

Finnish Independent Performing Arts

Funding Reform and COVID-19

There are about 5.5 million people living in Finland, but roughly 4 million tickets to theatre, dance and circus performances are sold in our country every year. We have good reason to describe ourselves as “theatre enthusiasts”.

Funding for Finnish performing arts is twofold

The Finnish field of performing arts has long been characterized by a division into theatres entitled to central government funding under the Theatres and Orchestras Act and the independent, or so-called “outlaw” field.

The Theatres and Orchestras Act of 1992 made state subsidies to large institutions an established practice, which is based on the annual payroll. However, many small, experimental groups, that started forming in the 1970s and were run as ensembles with focus on democratic decision-making and less traditional forms of expression, were excluded from this Act. Of course, the number of such groups has grown exponentially since the 1990s and 2000s. These groups engage in multi-artistic, innovative work in the genres of theatre, dance, circus and performance art, among others.

The independent groups receive funding from the state through the Arts Promotion Centre Finland in the form of discretionary subsidies. The sums are mostly insubstantial and because one needs to apply every year, this type of funding makes it difficult to maintain long-term operations. At present, around 100 independent groups receive a regular operational subsidy, about 8.9 million euros in total, whereas the state funds the 57 theatres that qualify for central government funding and are subject to the Theatres and Orchestras Act amount to roughly 59 million euros. In addition, the independent field includes numerous smaller working groups and organizations whose funding is project-related and irregular.

During the 30-year history of the Theatres and Orchestras Act, only a few new organizations have qualified to be eligible for funding under the Act – i.e., eligible for higher and more permanent funding. Despite this, it can be said that the independent field forms a large part of the ecosystem of Finnish performing arts and, despite their meagre financial resources, the groups are key employers for performing arts professionals. Consequently, a lot of criticism was directed at the system over the years, which eventually led the Ministry of Education and Culture to launch a reform of the funding system for performing arts a few years ago. The reform was several years in the making, and the new act on the system of central government funding for performing arts was finally passed in Parliament in late 2020.

Expectations were high, because it was hoped the reform could reduce financial and operational inequality between theatres under the central government system and the independent field of performing arts. However, the reform has been a disappointment to the independent field so far: the system will remain largely unchanged and shows no sign of significant improvements at all. Still, some additional funding from the government budget has been allocated to the implementation of the reform, so new eligible candidates under the Theatres and Orchestras Act might finally have a chance to qualify for long-term funding after working in the independent field for decades.

Members of Theatre Centre and the challenges of COVID-19

Theatre Centre is a Finnish association of independent performing arts that provides services and represents the interests of its members. The association was founded in 1971 to form a network specifically for theatre groups, as opposed to what is now The Association of Finnish Theatres, which represents bigger, more established city theatres.











As of January 2021, Theatre Centre represents 52 professional performing arts organizations. Our members represent a wide variety of performing arts genres: theatre, dance, circus, musical theatre, puppet theatre, improvisational theatre, children's theatre, clowning and performance art. Most independent performing arts groups, and thereby also most of our members, are based in Helsinki, but Theatre Centre's members are based all over Finland: from Turku in Western Finland to Rovaniemi in Lapland.

These independent performing arts groups are leaders in their respective genres and retain their administrative and artistic independence. Their work is driven by passion and high-quality artistic activities. A distinctive artistic policy encompasses a professional approach, agility and multi-genre activities. Still, the groups face challenges in the form of financial insecurity, a lack of resources and the strain on personnel.

Theatre Centre has been able to offer support and help to its members, in addition to providing a network where members can get to know and learn from one another. The growing number of members has also given additional weight to the representation of interests, and Theatre Centre has been able to speak more effectively about the challenges faced by the independent field to decision-makers and providers of funding.

Challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic also hit Finland in March 2020, and the Finnish government quickly decided to implement emergency laws. Public events were cancelled, public spaces and restaurants were closed, schoolchildren had to study remotely from home and social interaction was limited to video conferences. Performing art activities were practically prohibited from taking place until early June, after which performances could be held on the condition that the organizer adhered to adequate health and safety requirements in the form of social distancing, hand sanitizers and face masks. In cooperation with other associations in the field, Theatre Centre put together common safety instructions for the entire field of performing arts to protect theatre staff and groups as well as audiences. The autumn 2020 season was thus fairly successful because the second wave of the pandemic did not hit Finland until November. Public events have since been banned again, however.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the government has supported the professional field of performing arts by providing additional financial support to compensate for losses in ticket sales during the year. The fields of art and culture have received a total of about 110 million euros in additional support, some of which has also been allocated to groups in the field of independent performing arts. However, the situation for freelance artists has been most difficult, with no job opportunities, forcing them to rely on poor unemployment benefits.

Near the end of 2020, when public events were prohibited in order to stop the disease from spreading but restaurants and shopping centres were allowed to remain open, the field of performing arts started to feel a sense of injustice. The restrictions are still in place, and the prohibition of public events has not prevented a second wave in Finland. The Finnish government is now pursuing legal amendments that would allow business activities to be closed for at least two weeks at a time, but in the meantime, professionals in the field of performing arts are struggling to cope on a daily basis without the chance to do their job in front of a live audience.

Still, something good has also come out of the COVID-19 year: Many have come to appreciate the representation of interests and advice provided by associations. We at Theatre Centre have passed on messages from the independent performing arts field to decision-makers and have also tried to actively notify our members of the COVID-19 safety instructions, applications for additional support and the ever-changing restrictions on gatherings. The network provided by a Theatre Centre membership has been a valuable support to many groups during this challenging time. When performing arts professionals can once again perform in front of live audiences, it will be a wonderful experience for both the audiences and the performers. Looking forward to better times!

Kaisa Paavolainen

*Executive Manager
Theatre Centre, Finland*