

INTERNATIONAL DIRECTORS SUMMIT THE DRAMA LEAGUE

SESSION 4

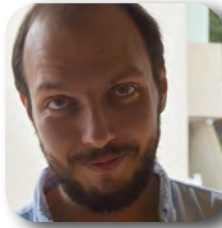
THE ART OF DIRECTING DURING GLOBAL FINANCIAL CHANGE AND DISPARITY

Monday January 9th, 2023

SPEAKERS



Maksima Boeva
she/her
🇧🇬 Bulgaria



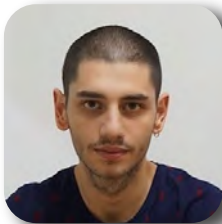
Stefan Prohorov
he/him
🇧🇬 Bulgaria



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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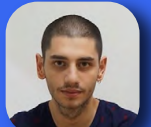
Monday January 9th, 2023

Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

This session is really about finances, and the economy, and how all of us are dealing with some of the biggest, in most of our lifetimes, biggest hits or interruptions or difficulties being presented by some global trends not just what's happening in our own countries but in the world itself. The pandemic has hit the economy. The war in Europe is hitting all of us in different ways. How does that impact our audiences?

Avto Diasamidze | he/him (Georgia)

Before the pandemic ticket prices were very low, for Georgian theater, but after the pandemic the ticket prices have jumped to 400 minimum. It's very hard to obtain a ticket. It's really strange how economics work. I was walking the streets and saw Russian propaganda everywhere, because of migration. Georgia is an independent country, an open space. Tourism and transit are the main economic boosters to the economy. Since the war, the Russian perspective has been dominant in Georgia, which makes me angry. I'm a theater artist. I usually try to question morality, rather than dictate what's right and wrong. Those Russian voices are now my audience, my neighbors. Should I be dictating now what's right and wrong? So what's the right you know, to forget about this kind of discomfort, and think about prosperity, which I don't understand. There is always an economic crisis in the world. It's a cycle.



Avto Diasamidze
he/him +
Georgia

Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

Avto, what about funding, how's that been impacted?

Avto Diasamidze | he/him (Georgia)

Those are two kinds of sources in Georgia theater. It's the Minister of Culture and money from the city.. It's all about subsidies from the government. This didn't change. Still means we need to find donors to help supplement the budget.

Maksima Boeva | she/her (Bulgaria)

I feel Bulgaria has been in constant economic crisis since the day I was born. The world of art and culture has been badly disadvantaged for years and years now. We have state funding but the money doesn't always go where it's supposed to go, by which I mean there is sadly a lot of corruption in the sector - funds are often used to line the pockets of certain people that are masquerading as artists but have a much greater interest in money than in art. Some theatres in Bulgaria receive funding from the state and the more money they make, the more funding they receive. This rarely helps out shows that are trying to start a conversation or make an impact, it also doesn't help out experimental work. Things that make money are more often than not very easy to digest, so that type of funding mostly goes to entertainment shows. I don't mean to demonise entertainment, but I don't believe it needs additional funding, most good entertainment can make money on its own.



Maksima Boeva
she/her
Bulgaria

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Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

Quickly before we move on, Maks, what about the audience trend?



Maksima Boeva | she/her (Bulgaria)

Audience in Bulgaria did decrease severely in the time of the COVID crisis. We have seen some returns, but I think the problem here specifically with audiences, is that we don't have a well developed marketing or advertising strategies in the cultural sector. We don't advertise our work well to potential audiences. We don't research them, so we don't really know how to make them interested in the shows we produce - I'm mostly referring to state theaters. Of course, lack of funding for advertising specifically also has an impact on the situation and that's felt mostly in freelance or independent work.



Kalina Wagenstein | she/her (Bulgaria)

We have two types of theaters. One is this system of state owned theaters, which is a vast network. I think in Bulgaria there are more than 30 for a rather small country. Yes, 10 of them are in Sofia, but in all big cities, there is a state owned theater, with their own company and with their own repertoire. On the other hand, there are many people or many artists who decided cautiously to not be in this system, not to work in the state owned theaters. Well, Maksima is both. She works in a State Theater, but she also makes performances on a private basis. But, for instance, Stefan works mostly independently without being in this, let's say, safety net. He doesn't have this security, which is the state funding. So if we can say that for the state theaters, they have secured funding, but some of them have problems with the quality of their productions, the independent artists are really struggling to get money. They should have to apply to very few funding opportunities, and it's extremely competitive. So artists, not only in Bulgaria, the whole post Soviet space are living two different, let's say, artistic lives. And this is very important to be taken into consideration because actually, two types of artists have to work in a very different environment.



Kalina Wagenstein
she/her
Bulgaria



Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

And in terms of the work they do, is that affected by their source of funding, whether it's independent or whether it's state?



Kalina Wagenstein | she/her (Bulgaria)

Very much.



Natalie Ester | she/her (Romania)

For twenty years, I have been spoiled to be a state actress and director. There is an influx of talent for such a small market due to universities. Twenty years ago, maybe 100 artists were finishing university. Today there are thousands, what do they do? Where do they go? So they run to the independent theater to find space for themselves.

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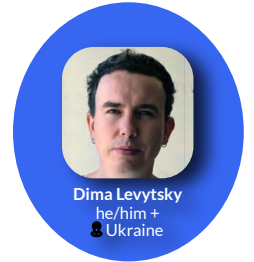
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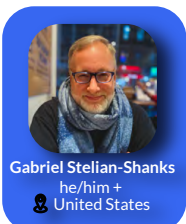
Dima Levitskiy | he/him (Ukraine)

In Ukraine, most of my projects were not funded by the government but by institutions. Before 2022, I paid taxes equivalent to five people. A consequence of not being a state funded artist. After the full scale invasion, most of the entrepreneurs are now paying the equivalent of two people's taxes. There are systems in Germany where each political party also has a cultural projects fund. So voters get to also decide what that fund is spent on when casting their vote.



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

In America, the government contributions to the arts are negligible. There's very little money in that regard. In fact, many companies could probably survive without the monies they receive from the federal and state governments, because it is so small. Most of the funding for theaters – and again, I'm talking in sweeping generalities – are a mix of ticket sales, subscriptions, NGOs¹, or foundations of private support, and individual donors. What I think is happening right now is interesting; in America theater was essentially shut down for over a year, and in that time, two enormous things happened. One is that our audiences fell out of the habit of going to theater, and so now we are trying to help them relearn that habit. We are trying to bring them back to theaters, but there is some resistance because the habit is no longer there. I saw a data point the other day here in New York that audiences are at about 60% capacity from what they were in 2019. So that's an enormous amount of income that has simply fallen away from the commercial and the nonprofit theater sector here. The second thing is that the philanthropic community, the NGOs and foundations that provide the other 50% of our financial model, have not radically increased to fill in the gap left by the drop in ticket sales. A few have, most haven't. During the pandemic, the US government offered assistance to nonprofit and commercial entities in a number of programs. You may hear us talk about PPP loans², which were loans that the government allowed us to take if we retained our staff during the pandemic, even though we were not producing...and that got a lot of companies through that period of time. Another was SVOG, which allowed commercial entities, like Broadway productions and other companies with physical stages to weather that moment. But that income is over, the assistance programs have ended and aren't being renewed. It was a lifeline, but now, I think a lot of theaters, at least here in New York, are really wrestling with the fact that their budgets are going to be radically reduced this season and probably even more next season. The artistic directors of theaters that I speak to here are making very, very tough choices. This has affected new play development, this has affected the commercial sector, the unions, everyone. There's no one that isn't being touched by the downturn in audiences and the lack of responsive philanthropy. I wish that there was a system of different



support. I have been to Bulgaria many times. I've been to Romania many times, and Dima I will tell you I've sat with Kalina in Sofia over coffee as we discussed the hardships of their funding systems in Bulgaria, and even so, I said to her, "I'm jealous." We have drunk many bottles of wine over the fact that I'm jealous! And then Kalina always says to me, don't be jealous, there are problems with this system too. But it is hard here in America, spiritually and tangibly, to realize that our government and our society does not prize us in the way that the cultural sector should be prized.

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Dima Levitskiy | he/him (Ukraine)

I should add that I also like, in general, the system where each city has a state theatre. I think especially for example in Germany, for a specific community. The only question is how it regulates itself in the theatre by the director, people who are regulated. It's really important how they're doing it.



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

Are any of you feeling that your work is being impacted by the economy in new ways? I think I'm asking about the frequency with which you're working, the depth of ability and resources to do that work? I'm giving myself away here, but I think this is coming for American directors – the management of severely reduced resources. I think we are going to be asked to do significantly more with significantly less, at least for the short term.



Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

And the reality of “nonprofit” is changing as well. Having sat on the New York State Council of the Arts artist panel, which evaluated grant applications from non profit companies making theater in New York it was remarkable to see how the companies that were the biggest, which acted the least like nonprofits were getting the largest grants, by far. And they don't necessarily need it because they are also operating like commercial enterprises.



Lisa Rothe | she/her (United States)

While working at The Lark a lot of my work was maintaining our relationships with Eastern European theatres. Majority of the funding came from state departments, and other global institutions. My mentor and teacher was Zelda Fichandler³, who was really like, you know, she's essentially the matriarch of the American Theatre and one of the visionaries of America's regional theatre movement. Todd London's⁴ actually going to be coming out with her biography with TCG⁵ this year. While starting Arena stage in 1950 she was in conversations with the State Department and local funders, and was able to have this vision and conversations about the regional theater⁶, which we just don't have anymore. I mean, the conversation has changed. What we're doing as artists, I think, is slightly different. We were at the relative beginning of the Cold War⁷, and coming out of World War II⁸, and there was a lot more funding at the time, and she was in conversations with the Ford Foundation⁹, and they were all sitting together and having these conversations about art and what to do, and this question, you asked about what to do in difficult times, in hard economic times, but also just challenging times, and I think, coming out of that time period, there was just a burgeoning and explosion of art and creativity. So we're just living in a different time and arts funding is less prevalent.



Lisa Rothe
she/her
United States



Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

I can't emphasize enough how the Ford Foundation really characterized in the last number of decades the way arts and culture's funded in this country. And that era is over.

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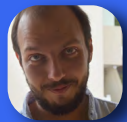
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Stefan Prohorov | he/him (Bulgaria)

We've been talking about the way we fund productions but not the ethics behind how and what we produce. Most of Europe does not have the actual free market conditions when it comes to performing arts because of the language barrier, mobility and economic barriers. So actually, there are very few countries that can produce artistic work which is not meant for entertainment, that can thrive and actually sustain itself in the market. Which means that it is absolutely necessary for a culture to be funded in other ways. So independence here is independence from the



Stefan Prohorov
he/him
Bulgaria



Mei Ann Teo | they/them (United States)

Gabriel and Lisa, I am in agreement with how you laid out the American landscape. I'll talk specifically about the situation I am in as one of the artistic leaders of an organization, called Oregon Shakespeare Festival¹⁰, which is a very large 44 million dollar institution, that has a new artistic director as of the last 3-4 years, who is a Black woman. The change from how the individual donors have responded to a very beloved White man, to a very brilliant Black woman, is astonishing. With programming that remains essentially the same, same directors, same writers, and yet our artistic director gets death threats, right, for the same exact thing. One of the things I'm noticing is that, "yes foundations", sure, yes. Actually, benefitted from the government saved our stages, because Nataki Garrett¹¹, our artistic director, basically and we were able to get 18 million dollars that mobilization. The government stepped gone. So we're back to zero again, like playing is, the rich racist White people have million dollars I promised the theatre to you're Black, I'm doing it because it's you." here at OSF. Now we're finding the donors threat has caused so many to take action. In New York Theatre Workshop¹³, has gath-fund specifically named for Nataki. I'm the been doing a lot of development work because that's what the theatre needs, and I'm basically trying to find the folks who are well-resourced and influential, and can actually gather together folks who have more resource to be



Mei Ann Teo
she/her
& United States

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■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Nilan | he/him+ (United States)

For the many conversations around equity, diversity, and inclusion we are collectively having in the United States. The conversation I believe is most necessary for the next chapter of the American Theater is the destruction of the non-profit system¹⁴. The theatre industry at large as you've heard is dependent on ticket sales, grants, and individual donors. The U.S. is a capitalistic system. The theatre is set up to beg to survive. We teach generation after generation how to beg, scap, and shuck and jive to stay a float. That's a system that needs to die immediately, in my opinion. The hoax is in the title, non-profit. The American Theatre is constructed to not allow artists a stake at their own futures. That goes all the way back to the Ronald Reagan administration. We've been fed over and over again that a stronger non-profit model helps create thriving communities. A stronger model also helps solidify the power and control of the upper class. Class is the invisible killer of us all across borders and oceans. This model will break us eventually. It's almost broken the spirit of theater administration workers who are the backbone of the cultural sector across the U.S. The way we do business must change. A step in the right direction is representation in the government. The pandemic showed us there were few and far between places to voice our cries for help. When will theatre artists look at themselves and art as a business?



Nilan
he/him +
United States

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

To the people who will eventually read the transcript of this conversation. I think when Nilan and Gwynn and I were talking about this topic, and possibly having this as a subject for this meeting, we didn't expect for us to talk about systems. I thought the conversation would be around production. But we have talked about the huge amount of unpaid labor directors are asked to do to navigate these systems. To hear Dima talk about the steps he has to go through, or Maksima working in these two systems of production in Bulgaria, which are somewhat complementary, but in other ways not at all. To watch Stefan try to ethically navigate how to be an artist inside these systems, and the heartbreak of Mei Ann, who is a brilliant artist for those of you who have not experienced their work. They are having to do development work to raise funds for their theater, an artist having to do this second important job...all of which Mei Ann and the rest of us are doing without question, all of which we are doing because we have accepted it as part of our tough reality. I think I just want to name it, for the people who will read this thing: that you are asking the artists of the world to do this extra job and suffer, and you don't even know it is happening. It's behind the curtain. It's not seen. And we are doing it. Thank you all for doing it, and hopefully as we finish out these sessions, we can come to some strategies to solve this, and also maybe we can have the artistic conversations that I hope you know, will be part of those solutions.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

Great thought to end our time on. Thank you everybody.



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¹ Non-government organizations.

² The Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) will provide cash-flow assistance through 100 percent federally guaranteed loans to employers who maintain their payroll during this emergency.

³ Zelda Fichandler was an American stage producer, director and educator

⁴ Todd London is the Head of the MFA Playwriting Program at the New School School of Drama and the Director of Theatre Relations for the Dramatists Guild of America

⁵ Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national organization for theatre, leads for a just and thriving theatre ecology. Since its founding in 1961, TCG's constituency has grown from a handful of groundbreaking theatres to over 700 Member Theatres and affiliate organizations and over 7,000 Individual Members. Through its programs and services, TCG reaches over one million students, audience members, and theatre professionals each year.

⁶ A regional theater or resident theater in the United States is a professional or semi-professional theater company that produces its own seasons. The term regional theater most often refers to a professional theater outside New York City. A regional theater may be a for-profit or not-for-profit entity and may be unionized or non-union.

⁷ The Cold War is a term commonly used to refer to a period of geopolitical tension between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies, the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc.

⁸ World War II or the Second World War, often abbreviated as WWII or WW2, was a global conflict that lasted from 1939 to 1945. The vast majority of the world's countries, including all of the great powers, fought as part of two opposing military alliances: the Allies and the Axis.

⁹ The Ford Foundation is an American private foundation with the stated goal of advancing human welfare.

¹⁰ The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is a regional repertory theatre in Ashland, Oregon, United States, founded in 1935 by Angus L. Bowmer.

¹¹ Nataki Garrett is the Artistic Director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, one of the largest theater-producing organizations in the U.S., and is widely recognized as an innovative and influential arts leader.

¹² Patricia McGregor is a freelance director and the artistic director of New York Theatre Workshop.

¹³ Influential Off-Broadway theater company producing plays & musicals in full productions & workshops.

¹⁴ A nonprofit organization or non-profit organization, also known as a non-business entity, or nonprofit institution, is a legal entity organized and operated for a collective, public or social benefit, in contrast with an entity that operates as a business aiming to generate a profit for its owners.