or animation activities), while the second – **the decision to continue or suspend theatrical**

**activities during the pandemic.** The intersection of these variables has allowed us to see four types of strategies adopted by alternative theaters during the pandemic. Online communication skeptics chose: (1) to continue the previous theatrical activities in direct contact with sanitary restrictions; or (2) to cease theatrical activity and the undertaking of other activities (animation, social, support) in direct contact. The strategies of online artists include: (3) transferring the theater to the virtual space and conducting theatrical activities based on new technologies; (4) the suspension of theatrical activities, maintaining the animation activity and keeping in touch with viewers online.

The majority of alternative theaters have decided to **continue their previous theatrical activities with the community**, taking into account the new **sanitary regime** and accepting the fact that not all events will be feasible in the pandemic. “Everything is in the context of ‘here and now’, alertness whether something will happen or not” (FGI\_1) – said one of the interviewees. Artists working with inmates in prisons, where the ban on visits was introduced one week after theaters had been closed, faced great difficulty:

We were practically cut off from working with a group in a prison where we have been working locally for years. Connecting online [with inmates] is virtually impossible. So we returned to the traditional form: writing letters. (IDI\_7)

Theaters that regularly initiated events that brought together the environment also had to demonstrate creativity in inventing a new formula for theatrical activity not mediated via the Internet. The team organizing an important, annual festival, which “has always been based on the

fact that we invite you, we are together, we build a community, we are close, we have fun together,” realized that

if this festival is to be organized, it must change direction. The narrative that has accompanied us for many, many years is now in conflict with the reality that completely changes the way in which we think about how to build such events at all. (FGI\_1)

Although the festival will take place in late fall, it is already known that the organizers will give up all forms of workshops that take place in closed spaces as well as crowded meetings and the busy schedule in favor of one event a day, which will additionally be streamed for those who decide not to attend in person. These decisions were reached after a long group discussion that led the respondents through a series of important questions:

Perhaps we need this single meeting more? Let’s do less, but let’s really build an encounter around this one event, and mindfulness around the issues it touches upon. [...] One also has to learn that this does not have to be spectacular and that perhaps smaller things are more important now. (FGI\_1)

Building a community around small meetings and small things was also the focus of those theaters that **ceased workshop or theatrical activities** and implemented projects to **activate the community** based on the diagnosis of its current needs. An example of such action is the group that – even before the nationwide campaign of sewing face-masks emerged – had mobilized over forty people in its community who were willing to help, could sew, and had sewing machines. “We came up with initiatives that could revolve around making connections in order to start with things that could bring

us closer” (IDI\_2) – recalls the organizer, for whom activities connecting the community are the basic element of theatrical activity, and had been such also before the pandemic.

After many years of work and introducing many things into a small local community – festivals, performances, meetings – we can see that we are this link, whatever we do. (IDI\_2)

So far, the coronavirus epidemic did not change the direction and mission of theatrical activities, although it forced them to adapt the form, themes, and the scope of activities to suit the new needs and possibilities of the local community. The activities of alternative theaters have always been tailored to the recipients and circumstances; in the era of the pandemic, the main need is to be together despite being 2 meters apart.

Initiating theatrical activities online **proved to be a helpful strategy for maintaining bonds between people** (Kułakowska et al. 2020). In this context, as one of the respondents said, “being together was taken away from us, but at the same time – rebuilt” (FGI\_1). Despite the conviction of a significant part of the independent theater community that “direct contact cannot be replaced by a screen” (IDI\_5) and that “the essence of theater is live contact and [...] one cannot think of reformulating theater as not being theater...” (IDI\_3), some made experimental efforts to transfer theatrical activities to the virtual space due to the need to save what was essential for the alternative: the indissolubility of the community:

We wondered how to keep what is the most important to us online. We had to adapt quickly and it just happened. At first I thought it'd be impossible, but

then I thought I had to. First, for financial reasons; second, to keep the group dynamic; and most of all, to give kids some support during this pandemic. And I just got to work. (IDI\_4)

Concern for the local community seems to be the first moral obligation of the alternative, which prompted them to **stay in touch with the audiences**, even if they were not sure about remote work and generally **opposed online theater**. The idea was “for people to feel taken care of and for them to know that we are here, that we are not going anywhere” (IDI\_4). “We sometimes tried to make them feel better, with a post or a kind word,” said one of the interviewees, and after a moment she added – “Besides, they also wrote to us” (IDI\_3). When the events’ participants initiated contact, it was a signal for many theaters that the theater–community bond is strong and valuable for both sides, and it is all the more reason why it must be maintained under the conditions of social distancing.

### How to remain honest online?

Due to the limitations caused by the pandemic, which robbed the alternative of the well-established tools of theatrical work (close physical contact) and imposed an ‘alien’ (isolating, non-community) creative climate, the environment faced the dilemma of losing its main technology of work. For a period of time, some people abandoned theatrical activity that included “contact with another human being” (FGI\_1), openly expressing their disapproval of online theater and the opposition to online activities, arguing that:

The essence of theater is live contact and online is a kind of ersatz, just one-tenth of what you can give. (IDI\_3)

I don't believe in online relations when it comes to theater, workshops with people, being. I missed the contact. (IDI\_2)

It seems to be a negation of theater, a negation of the proximity of contact, on which all my workshop work is based. (IDI\_6)

Those who did not give up theatrical activities resorted to remote work or introduced social distancing in direct contact with others. In both cases, the **unique geography of relations**, the technological *modus operandi* of the theater alternative, has suffered. Theater practiced by independent artists, present within community and physical proximity, is a key element of the professionalization of the social world of the alternative. Alternative-theater artists have become a group of experts in strengthening social ties in close contact in a localized relationship, and without this technology, without the space to meet – as one respondent said – “we are in the same place that we were 10 years ago” (ETNO\_2). The pandemic, attacking the main technology of the social world of the theater alternative, somehow reversed the process of its professionalization. It was a “time of reset” (IDI\_11); it forced independent artists to look for replacement technologies, new spaces to work, and other ways to stay active. “If one wants theater to truly be a way of being with yourself, partners, and guests, one has to be honest” (Hajduk cited in Jawłowska 1988:147). But how does one achieve such honesty in online communication that lacks personal, deep, close connection? How to do that without “sensitivity full of wonder and mutual curiosity” (ETNO\_4), which can only be generated during an intimate meeting? Artists who undertook online theatrical activities were often accompanied by the conviction that the pandemic “simply forced them to work like this” (IDI\_6). They felt uncertainty, a lack of conviction about the

chosen path, or a sense of frustration at the loss of possibilities offered by theater:

In my work, I pay a lot of attention to detail, and working online took that from me. I was able to adjust, but I felt that somehow what I was commenting on was incomplete. There was some inner frustration. (IDI\_4)

On the other hand, those who decided to do live theater in line with the sanitary regime, had to abandon “the driving force of alternative fashion in recent years, i.e. group action: we run, we focus, we make bodies that mingle with each other, these bursts of energy, how wonderful!” (FGI\_1) and look for a more conservative, less expressive formula for their encounters. Despite the loss of important theatrical techniques, they generally thought that the change caused by the pandemic was a fact that forced them to search for new technologies:

It's not our language anymore; it's going to ring false now. Not because it is bad, not because it is ineffective, but because it is not relevant to the situation. We have to wait for the right tools to be created. [...] The basic driving force of the alternative is some kind of honesty that there is no faking here. Because there are no other profits here, except that you have the feeling that you are doing something important, that it is real, that you want to do it, that it is some kind of activity that is important to you. And precisely because there is no faking here, it is very difficult to get into the fact that now [in the pandemic – K.K.] we operate at 150%. (FGI\_1)

And it is all about honesty, authenticity, truthfulness, and avoiding anything that might be false. Alternative artists perceived both offline (but no longer so close) and online theater work as a loss of the independent theater's toolbox.

## **How to maintain quality in the era of overproduction?**

The pandemic generated two closely related threads pertaining to the subject of the marketization of culture, which had already been an important arena of the social world of the theater alternative. The first issue concerns the expected drop in overproduction in independent theaters, while the second one is about a certain reevaluation related to the pace of life and the quality of work.

The currently dominant form of organizing the work of the alternative means that instead of grassroots initiatives and rebellious turmoil, bureaucratic newspeak leads the way. Creativity is being slowly exterminated by the grant system and project management, over which the specter of overproduction hovers. An important economic pillar is the grant-based financing system for alternative theater. With theaters closed in the first half of the year 2020, artists could not fulfill their contracts and obligations toward the funding bodies/grant-givers. The signed contracts, however, must be honored. This means that spring and summer programs, as well as activities planned for the fall, will all have to be realized in the second part of the year. Because of this, the respondents expected a buildup of theatrical activities following the forced closures:

Everyone has left everything for the fall. After all, they have to complete projects, they have to stage performances, they have to do this, they have to do that and it will be a nightmare, but it also shows that there is simply a lot of it all. (IDI\_1)

We are told to accumulate everything, nonsense, we are producing all this just so that the paperwork is in order. This rush is simply sick. (FGI\_1)

Although the question of being entangled in the free market system is a well-rehearsed topic in the social world of the alternative, the fact that it was aggravated by the onset of the pandemic has prompted some to continue to ask questions about the meaning and quality of actions inspired by the mechanisms of supply and demand. The daily routine of constant explorations and activity, which for years has been forcing people to live in a massive rush, has been replaced by pause and reflection. Seen as a collective break from playing the game (cf. Drozdowski et al. 2020:29–30), the pandemic sharpened the contours of the arena for caring for the quality of work, whose high artistic values are, after all, associated with nurturing alternative values, and not with “fulfilling the contracts” (ETNO\_4). The current situation allowed people to take a look from a distance at the union – one which is unwanted and regularly criticized, but renewed every now and then – between the alternative and the market. Stopping “constantly doing things” (ETNO\_5) launched a debate that verified these things’ meaning, provoked the respondents to think that “it’s better to do nothing than do something shitty” (IDI\_3) and that “it is not necessary to say right away that we will do this, that and the other, okay – let’s go!” (FGI\_1). Because this “pandemic break” is accompanied by a clear view of the future game on the horizon, resuming the debate on quality and overproduction might have a real impact on the future development of the alternative-theatre scene.

## **How to be independent outside and within the institution?**

As Jerzy Grotowski said, “It is not better not to eke out; it is better to have a space where work and life intersect” (2012:678). For a large part of the society, lockdown was associated with the need to combine

the private and professional lives; the quarantine left many people locked in their homes along with their families, remote work, and remote education. Suddenly, the boundaries of work and family life got blurred. Paradoxically, however, for people from the alternative theatrical circles, this time was associated with the **separation of the professional and private roles**. Members of alternative theaters not only had to physically part with their theater companies, but also were not able to fulfill their professional roles in private spaces. Abandoning them meant abandoning the mission that constitutes their entire life. Those who were left in the worst financial situation had to decide whether it was more important to provide for their loved ones or to implement the ethos of an independent theater. “People who don’t have enough to eat don’t think about art. For someone who is an up-and-coming artist, the pandemic was a nightmare” (IDI\_5). Somewhere, one of the main principles of the alternative culture has faltered. As Jawłowska once stated:

The inseparability of life and creativity, a coherent image of the surrounding world, the unity of thinking and acting. Culture, in which an individual could develop as a fully integrated, “authentic” being, avoiding being torn between values and performed roles, reflecting on customs and forms adopted in culture. (1988:6)

The community of alternative theaters has always been based on close relationships of a group of people, in which everyone felt fully committed to all the components, i.e. everyday, family, professional, and creative life. The participants of the independent theater movement did not separate life from work – they treated them as a system of interconnected vessels; the alternative was not a “theater-institution,” but a “family theater” (Nyczek 1980:16–17); for them

theater is not a profession, but a vocation, a way of life. “This is not an ordinary workplace with work-life balance” (IDI\_8), but the space-time continuum of human fulfillment as a whole. This system of closely interconnected roles performed in the personal, artistic, and public spheres has been severely damaged by the pandemic crisis. From a unified “community view,” the alternative has moved to the perspective of a constellation of roles that need to be somehow balanced and reconciled.

Quarantined during their travels, scattered around various towns and countries – because anyone without the means to survive made use of the resources of family or friends – theater people had to rebuild their worlds away from the physical and social space that has so far justified their actions. Sometimes this meant changes in their professional or personal life: “the pandemic has changed the roles you enter while doing theater and educating your child, trying to avoid working for Uber Eats and counting on a grant from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, or Stoart...” (ETNO\_2).

The ways of earning money have changed. Some people had to abandon their artistic identity in order to face new roles: food delivery couriers, salespeople, cooks, handymen. “Anyone needs something?” – one of the artists wrote on Facebook – “I can make memes about your theater or run its website. I will also undertake repairs, painting and decorating, and transport jobs” (NET\_4). The positions of directors or those responsible for the organizational side of alternative theatrical activities were safer. Where the previously funded projects had already begun, the pandemic strengthened the position of the coordinator. In a world where new interpretations of new government policies emerged on a daily basis, those who efficiently navigated the maze of regu-

lations grew into leaders, regardless of their previous function or position within the team. The role of a theater group member, which used to translate into particular duties and practices of participation in various forms of gatherings, has now turned into a set of activities maintaining interactions 'despite' the circumstances.

The pandemic provided an opportunity to verify to what extent membership and participation in a theater collective constitutes the basis of one's identity, and to what extent it imposes the basic social roles performed by an individual. It also forced further considerations on whether and to what extent life and art remain inseparable, or whether and to what extent this indissolubility can be temporarily suspended in the face of any unexpected turmoil in the social world. In other words – to what extent is it possible to maintain the beautiful but utopian idea that life is theater and theater is life?

Such dilemmas raise another question as to whether independence from institutions – which is one of the founding myths of the Polish alternative theater – is still a desired path that proves 'true' independence. For some time now, certain sub-worlds of the alternative have been going through a slow process of getting used to the broadly understood institution. Some groups are financed by the state and their actors are permanently employed by state institutions; other groups operate on the basis of obtaining grants from public subsidy programs; members of some theaters work in different professions on a daily basis. According to Kornaś, "Theater audience ceased to pay attention to any institutional complexities of the functioning of theaters and how they are governed" (2010:65). Thus, the long-standing discussion on the organizational independence of alternative theaters seems to be veering toward

opening up to more or less formal relations with institutions.

During the pandemic, institutionalized theaters – i.e. the alternative that moved beyond financial precarity and entered the sphere of local government-funded cultural institutions (although with respect for basic values) – found it relatively easy to function. "We are an alternative that functions close to the institution, we take what the institution offers us while giving them some of our energy that is missing there. It is a kind of symbiosis" (IDI\_3) – this is how the social worlds of alternative theaters intersect with the world of cultural institutions, becoming "organizational hybrids" (IDI\_1). In these kinds of theaters, activities during the pandemic did not require any additional formal measures, which was in line with the belief that "institutions will somehow survive" (IDI\_6); it was easier for artists to support themselves and continue their theater activities:

We were saved by the fact that we are permanent grant recipients [...]. It's not a lot of money, but the fund allows us to cover the daily costs of accounting and some operational costs. Thanks to this, we are not in some terrible position now. (IDI\_6)

The fact that we have grant support is an advantage. (IDI\_1)

Running an independent theater is good when everything is going well, because we are not earning [enough – K.K.] money to have some kind of a financial cushion. (IDI\_3)

Theaters which continue to dogmatically attempt to operate within the narrowest possible limits of an alternative, once understood as being independent of the institution, found themselves in a much

worse position during the pandemic crisis. Independence has rewarded them with total dependence on the living conditions that came with the pandemic as well as the recognition that an institution can give them independence rather than just restrict it. In this context, efforts to expand the alternative to institutional activity, made over the past two decades, seem to be a process strengthening the social worlds of alternative theaters rather than a process that would pose a threat.

It is worth noting that in the face of the loss of spaces and funds supporting the activities of some theater groups, the alternative theater community expressed solidarity by providing help to those who found themselves in the most difficult situation.

This pandemic has not affected us economically, but there are people who have lost everything. If we had the opportunity to invite such people to join in our activities, that was the first thing we did, we helped those who were really at risk. Sharing wherever possible, our first moves were to help others. (FGI\_1)

Although there were more community-based aid initiatives “to give people jobs” (IDI\_1), it does not change the fact that the dominant feeling of members of non-institutional theaters was the belief that when it came to systemic solutions, they were “in all honesty left to fend for themselves” (IDI\_1). It is difficult to freely enjoy independence under such conditions.

## Conclusion

Our research made it possible to describe how the existence of the social worlds of alternative theater is being maintained in times of the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In this particular envi-

ronment, this crisis was perceived, on the one hand, as another difficulty faced by the alternative, while on the other, as a unique breakdown of the alternative theater world, affecting the primary activity, technologies, and values around which this world is built. We found that **the pandemic interferes with the development trajectory of the social worlds of the theater alternative in four ways**: it *alters* or *strengthens* the previously observed directions of development, and it *accelerates* or *slows down* the pace of processes that have been taking place in the independent theater movement from the very beginning of its existence.

A visible **change** occurred within the perception of the coupling of the social world of alternative theater with the mechanisms of market culture. For some, the enforced slowing down of the pace of work was a time for a sober re-evaluation of the so-called grant-art, practiced by them for over a dozen years – the widespread implementation of projects ordered by the public sector, which in the neoliberal system is subject to market mechanisms (see Marecki 2010:4–6). Some perceive the intersection of the social world of the alternative (and the entire cultural sector) with the world of commerce and bureaucracy as a necessary evil, but it seems to be a path from which it is difficult to turn back. The pandemic verified this process and raised the question whether this is a threat to the social world of alternative theaters. There is a certain potential to change the functioning of the world of alternative theater, but it cannot be said now whether reflections born during the pandemic will permanently steer the alternative toward new paths of ‘slow’ creativity/art and avoiding overproduction. It might also be the case that thinking about ‘slowing down’ will lose in favor of the trend for acceleration that cultural employees are so wary of.

The **strengthening** of the existing choices and practices was related to two areas. Firstly, the time spent in isolation as well as socially-distanced interactions confirmed the respondents' belief that putting community first is the right course of action. They remembered what was really important, and felt overwhelmingly that it was impossible to make alternative theater without a community. Secondly, the period of pandemic turmoil emphasized the identity crisis of alternative artists and showed that functioning in chaos is something that alternative-theater people understand and know quite well. Thus, community and the ability to function in a crisis both seem to be the strongest – and reinforced by a sense of mission or by circumstances – identity traits of the contemporary theater alternative.

**Acceleration** took place primarily in the area of expanding the social boundaries of alternative-theater worlds to include institutional activities. The social world of alternative theaters has long intersected with the sector of cultural institutions. However, getting to know the new area – and going beyond the founding myth of organizational independence of alternative theaters – was slow and gradual. It seems that the pandemic-related financial crisis, having posed a serious threat to the existence of some artists, might lead to the community adapting to the process of building independence within institutions.

In turn, **slowing down** relates to the matter of tools and methods of theater work. The high level of professionalization of the social world of alternative

theater was connected with the continuous and intensive development of the main technology of producing alternatives, namely practicing theater in close physical contact and being together 'here and now'. The closure of theaters, sanitary regime, and the transfer of theater work to the virtual space are all reversing the achievements of the alternative in the field of theater practices based on proximity. They block further professionalization and force artists to search for new technologies that would allow the existence of the social world of the theater alternative to be maintained.

The pandemic shook the foundations of the alternative theater movement and put its very essence at risk. However, accustomed to functioning in a crisis and despite doubts and frustration, alternative artists keep "doing their thing," i.e. they keep looking for new solutions and keep fighting so that "humans are more human to one another" (FGL\_1) and "are stubbornly enthusiastic about the world" (ETNO\_4). In the face of such a *credo*, no threat to alternative theater seems to be final. "The crisis seen this way is not a transition level, so it cannot be valorized only by what will emerge after it ends. Its value is the paradoxical permanent instability, the certainty of uncertainty, and being permanently open to flow" (Kosiński 2010:486).

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## Wspólnota na kwarantannie. Społeczny świat teatru alternatywnego w pandemii

**Abstrakt:** Celem artykułu jest opisanie funkcjonowania środowiska teatru alternatywnego w czasie pandemii COVID-19. Ramy teoretyczne rozważań wyznacza teoria światów społecznych pozwalająca uchwycić procesualny charakter rekonstruowania świata społecznego teatralnej alternatywy w dobie pandemii. Problem badawczy dotyczy tego, jak radzi sobie teatr niezależny, gdy zagrożone jest praktykowanie teatru alternatywnego jako narzędzia budowania wspólnoty „tu i teraz”, a więc główna technologia, wartości, a wraz z nimi centralne działanie organizujące komunikację w społecznym świecie alternatywy. W artykule uwzględniamy zarówno zmiany spowodowane pandemią (brak możliwości budowania relacji podczas bezpośredniego spotkania z widzem/uczestnikiem), jak i stałość w codziennym doświadczeniu ludzi teatru alternatywnego (kryzysowa tożsamość ludzi alternatywy). Empiryczną podstawą analiz są materiały zgromadzone podczas dwóch badań socjoantropologicznych: (1) sytuacji zawodowej pracowników i pracownic teatrów w Polsce w czasie pandemii, realizowanych przez Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszelewskiego w Warszawie; (2) modusu pracy teatralnej Teatru Węgajty z perspektywy doświadczeń jego uczestników i uczestniczek.

**Słowa kluczowe:** socjologia teatru, teatr alternatywny, teatr niezależny, społeczne światy teatru, pandemia COVID-19