Heidi Wiley, Executive Director, European Theatre Convention

invited for an inspiration speech at

**8th Culture & RTBF Meeting: Co-construction in the age of digitalization
24 octobre 2022, Théâtre de Namur (Belgium)**

Speech

"Good practices born during the pandemic and to be sustained How the theatre sector has reinvented itself and what it wants to develop in the future"

On October 12, 2022, the Belgian channel RTBF brought together senior Belgian officials and key representatives of the European audiovisual and cultural sector in the Theatre of Namur for the *8th Culture & RTBF Meeting: Co-Construction in the age of digitalization*.

As part of the programme of the day, Heidi Wiley, Executive Director of the European Theatre Convention, was invited to present an **overview of the good practices that have emerged during the pandemic** and **reflect on those that should be continued.** Her presentation covered how the theatre and performing arts sector has adapted, and what it wants to develop in the future.

Later in the day, the French version of the study **"Performing Arts Recordings and Broadcasts: A practical manual on author's and related rights,"** commissioned by Prospero - Extended Theatre, a project co-funded by the European Union's Europe Creative program, and published by the European Theatre Convention, was also launched and presented by its authors.

Below you have access to the presentation and the speech Heidi Wiley delivered (translated from French into English).

Introduction

European Theatre Convention

Good practices born during the pandemic and to be sustained

How the theatre sector has reinvented itself and what it wants to develop in the future

Heidi Wiley

Executive Director, European Theatre Convention (ETC)

Good morning, everyone,

This is not the first time that I've stood before a group of policy and culture experts in Belgium and prepared a speech - in French of course – about innovation in theatre and the performing arts. Like last time, I'm feeling a bit concerned about the language. But things have changed drastically since 2018, when I was last here. 2018 was a different era. It was the time BEFORE – before Covid. Before we learned to adapt to travel and performing restrictions. Before digital means of performing and distributing theatre became so widespread that we sometimes even forget to label them digital.

For those of you who don't know us, the organisation that I lead, the European Theatre Convention (ETC), is the largest network of publicly-funded theatres in Europe. We now have 55 members from 30 countries, who you can see on screen. Together we make cross-border artistic projects, provide training and professional development events on key themes of sustainability, diversity and digital innovation; and advocate for a stronger and more resilient theatre sector.

Let me tell you an important story about how theatres became ready to innovate and experiment during the pandemic.

I will give you an overview of

1) How theatre went digital during Covid-19, and some of the most exciting work to emerge in that period.
2) We will then look at where we are now, with an introduction to the ETC Digital Theatre Study, and highlight some of the most important developments on an EU policy level.
3) Finally, I will discuss the new study on artists rights, and
4) Why the creation of this document has important good practices that should be continued for the future.

So, back where things started.

2016 - 2018
European Theatre LAB: Drama goes digital

The European Theatre Lab was Europe's first think tank devoted to researching a digital strategy for theatre.

A pioneering mix of workshops, conferences and theatrical performances across Europe.

European Theatre Convention

We have grown considerably in size and influence in recent years, but in 2018 our core work was the same. That year we had just wrapped up our 2-year digital theatre project called the European Theatre Lab which connected partners from theatre, technology hubs and art / media research institutes to test new ways of using technology on stage. It was Europe's first think tank devoted to researching a digital strategy for theatre.

After two years of experimentation, the project revealed what was needed in the future to support digital theatre: new digital strategies, for R&D funds, for time to invest. Basically, it was clear to the partners involved, and all the organisations we shared the learning with, that when using digital theatre, you have to embed digital concepts across the entire organisation.

1) Going digital during Covid

This context is important because it laid the groundwork for structured innovation in theatre when the pandemic erupted in Spring 2020 - when all theatres were shut down and international touring came to a standstill.

This is how theatres went digital during COVID-19, and some of the most exciting examples of digital work during that time.
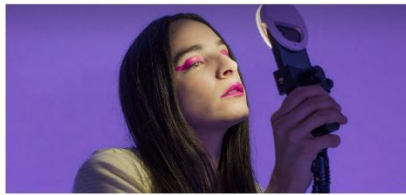
We in ETC and theatres had to find new ways of reaching audiences, of remaining visible and relevant. The pandemic accelerated nearly with the speed of light the development, exchange and circulation of ideas and concepts. And often, this was with digital means.

It's useful to give some examples, and you can see some of them on screen now. As many know, the first step lots of theatres took was to make their recorded shows available for audiences at home. Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, for instance, started its own digital platform to watch old and new performances.

Soon a greater sense of strategy emerged. SNG Nova Gorica in Slovenia, for instance, realised that recorded theatre productions could compete with high-budget Netflix series. But what you could offer people is nostalgia. The theatre set up their older and most well-loved shows, and that's what they invested in.

Dakh Theatre in Kyiv took their own approach to strategy and developed an innovative three-part approach to digital theatre. They started by turning their existing productions into online versions. Then they made theatre specifically made for Zoom and other online medium. And finally, they made theatre online, with the express intention that it would be taken back offline as soon as possible. This was seen in the project Alambari, which began as a zoom 'flashmob' connecting audience members around the world, and became a site-specific installation in Ukraine.

Let's get an insight into this process with a clip from a **video interview with Andrii Palatnyi**, Project Manager & Curator at Dakh Theatre.

→ [Play the video here.](#)

Some theatres invested heavily in the infrastructure to make broadcast theatre feel live. Det Norske Teatret in Oslo, who you can see in the picture on the bottom of the screen, created a livestreaming platform, Direktestrøyming, which used a series of cameras in the auditoritum to capture performances on stage in real time. Audiences at home bought tickets to something that

was not quite streamed performance, and not quite film, and watched it live. This inclusion of payment was a way of remaining financially sustainable and also attaching value to a performance.

Theatres and artists were inventive and reactive when needed. Theatre de Liege invited the show _jeanne_dark_ by the artist Marion Siéfert as part of their IMPACT Festival, International Meeting in Performing Arts & Creative Technologies. As audiences couldn't come in person, this became an Instagram-only show, where audiences could follow the actress live and interact with her in a new and familiar setting.

Some theatres used digital means not to reach as many people as possible, but to test a different and more freeing sense of creation. National Theatre Prague, a very large theatre with 1000 staff across the various departments of drama, opera and ballet, used the limitations on mounting new productions to 'slow down the machine' and experiment with a sort of 'intimate' theatre. This was performances for just one or two people, who sat in their living room and listening to audio. There was even, in the case of a collaboration with an organisation called 'Building Conversation', an example of removing the actors altogether and facilitating performances between two audience members, who would have a structured phone conversation together.

Some of the initiatives set up artistic projects that last to this day. Folkteatern Goteborg created Fjärde Scenen, as a digital space or stage for experimentation, artistic development and global openness. Folkteatern produces and commissions stage art tailored for this stage. This is a stage that includes a lot of experimentation with sound and video performance and continues to challenge with its contemporary work.

ETC EUROPEAN THEATRE CONVENTION

2020-21
**Going digital during Covid**

Renaissance

22 digital theatre films
18 countries
250 artists

Reached 130,000 people

And as a network with reach across Europe, at ETC we tried a series of European initiatives too. We created Renaissance, a programme of 22 digital theatre films from theatres in 18 countries, connecting 250 artists. The recordings – sometimes produced for a zoom environment, or for Instagram, or with traditional cameras – were released daily over a period of a month, reaching a total of 130,000 people. We were inspired by the historical period of the Renaissance:

- which was a complex and uneven explosion of creativity after the worst pandemic in human history
- It was also a time of dramatic changes, brutal ruptures with societal patterns.
- And it was a time that led to a shift in European thought and introduced a new Zeitgeist.
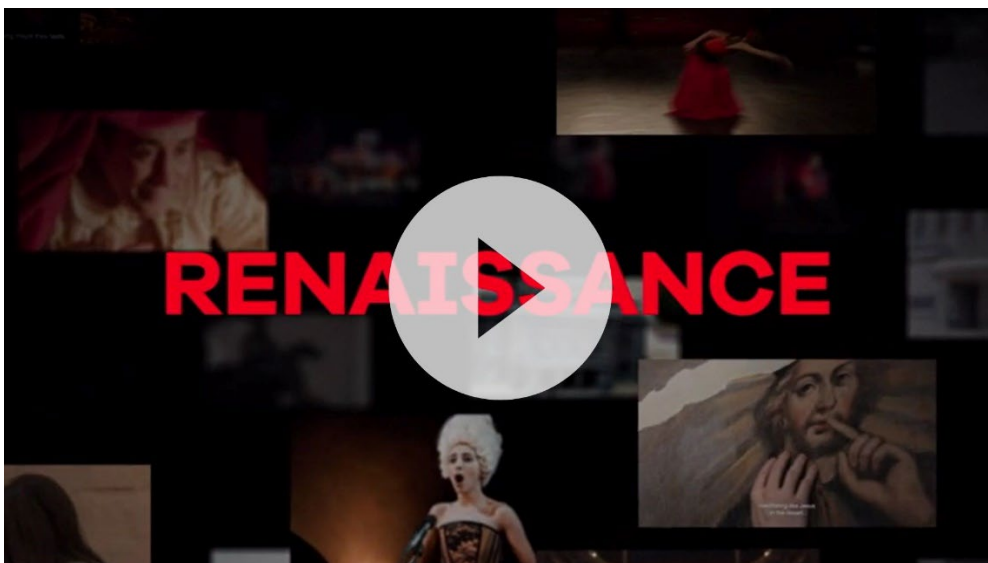
➔ Play RENAISSANCE trailer here.

The films are online on our website and were presented at the International Theatre Times Online Festival, the CINARS Web Biennale in Toronto, and at the Maribor Theatre Festival in Slovenia.

This period of experimentation revealed things that didn't work as well. That's OK! That's all part of the process. For instance, as international touring was not possible, we collaborated with Schauspielhaus Graz to reach international audiences with their VR production of *Krasnojarsk,* which you can see in the top-right hand corner of the slide, which was a dystopian piece filmed in 360 degrees. We organised the distribution of VR glasses, previously loaded up with the performance, to all of our then 45 theatres around Europe. Instructions were included on how to send the still highly costly VR glasses back once the theatres had watched the performance. Well…. Let me tell you. It was a challenge to collect everything again, and we would not recommend using this way of circulating theatre on a larger scale.

2) Where we are now – ETC's Digital Theatre Study, needs and recommendations.

Where We Are Now

ETC Digital Theatre Study
EU Policy Highlights

This is all very interesting, but it's important to be clear about what will stay and what impact this can have on theatre, the performing arts, and the wider cultural sector. **It's important, in other words, to work out where we are now and what the research and EU policy position is.**

The first thing we've done is track the learning from all these projects on a European scale via the ETC Digital Theatre Study, which we expect to publish in Spring 2023.

For three separate years (2019, 2020, and 2021), the survey asks respondents to provide information on what proportion of work was digital, what proportion of their money was allocated to digital salaries and hardware – and whether digital theatre is and has been considered a solution to the pandemic restrictions and theatre's long-term artistic and financial growth. It's time to stop and look back at the true impact of innovation in theatres. Tight budgets and a return to 'normal' performance schedules put continued digital exploration at risk.

These questions have never been asked on a European-wide scale, and no research has yet focused on these questions in relation to the pandemic. We will have to wait for the full conclusions when the research is published but what is already clear is that we have developed the terminologies and structures to professionalise the use of digital work in theatre.

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Digitally Distributed Theatre

Broadcasting theatre from where it is taking place, to remote audiences. This includes livestreams with both in-house and remote audiences, as well as broadcasts of recorded performances, after they have taken place.

We now know to speak of digitally-distributed theatre, which is broadcasting theatre from where it is taking place to remote audiences.

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Digitally Mediated Theatre

Using digital technologies to mediate the audience's experience, during a performance. This includes the use of smartphones, tablets, and apps, as well as hybrid theatrical experiences that combine 'live' performance with virtual reality or augmented reality elements.

This is distinct from digitally mediated theatre, ie the use of smartphones, tablets and apps to shape an audience's experience during a performance.

2022 - 2023
ETC Digital Theatre Study

Digitally Located Theatre

Theatre that takes place in a digital-first location. For instance productions created specifically to be performed on Zoom, or hosted on digital platforms like Gathertown. This also includes performances solely accessible through virtual reality.

And digitally located theatre, which takes-place in a digital-first location like Zoom or Gathertown.

We know the limits, what the benefits are, what the context is. We now know what is advisable to do. Artists and theatres can now include the broad ideas presented by digital theatre in their creative toolkit when they're planning productions and thinking about audience interaction.

And what about on an EU level?

2022
EU Policy

European Commission:
European New Theatre Initiative

European Commission:
Conference on the Future of Europe

In Autumn 2021, as theatres were still experimenting with digital work and starting to open up again, we brought together theatres from across Europe at the ETC International Theatre Conference in Malta to discuss what needed to stay in place, creating a policy document. This was delivered to the European Commission, via a listening exercise called the Conference on the Future of Europe, which considered ideas and viewpoints from Europe on the challenges and priorities for the future.

One of the key calls in the document was for a way to tackle widespread digital poverty. It's no use offering lots of exciting digital experiences if your audience can't engage with them. The document also stressed the wider implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed just how important culture is for the mental wellbeing of individuals and society, but also how fragile and vulnerable our structures and eco-system are, and that it needs particular attention on European level to safeguard the cultural diversity that we are so proud of and that we want to pass on to generations to come.

This was identified too earlier this year, the European Commission released a study on theatres across Europe, called The Situation of Theatres in the EU Member States. This mapped the socio-economic profile and impact of the theatre sector on the continent. It provided findings in three main areas – consequences of COVID-19 on the theatre sector, the challenges to become a professional in the theatre industry, and the efforts to reduce carbon footprint.

To support the sector, it also made the key recommendation to have a second version of the European Theatre Forum, which is a policy instrument to bring together artists and stakeholders for high-level discussions about what the theatre sector needs. This is a very important step for the sector and is something that was introduced in 2020, showcased in a digital version of the venue. We are convinced that a place like the next European Theatre Forum can help to accelerate the transformation process by exchanging our know-how and working hand in hand with policy makers for a more digital theatre sector.

The study is also a core element of the New European Theatre Initiative, which is the policy structure created by the European Commission to strategically support the European performing arts.

3) What's next – launch of the study is an important step towards transparency and professional use of new extended stage for theatre

It's important for the sector to understand the realities of working in a digital space. In some ways, the ease of being everywhere, and taking up this new technology and making it work for you in a variety of circumstances, is balanced by the perceived complexity of broadcasting live performance online.

The new study we will hear about today, Captations du Spectacle Vivant : Manuel Pratique des Droits D'Auteur et Droits Voisins, is an important step towards transparency and a professional use of the new extended stage for theatre. Let's talk about why it's important.

It's important because it is a practical guide for people who are not legal experts. It is a tool for theatres and producers to capture and disseminate live work more securely and consistently, including advice on relevant legal principles.

The conclusions are important: theatres must think about the wider territory covered by the broadcast, as well as the new rights for performers that emerge as 'neighbouring rights' in the context of online dissemination. It also makes it clear that some national laws affect who is and is not covered by copyright.

But I mention this because the study is born from real need, and practical application. The nine European theatres that make up the PROSPERO- **Extended Theatre** project are pursuing an admirable artistic goal, to collaborate and produce plays that can be enjoyed by their respective audiences, and audiences outside of their countries too. This has been done via an online platform that you can see on the screen, **prospero-theatre.tv,** to distribute the recordings, which

was provoked by being unable to travel during the pandemic. And here, the theatres faced a structural, or legal challenge: how can we legally, and in compliance with copyright law, distribute these performances?

4) Take aways – claims to formulate

As we come to the end of this talk, we have to talk about what the key lessons to take away are. What are the good practices that have been developed during the pandemic that need to be continued?

The story of the PROSPERO study is one of working out practical solutions to a problem and sharing the learning with the rest of the sector. This spirit of invention and collaboration is exactly what is needed right now.

It's important to make sure that the learning that happened in one theatre during the pandemic, or in one period of experimentation or international project, doesn't get stuck on some website that nobody visits, or with a few experts that are not connected with everyone else's work. What is the value of all of this energy, this investment, if it doesn't build to anything? If it doesn't crucially, reach audiences and people around the globe. If we don't use digital methods to democratise?

With all these increased possibilities, we must continue to ask ourselves what use the variety of choices and digital platforms is. All of us here today are either engaged in making media for people to consume or working out the best environment in which this creative exchange can take place. Yet audiences can only make once choice at any one time, and creative teams can only do so much. We only have a limited number of resources and economy of attention for audiences,

so we need to make wise choices about where we put our effort. Even if we could have audiences watch everything – are we reaching everyone and being inclusive, and what would that say about their leisure time from a wellbeing and sustainability perspective?

TV, like theatre, has its concern about shifting audiences, and the move from live to on demand. Perhaps the lesson is to not be afraid of blurring the boundaries between what 'is' and 'isn't' theatre, or the performing arts, or TV. We had some comments to this effect when producing the Renaissance project of 22 short theatre films across Europe. Some said that the word 'theatre' in this instance was redundant – if you've recorded something, and display it as a video, it's simply film. This could be true on a practical and logistical level, but it forgets something fundamental about the creative process in theatre, the creative experimentation that brought those pieces of recorded content to computers around the continent.

This playfulness and way of working is what defined it as theatre perhaps. Whether it is delivered via Instagram, or a live-stream, or recorded and watched back on a laptop, performance can remain theatre. In fact, audiences wouldn't even consider it different because of the medium it's engaged in, when video conferencing and social media stops being distinct from doing things 'in real life'. TV shouldn't be afraid of experimentation and pulling itself into different places.

Nor should it be too afraid of competition. Theatre is an important additional cultural channel which is interesting for live and recorded media. It's now about collaboration and reaching and supporting the same audience, in different moments. This can of course be done together.

Digital theatre is not a replacement for in-person theatre, or even the opposite of traditional theatre. It is simply another form of making art; of expanding our stage and creative means by trialling new things.

For us then, the answer is to just get started with digital theatre. It's about EXPERIMENT. DEVELOPMENT. Being RELEVANT. GO BEYOND. the common practice and STRATEGISE. to be part of the new MAINSTREAM. and all of this can only happen through COLLABORATION.

So, the good practices that have been developed during the pandemic are really good practices of collaboration and shared ambitions. This is true for theatre and for all other media.

Thank you.

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