https://doi.org/10.18778/2353-6098.7.03

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5492-4255
e-mail: Edyta.Lorek-Jezinska@umk.pl

Symptomizing Crises. Theatres of the Pandemic – *Isolated But Open* and *Inside/Outside*

Abstract

My aim in this article is to look into manifestations of the corona crisis in theatre and performance as well as representations of other conflicts and problems, revealed or intensified by the pandemic. Drawing upon theories on the social influence of the pandemic developed by Snowden, Žižek and Neiman, I examine the potential of the pandemic theatre to critique and change the existing structures and to envision a more caring and considerate society. My analysis focuses on two British theatre projects: *Inside/Outside: Six Short Plays* (2021) and *Isolated But Open: Voices from Across The Shutdown* (2020) and their representations of the conflicted reality of the pandemic, addressing the questions of limitations and restrictions of rights and freedoms, on the one hand, and care and protection, on the other. The plays expose the conflicts between survival and life worth living, inside and outside, and the problems of the new normal and its life-changing potentials.

Keywords: theatre, pandemic, loss, grievability, environment

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has caused a major crisis in today's world, affecting almost every sphere of life, and exposing a variety of other crises, conflicts and problems which have existed prior to the pandemic and have been exacerbated by these new circumstances. Theatre and performance were among the areas of culture most affected by the pandemic: live productions have been either suspended or restricted, especially in the number of attending audiences or types of interaction permitted, or transferred to the Internet. However, in its struggle for survival in these new circumstances, theatre also discovered a chance of reaching wider audiences as well as exploring new forms of activity. Theatre of the pandemic from the early stages of the first lockdown welcomed – out of necessity – new media technologies and responded to themes that emerged from the confusion, uncertainty and radical change of everyday reality during the pandemic. Moving online – whether in interactive projects or livestreamed performances or recorded videos made available on the internet – became the rule and sometimes only effective survival strategy, often

Received: 16.02.2022. Revised: 10.07.2022. Accepted: 11.08.2022.

supported by governments, charities, artists funds or other organisations. These tendencies have been explored in a number of publications that were published within approximately the same period, some of which based their findings on extensive interviews with – or surveys conducted among – theatre directors, playwrights and performers (e.g. Svich 2021; Jeziński and Lorek-Jezińska 2021 online; Betzler et al. 2021; Spiro et al. 2021) and some focused on the very nature of pandemic theatre, individual projects and emerging tendencies (e.g. Lorek-Jezińska et al. 2022; Aebischer 2022; Fuchs 2022).[1]

One of the first responses to the need of continuing activity online in British theatre during the first lockdown was the online video and publication project launched by Papatango – *Isolated But Open: Voices from Across The Shutdown* (2020). Announced just hours after the beginning of the first lockdown, when "[c]urtains fell across the country. Stages plunged into darkness. The work of months or years disappeared in an instant" (Foxon 3), the programme aimed to help both playwrights and actors to continue their work:

> On 17 March 2020, just twelve hours after the theatres closed, we launched *Isolated But Open: Voices from Across The Shutdown*, to create a new infrastructure that would ensure stories could continue to be told. We committed to produce the world premieres of a series of new monologues, selected from an open call-out. We pledged £2,000 to invest in the ten writers and ten actors who would pen and perform these monologues, guaranteeing them paid work when they needed it most. We promised to share the performances for free online, with captions, so that anyone could enjoy great new stories. (Foxon 3)

A similar aim, but delayed by a year's closure, was realized by the Orange Tree Theatre, which in March 2021 re-opened to stage and live-stream new productions by new and established writers. As Guy Jones notes, "[a]s I write, the Orange Tree Theatre has been closed for a year. It's time to switch the lights back on. *Inside/Outside* will be the first time we have told stories here since March 2020" (vii). What these projects share is their commitment to the continuation of artistic activity, the belief in its importance as well as promotion of new writing that responds to the critical circumstances of the pandemic.

The aim of this article is to examine how selected pieces from both projects, *Inside/Outside: Six Short Plays* (2021) and *Isolated But Open: Voices from Across The Shutdown* (2020), confront the conflicted reality of the pandemic, addressing the questions of limitations and restrictions of rights and freedoms on the one hand, and care and protection on the other. They also problematize how many of the issues that seem to be the result of the pandemic are in fact, as Jones writes, "inequalities we live with [and which] are written into the systems in which we are asked to participate" (ix). In the following section, I will refer to this discussion on the relation between pandemics and the social conflicts preceding and accompanying them, the changing priorities and redefinition of lives and their grievability in the time of crisis, as well as the life-changing potential of the critical situation leading to the creation of the new normal. I will be drawing mostly from the fields of medical humanities, social studies, philosophy and ecocriticism to set the foundations for further discussion of the theatre projects.

[1] Research conducted by various institutions was also published in a report format, for example, by IDEA Consult, Goethe-Institut, Sylvia Amann and Joost Heinsius (2021. *Research for CULT Committee – Cultural and Creative Sectors in Post-Covid-19 Europe: Crisis Effects and Policy Recommendations*), by Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego (2020. "Nowe formy istnienia: jak zmieniał się teatr w pandemii" https://www.instytut-teatralny.pl/dzialalnosc/projekty-i-programy/nowe-formy-istnienia-jak-zmienial-sie-teatr-w-pandemii/) or by SDA Bocconi School of Management (2020. *The Impact of COVID-19 on the Performing Arts Sector*).

The Pandemic as Conflict, Crisis and Chance

In his book *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (2020) originally published in 2019 and republished with a new preface referring to the coronavirus pandemic, Frank Snowden argues that "[e]pidemics afflict societies through the specific vulnerabilities people have created by their relationships with the environment, other species, and each other" (ix) and "spread along fault lines marked by environmental degradation, overpopulation, and poverty" (505). The fault lines, marking the deficiencies or weaknesses of social systems, expose existing conflicts and provoke new ones. The two theatre projects to be discussed further focus on deficiencies related to environmental degradation and various forms of discrimination based on gender, race and age, together with excessive control exerted by the state over individuals.

To all these problems exposed by the conditions of living during the pandemic Slavoj Žižek adds another layer, in which the pandemic itself becomes "a serious existential" conflict of visions (4). In his second book on the coronavirus crisis *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost* (2021), Žižek argues that "[t]he ongoing pandemic hasn't just brought out social and economic conflicts that were raging beneath the surface all along; it hasn't just confronted us with immense political problems. More and more, it has become a genuine conflict of global visions about society" (3). One of the important aspects connected with this issue is how we understand the concepts of care and protection and their complex impact on freedom and independence. This is further related to controversies around complete lockdown and other restrictions that were imposed at the beginning of the pandemic. As both theatre projects under consideration refer to these conditions of the early months of the pandemic, this discussion is particularly relevant to them, highlighting the collisions between care and control, life and survival. In interrogating reasons behind the violation of restrictions by protesters during the pandemic, Žižek points to important choices being made, concerning primary existential questions. Žižek asks whether these examples imply that "we have to risk our lives (by way of exposing ourselves to possible infection) in order to remain fully human?" and whether

> Giorgio Agamben was right when he rejected state-imposed lockdowns and self-isolation as measures that imply reducing our lives to mere existence – in the sense that, when we follow the lockdown regulations, we demonstrate that we are ready to renounce what makes our lives worth living for the chance of bare survival? (Žižek 28)

In his early reactions to the restrictions imposed by the Italian government, Giorgio Agamben warned about the consequences of the radical reshuffling of priorities when introducing the state of exception. By taking a decision to prioritize what he calls "bare life" (*Homo Sacer*), a life that is politically defined as necessary for survival and limited to the most essential needs, over "what makes our lives worth living" (Žižek 28), according to Agamben, people are ready to "sacrifice practically everything" ("Clarifications"). The following excerpt, which tries to clarify the controversial stance taken by Agamben in early 2020, illustrates the tensions and disorientations of the early stages of the pandemic and problematizes some of the concerns emerging in the pandemic productions to be examined in the next sections:

> It is obvious that Italians are disposed to sacrifice practically everything – the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions – to the danger of getting sick. Bare life – and the danger of losing it – is not something that unites people, but blinds and separates them. Other human beings, as in the plague described in Alessandro Manzoni's novel, are now seen solely as possible spreaders of the plague whom one must avoid at all costs and from whom one needs to keep oneself at a distance of at least a meter. The dead – our dead

> – do not have a right to a funeral and it is not clear what will happen to the bodies of our loved ones. Our neighbor has been cancelled and it is curious that churches remain silent on the subject. What do human relationships become in a country that habituates itself to live in this way for who knows how long? And what is a society that has no value other than survival? ("Clarifications")

Anxieties related to government control caused by the permanent state of emergency contributed to reflection on what kind of future can be expected in the aftermath of the pandemic ("What is worrisome is not so much or not only the present, but what comes after"; Agamben "Clarifications"). Both the present and the aftermath of the early stages of the pandemic reappear as major themes in the pandemic productions examined in this article, particularly in relation to the future social systems based on surveillance, the reduction of human existence to bare life, as well as to the disruptions of the mourning process caused by sanitary restrictions and lockdown regulations. This aspect, in turn, is closely connected with questions of grievability, affecting the choices and hierarchies in a critical situation and based on the tendency to see some lives as valuable, "worth mourning," and thus grievable, and others – the ungrievable ones – as "those whose loss would leave no trace, or perhaps barely a trace" (Butler *The Force*, 75). The plays in both theatre projects problematize questions of grievability both in reference to the right to live and the need to mourn.

Another significant aspect of the early stages of the pandemic was a tendency to identify in the COVID-19 crisis a potential for change and transformation. This tendency was discussed by Susan Neiman in her article under the telling title "Corona as Chance: Overcoming the Tyranny of Self-Interest" published in *Democracy in Times of Pandemic: Different Futures Imagined* in 2020. Neiman proposed to see the crisis as an opportunity to rethink and change what we believe to be normal, which is, according to her, based on self-interest: "My aim is to remind us that we are living in a conceptual framework that we barely perceive as such. By perceiving it, we can begin to imagine others that will help change the conditions themselves" (154). Neiman thus suggests that, as Maduro and Kahn put it, "the pandemic offers us a chance to reject this attitude [self-interest] and become a more caring society" (139). Such an optimistic vision surfaces in some of the plays to be examined in the following sections of this article, where they either envision a more inclusive post-pandemic society or present an increased awareness that might potentially lead to change. They correspond to (what could be termed) "overcoming" narratives and visions of the post-pandemic future that appeared in the early months of the pandemic, such as the utopia of human spaces reconquered by animals and nature, or wiser and more mature societies rethinking mass overconsumption and overproduction and rescaling their needs. In this version of the crisis the pandemic offers a vision of "imagining otherwise" (Gordon 5) – the concept used by Avery Gordon to refer to the capacity to use alternative means of envisioning reality and grasping the possibility of creating a better version of society. Yet simultaneously, such a possibility also emerges from post-apocalyptic scenarios inspired by the pandemic and exploring the consequences of social practices of exclusion, "stigmatization and scapegoating" (Snowden 5), which will be referred to further in the article with regard to the pandemic-related generational conflicts. Overcoming self-interest and imagining otherwise is also connected to what David Abram calls the Humilocene, the term coined to emphasize both humility towards nature and humiliation caused by the awareness of humans' destructive influence on the environment (Abram et al. 9). The critical distance and in-betweenness of the lockdown redefined our understanding of both local and global environments, forcing us to rethink and reevaluate our place and attitude towards the environment. This aspect is addressed in the section focusing on the condition of solastalgia (Albrecht), a phenomenon presented in the context of the complete lockdown, but also embracing larger environmental concerns.

The pandemic has also been viewed by some as an opportunity for theatre, that is not only relevant and meaningful in addressing the pandemic crisis, but also searching for new audiences and exploring new channels of communication, together with their major asset – accessibility. As Barbara Fuchs rightly notes in her *Theater of Lockdown*, "Gradually, what had at first seemed like a quick fix became instead hugely enabling – not just a life raft but a flotilla of rapidly proliferating possibilities . . . productions multiplied and it became clear that digital theater meant watching anything, anywhere, anytime" (1). In what follows, three aspects of the pandemic theatre will be discussed with reference to the two projects introduced above – *Inside/Outside* and *Isolated But Open*[2]: firstly, visions of the post-pandemic future – addressing the problems of grievability and bare lives and searching for the new normal; secondly, problems of environmental loss and its intensification during the pandemic, represented through the concepts of solastalgia and the Humilocene; and thirdly, the representation of loss and mourning as one of fundamental pandemic experiences. All of these themes revolve around the conflict between freedom and restrictions/lockdown/captivity and comment on the redefinition of the way we come to conceptualize space during and after lockdown (inside versus outside). Some refer to conflicts running across generations, negotiating values and expectations. All of these problems have been exposed or redefined in the time of the pandemic.

Visions of the Future: Grievability, Care and "Corona as Chance"

In this section two plays presenting visions of the post-pandemic future will be examined with reference to the problems addressed by medical humanities introduced above. Both plays combine elements of dystopia and critical utopia either to warn about or dream of possible post-pandemic social scenarios and to a large extent both can be said to symptomize the pre-pandemic social inequalities conceptualized through the notions of bare life, grievability and discrimination. One of the most striking plays in the two collections under consideration is *When the Daffodils* (from the anthology *Inside/Outside: Six Short Plays*), written by Joel Tan, a Singaporean playwright based in London. The play comments on the generational conflict during the pandemic, control and imprisonment, as well as the limits of one's sacrifice and solidarity. *When the Daffodils* poses questions relating to the quality of life and the cost of survival, questions relevant to debates – especially at the beginning of the pandemic – on the right of governments to severely restrict freedom and reduce life to the minimum of survival. The play also asks who deserves to be saved and who can be sacrificed as well as whose vulnerability gets priority and whether the protection of bare life is more important than the protection of the quality of life.

By asking those questions, the play exposes the extent to which social structures during the pandemic are based on what Judith Butler in *Frames of War* and *The Force of Non-Violence* calls "the differential" nature of "grievability of lives" and precarity (*Frames* 25, 34) and their "unequal distribution" (*The Force* 58). In this way, the play touches upon one of the fundamental problems addressed by medical humanities, mentioned in the above section, illustrating to what extent the pandemic situation has reshuffled some of these hierarchies and what are the ethical consequences of this change.

[2] In my analysis, I will consider both the texts collected in *Isolated But Open* and short films recorded and posted online on the project's webpage. I will point to interactions between word and image out of which some meaningful contradictions emerge. In the case of *Inside/Outside* out of necessity I limit my analysis to the published text only.

One of the important strategies to signal the very process of transformation and instability of social relations and hierarchies in Tan's play is the audience's postponed discovery of the rules governing the system presented in it. We begin with expectations shaped primarily by our pre-pandemic experience, verified or drastically changed by the pandemic, but staying within the rules of verisimilitude and probability. The play presents a meeting of an old woman Meg and social worker Samia, who brings Christmas shopping to her. It seems initially that we are seeing a casual conversation between a lonely woman who needs to talk to someone (and Samia is her only visitor) about Christmas brussels sprouts and being naughty when eating a bar of chocolate. It is only after some time that the reader/viewer gradually discovers that the situation presented in the play is not a day from an old woman's life during the present pandemic but a projected future. As we discover in the course of the play, in order to enable young people to lead normal lives, the old – as the most vulnerable – are kept locked in their flats being taken care of by uniformed workers. Not being allowed to go outside, old people are totally dependent on their carers who try not to get involved with them emotionally.

The structure of this post-pandemic dystopia is revealed towards the end of the play, when we discover that this arrangement is part of the consensus that has been reached at some point in the pandemic. Accordingly, three years after what seems to have been the isolation of young people to protect the old, it now is the turn for the elderly to isolate themselves and accept the care as well as surveillance from the younger generation. Samia describes this arrangement, when trying to negotiate with Meg, who wants her carer to help her escape:

> three years of your life just taken away like that, three years of your prime life, Meg, three years I could've gotten rich, gotten ahead, gotten on . . . three years and I moved from my twenties to my thirties, Meg, three years is a generation, Meg, a whole generation stuck inside like fucking lepers. And now. Well, that was the consensus, you know that. (Tan 40)

The gradual realisation of the rules of this consensus changes the perspective and meaning of the care given to the old lady. The rule "protect the vulnerable" is pushed here to an extreme – where protection and care equal control and detention. In a reversal of the lockdown of all people to protect the elderly – this subsequent and seemingly permanent lockdown of old people gives the young a chance to live. Samia describes the system as the best solution:

> We all agreed, didn't we? All waved goodbye, shut the doors, stopped the clocks, hoped for the best. Do more? … Best outcomes. Best for all. Right? Optimised. On top of things. Firm grip, sure, bit hard in places, tight … tough love, expensive love, might I add. Sure. But it's a relief. A jab in the bum. And don't we need it, after all? After all that? (Tan 41)

The self-regulating system presented in the play is based on control and surveillance; if something disturbs it, the system can be reaffirmed through false testimony. After an attempted breaking of these rules, Meg confirms her positive opinion of the life and care that she receives. This is to compensate for the problem she caused by saying aloud that she wants Samia to take her out from her flat and escape with her, as it turns out that Samia's visits are being recorded and the authorities already know about the incident.

Isolation, loneliness, physical and emotional distancing, touch deprivation – all of these aspects of Meg's life represent the experience of the complete lockdown shared by many people, not only the elderly. However, in important ways the system presented in the play can also be seen as a commentary on the situation of the elderly in old people's homes under ordinary circumstances (before the pandemic), which was only exacerbated by their additional isolation from their families during the pandemic and vulnerability to abandonment and neglect which was occasionally reported in the first stage of the pandemic.

As for the question of grievability and value of lives, Tan's play echoes the paradoxical reversals of status brought by the coronavirus crisis. During the pandemic some groups were made particularly grievable through their vulnerability to illness, repositioning some of the earlier biopolitical hierarchies privileging younger people. In the time of crisis those who can take care of the most vulnerable are empowered, while those whose lives are most grievable are particularly protected because of their precariousness. In the first stages of the pandemic young people were left out from this relation and were in a sense sacrificed or disregarded, particularly where mental health and social wellbeing are concerned. Tan's play comments on this aspect in the discussion of Samia's feeling of guilt and her memory of being bombarded with a sense of responsibility and commitment before the change of the system of care described in the play: "Need I remind you? You were the ones dropping off. It was your sad faces on the posters, on the ads, on the videos, on our minds all the fucking time" (Tan 40). After the change, the young regain freedom (by isolating old people) and gain additional sense of power and control as carers and guards.

Another problem that the play addresses is the conflict between the two visions of life that emerged during the pandemic, mentioned in the previous section with reference to Giorgio Agamben: the reduction of living to bare life and survival to save as many lives as possible no matter what their quality is and the contrary belief that we cannot compromise our freedom and happiness for others and ourselves to survive. In Tan's play, Meg and Samia represent these opposing stances, each having their own reasons to believe they might be right. Meg does not disagree that the young should have a chance to live their "normal" lives, but she can no longer bear her isolation:

> I forgot, for a moment, forgot myself. Forgot. Forgot this is good, after all, and right, and, better than death, and life continues, and life goes on, and this is good, after all, for you especially … maybe next time you could just bring me some daffodils? (Tan 44)

The injustice of the system and unhappiness it causes on both sides – the one caring and the one being cared for – continue as the crisis presented in the play is abated; the characters' caring for each other is paradoxically used to perpetuate its efficient functioning as they adjust to not causing further harm. In a pessimistic post-apocalyptic fashion, the play exposes the dangers of taking inadequate measures in the time of the pandemic to protect people from risk and death and abusing care and protection to take control, presenting a thin line between these two categories.

rise from the wreckage by Benedict Lombe (a Congolese-British writer and theatre-maker) from *Isolated But Open* – ironic and self-reflexive as it is – comments on the chance to rethink and remodel social structures after the crisis and imagine a different possibility for the future than the familiar scenarios. The play thus seems to respond to the optimistic tendency represented by many thinkers at the early stages of the pandemic (Neiman 153) hoping for a possibility to change and improve the world after the crisis and "imagining otherwise," mentioned in the previous section. This apparently optimistic monologue is spoken by a woman (WOMAN) described in the stage directions as "a black womxn in her twenties" (Lombe 26). The video that we watch as an audience is a recording that is to be "sealed in some vault/cloud/digital coffin-type … thingy …" (Lombe 27) for ten years to be then recovered and watched by the protagonist's older self. In the very act of watching the video, the viewer is placed in the position of the protagonist's future self, addressed directly by her, and thus also in the position of a survivor. The video is part of the project the woman decided to embark on to record her daily experiences for several months. In its film version, Lombe's piece is thus an example of what Seda Ilter calls a "postdigital" awareness (Causey) within "mediaturgical plays" (Marranca) (174–175) in the way the media (video and data storage devices) predefine the relation between an actor and image as well as the viewer's place in this arrangement

as both a spectator and the character's double. In the first recording, which we have an opportunity to see, the woman recounts her dream of a catastrophe in which only babies survived:

> So in the dream, we lived in this alternate universe, or whatever, and 90% of the population was on the brink of being wiped out from this unknown natural threat, right? And the 10% who were immune from this were almost entirely … babies.
>
> I *know.*
>
> So, we decided, collectively, that we would put as many babies as we could in cryosleep, where their bodies would be stored at a mad cold temperature to preserve them. (Lombe 27–28)

The survivor society will consist only of these babies and bell hooks and Malala to take care of them and "guide them" ("what a *life*" – she says). The new world that emerges from the catastrophe is a utopian one:

> Just *imagine* the possibilities of a world that allowed everyone to exist in their fullness. Not "later." Or "eventually." Or "for a while." But from the very beginning. From the moment you begin to exist – you *see*, and you *learn*, and are *taught* that everything that you are is … perfectly okay. (Lombe 29)

The catastrophe from which this new world emerges largely resembles the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> But in your world, years from now, I hope we remember *this* moment as the moment our world changed … I hope we remember that when touch was out of reach, when we couldn't predict what lay ahead, and we didn't know how to feel – words, voice – *that* became all we had. And my God, I hope we found a way to use it.
>
> I hope we harnessed its power and turned it into action. (Lombe 29)

In the final vision, the woman addresses her future self, expressing her hope that during those ten years people will have managed to gather enough strength not only to survive, but also thrive and to demand a new normal. Addressing her future self – and simultaneously a survivor of the pandemic – the character shares with us her wish that the crisis can be used as an opportunity to change reality, reject the old normal and set new standards of living for everyone. She also insists, as did some scholars mentioned in the first section of this article, that what used to be seen as normal was always faulty and the present crisis exposes it and gives one courage to demand a change. Similarly to Snowden (505) and Svich (2), who use the metaphor of "fault lines" to refer to the cracks in social systems that were deepened by the pandemic, the protagonist sees the past and present as "broken" but capable of repair:

> I hope we saw a chance to rebuild something we always knew was broken. A chance not just to survive but for us all to *thrive*. I hope we didn't request but demanded a new normal. That we cast our nets wide and gave as many as possible a say in creating it. I hope we sustained it. I hope we achieved a reality where we were brave enough, and generous enough and compassionate enough to set a new standard. I hope we saw a chance to rise from the wreckage. And do better. (Lombe 30)

What Lombe's monologue problematizes is whether we can learn anything from the catastrophe and find enough compassion and courage to include in our vision and negotiations the groups that have always been left out: "those we forgot, for those we silenced, for those we failed for decades, centuries, over and over and over again until we couldn't get away with it any more" (Lombe 30). The monologue also juxtaposes the idea of survival with thriving and doing better, insisting on the power of education and knowledge, specifically the importance of reading the right books (WOMAN lists food and books

as equally important – "Ones that dared to believe that a different way was possible" [Lombe 28]). The naivety of this future project, which the speaker seems to be aware of but simultaneously tries to defend, points to the degree of desperation she experiences in the pandemic but also reflects a type of optimism characteristic of the early stage of lockdown that enabled a different perspective. Placing the viewer in the position of WOMAN's future-self offers an interesting experiment in confronting one's own frame of reference and the future imagined by the character.

Environmental Loss: Solastalgia in the Time of the Pandemic

Similarly to Tan's and Lombe's plays, *Solastalgia*, a monologue from the project *Isolated, But Open*, by British political playwright Anders Lustgarten, looks not only at the problems exposed by the pandemic but also those existent prior to it, in this case those that symptomized a major environmental crisis. The play is an ecocritical commentary on the relation between humans and trees over the millennia. Important meanings are generated in the juxtaposition of the text's message and its video realization with its indirect references to the pandemic and lockdown. Solastalgia is the term coined by Glenn Albrecht in 2003 (Gladwin 42) to refer to a particular kind of feeling associated with one's place of living:

> It is the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one's sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation. It is an intense desire for the place where one is a resident to be maintained in a state that continues to give comfort or solace. … It is the "lived experience" of the loss of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the present. In short, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at "home." (Albrecht 48)

The concept of solastalgia is employed most often in the context of a direct experience of natural and artificial transformation of the environment. However, as Albrecht argues, in the contemporary times of information availability and globalization, and the resultant blurring of the concept of directness of experience and the limits of one's home, "the experience of solastalgia is now possible for people who strongly empathize with the idea that the earth is their home and that witnessing events destroying endemic place identity (cultural and biological diversity) at any place on earth are personally distressing to them" (49). What is also significant is that solastalgia, as Albrecht suggests, is a concept that is both present and future orientated – and thus is not defined by the longing for the past that is lost forever, but may refer to collective action for creating a space that will fulfill the need of comfort and solace (49).

The title of Lustgarten's monologue refers firstly, to a number of environmental issues metaphorically represented through the conflict between trees and humans, and secondly, to the drastic change that occurred in people's sense of place in the times of the pandemic. The latter concern again, like in *Wild Swim* to be analysed in the next section, is not mentioned directly in the text but is signalled by the disjuncture between the narrated story and images presented in the video. What we can see on the screen is a man, sitting in front of the window with a part of the street visible behind him, featuring a couple of trees and bushes as well as cars and other buildings. What he recounts is the history of the domination of trees and their gradual destruction, seen as a temporary crisis caused by human beings and to be followed by the trees' revival. Already the first sentence: "The trees were here before the town. The trees will be here after the town" suggests the power relations between nature and humankind, with the trees being gods and human beings usurpers:

> These trees are gods. They transcend us. They were ancient when the Romans got here. Ancient before people got here. Theirs is a calculus in which we do not figure. They give the lie to our delusions of grandeur, our self-absorption, our mad belief that we are all there is. (Lustgarten 33–34)

Such a perspective echoes the implications of the Humilocene, by acknowledging human humility towards nature but also humiliation resulting from the awareness of people's destructive nature caused by anthropocentrism (Abram et al. 9). As the story develops, the people decide to "kill the gods" by using them in the process of industrialization. The trees, struggling for survival, paradoxically prepare their own death by contributing to the formation of coal:

> But the trees fight on, still raising up and crashing down and sinking under and growing again, and in so doing they sow the seeds of their own demise. For as they sink down over the millennia, they and the ferns and the detritus and the birds become the biotic material that turns into coal . . . The trees become the fuel for their own destruction. (Lustgarten 34)

The monologue ends with a comment on our failure to notice the presence and importance of trees before: "And yet, somehow, we never really notice them. Until now" (Lustgarten 34). The phrase "Until now" may refer both to the recent increase in environmental awareness or to the change of perspective brought about by the pandemic – the redefinition of our sense of place and home and how it is located within a wider pandemic environment. The experience of the complete lockdown in the spring of 2020 in particular exposed the importance of contact with nature and a sense of spatial deprivation resulting from self-isolation. Solastalgia thus refers both to the discomfort caused by global environmental changes (deforestation) and to the temporary loss of contact with a comforting aspect of our environment/home, here embodied by the trees.

The play's video exposes the contrast between the domesticity of the lockdown and a sense of isolation from the environment it evokes. It also presents a commentary on the present state of the "divine" trees, surrounded by the city, smaller in size and leafless. In short sequences, the camera pans over the images of a small patch of woods, which contrast with the grandeur mentioned in the text. The effect is a feeling of guilt for having contributed to the destruction of trees and wonder at their "divine" ability to persist. Similarly to *Wild Swim* and *Guidesky and I*, to be examined in the next section, Lustgarten's *Solastalgia* comments on the radical redefinition of our experience of and connection with the environment during the pandemic. The real trees, grotesque as they are in comparison with the ones described in the monologue, are still capable of bringing solace and comfort and define a sense of place, especially during the lockdown, when our needs are reduced to the minimum of survival.

Loss and Mourning During the Pandemic

A sense of loss and interrupted mourning creates a subtext for several monologues in *Isolated But Open* and plays from *Inside/Outside*. Although deaths to which the plays refer are not revealed to be caused by COVID-19, the mourning process is interrupted or disturbed by the limitations and restrictions imposed during the pandemic. The pandemic itself remains a form of subtext, changing the meaning of the text and refracting the original stories. This section examines two plays which symptomize the personal and collective experience of bereavement and having no resources to adequately respond to that loss because of the sanitary restrictions and isolation, particularly during the complete lockdown. The first text refers to the pandemic mainly through the disjunction between the text and the film, whereas the second more directly addresses both the mourning and its circumstances.

The monologue *Wild Swim* by Martha Watson Allpress (a writer and actor from the East Midlands living in London), who contributed to the *Isolated But Open* project[3], is spoken by Lauren who has recently lost her mother. The "wild swim" refers to the hobby her late mother followed in recent years – swimming in a natural lake together with her friends. On the wake day the daughter is invited by her mother's friend to join her on a wild swim and despite being in a "don't touch me or talk to me" mood, she offhandedly accepts. Yet instead she goes to the lake alone to swim and find – metaphorically – her dead mother in the water, reuniting mentally with her. This is what we hear when we listen to the monologue only, without watching the video. When swimming, Lauren says:

> I love it, and then with no thought at all I leave it. I push off into this abyss desperate to explore the reeds and the winter of the water. My extremities are so finally in tune with the rest of me; they are saving my life with each stroke. I dunk my head under and for the first time in six months I can't hear any noise. It's magic. I search for her. I want to find the exact spot my mum fell in love with it. I will find that spot. I will swim next to my mum, or she'll swim next to me. I'll just know she's there. (Allpress 66)

Swimming is an act of imaginary reunion with the mother in water; it seems that by performing this act Lauren confronts her loss, lets the object of loss go and in a way completes the mourning process. However, when confronted with the video, it becomes apparent that some aspects of the pandemic reality interfere with her mourning. The video shows the character trying to find a place where she could go swimming outdoors but to no avail. Because of sanitary restrictions, swimming in the lake is forbidden. On seeing the sign saying "Due to the current government guidelines concerning COVID-19, use of the lake is prohibited until further notice," Lauren takes a dog for a walk on the river bank (to have an excuse to walk in the empty city), becoming aware of the impossibility of realizing her wish. Finally, she enters the bathroom of what probably is her mother's house, changes into a swimsuit, swim cap and goggles, and plunges into the icy water in the bathtub (adding ice cubes to the water to make it closer in temperature to the lake water).

The trivial domesticity of what was supposed to be a wild swim exposes a general sense of futility of action and helplessness felt in the early phases of the pandemic, affecting also the experience of grief connected with loss. The pandemic has drastically reversed the spatial sense of outside and inside, blocking the completion of mourning and the healing process. Yet paradoxically, it has simultaneously imposed some form of critical awareness of the symbolic nature of the act of mourning: as it turns out, wild swimming can be performed in a bathtub by the power of imagination and by internalization – rather than exteriorization – of grief. Despite the circumstances, in the final epiphany, the character discovers that she will not regain her mother, but can go on living without her:

> Nothing's going to be the same after this. I can't float forever. I know that. And I'm still not going to have a mum when we get out of this water. I know that. But I'll have had this.
> I'm going to push and swim and love and cry and grieve and swim and feel and smile and spit and swim and tire and want and miss and swim and shout and swim and stroke and breathe and shiver and believe and swim and daydream and finish and swim and swim and swim. (Allpress 66)

In the process resembling in its first stage a "hallucinatory wishful psychosis" in which the character "turn[s] away from reality" trying to cling to the loved object (Freud 20) and in its second a transformation of the lost object into creative energy through positive introjection, Lauren

[3] The play is included in the collection as one of the texts submitted for the competition and is not described as having been written before the project was launched. However, Martha Watson Allpress authored a different play with a similar motif of wild swimming, *Wild Mum*, featuring two characters (male and female) struggling with the loss of their mother before the coronavirus pandemic (http://www.www.upstairsatthegatehouse.com/wild-mum).

passes from pathological melancholia to mourning that eventually can lead to healing. The split between the intensity and sublimity of Lauren's emotions and the triviality of a bath taken at home symbolically represent not only the reduction of the significant processes in people's lives during the pandemic, but also the resilience that enables them to adjust to these circumstances, by scaling down their need for authentic experience and accepting what appears to be its grotesque substitute.

In *Guidesky and I* (2021) by Deborah Bruce from the collection of *Inside/Outside*, mourning is also partly filtered through the grotesque, which points to the radical redefinition of everyday life during the pandemic. Similarly to Lauren from *Wild Swim*, the main character of *Guidesky and I*, Diana, has lost her mother and since her death she has lived alone, moving between her flat and her mother's house to take care of her mother's cat. In contrast to *Wild Swim*, *Guidesky and I* clearly specifies its lockdown and pandemic context through direct references to restrictions and isolation, while foregrounding types of social interaction prevailing in this time, such as online shopping and home delivery, as well as e-mail communication (registering a complaint). The major part of the play consists of e-mails, written to a seller called Guidesky, demanding a refund for a cat cave which she ordered for her mother's cat. Diana puts a lot of energy into corresponding with Guidesky; her anger escalates, reaching absurd levels when she announces that she will find and kill the man if she does not get the money back. At some point Diana begins to doubt whether she received any answers from the man and starts to suspect that she just imagined him. She seems disoriented and "socially awkward" (Bruce 23) having spent more than a hundred days alone. At the end of the play the Guidesky man arrives with the cat cave she ordered, but his behaviour and a different passage of time seem to confirm Diana's suspicion (thirty years pass between the man's exit and almost immediate re-entry).

Guidesky and I comments on loneliness and isolation, which the character tries to desperately break by engaging in the (imaginary) argument. Similarly to *Wild Swim*, during the pandemic, the character has no resources that she can fall back on to confront the feeling of loss. Diana notices how the lockdown reduces life to the bare existence and suffers from social isolation, but instead of trying to change this, she yields to the state of being suspended between life and death. She is afraid to fully confront her loss, redirecting her anger and frustration onto the imagined man. She invests all her energy in meaningless communication to fill in the empty space in her life and keep some form of social contact. It is only in one moment that she opens her mind to a memory of a rope swing in the garden, the image of which leads her to a pivotal statement directly referring to her loss:

> Is the rope still on the tree, I wonder? […]
> It'll be slimy with moss. Frayed to a thread probably. Or just not there at all.
> Weathered into absence.
> –
> Loss is a deep pool you can't just dip your toe into. (Bruce 22)

At this moment Diana recognizes and verbalizes the reason behind her inability to move forward. Similarly to *Wild Swim*, Bruce's play presents the grotesque – almost comedic – contrast between the gravity of loss and the triviality or clumsiness of the character's misdirected actions. What is also common to both plays is the characters' metafictional and self-reflective awareness – with Lauren looking directly into the camera and Diana making eye contact with the audience (described in stage directions as "self-conscious under our gaze" [Bruce 25]). The effect of both – the grotesque and the self-referential – achieves a type of understanding with an audience, and points to the common experience of the pandemic. It also in a way naturalizes some of the characters' "awkward" reactions as ways of dealing with personal and collective senses of loss during the pandemic crisis.

Conclusion

The pandemic has caused a major crisis in the theatre world, overcoming which has involved an extensive reformulation of contact and live action and their transformation into other – mediated – forms. It has also changed the focus, perspective and positioning of both artists and audiences, altering the scope of themes that could be seen as urgent or valid in these new circumstances. Most of the monologues and plays discussed in this article were launched at the early stages of the pandemic – during or just after the first lockdown. What is interesting about some of them is that they do not address the present pandemic directly, sometimes failing even to mention it at all, but the commentary on the change brought by the pandemic emerges from the disjuncture between the spoken narrative and the images presented in the videos or from silences or omissions that we can notice in their stories. The pandemic is thus a kind of subtext changing the meaning of narrated events presented in the monologues, preventing their completion or development, restricting options and reducing scale, thereby symptomizing the problems that make "normal" life impossible.

The projects addressing the pandemic more directly focus on the radical transformation of the meaning and use of everyday spaces, objects or relations to others in the period of lockdown, domesticating some of the crisis and estranging what used to be a familiar and safe element of people's environment. In both projects *Isolated But Open* and *Inside/Outside*, some larger problems of the pre-pandemic world emerge, such as environmental degradation (*Solastalgia*), racism and discrimination (*rise from the wreckage*), agism (*When the Daffodils*), and control and surveillance (*When the Daffodils*, *Wild Swim*, *Guidesky and I*). They also gain a new visibility during the pandemic and are exposed in the context of the increased sense of loss and powerlessness. In the plays focusing on the experience of losing a close relative, the pandemic restrictions and rules of isolation make it impossible for the characters to fully live through, express and share their mourning. Their struggle with loss exposes the needs that go beyond mere survival and represents the disorientation felt by people during the early months of the pandemic, related to the feeling of having lost a large portion of daily existence and experiences that go beyond it. The pandemic has also inspired visions of a better world and the emergence of the new normal, which in Lombe's play means a radical transformation of the whole system to cater for the needs of everyone – for the new imagined society not just surviving but using the crisis as an opportunity for improvement.

Works Cited

Abram, David, Milstein, Tema and Castro-Sotomayor, José. "Interbreathing ecocultural identity in the Humilocene." *Routledge Handbook of Ecocultural Identity*. Eds. Tema Milstein and José Castro-Sotomayor. Routledge, 2020, pp. 5–25.

Aebischer, Pascale. "Introduction." *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of Pandemic.* Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 1–10.

Agamben, Giorgio. "Clarifications," translated by Adam Kotsko. *An und für sich*, 17 March 2020. http://www.itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Translated by Daniel Hellen--Roazen. Stanford University Press, 1998.

Albrecht, Glenn, "'Solastalgia': A New Concept in Health and Identity." *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 3 (2005): 44–59.

Allpress, Watson Martha. *Wild Swim*. *Isolated But Open: Voices from The Shutdown*. Nick Hern Books, 2020, pp. 62–66.

Betzler, Diana, et al. "COVID-19 and the Arts and Cultural Sectors: Investigating Countries' Contextual Factors and Early Policy Measures." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 27.6 (2021): 796–814, https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2020.1842383

Bruce, Deborah. *Guidesky and I. Inside/Outside*. Nick Hern Books, 2021, pp. 5–25.

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2009.

Butler, Judith. *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind*. Verso, 2020.

Foxon, Chris. "Introduction." *Isolated But Open: Voices from The Shutdown*. Nick Hern Books, 2020, pp. 3–5.

Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), translated by James Strachey. *On Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia."* Eds. Leticia Glocer Fiorini, Thierry Bokanowski and Sergio Lewkowicz. Karnac Books, 2009, pp. 19–34.

Fuchs, Barbara. *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic*. Methuen Drama, 2022.

Gladwin, Derek. *Ecological Exile: Spatial Injustice and Environmental Humanities*. Routledge, 2018.

Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Ilter, Seda. *Mediatized Dramaturgy: The Evolution of Plays in the Media Age*. Methuen Drama, 2021.

Jeziński, Marek, and Lorek-Jezińska, Edyta. "The Response of Polish Performance Artists to Cultural Policies during the Pandemic: Liminality, Precarity and Resilience." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (2021). https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2021.2011252

Jones, Guy. "Introduction." *Inside/Outside*. Nick Hern Books, 2021, pp. vii–ix.

Lombe, Benedict. *Rise from the wreckage*. *Isolated But Open: Voices from The Shutdown*. Nick Hern Books, 2020, pp. 24–30.

Lorek-Jezińska, Edyta, Jeziński, Marek, and Domeracki, Piotr. "On the Benefits of Plague: Polish Fringe Theatre in 2020." *Theatre Journal* 74.2 (2022): 207–226. http://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2022.0046

Lustgarten, Anders. *Solastalgia*. *Isolated But Open: Voices from The Shutdown*. Nick Hern Books, 2020, pp. 31–34.

Maduro, Miguel Poiares, and Kahn, Paul W. "Introduction: Part III." *Democracy in Times of Pandemic: Different Futures Imagined*. Eds. Miguel Poiares Maduro and Paul W. Kahn. Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 137–139.

Neiman, Susan. "Corona as Chance: Overcoming the Tyranny of Self-Interest." *Democracy in Times of Pandemic: Different Futures Imagined*. Eds. Miguel Poiares Maduro and Paul W. Kahn. Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 153–167.

Papatango. *Isolated But Open: Voices from The Shutdown* (films). http://www.papatango.co.uk/isolated-but-open/. Accessed 20 Dec. 2020.

Papatango. *Isolated But Open: Voices from The Shutdown*. Nick Hern Books, 2020.

Snowden, Frank M. *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020.

Spiro, Neta, et al. "The Effects of COVID-19 Lockdown 1.0 on Working Patterns, Income, and Wellbeing Among Performing Arts Professionals in the United Kingdom (April–June 2020)". *Frontiers in Psychology* 11.594086 (2021). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.594086

Svich, Caridad. *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations during a Pandemic*. Methuen Drama, 2022.

Tan, Joel. *When the Daffodils*. *Inside/Outside*. Nick Hern Books, 2021, pp. 27–48.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost*. Polity Press, 2021.