

# When Europe's Theaters Reopen, Will Fans Return?

People from across the continent told us about the ups and downs — mostly downs — of loving and streaming theater during a pandemic.

By Thomas Rogers

March 5, 2021

With most European countries lurching between lockdowns and reopenings over the last year, it has been a disruptive time for the continent's many theater fans.

When theaters open up across Europe, likely in the coming months, they will do so in an increasingly digital world (theaters in a few countries, like Spain, are already open). Deutsches Theater in Berlin, La Scala in Milan and the Schauspielhaus Zürich, among others, have streamed performances during the pandemic, and fans have had access to virtual theater from all over the world. Some venues have expanded their audiences far beyond what's possible in their physical spaces. Around 160,000 viewers watched a streamed performance of "Carmen" last year by the Berlin State Opera, whose auditorium seats 1,300.

The shift has raised questions about whether audiences will return to theaters in the same numbers as before, and whether a blend of online and in-person viewing will become the new norm. The answers could have broad repercussions for the European cultural landscape. As the critic George Hunka once put it in The Guardian, "theater, as an art form, is not as deeply embedded in the history of America's modern culture as it is in Europe's."

To find out how the pandemic might affect Europe's theater scenes, both large and small, we spoke with theatergoers in seven different countries. These are edited excerpts from those conversations.

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## Nadia Busato, 41

Brescia, Italy; novelist and consultant



Nadia Busato and her daughter Viola watch a performance as part of Brescia's Musical Zoo Festival in 2017. Ilaria Vidaletti

Recently, there was a symbolic event where theaters were open and lights were on and you could walk to the foyer of the Teatro Sociale, and I cried. Some of the most important moments in my life are linked to shows I've seen — when I was pregnant, when I had my second child. I spent the first lockdown at my parents' house with my kids, and every morning, the telephone would ring, it was news that someone we knew was dead. The important thing was to keep it all together.

The ministry asked all of the theaters in the public theater system to put their archives online, so once a week at least, after everyone had gone to bed, I would watch a performance I had never seen before. I love theater so much, but it was hard to watch and listen because it was not a quality experience. In Italy, we are not used to thinking about theater existing outside of the theater, in other media.

I've subscribed to the National Theatre's streaming platform, the Soho Theatre platform, so maybe in the future instead of Netflix I will watch international theater online, and I hope that Italian theater goes online with similar products.

My whole life when I wanted to see a show, I took a plane and went to the place and watched the show there, but now I can see them online.

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## Jessi Parrott, 29

London; performer and academic



Jessi Parrott at the Barbican Center in London. Bev Chambers

For a powered wheelchair user like me, access was complicated before the pandemic. For smaller theaters, you have to go through layers upon layers of website to find out the accessibility information, and then you have to phone and tell them the dimensions of your chair. The big West End theaters also often have this policy that they're in an old building, so they can't do anything about it.

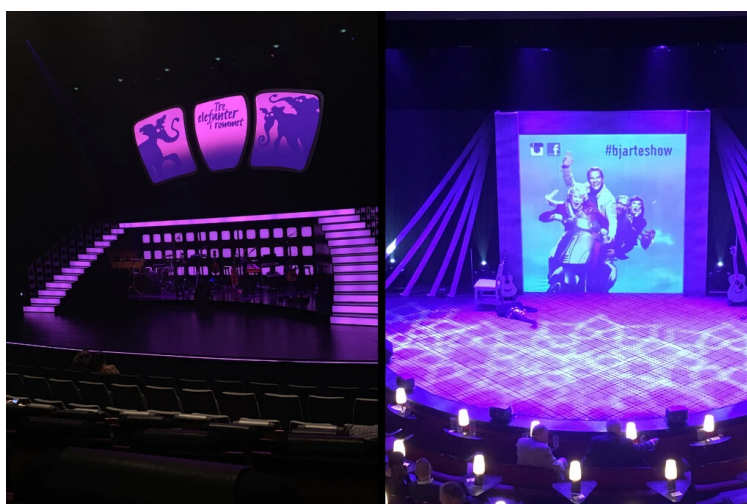
Now I've been able to see shows virtually that I wouldn't have been able to engage with at all because my chair can't get into the venue, like "Emilia" by Morgan Lloyd Malcolm at the Vaudeville Theatre. It was a transformative production, but on a personal level, I find virtual experiences difficult to engage with.

I'm worried that when social-distancing measures are incorporated at theaters, it will impact the availability of wheelchair spaces, because they won't want to further "reduce capacity."

But I'm cautiously optimistic that the pandemic will ultimately lead to positive change. I think there has been a realization through things like "long Covid" that people never know how the virus is going to affect you. I hope there is more compassion and support. The virtual stuff shouldn't be used as a proxy so that all of the disabled people can stay home and all the nondisabled people who don't need to think about their health can party and go to the theater.

## Erlend Engan, 36

Hell, Norway; marketer



Left, "Three Elephants in the Room," a standup revue or "revy," and right, Bjarte Hjelmeland's one-man revy. Erlend Engan

I live in Hell, which has a couple thousand inhabitants, and around here, there are about 10 revy ("revue") groups. Each revy group usually does one performance a year and a single performance will include 15 to 20 numbers of about four minutes each — sketches, songs, monologues.

I was 15 years old when I went to revy for the first time. At 17 I joined Lankerevyen, an award-winning revy group, and went from seeing revy one or two times a year to seeing everything.



Erlend Engan has been performing in a revy group since he was 17.  
Marthe Nygård

Revy is like a mirror for society. It involves sketches about what's happening in your community or country. For 30 or 40 years, no crisis has stopped people from doing shows. It's the best opportunity for people to meet their neighbors, and when you don't get that something is missing.

One group in Norway put together a stream and it's not the same, but it's better than nothing. If you're at home, it's not that easy to cry, or clap your hands or talk about it with people afterward. But in the future, I think it will happen more. Instead of having to perform ten nights in a row, they might perform it once and put it on a stream. But for me, it will be an addition to the things I am seeing, not a replacement.

## Ronan Ynard, 29

Paris; theater marketer



Ronan Ynard at La Comédie des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 2017.

In 2016, I launched a theater YouTube channel and started going to 150 or 200 performances or more a year — basically every night. My social life is largely encounters I have before and after shows, but that's not the principal appeal for me. Theater is an education, a discovery of social issues. It's a rare space where you're listening to people speak for one or two hours, and you're forced to be silent. By the time you are able to talk about it, when you're leaving the show after the applause, time will have passed, and things ripen in you that otherwise wouldn't ripen.

I couldn't get into the theaters' digital offerings. It's not theater, it's evidence of theater. The mistake of streaming is to think that a show starts when the curtain rises and stops when the audience claps — but theater is reserving the ticket, waiting in the lobby, it's a whole social event. If it's raining outside, a show isn't the same as when it's sunny outside.



Ynard saves the tickets for each play he attends. These are from the last six years.

The Comédie Française had streams of archived shows every night, but I would never sit on the couch for 2.5 hours and watch all of Klaus Michael Grüber's "Bérénice." I get up after five minutes to go to the fridge or look at Twitter. We are so used to the cuts, the rhythm of cinema, that when something uses the language of cinema but is live, without cuts, on a screen, it just becomes long and annoying.

## Bertalan Sugár, 42

**Budapest; yoga teacher**



Bertalan Sugár with the actress Gena Rowlands. Bertalan Sugár

I go to the theater maybe four or five times a year. There are two or three actors — like Adel Kovats — where I see all of their bad shows, just because I know they will give a brilliant performance, and I see all the shows by Dollar Papa Gyermek. When I had my fortieth birthday, I wanted to hire them to come to my apartment because they have a program where you can do that, but Emoke Kiss-Vegh, the lead actress, was pregnant. If you order a show to your own apartment, it gives your home a story you'll never forget. It's like room theater, a Hungarian theater movement from the '60s and '70s.

At the beginning of shutdown, my partner and I streamed five or six plays. We have different taste in theater, but I'm making his much better. I watched the National Theatre of London put up Gillian Anderson in "A Streetcar Named Desire," and she was marvelous.



But I want to watch theater in a theater setting. When I'm sitting in the audience in a theater I can look at whatever I want. If I don't want to look at the face of the person delivering the monologue, I can look at the face listening to it. Theater is a lens to reality and if it's theater on TV, then it's two lenses.

But I won't be going to the theater more often just because we've had a pandemic. If it's New York and I can't fly there, then too bad. I'll watch clips on YouTube, but the whole show, I don't think so.

## Aloys Buch, 69

Korschenbroich, Germany; theologian and philosopher



Aloys Buch in front of the Passion Theater Hall in Oberammergau, Germany. Petra Buch

The town of Oberammergau started putting on the Passion Play in 1634, during the plague. The villagers made a promise that if the village was spared further victims, it would put on a Passion Play — depicting the end of Jesus's life — every ten years. Before 2020, it's only been interrupted during the Second World War and in 1770, when the authorities banned it.

In 2000, we went to the Passion Play. It was more overwhelming than we expected. You feel in the strongest sense spoken to. You sit closely among about 4,000 audience members. It's not an advertisement for religion, but it exists in an overall atmosphere that presents religion as self-evident, which is strange in Germany, because here we generally separate that more.



Jesus is led to his crucifixion during a rehearsal for the Passion Play in Oberammergau in 2000. Diether Endlicher/Associated Press

We had reserved tickets for 2020. We were very disappointed when it was pushed back to 2022, but we were mostly worried for the people who were directly involved. The people in Oberammergau measure the passage of time by the Passion Play. We once met an older man who had acted in it seven times, and he was over 80, and when he told me he wouldn't experience the next Passion Play, tears started pouring down his cheeks.

Hopefully the long wait will lead to an interior explosion, and the frustration will be incorporated into the play, so it becomes a personal reward, not only for the actors, but also the audience members.

## Pat Johnston, 68

**Ballinasloe, Ireland; retired teacher**



Pat Johnston, right, with the poster for a 2019 play she wrote. via Pat Johnston; Sweet Memories Photography

Theater is the only thing I'd be willing to leave the house for now. My area is rural and is particularly underprovided for by the government in terms of support for industry and jobs, but it's fighting back, in particular in the area of culture. That's probably the one thing we have to offer. In every second village, there is a drama group. These wouldn't be top class performances: You'd have good characters, good actors, but the sets are very basic.

One thing I've seen over the last 20 years is the level of improvement. We're really talking about plays from the Irish canon, and there's something about the sense that we're doing our own stuff, that this is our own experience, our own story. Of course, there's also the possibility that something might go wrong.

During lockdown, the Abbey Theater in Dublin immediately came up with something called "Dear Ireland," inviting 50 writers to write about their experience and 50 actors to act it, and they put that out on Zoom. But to me it wasn't drama. The flatness of the screen, compared to the three-dimensional performance, I couldn't face it.

I'd rather watch a television program than any of the streamed plays. It makes you realize what you're missing. I would be anxious to go in and sit next to someone and hope they've been vaccinated, but I do look forward to it. I just hope that they don't dwell too much on the pandemic in new plays. I don't particularly go to the theater to be depressed. I can do that on my own.