

INTERNATIONAL DIRECTORS SUMMIT

THE DRAMA LEAGUE

SESSION 2 THE ART OF DIRECTING AND HEALTH PRACTICES

Monday November 21st, 2022

SPEAKERS



Maksima Boeva
she/her
🇧🇬 Bulgaria



Stefan Prohorov
he/him
🇧🇬 Bulgaria



Natalie Ester
she/her
🇷🇴 Romania



Dima Levytsky
he/him +
🇺🇦 Ukraine



Avto Diasamidze
he/him +
🇬🇪 Georgia



Anna Smolar
she/her +
🇵🇱 Poland



Mei Ann Teo
she/her
🇺🇸 United States



Lisa Rothe
she/her
🇺🇸 United States



Gabriel Stelian-Shanks
he/him +
🇺🇸 United States



Gwynn MacDonald
she/her
🇺🇸 United States



Nilan
he/him +
🇺🇸 United States



Kalina Wagenstein
she/her
🇧🇬 Bulgaria



Andrew Coopman
they/he +
🇺🇸 United States

Maksima Boeva, Stefan Prohorov, Natalie Ester, Dima Levytsky,
Avto Diasamidze, Anna Smolar, Mei Ann Teo, Lisa Rothe
Gabriel Stelian-Shanks, Gwynn MacDonald, Nilan, Kalina Wagenstein and Andrew Coopman

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Nilan | he/him+ (United States)

Welcome back everyone to the International Directors Summit. I'm Nilan, Associate Artistic Director of The Drama League and a Creator/Performer out in the world working across mediums to tell nuisance and necessary stories about the Black diaspora¹ and those individuals across the LGBTQIA2S+² spectrum. Our time today will focus on our individual and collective experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic.



Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

There is a similarity to how various countries managed the pandemic and to how artists have made work forever. Both have had to work with limited resources. Artists, especially directors, never thought they'd count as a limited resource for their own collaborators. Human health was a limited resource. Making work together became a life and death situation. Which shook theatre workers to our core. For most this was our first experience of a pandemic. The pandemic took something from everyone. What did it take from you?

Stefan Prohorov | he/him (Bulgaria)

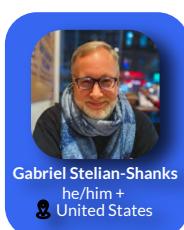
The loss of free time. Suddenly, my home became a work space. My space hasn't been separated since. Many may think it's acceptable to combine these spaces, but I haven't been able to return to a healthier separation of the two. We've accumulated a new habit of living and working in our personal space.

Natalie Ester | she/her (Romania)

Interacting with people. I thought of Shakespeare³. How he had to live through a pandemic too. His stories made it through pandemic. Made me feel my stories would make it too. I told the students about Shakespeare. They began to write stories, impersonating characters, turning theatre into a Zoom adventure. Cameras, the intelligence, the artificial came into our theatre work, even when we return to the stage.

Gabriel Stelian-Shanks | he/him+ (United States)

I too tried to make work during that rough initial time in the first few months when the streets of New York City were empty. Nilan and I were asked by Dixon Place⁴, to participate in a live fundraiser produced by Peculiar Works Project⁵; I know that many of you have worked with them, they have been to Eastern Europe a lot. The rules were that we had to write an original piece that could happen outdoors, our actors could not be any closer than 12 feet, and had to be masked. On top of all that, the audience had to be 18 feet away from that. What it meant to even rehearse a play during those days became different. What it meant to produce a play became different. Actors suddenly felt like maybe they were risking their lives, something theater had not asked them to risk before. So I just wanted to share that experience alongside Natalie's, and see if other people tried to make work during this time, and if it was similar for everyone.



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Maksima Boeva | she/her (Bulgaria)

I agree with Gabriel, the way directors communicate and work with actors has changed. One of my actresses has contracted COVID⁶. Rehearsals have stopped and I'm beginning to have flu-like symptoms. Maybe I have also contracted COVID, fashionably late as they say. The actress in question is 60 plus, so we're very worried for her, although she is vaccinated. We all know that "the show must go on" line.. A lot of people I know and work with live by that "rule". I can list plenty of examples of the show going on in unbelievable circumstances -

actors arriving very sick to shows or carrying on with severe injuries. . I find that very unhealthy. The pandemic made a lot of people, creatives included, aware that health comes first. Our mental and physical health is more important than the art we produce - if not for other reasons, then at least because if we're not fully present and capable we can't truly create something of value.

This romanticized image of the tortured, starving, sickly artist has done so much damage. It is about time we pulled away from this narrative and realize that the creative shouldn't rob us from our physical and mental health, it should strengthen them. I think that in that sense COVID did ground us a little. Regarding other changes I experienced - I lost the certainty of having an audience for the show, because people are scared to gather in large groups. I lost



Maksima Boeva
she/her
& Bulgaria

Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

Is there anything else that you guys discovered in your process? Or, again, took you by surprise as you were dealing with this new situation?

Anna Smolar | she/her (Poland)

In Poland, it's very common to have huge weddings, you know, huge parties where people usually get completely drunk. Most people were getting sick at weddings, not at theaters. Nevertheless theaters were one of the institutions first to close and last to reopen. Theaters were very safe spaces during periods of reopening. So many artists who were at the edge of survival turned to Uber etc. to pay their debts. Theatre was solely looked upon as entertainment, not as a cultural fixture to society. We weren't important in the eyes of the Polish government. I think this is a big political and social topic. How do we define theatre? What role does the artist play in society at this moment? Gabriel, I was one of those White privileged people confused by what was happening but a bit happy to have a bit more time with my family. We went to the countryside and finally I could hear my thoughts. I remember my first two performances post the first lockdown felt so uncertain. You never knew if you were going to rehearsal the next day or if a colleague wasn't going to show. We learned to produce differently in a more thoughtful and sustainable way. What is worrying, is that somehow, we came back to what we were before.



Anna Smolar
she/her +
& Poland

Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

Does anybody feel like some of the positive things that were discovered, new inner resources, new ways of working, are here to stay? Or are people feeling like things are sliding back to old pre-pandemic ways?

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— Dima Levitskiy | he/him (Ukraine)

— It's interesting what Anna said, because the pandemic in Ukraine highlighted the relationship between the authority and theatre. Shopping malls and other commercial businesses were open but the theatre remained closed. I was still able to produce my audio plays because we did it outdoors. It became the only format to produce theatre during that year.

— Lisa Rothe | she/her (United States)

— I lost my livelihood. I had work setup for the next year and a half and all of that disappeared. I had to figure out how to make money. I suddenly became a caretaker for my partner who has a very compromised immune system. We had to figure out how to get food and how to get provisions. So, I went into a coaching mode, and I had a group of really interested young actors who wanted to work. Zoom became a place of freedom but after a while people became locked by the screen. How do we actually navigate our bodies and not worry about these silly little parameters? So the energy isn't getting stuck.

— Mei Ann Teo | they/them (United States)

— I keep thinking about what's lost and oftentimes when something's lost, something's found. I too, feel that shift between the assumptions of what it takes for a show to go on, and what is at risk, when a show goes on. There's a show that I've been working on for a few years, called *Where We Belong*⁷ by Madeline Sayet. Back in 2021, we were deciding whether or not it's a one person show, whether or not it should be done with an audience (that is socially distanced), or if it should be filmed. Sayet is Mohegan⁸ and wants indigenous people in the audience. Sayet's play is not just for a White audience. I remember when she said, "No native person is going to come to the theater right now, because we are dying." I remember the flush of my own mental, physical, emotional health, being very much processed through theatre. All of that needed to shift. The most beautiful thing is to sing together and that being the most deadly act is heartbreaking. So much of what we've known that's good and beautiful was deadly overnight.



— Lisa Rothe | she/her (United States)

— I was directing an 11 person show. It was very difficult to understudy due to the diversity of the cast. We would need 8 understudies⁹ which isn't a real reality. So there were times, in the last 10 days (10 performances), where we literally called someone into read on stage. I would never have done that before in my directing practice and producing practice. But the fact was, the story was worthy enough to be told. It's like the sort of weird level of like, sure, you saw the show once, why don't you perform it tomorrow, and everyone else has been working for two months on it. Why not? There's this kind of release of perfectionism for myself as a director. That allows a lot more ease in breath.



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— Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

The pandemic certainly transformed the role of understudies in great ways and also difficult ways, right? Understudies blew up everyone's production budgets. The unforeseen cost.

— Avto Diasamidze | he/him (Georgia)

I was recently in a shop buying bread or something. Talking with the seller she told me "we were so happy during the pandemic". Which made no sense to me. Then I thought the pandemic was humans versus a virus. Humans dying by biology. Whereas in war it's humans versus humans, and humans dying by human hands. I thought that would lead to everyone wanting to become closer after the pandemic but that isn't the case here. Online theatre is the craziest thing I've ever heard, by the way.

People were watching the rehearsal and not the finished product. There was no way to deliver the performance to them.



— Nilan | he/him+ (United States)

You're right! We delivered the rehearsal as a product. How capitalist of us all. I feel that directors were forced to work blindly. There was no way to ethically lead a room for a moment there. Theatre artists are groomed to roll with the punches, right? When did that grooming turn into playing God for art sake? People were watching the rehearsal and not the finished product. There was no way to deliver the performance to them.

— Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

That's a really good point. Do you want to expand it?

— Nilan | he/him+ (United States)

Voicing the change in process is difficult. I'm attending shows in person again. Trying to relive a feeling, an experience. I'm watching a lot of work, but it's not hitting me in the same way. I, as audience, am sometimes having a delay or distancing to my own response to what is happening in front of me. Is there a conditioning we all need to endure? To feel present again? For me, the effect of the live experience has changed. There is something new to figure out as artists before



— Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

You're making a point I haven't heard before, which is the isolation of the audience from the artist. I mean, theater was a communal experience, and every performance is immeasurably affected by the audience.

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— Natalie Ester | she/her (Romania)

In Romania, the public were eager to help artists. Online theater was quite successful. Live performances are back and online theater is still here. Well sadly enough, after Syria, Romania has the biggest population of migrants that live Romania permanently. Romanians living abroad are buying tickets and watching. A piece of home.

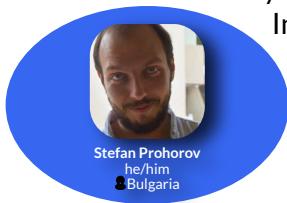


— Maksima Boeva | she/her (Bulgaria)

The same in Bulgaria. The online theater became a thing, and it's still a thing. I wanted to touch on something that Mei Ann said about understudies. I'm envious of the U.S. for having understudies. Understudies aren't a thing in Bulgaria. "The show must go on" is taken to the extreme. I've heard stories of very sick colleagues. Like a friend of mine, quite famous in Bulgaria, an actress that had to do a laugh scene while having horrible diarrhea. Canceling shows is like betraying the audience. These people have gotten ready to go out and the show is canceled. There is a crisis here in Bulgaria. The audience hasn't come back. It's alarming to state theaters and dangerous to the independent theatre scene.

— Stefan Prohorov | he/him (Bulgaria)

According to data provided by the state theatres there is a 40% withdrawal of audiences compared to last year. It's not only happening in Bulgaria, according to data from the European Association for Independent Performing Arts¹⁰ (EAIPA), these are similar numbers all over Europe. In Italy, reaching up to 60% of audience withdrawal. It's really staggering. Are you experiencing audience withdrawal in the U.S.? There are answers to find in theatre. This isn't happening



— Anna Smolar | she/her (Poland)

I would like to revisit Nilan's thoughts. This question of audience and the artist is really crucial. I was speaking National Theatre in Cracow who said "When people are coming to questions: Is it funny? How long is it?" Should that feedback define production? I try to listen to their wisdom. Even if it's capitalistic about the topic, story, who is performing, but what about the about people attending concerts is interesting. The form changes



misunderstanding between the to the intendant of the the box office they ask two our thoughts on the next cally interpreted. We care form. Stefan, your point so often. The future has to

— Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

In the U.S., we are talking a lot about how audiences have lost their muscle of sitting in performance and receiving stories. How do you cultivate that muscle again?

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— Gabriel Stelian-Shanks | he/him+ (United States)

Sporting events are back to full strength now, packed with people; other kinds of artistic expression are seeing audiences return fully too. I wonder if it is still really about health here in New York? We no longer have the mask mandate, except for some off-Broadway theaters and smaller houses. New York is a very specific market, but we are discovering that even stardom and celebrity, which dominate so much of our system here, is limited in its ability to bring people back. Hugh Jackman¹¹ is currently playing in The Music Man¹² and is breaking records, but other star-driven performances are suffering. Many producers are talking about the increase of papering and majority-comped houses. That's not sustainable.

— Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

That's also a strategy, right? The papering¹³ is trying to prime the pump or get audiences back "into the habit" of going to the theater.



— Gabriel Stelian-Shanks | he/him+ (United States)

That is the most positive way we can talk about that. Another option that could be exciting, but we're not currently doing it, would be to offer complimentary tickets to underrepresented communities. We are not using this moment as an entry point for people who have price sensitivity. We are comping people who could pay, who used to pay, and currently are not.

— Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

Anyone make bold choices that were unexpected that came directly out of the COVID experience?

— Maksima Boeva | she/her (Bulgaria)

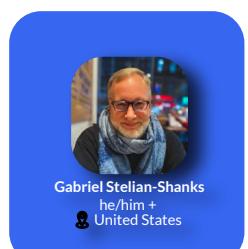
Prioritizing my mental health.

— Anna Smolar | she/her (Poland)

Pleasure became very important in my work.

— Gabriel Stelian-Shanks | he/him+ (United States)

Well, thank you, everybody for this conversation. We really appreciate, again, how robustly and thoughtfully you're coming to this gathering of people. Thank you.





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¹The African diaspora is the worldwide collection of communities descended from native Africans or people from Africa, predominantly in the Americas.

²An acronym for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or gender expansive, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, and two-spirit (LGBTQIA2S+)

³William Shakespeare was a renowned English poet, playwright, and actor born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. His birthday is most commonly celebrated on 23 April, which is also believed to be the date he died in 1616.

⁴Performance venue in New York, NY showcasing alternative theater, dance, music & literature with a bar & lounge.

⁵Peculiar Works Project was founded in 1993 by Ralph Lewis, Catherine Porter and Barry Rowell to create original performances that are accessible and engaging for diverse audiences. Using various artistic disciplines in unique combinations, this Obie Award-winning company challenges the conventions of alternative theater.

⁶The COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus pandemic, is an ongoing global pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

⁷Madeline Sayet is a member of the Mohegan Tribe in Connecticut, where she was raised on a combination of traditional Mohegan stories and Shakespeare. Both of which have influenced both her work as a playwright and as a stage director of new plays, classics, and opera.

¹⁷Andrew Coopman, Artistic Coordinator for The Drama League.

⁸The Mohegan Tribe is a sovereign, federally-recognized Indian tribe situated with a reservation in Southeastern Connecticut.

⁹In theater, an understudy, referred to in opera as cover or covering, is a performer who learns the lines and blocking or choreography of a regular actor, actress, or other performer in a play.

¹⁰European Association for Independent Performing Arts (EAIPA) represents people, companies and theatres working in Europe's independent Performing Arts sector, and it responds to Europe's cultural policy making by collecting up-to-date information, initiating new policy proposals and by raising visibility for the needs and achievements of the sector.

¹¹Hugh Jackman is an Australian performer who was considered a “triple threat”—a successful actor, dancer, and singer. He was perhaps best known for his action movies and stage musicals.

¹²The Music Man is a musical with book, music, and lyrics by Meredith Willson, based on a story by Willson and Franklin Lacey. The plot concerns con man Harold Hill, who poses as a boys' band organizer and leader and sells band instruments and uniforms to naïve Midwestern townsfolk, promising to train the members of the new band. Harold is no musician, however, and plans to skip town without giving any music lessons. Prim librarian and piano teacher Marian sees through him, but when Harold helps her younger brother overcome his lisp and social awkwardness, Marian begins to fall in love with him. He risks being caught to win her heart.

¹³Papering is a way of filling seats in a house in hopes of increasing ticket sales through word of mouth.