



The Impacts of COVID-19 on New Zealand Theatre
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In writing this paper I want to recognise the indigenous people of New Zealand. Although I'm using the name New Zealand in this paper, I hope that one day I'll be able to call it Aotearoa.

Abstract

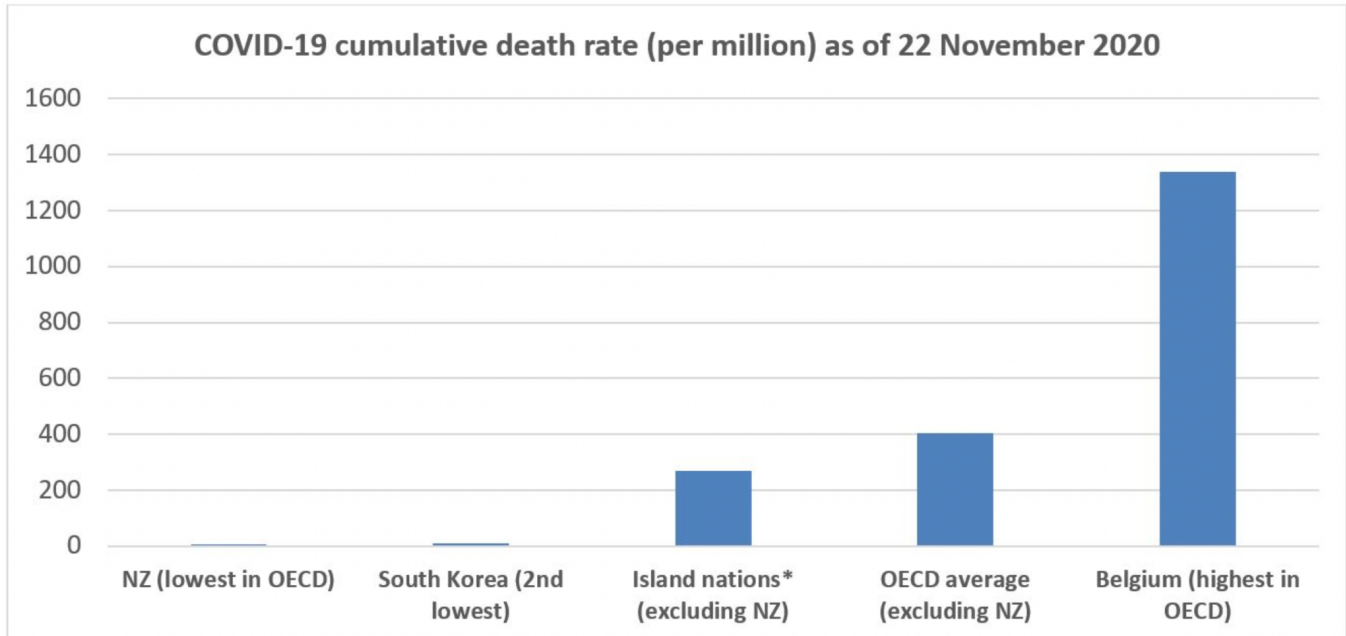
The short and long term impacts of COVID-19 will be interwoven within our society for many years to come. Therefore, my independent research project explores the impacts of COVID-19 upon theatre arts and performances within New Zealand. Through my experiences and the events I've witnessed surrounding theatre during COVID-19, I really wanted to take this opportunity to conduct my independent research project on a topic which resonates with me. In this regard, I have personally contacted leaders of four New Zealand theatre companies about how COVID-19 has impacted their businesses both initially and in the long term. The interviews I have conducted allowed me to analyse the responses in the context of New Zealand's financial support. This paper explores these ongoing support fundings before, during and after COVID-19 and, how effective the funding has been for theatre companies. Apart from these aspects, I have explored what motivates these individuals to persevere with theatre companies despite adversity. Although I have researched statistical evidence, through talking to these leaders in theatre I have understood, personally, how and why theatre companies have succeeded through their drive and optimism, which reaffirms passion.

Introduction

During our COVID adjustments, as a student body returning to school, there were many changes that we had to get used to based on the country's restrictions. These included the face masks which revealed only the eyes of students and teachers, the portable hand washing stations positioned around the school hallways as well as the regulations which enforced social distancing and seating students 2 metres apart from one another. Throughout school it became clear that the most significantly impacted portion was the arts department which could no longer put on the annual musicals and host choir rehearsals. Because I was heavily involved in the campus performing arts, I wasn't able to pursue my passion at this time. COVID-19 had its ebb and flow, so that returning to school meant a gradual loosening of COVID-19 restrictions. It was in this setting that Anders Falstie-Jensen visited our school to perform his one man play *Back to Square One*. The premise of this performance was based on COVID-19 and particularly the human experience of coping with the difficult distancing and resulting limited human connections. After the performance, we found out that the play was initially designed to be performed for his neighbours while complying with COVID-19. His resilience to continue with theatre throughout COVID-19 stuck with me long after the performance and hence, inspired the beginning of this project.

Background

COVID-19 impacted the world's population in various degrees and forms. The impacts of COVID-19 on New Zealand were social and economical but largely minimised by the government's clear strategies. New Zealand's methods proved also to be effective through the statistical evidence that it rated lowest in cumulative death rates per million as of November 2020. (Wilson et al, 2020)



(Wilson, N. (2020). *COVID-19 cumulative death rate* [Graph]. Phcc.

<https://www.phcc.org.nz/briefing/health-and-economic-impacts-covid-19-response-nz-compared-oecd-countries>)

This, however, does not detract from the still significant impacts of COVID-19 on New Zealand's population. Due to the nature of a pandemic, there is no "after COVID-19" yet since the population's experiences of COVID-19 are ongoing. Thus, it is difficult to define what constitutes an impact as short or long term. Because of this difficulty I will, therefore, define the short term impacts to be between 2020 to early 2022 and the long term impacts to be from 2022 onwards. I have based this structure on the alert levels, where social distancing was mandatory, which took place in bursts from 2020 until the end of 2021. This means that through late March 2020 into January 2022, the country was largely experiencing COVID-19 as it was occurring through the disruptions of daily lifestyles. Consequently, during 2022 and onwards, COVID-19's impacts became less immediate, with no lockdowns since. After the discussion of short and long term impacts, I will then explore the research from case studies and databases which will be evaluated to the rest of COVID-19's context.

Quantitative Research

Through the social distancing restrictions caused by COVID-19 within New Zealand from 2020-2021, large gatherings of people, such as theatre, were prohibited. As a result of this, both audiences and theatre creators were affected. Among the artists and backstage workers the damages were mainly economic and social, whereas the consequence on the audience was predominantly social.

According to New Zealand's ministry of culture and heritage, the consequences of COVID-19 have been described as "the greatest economic shock in living memory". (Schorn & Whiteford, 2020, p.5) The same source and statistics also estimate New Zealand's arts sector to be profoundly affected by COVID-19 due to several factors. Firstly, the declining income associated with COVID-19 means that people lowered theatre on their priority list. Although art is often cited as key to human development, it remains something that is unnecessary for basic survival. Furthermore, the quarantines and restrictions made it similarly difficult for artists to enter New Zealand during these times. This could mean that artists cannot receive jobs from other countries which could have potentially better opportunities. (Schorn & Whiteford, 2020, p.7) Lastly, it seems as if there may be a shift in perspective in audiences due to COVID-19 which could suggest general reluctance to take part in large gatherings even when restrictions loosen. (Schorn & Whiteford, 2020, p.7)

According to Infometrics and Statistics NZ, it estimates a 11.7% decrease in employment from 2020 to 2021, compared to the estimated 9.8% decrease in overall economy. The long term impacts still seem unclear, but there is a forecasted economic downturn. This suggests that artists were less likely to receive economic support due to reluctant audiences. The relationship between artist and audience is codependent; the actors need to feed off the energy given to them by the audience. Thus, the absence of an audience is severely detrimental to theatre. More importantly, without an audience, artists lose their source of revenue. This can cause artists to search for another occupation which can sustain their living. These implications are seen widely among backstage crew members, who manage jobs such as lighting, sound or properties. Their occupations are based on employment from different theatre companies and through COVID-19, there were fewer job opportunities to sustain them. Thus, there are significant economic effects due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

The social effects on artists are also large due to the difficulties they have overcome to continue their art forms. Many artists experienced immense emotional strains due to the absence of theatre. Cathy Knowsley, an experienced theatre consultant, outlines how artists are "the first to stop ... but also the last to come back". Knowsley states that they are all "without work, without hope". (Chumko, 2020) In addition to summarising the two main effects of theatre, it also reiterates how mentally taxing it is for artists to hold onto their jobs when they see no sign of COVID-19's effects lessening. Since a pandemic had not yet been seen in modern times, it meant that there were few historical events that the world could use to estimate COVID-19's tendencies. For example, we cannot predict when COVID-19's effects will fade completely and, thus, return the world to normality. It is due to the human population's universally experienced confusion that COVID-19 was so difficult to deal with mentally. Through obstacles such as

cancellations, the economic downfall could also affect the mental health of artists and soon could force them to search for alternative occupations.

Audiences are similarly impacted socially by COVID-19. Indicated by Creativenz, around 40% of New Zealanders reference arts to be important for their wellbeing. This highlights how thoroughly art is interwoven within our society. On the other hand, art is not something humanity needs for survival but definitely needed for living a better life for many. This could explain the 60% who indicated arts to be of little to no importance to their wellbeing. Thus, the potential reluctance of audiences is connected to the social impacts of COVID-19. (creativenz, 2020)

Due to physical distancing and restrictions, “traditional” theatre with performers and an audience in a room could not continue. This means that the impacts of COVID-19 on theatre creatives seemed to be worse than any other occupation. Therefore, the New Zealand government began to introduce government funding towards the arts sector in attempts to help artists gain financial stability when theatre work could not provide revenue.

The Government Response Package was established to provide direct monetary support to artists. Of which, the most significant package offered to the arts sector was \$16 million given by Creative New Zealand. As a whole, the majority of funds aim for reassurance and flexibility towards the artists, listening and respecting the needs of the people as well as offering extra funds towards rapid response. (Harwood, 2020) The Arts and Culture COVID Recovery Programme, for example, encompasses initiatives which target short and long term relief in response to various outbreaks. Led by Manatū Taonga, the ministry for culture and heritage, and partnering with other groups and agencies, it provides support for the arts within New Zealand. (Manatū Taonga, 2023) These funds provided monetary support to artists who could not continue rehearsal and performances of shows and, thus, had no source of income from audiences. They were also widely accessible to all artists in New Zealand due to the large amount of money that was expended. Overall, there seems to be active support from the government to support the arts.

To further analyse the effects of COVID-19 on theatre companies, I was lucky enough to be able to contact Anders Falstie-Jensen, Hamish Moaut, Lesley Fifield, Grant Meese and Terry O’Connell to give me a first hand source of information for their different perspectives. Falstie-Jensen wrote, directed and performed a one person play called *Back to Square One*, which was designed specifically to be performed within COVID-19 social distancing restrictions. Moaut is the director and co-founder of Encore Theatre Collective which provides young people a platform to perform musicals in. During COVID-19 restrictions, Encore unfortunately had to cancel the performances of *Elf the musical* but ultimately, were able to perform this musical two years later. Fifield is the co-founder of Auckland Performing Arts Academy (APAA) theatre company which runs similarly to Encore, providing opportunities for young performers in musicals. G&T Productions was founded in 2004 by Meese and O’Connell, bringing theatre to venues all over New Zealand. Throughout the duration of COVID-19, G&T put on many large-scale musicals including *Mary Poppins*, *Jersey Boys* and *Les Misérables*. In particular, *Mary Poppins* was not only the first musical to hit the Civic theatre post- COVID-19, but also the first major production to be performed in the world since the outbreak of COVID-19. (1news.com, 2020)

Qualitative Research

The interviews I had conducted revealed first hand information specific to my research. The impacts of COVID-19 to theatre companies continued to be mainly economic and social.

Anders Falstie-Jensen, who inspired me to begin this project, is an artist I was fortunate enough to interview. With his company Rebel Alliance, which debuted its first show in 2006, Falstie-Jensen seeks to tell anecdotal and historical stories through his projects. In my interview, Falstie-Jensen discussed the experiences he had as a result of COVID-19. When lockdown first hit, artists “freaked out” and people “lost jobs immediately”, but the optimism and hope drove the artists to pursue other methods of theatre. Falstie-Jensen describes the online surge with bedroom concerts and Zoom performances with “bad sound and lighting”. Nevertheless, the artists made it work, and for some it was even “therapeutic”. An example of this is Mouat’s work on his social media platform, @theshowmustgoon, where he posted musical theatre content for young people during lockdown. Another example is a version of Chevkov’s *The Seagull*, which was performed by Auckland Theatre Company in May 2020. The play consisted of thirty minute episodes which were published and streamed online.

Despite these examples, Falstie-Jensen wanted to do something live because he hated Zoom meetings. To create something he had to resolve the given limitations he was faced with. His inability to leave town meant that the play was local and the required social distancing meant that he incorporated a drawn chalk bubble that audience members drew around themselves on the concrete. Thus, *Back to Square One* was born. The versatility of the piece also allowed for it to be performed all over New Zealand, where Falstie-Jensen would send instructions and direct performers over Zoom.

As we spoke, Falstie-Jensen had the insight that theatre is “more for the sake of the performers than the audience”. This highlights the deep psychological needs artists have to create and perform, even in the context of a pandemic. As a result of the first lockdown, artists all over New Zealand were in a state of shock and confusion due to the immediate cancellation of projects. Theatre is a business full of risk, since artists can never know how their art will be perceived. As a result of COVID-19, these risks are amplified since the prediction of the audience’s reactions to COVID-19 in relation to art were even harder to quantify. This is where artists begin to contemplate if theatre is worth persevering when COVID-19 is so unpredictable in so many forms.

Falstie-Jensen also describes the economic implications of COVID-19 from an artist’s perspective. Ironically, some artists were faring better during lockdown than out of lockdown due to government subsidies. New Zealand’s government “poured in money” and artists applied for any available grants during COVID-19, but when these funds ran out the artists were left without support once again.

As outlined by Falstie-Jensen, theatre companies also suddenly experienced shortages of workers in different regards. For theatre to cohere, there needs to be collaboration of people

who are each skilled in their specialty. This is depicted in the increased casting of understudies within plays or musicals or recruiting a larger backstage crew to account for possible COVID-19 cases. Independently, this is an expenditure of time, effort and money which would not have been necessary prior to COVID-19. This was an especially important result of COVID-19 which is brushed over at times.

When I asked Falstie-Jensen what motivates him to persevere through COVID-19, he answered that it was something he “really loves”. Additionally, the support of his wife with a full time job means that they can balance the income within the family. Ultimately, when it is something you “really love you make it work when it’s tricky”. Falstie-Jensen also discusses how staying in the business is “so much harder for younger artists” since there is “not enough money” and they are often alone. Moreover, Falstie-Jensen is largely successful for his wide variety of skills being a good writer, producer and director. He is independent and willing to be flexible to grasp opportunities.

There were two major periods of lockdowns within New Zealand in 2020 and 2021. Thus, due to the fluctuation of COVID-19 cases throughout 2020 into 2022, there was no stability within theatre companies according to O’Connell and Meese of G&T Productions. Throughout COVID-19 G&T Production worked on five uncanceled shows, albeit with delays and drawbacks. *Mary Poppins*, for example, was set to be performed in March 2020 but was pushed back as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. Although the company lost approximately \$200,000 in this period, *Mary Poppins* was ultimately extremely successful with sold out performances. (Wynn, 2020) When discussing these successes with Meese and O’Connell, it seemed as if it was due to their flexibility to adapt accordingly. With this O’Connell discusses the “strict protocol” they followed which proved to be effective through the “practices with buy-in from everybody involved”. This meant that they had a cooperative and invested collective which protected themselves from getting sick throughout the rehearsal process. Meese then elaborates on *Mary Poppins’* rehearsal process which was “a huge challenge”, affected by the postponement, which in turn necessitated a venue change. In addition to cast and crew being required to wear masks, G&T Production also introduced weekly, and then daily, testing for COVID-19 during rehearsals.

Furthermore, the timing of the show, being immediately after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, meant that it was a big gamble since G&T “didn’t know if people could accept being in a theatre.” This heightens the risks that theatre companies faced during COVID-19. These implications were also apparent in the musical performance of *Les Misérables* in Wellington, in 2022 after the second round of lockdown. O’Connell also emphasises the “build of insurance” that companies have had to take as a result of COVID-19. Suddenly, G&T felt as if they needed “understudies for almost every position” to ensure the successes of a performed production. Meese then reflected on the changes that have occurred in the logistical planning of shows where, prior to COVID-19, “it was a bit of tongue and cheek” and to “get on that stage, come high or hell water,” but that now there is a whole new way of organisation which protects the wellbeing of all those involved.

O’Connell and Meese also discuss the flexibility in which they approach their performances. Since the company only has O’Connell, Meese and one other director to organise the production process, each individual has a huge workload. On the other hand, they can make

“quick decisions” when needed since there are only three people. Meese also references the locality of their company, where there is flexibility between individuals in terms of accommodation and venues. This is similarly depicted in the way *Jersey Boys* had lost a week of rehearsals in person as a result of COVID-19 and had to be adaptable in their actions. The change of venues *Mary Poppins* had “from Bruce Mason to the Civic” was another specific example of flexibility that G&T experienced as a company. These ideas are supported greatly by Falstie-Jensen who reiterates the benefits of flexibility as an artist.

It was through these experiences that they reflected on the social and behavioural changes of people due to COVID-19. They felt the dedication of passionate people who would do “whatever it took” to make theatre work. Conversely, they also saw COVID-19 bring out personalities that they haven't seen before in people they “have known for ten years”. It is then with this evaluation that O'Connell and Meese discuss their priorities in their theatre company being “for the people.” For example, O'Connell details the situation where they would be alerted to an audience member coughing in the audience. The ushers would “ask them to step outside,” and the audience member would be offered tickets to the same show on a different night so that they can still enjoy the performance. From this, the success of G&T is that they value people and the interest of people at all levels.

These ideas are also largely depicted in the experiences of Encore and APAA, according to Mouat and Fifield discussing their respective theatre companies. Mouat discusses how theatre “is always a risky business” because you never can estimate a “public's perception of a performance,” but with the added complications of COVID-19, “everything put forward could be lost,” both socially and economically. When COVID-19 restrictions happened, APAA went into online rehearsals but with a variety of people, “some found it wonderful and others found it hard,” which made the process difficult. These discussions support Falstie-Jensen's claims about the different reactions of artists when lockdown was enforced in New Zealand.

Fifield also described the conflict of values they experienced as a result of COVID-19. A component of the restrictions meant that vaccinations were required by performers and crew alike. This meant that those unwilling to be vaccinated could not participate in theatre performances and processes. Apart from the social impacts on these individuals, it also alters the company's abilities to perform collectively since they must fill in the gaps. As a result, there were strains put on relationships where the separation was caused by regulations of the government and neither side were satisfied by the outcome. This was prominent throughout the lockdowns and APAA's rehearsals where “some were glad that you are still flogging it 18 months later” and others thought that “you should have quit immediately” as a theatre company. This resulted in tensions and conflict between the organisers and participants since there were “such different views on COVID-19 anyway, regardless of theatre,” (Mouat, 2023) it has created difficulty in navigation.

Moreover, Fifield reiterated the impact of lessened restrictions. As theatre began to be performed again, it was under restrictions that required social distancing. This meant that audience members had to sit one or two seats apart to minimise the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, the amount of revenue was significantly decreased, which put more pressure on

companies to sell tickets. It is an indication which again weighs on the difficulties of theatre within a pandemic.

Mouat also highlighted how the second lockdown was worse than the first as a result of COVID-19. After the first lockdown, artists had been desperate to return to normality and continue the projects they had held off. Economically, the artists had also been eager to dedicate money into their projects due to their increased hopes. This emphasised the optimism that encouraged people as a result of adversity. As a result, it felt as if the artists had their hopes increased too much from the loosening of restrictions. Thus, when the country was put into another significant lockdown, it meant that there was an exacerbation of consequences when the hopes of artists were crushed. Therefore, it seemed that the amount of lockdowns weighed heavily upon an artist's resilience.

Nevertheless, both Mouat and Fifield emphasised the joys of their occupations. The joy of theatre and "sharing it with young people", more so than before, was extremely important to Mouat throughout COVID-19, where "people needed the escapism of theatre". Fifield adds to this by describing how the conflict that did happen as a result of COVID-19 was minimal and resolvable. As an example, all the performers who left, APAA and Encore eventually returned to perform in another season of performance. Furthermore, Mouat highlights how the sharing and magnifying the joy of theatre for a child to give them something to look forward to motivated him in his career choices during COVID-19.

Conclusion

In this investigation, I have researched both the quantitative and qualitative data surrounding the impacts of COVID-19 on New Zealand theatre. From statistical research retrieved from websites, I was able to gain general information, which in a sense was quite objective. For example, the statistics often referred to the country as a whole rather than specific cases. On the contrary, the interviews I conducted allowed me to understand the personal implications of a variety of experiences that artists had. Interestingly, I felt as if the quantitative data I gathered seemed to be more focused on economic impacts and the interviews more focused on social impacts. In this regard, it highlights the humanity of people and how there is a prioritisation of people and relationships. Furthermore, this paper has reiterated the emotional strength of artists. To succeed in this field of work, optimism is an integral component to all artists. Through the difficulties COVID-19 has inflicted, artists seem to find methods to overcome regardless of their situation due to their adaptability. From this, I wonder if there is an inherent necessity to be flexible within the occupational role of an artist. Ultimately, this investigation has built reassurance in my mind about the trajectory arts will take despite any adversity or hardship. I truly think art is something that will never die.

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