

# Staying afloat, funded and free

## Independent performing arts in Iceland

**With a population of roughly 360,000, it should come as no surprise that the Icelandic performing arts scene is small. Very small. On the whole, it is a tightly knit group of people passionate about theatre. This passion functions in two ways: it is a key element for any artistic endeavor and the only way to survive the harsh economic environment in which artists live. This economic vulnerability of independent performing artists in Iceland, and indeed globally, has been swiftly and cruelly exposed in recent months with the onset of a devastating global pandemic.**

When this article was commissioned at the end of February, the Icelandic performing arts season was in full swing, usually spanning the months from September to May, with regular premieres and artists both performing and preparing new works. Few had an inkling of the devastation ahead. Less than a month later, every theatre in the country had shut its doors, performances were postponed or cancelled, and a whole industry was left in financial limbo. It had been bad beforehand, but now it was even worse. However, Iceland has incredible numbers when it comes to audiences. In 2014, nearly 270,000 people bought a ticket to a professional performance. Hopefully, they will return sooner rather than later.

Globally, there is no end in sight. Performers, creatives, producers, and theatre companies all around the world are fighting a battle for their lives in an unforgiving current of uncertainty. Audiences have disappeared into the shelter of their homes and an online world to watch performances, provided mostly by larger artistic institutions, and it seems inevitable that freelancers and smaller companies will bear the brunt of the coming economic downturn.

However, this is a story of a small band of artists on a small island in the middle of the Atlantic fighting for their right to be heard, seen and to survive.

### **The independent past**

To write about the country's current theatre environment and its future, it is necessary to briefly write about the past. Icelandic professional theatre has its roots in amateur theatre and, perhaps to the surprise of some, does not have a very long history. Of course, Icelandic cultural history spans hundreds of years, but modern theatre practices were not introduced to the country until the late 19th century, and it would take until the middle of the 20th, when the National Theatre was opened in 1950, for the first fully professional theatre to open its doors.

Ten years later, the theatre group Gríma was founded, not the first of its kind but quite possibly one of the most influential. The company brought the European avant-garde to Reykjavik, which the group perceived as being ignored by the two houses, including works by Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett but also premiered work by progressive Icelandic playwrights, such as Oddur Bjornsson and Svava Jakobsdóttir. Some members are still active today: Magnus Pálsson is a respected visual artist and Kristbjörg Kjeld is still working as an actress. (On a side note: Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, once the artistic director of the Reykjavik City Theatre, would also go on to become the first female president of Iceland and the world's first female democratically directly elected leader.)



Over the years, a plethora of theatre companies have come and gone, many having a lingering influence. It is impossible to go into great detail, but a few worthy mentions include Svart og sykurlaust that brought theatre to the streets in the early 80s, Frú Emilia made an impact performing the classics in the late 80s, Lab Loki brought experimentation in the 90s and Vesturport went international in the 00s. Some are still surviving, most have not. The reasons will be explored later in this article as they are still prevalent today, but first it is necessary to set the scene, starting with the two towers dominating the Icelandic theatre landscape.

### **The National Theatre and Reykjavik City Theatre**

It is impossible to write about Icelandic independent theatre without talking about the scene as a whole, which is dominated by two towering giants: The National Theatre and Reykjavik City Theatre. They are both ensemble houses, each with their own company of actors and creatives, which is impressive for such a small country. The first is being funded by the government, the second by the city of Reykjavik, with each receiving around 6 million Euros in funding each year. The independent sector receives about 1.5 million Euros in total. And while institutional funding has been slowly increasing over the past few years, the independent sector has plateaued.

The theatre season was already in upheaval before the pandemic. Both institutions changed Artistic Directors and are currently going through a period of artistic transformation. Traditionally, both houses host visiting independent companies, chosen each year by application. These are popular slots as the institutions offer a higher profile, better equipment and, at least in the case of Reykjavik City Theatre, quality spaces. However, these slots do come at a cost. If the companies get through the selection process, they need to put up their own funding and work around the schedule of the house. If the project is successful, either critically or financially, the house will use it to its advantage and promotion, if it is not, it can be brushed off as an independent project.

### **Independent venues**

Unlike many other countries, Iceland does not have many theatre buildings run by independent companies. Many have opened and shut over the decades, most of them lasting only

for a few years. But a few manage to survive, building a solid base for a company to grow and develop. Gaflaraleikhúsið can be found in Hafnarfjörður, recently staging mostly performances for children, and The Freezer Hostel is located in Snæfellsnes.

Tjarnarbio, located in the heart of Reykjavik, has a long history as a haven for independent theatre. A reputation it still holds today. Originally a cinema built in 1913, it then served as a theatre in the 60s, hosting Gríma among other groups. The Alliance of Professional Theatre Companies (AITI) has operated the building since 1995. Ten years later, discussions about using the venue as a permanent base for independent theatre between the alliance and the city council of Reykjavik proved fruitful. Refurbishment started in 2008 and the revamped building opened its doors in 2010. However, Tjarnarbio functions not as a production house for their own performances but rather as a venue for independent companies to stage their productions, hold meetings and events. There is only one stage, so the space is very sought after and operates with an application process. Fridrik Fridriksson is the chief executive of Tjarnarbió and serves as the president of AITI.

There is another house less than a five-minute walk away, which has an even longer history than Tjarnarbio. Since the late 18th century Iðnó has served as a theatre for the city, it has been a founding home for professional theatre in the country and hosted the Reykjavik City Theatre up until the late 80s. It has a lauded history and the building is protected by law. Sadly, at the beginning of May, the new managers of Iðnó announced that they would have to shut their doors permanently due to the pandemic. The story of these two houses encapsulates the difficulties independent companies are facing in this country.

### **Evolving education**

Over the past hundred years, dramatic education has come a long way. From informal evening classes led by self-taught actors, to a formal acting school (Leiklistarskóli Íslands), to a fully-fledged arts university with diverse programming.

The foundation for the Iceland University of the Arts was laid in late 1998, teaching began in 1999, and in 2000 the theatre department opened with acting as its main focus. The institution has broadened the artistic approach since

Fotos von oben:

1. Spills

2. Sóley Rós ræstitækni

© Jóhanna Helga Þorkelsdóttir

3. Welcome home

© Owen Fiene

then. In 2005, the university opened a new department called Theatre and Performance Making (full disclosure: the author of this article is a graduate from this program). Contemporary dance was added to the curriculum two years later and a MFA program in Performing Arts has also been made available. These courses have transformed the theatrical landscape over the past fifteen years. Its influence can be felt in almost every niche of the industry. If artists want to specialize, for example in directing or stage design, they are forced to go abroad. Copenhagen was very popular in the 70s and 80s, followed by the United Kingdom in the 90s and Germany in the 00s.

Iceland University of the Arts is the hothouse for the dramatic arts in the country, fostering talent and forging connections between students. Classes are small, interdisciplinary work and collaboration are being encouraged.

### Fight for funding

Kolbrún Halldórsdóttir's experience within the theatre sector of Iceland is vast and spans four decades, ever since she graduated as an actress. She has worked as a director, producer and served as a member of Parliament, serving as minister for the environment.

In a conversation with the author of this article, she describes the policy development of the performing arts scene in Iceland as moving at a "snail's pace", with each improvement being either short-lived or miniscule. In the late 80s, Frú Emilía received an unprecedented three-year grant to develop and produce performances, which was not renewed and given to another company without any proper reasoning. Then, this type of funding simply stopped. In 2013, Parliament approved and put forward a cultural agenda which has never been formally implemented, and Kolbrún calculates that Iceland is 10-15 years behind its neighbors in regard to cultural policy. Members of Parliament and government officials need to foster a better relationship with the arts sector and listen to the artists' experiences and recommendations.

Only recently, the minister of social work, Ásmundur Einar Daðason, said this on national television: "I'm not a supporter of either students or others who are on the unemployment registry receiving government funding to do nothing at all". Even though he was speaking about the working population as a whole, this encapsulates the view of many Icelandic citizens who feel arts funding is basically paying people to do nothing at all.







The beginning of each new year in Iceland sees the announcement of funding for the arts. A controversial policy issue at the best of times. This year, 620.000 Euros in funding were awarded to 20 projects: 10 plays, one performance for children, one circus performance, four dance works and four operas. Broadly, the funding for the arts can be split into three categories: the artists' salaries, funding from the council for the performing arts, and cultural grants from the Reykjavik city council. In one application, the project has to be "profitable", yet it must also contain the words "research" and "development". These words are a point of contention, both because the demand for profitability is vague and little funding is given to projects in development; the focus is mainly on delivering a finished product within the next year. Another criticism has been the lack of support for independent playwrights, who usually have to apply for support through a company or take their chances and apply for an author's grant. Only very few succeed.

At the end of April, the ministry of education and culture announced another 620.000 Euros in additional funding. This is a good start but not enough. Only last week, there was harsh criticism concerning how the funding is organized, with authors receiving the most and those hit hardest by the pandemic, musicians and theatre makers, receiving a lot less. The city of Reykjavik also announced additional funding of a little less than 200.000 Euros. Applicants will receive a grant of either 4.600 Euros or 3.100 Euros, not a lot, but even small amounts can make or break a company. Additionally, extra monthly payments of 2200s Euros are being made temporarily available for the next two years.

In a recent online survey conducted by Fridrik Fridriksson, 24 theatre companies and festivals participated and reported the cancellation of 435 performances in Iceland and 45 performances abroad. Purported loss of revenue in potential ticket sales is a little more than 400,000 Euros. The report also included suggestions for improvement, ranging from paid workshops, more financial support for independent venues – so they are not totally dependent on ticket sales – to the initiative that The Icelandic

National Broadcasting Service, or RÚV for short, will support independent performing arts by purchasing and broadcasting their performances. The last suggestion follows regular showings of past National Theatre performances on national television. The argument being that a national institution has a duty to serve not only other national institutions but the citizens of the country, including the artists.

### The artists' struggle

Independent artists in Iceland are struggling. To a certain extent, they have always struggled. Marred by lack of funding, lack of time and lack of space. Icelandic independent artists often wear multiple hats moonlighting and are involved in multiple projects at the same time. To an outsider, this energy might seem volcanic, but it is draining and quietly destructive.

Things were hard for independent companies before Covid-19, but now they are seemingly impossible. Independent artists from all sectors report massive financial losses. Rehearsals have been cancelled, productions postponed, and unemployment is skyrocketing. For many independent artists, the hit has been doubled by the loss of their secondary income; retail jobs shrunk, the restaurants closed and the tourist industry all but vanished overnight. However, this bleakness only scratches the surface. Kara Hergils, an independent theatre artist and co-founder of Trigger Warning, has lost all her dance teaching opportunities over-night, a

project has been postponed until next year and a touring trip to Denmark was cancelled. However, she says that the pandemic "has also opened up new opportunities", and with the re-opening of government funding she was able to re-apply, as she did not receive funding the first time around.

### Independent companies

Finally, our story takes us to the companies themselves. Interdisciplinary collaboration defines most independent performing arts groups in the country. The artists move between different ensembles, depending on the project. Or start new ones with each funded project. This comes both out of necessity and familiarity. As stated before, the scene is small and work is scarce. It is not unusual for phone calls to be made and meetings to be held during the summer months to figure out whose name is going to be on the autumn funding applications, with the same name often on a number of different ones. The upside to this arrangement is fluidity, with artists with different orientations working together, the downside is the lack of stability. One can also argue that the aesthetics of minimalism dominating the scene in the past few years can be connected to funding issues, but that might be overreaching it just a little.

Internationally, possibly the most recognizable current performing arts group from Iceland is Hatari, the leather-clad performance punk band who acquired Eurovision fame. This might be a controversial opinion as they are mostly known

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for their music, but, for anyone who has seen their music videos, television appearances and especially the live performances, it becomes abundantly clear that performance is at the black heart of their project. As an example, prior to their massive success, they staged a collaborative performance evening at a bar during election night in 2017.

In 2001, Vesturport exploded onto the Icelandic theatre scene. Their first bona fide hit was an acrobatic version of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which then toured all over Europe. Vesturport was awarded the Europe Theatre Prize in 2010. Since then, Vesturport have performed all over the world. In the past twenty years, the group has moved from the fringe into the heart of the establishment. Today, the company functions more as a production company, working on individual shows for the big Reykjavík theatres.

An up and coming company is Trigger Warning. Their work has mostly revolved around personal stories from the fringe; the first being a story of a transwoman told from the point of view of and performed by her son. Their second project, called *Welcome Home*, was also based on the performer's personal story of being a bi-racial individual in Iceland. These pieces both confronted complex issues with a minimalist and humorous approach.

Honorary Nation is another interesting company with an impressive repertoire of performances, ranging from opera to science fiction and documentary theatre. *A Thousand Year Silence* was an experimental piece performed in Mengi, a

tiny independent arts venue, and their latest piece *SOL* told a true story about finding love online. Their contemporaries, Kriðpleir, constructed one of the best shows last year with *Club Romantica*, based on a photo album found and bought at a German flea market.

Even though 16 Lovers was founded a little over a decade ago, they can be considered the old guard of progressive groups currently working in the country. In 2008, the collective's first project was *IKEA Travels*, taking audiences on a trip around the world through small spaces. Their work is immersive, often performed in existing locations and laced with both humour and scathing social commentary, tackling subjects like capitalism and the meaning of life. *Marble Crowd* premiered what was quite possibly the best show of the last season. *Øland* was an ambitious and large-scale performance piece confronting the ecological devastation ahead, perhaps showing the audience what has already happened.

Last but not least, there are Kvenfélagið Garpur and Sokkabandið, both women-led companies focusing on works by women about women. Kvenfélagið Garpur had a massive hit a couple of seasons ago with the documentary play *Sóley Rós, ræstitæknir*. A two-hander that told the story of a working-class woman struggling with structural inequalities.

Dance companies possibly operate at the forefront of the avant-garde in the country, hosting workshops and classes at Dansverkstæðið (Dance Workshop), which has finally



received funding for a permanent location. There are usually few and infrequent performances, but one can usually rely on seeing something brand new and exciting each time. Children's theatre is also a very important subsection of the scene, with Lotta touring the country each summer with a new show, and more companies, such as Ten fingers, are bringing the experimental spirit into the genre.

All of these companies exemplify a different side of Icelandic culture, but they do share quite a lot of commonalities. They work when they receive funding, almost all of them have performed in either The National Theatre or Reykjavik City Theatre, and members swap between groups.

### International circuit

Many independent artists work abroad, often returning with their work to Iceland. Rósa Ómarsdóttir is a dancer who until recently worked out of Brussels. When asked about the difference between Iceland and Belgium in regard to the arts scene, she replied:

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**“The scene in Brussels is very vibrant, there are a lot of dancers and choreographers here, it is quite an international scene and there is a lot of variety. There are more institutions, theatres, workspaces, production houses and so on. So, I feel like there are perhaps more opportunities in Belgium in that way, at least on an institutional level. The dance scene in Iceland is of course quite small, but I would think it is still quite big compared with the small population of Iceland. There is perhaps more sense of community there, everyone sees each other's shows and the scene is extremely supportive. It is mostly artist-run and you can sense that it has been built from scratch by a few very passionate people. It is always so pleasant to perform in Iceland because you can really feel the sense of community of the place.”**

For years, there has been a discussion between arts organisations and the government to open a promotion center for the Icelandic performing arts. Finally, it seems to become a reality. Before the pandemic, the opening was set for July 1st of this year, but this has only been a whisper and it seems to be happening with little fanfare.

### Festivals, past and future

Like independent companies, independent theatre festivals have come and gone throughout the decades. They pop up, often briefly, run by a small group of individuals, manage to function for a few years, and then fold due to lack of funding or because their showrunner has moved on to other projects. However, the grand dame of them all is the biannual Reykjavik Arts Festival, founded in 1970. Most of its funding comes from the government and the Reykjavik city council, plus some corporate sponsorships, but it is a vital venue for independent artists to showcase their work on an international stage.

Lunga Festival, the naughty teenager of the Icelandic festival scene, was supposed to celebrate its twentieth anniversary later this summer but has postponed the festivities until 2021. Since its inception, it has been a melting pot of young energy, with this tiny village in East Iceland becoming the place to be for young art lovers and performers. Seyðisfjörður now hosts an arts school. There is also the A! Performance Festival in Akureyri, Plan B Art Festival in Borgarnes and Act alone in Suðureyri.

Initially, LÓKAL and Reykavík Dance festival were two separate festivals that are now held back to back. The youngest of the festivals is Reykjavik Fringe Festival, which is hosted during the summer months and is still trying to find its feet.

### The future of Icelandic independent performing arts

On May 4th, some of the pandemic-related restrictions were scaled back in Iceland, allowing for 50 people to gather in one place. As of today, May 16th 2020, the pandemic is officially in recession. This month, only 5 new cases have been recorded, none in the past four days and only 6 active cases are on record. The country is slowly coming to life. However, there is still the very real possibility of the virus coming back.

To be fair, Iceland had everything in hand to contain the pandemic; restrictive measures were put in place very early on – the borders of an island are easier to close – and, financially, the country is relatively stable. But there are warning signs for a looming recession, Fridrik warns: “My current fear is that the economic downturn because of Covid-19 will result in the government needing to tighten spending, and I fear

the arts will be the first sector to feel the cut." The issue at hand is not only the devastating financial loss but also how long the current situation will last. Theatres remain closed, and when they finally re-open, there is no guarantee that audiences will return in the same number as before, although Fridrik remains confident that they will.

Additional funding has been showering down on artists in the independent performing arts sector recently, if applications were successful. But any plans for building a stable working environment for the future remain opaque. There is still no road map to a place where independent artists are not left fending for themselves year after year, from one project to the next, and juggling multiple jobs in order to simply survive, let alone thrive.

This history of the performing arts in Iceland, and especially the independent sector, is yet to be written. The present is in development, pending proper funding. The future remains uncertain, but it is filled with potential and plenty of talented people.

Sigríður Jónsdóttir

*is a theatre critic for Frettabladid. She is currently employed as a health-care worker and will be working for the Fulbright Program starting in August. She has lectured on theatre criticism and queer theatre.*

#### WEBSITES:

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