

## Strategies in Managing Challenges of The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPAC) during Uncertain Times: A Reflection and A Way Forward

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**Abstract:** The recent pandemic was a plague to the performing arts industry. KLPAC was crippled by the incessant restrictive movement orders, where theatres were deprived of audiences for over 377 days bringing losses to about RM2,000,000 during that period. Previous studies on tackling these challenges are widely addressed in countries that rely heavily on this industry to preserve traditions. In Malaysia, collective coping strategies across cultural policies in the country is still in its infancy. Decentralisation in the navigation of this predicament compelled such cultural and arts centres to find their own way out in times of uncertainty. Hence, this paper examines the strategies adopted by KLPAC during the pandemic with the hope of extending these sustainable measures across any uncertain times that may occur in the future. The study was guided by John's Model of Structured Reflection. Interviews were conducted with KLPAC's management, stakeholders, and audience to explore ad hoc and long-term strategies. Through a focus group discussion, responses were analysed to gauge the efficacy of these suggestions and feedback. The findings of this study indicate the need for a new business model and the necessity to build a resilient arts community through digitalisation.

**Keywords:** Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPAC), uncertain times, managing strategies

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## Introduction

Running any performing arts centre can be demanding given the nature of this form of art which attempts to connect time, space, body and the presence of the artist, as well as the relation between the creator and the public. Its need to be appreciated in the light of audience interaction can be the determining factor of its success or failure. The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPAC) has managed to overcome various challenges since its establishment in 2005, due to the strong management led by Faridah Merican and Joe Hasham (Engku Abdul Rahman, 2021). Corporate sponsors like YTL Corporations Berhad, Yayasan Budi Penyayang, and Mercedes Benz have been instrumental in providing financial assistance and operational support to ensure the centre's sustainability (Kamaruddin & Harun, 2014). It is common knowledge that the recent COVID-19 pandemic affected the education industry and its management of students leading to a shift in pedagogical endeavours (Nesamaral et al., 2022). Likewise, this event also exacerbated the art centre's issues, and changed the way performing arts companies functioned (Pensiero, 2020).

As an archival tool of the social and political milieu of the times, this contemporary Malaysian theatre has kept abreast with discussions related to nation-building, race, and identity, illustrating its importance as a catalyst to a facet of multiculturalism (de Silva & Rajandram, 2022). Hence, it was pivotal for the art centre to find ways to survive the pandemic. Standard operating procedures (SOPs) like social distancing and closure of public venues made it difficult for performing arts centres to operate, and when the regulations were relaxed and allowed for limited audiences, operating costs exceeded the revenue collected from ticket sales (Bădin, 2021). Cancellation and postponement of performances, festivals and residencies had left theatre halls empty, and arts workers unemployed. While the full-time staff of arts centres experienced pay cuts, freelance performers had to find employment outside of the arts to sustain themselves (Rodriguez & Vakharia, 2020).

Some previous studies have looked into this pressing issue with a focus on hybridising performances, re-visiting adaptive cultural policies and leveraging on social media platforms, in order to build liminality, precarity and resilience (Bădin, 2021; Jeziński & Lorek-Jezińska, 2022; Setiawan et al., 2021; Webb, 2021). More often than not, the endeavour has been to ensure that the operations and finances are steady. While these studies indicate the scenario across the globe, there is a lack of literature on the local front with regard to navigating these uncertain circumstances. Most studies tend to focus on the education realm with reflections on how to best engage students of the arts. There are also several studies that have in fact acknowledged that art has metamorphosed into one that feeds into the pandemic agenda. Ong and Wai (2022) draw a congruence between art and health promotional messages while the evolution of the media arts is recognized in Zuhairi et al. (2021). De Silva (2021)

takes it a step further and exemplifies how the point of view technique can be used to stimulate audience interactivity in an online theatre setting. To extend on these studies and examine how a performing arts centre can attempt to stay afloat amidst difficult times, this study is dedicated to reflecting on the issue and finding a way forward so that arts centres can continue to thrive long-term. Hence, the researcher as an active member of the performing arts ecosystem of Kuala Lumpur, investigated the specific issues that affected KLPAC, a renowned cultural hub that is dedicated to cultivating and sustaining the performing arts in Malaysia, and the strategies that were adopted to counter them. KLPAC is seen as the leading privately owned performance venue in the city, and the media always seeks it first to discover how it reacts to any change or turn in SOPs. The pandemic SOPs directly impacted the operations mechanism, audience capacity, and revenue of the centre, creating challenges for all departments. Thus, this study aims to seek answers to the following: What were the immediate, evolving, and permanent strategies put in place, and how these challenges changed the ideals of KLPAC in the long run?

## Literature Review

### Performing Arts Centres During Uncertain Times

Ever since the coronavirus outbreak was declared a pandemic in March 2020, arts centres everywhere experienced financial hardship (Lew, 2020). The groups affected include the people working for the arts centres, the freelance performers who depend on the productions staged at the centre, and arts teachers who teach the classes offered there (Ilesanmi, 2021). The lockdowns imposed at the beginning of the pandemic demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of arts fraternity (Rodriguez & Vakharia, 2020). Performance groups began to digitalise their performances, many learning to use online technology for the first time. The entrepreneurial facet of the performing arts space became tantamount to its survival and learning how to produce and present content online seemed the only way forward. When the lockdowns were eased, performance centres were allowed to operate again, but not without uncertainty. Performance centres and their patrons were unclear on the best balance between safety and operating feasibility. There was a lack of discussion between the state administration and performance centres on the best operating procedures to ensure patrons' safety, and the performing arts ecosystem's sustainability.

Rodriguez and Vakharia's (2020) paper suggests a revamp of the performing arts centres' operating systems and call for ingenuity in adaptation, to prepare for future challenges. There will be a need to reflect on: (a) what past values and cultures should we retain, (b) what are the new policies, and how do they fit into the centre's long-term sustainability, as well as (c) how can the centre become more resilient to challenges in the future.

On the other hand, Patel and Brooks' (2022) scoping review lists analyses on the performing arts during the pandemic based on themes such as loss of work, financial impact, psychological wellbeing, continuity of creative pursuits and inequalities. The paper highlights the multi-faceted challenges faced by the players in the arts, including personal adversities encountered by the artistes during this time. It also, however, proposed opportunities that have arisen from experiencing the pandemic, namely improved well-being amongst some practitioners, and branching into online modes of performances.

### **Navigating the Online Platform for Performances**

Artistes are a resilient, and empathetic group of people, as recounted in Rodriguez and Vakharia's (2020) study. In responding to the lockdowns, performing artistes worldwide educated themselves on online sharing platforms to create and entertain the masses in isolation; many of them doing it for free.

Theatre companies have long been offering recorded versions of their shows on online platforms like YouTube, as a supplementary to their live shows. Since the pandemic, lockdowns have made this mode the only way for the performing arts centre to showcase its products (Timplalexi, 2020).

One of the most publicised online performances at the start of the pandemic was the Globe Theatre's streamed performance of *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. The performance was streamed live on September 11, archived and was made available online for 6 months via the "Shakespeare Lives" website. The live streaming of the play was praised for its ingenuity by most viewers, but an analysis conducted by Sullivan (2020), disclosed its limitations. Audience engagement fared higher in the sample watching the play live via event cinema transmission (akin to going to a cinema to watch a movie), compared to watching it at home via personal devices. This can be attributed to more other online distractions when watching on a phone or laptop, and inferior audio and video quality. Going with a group to watch a play streamed onto a giant screen, is also more similar in aesthetic to attending a live performance.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

To cater to the evolving, and persistent nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, a critical reflection approach was adopted to analyse the collected data, periodically. John's Model of Reflection (MSR) was selected as it entails continuous outward and inward reflection for the organisation. Its emphasis and focus on "look inwards", that is, to consider one's own thoughts and feelings and "look outwards", that is, to consider the actual incident or situation alongside whether actions were ethical in an external

context served as a comprehensive framework to study this issue at hand. In the context of this case, the study followed the five phases as stipulated by the model to inspire critical reflection:

- describing the experience
- reflecting on the experience
- identifying influencing factors
- identifying alternative options
- describing what has been learned from the experience

### Phases and Interview Questions

In the first phase, the study looked at the descriptions of experiences adapting to the pandemic and the lockdown in March 2020, by the interviewees. The management team of the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, organizers of shows and events, producers, and audience members who had come for performances during the pandemic described what they felt were factors that led to the challenges faced by the centre during that time.

In the second phase, the interviewees were then asked to reflect about how they felt about the experience and what they did spontaneously. These then extended into their decision-making processes with questions related to what considerations did they need to make in arriving at decisions.

In the third phase, they were asked if there were influencing factors in their decision-making processes such as personal experiences, familial issues and other sources of knowledge were elicited. This is to ascertain how their lived experiences came into play when making decisions.

In the fourth phase, interviewees were asked about alternative options and decisions in hindsight, noting what they could have done better. This phase triggers deeper thinking and thoughts about solution-oriented practices and a critical examination of potential and talent, alongside the reflection of whether all options had been exhausted.

The fifth and final phase is the take-home point of the entire process. Interviewees would be asked about what they had learned from the experience, especially on the decisions that would change the centre's work culture permanently, and impact future decision making by the team.

With these phases to guide the structured reflection, Table 1 summarises the preliminary questions directed to the interviewees.

**Table 1.** Questions to management team, external organisers and audience

- 
1. What is your background?
  2. What is your connection to KLPAAC?
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**Table 1** (con't)

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3. What were immediate challenges faced at the start of the pandemic?
  4. What were the evolving challenges faced mid-pandemic?
  5. What were the long-term challenges that you foresaw arising from the pandemic?
  6. What were the strategies adopted to address challenges 3-5?
  7. How has these challenges changed the ideals of the KLPAC?
  8. How has the live performance experience changed during the pandemic?
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### **Participants**

The primary method of data collection for this study was interviews with the management team of KLPAC, organisers of shows and events, producers, and selected audience members. The management team members interviewed were the theatre manager and the marketing manager through a focus group discussion. As they were responsible for responding immediately to news of the lockdowns during the pandemic, and for strategising long-term plans for the centre, their input was crucial to building strategies moving forward. Production houses, Theatresauce and Dama Orchestra were also interviewed in this study. Their feedback was vital as they were victims of postponement and cancellation of their shows. Lastly, audiences were selected for the interview based on the criteria that they were regular patrons who had come for shows before, and during the pandemic. Gathering empirical material from these three main sources formed a co-constructed solution that would shape the centre's way forward.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Revenue Related Challenges**

From the analysis of the interviews conducted with the management of KLPAC, and external hirers, the main challenges faced during the pandemic were: cancellation of shows due to lockdowns and a loss of revenue streams. Almost 100 shows were cancelled in 2020 alone, since the first Movement Control Order (MCO 1) was announced in March 2020. Internal productions by KLPAC were postponed, but external producers cancelled their bookings indefinitely. All the revenue streams of the centre were impacted. The academy where drama classes were held was closed, and ceased taking in new students, while there were no tickets sales for shows, and revenue rentals were cancelled.

This scenario is akin to the predicament faced by the Spanish Classical Theater. In Moreno's study (2022), the Andalusian companies dealt with the 2020 pandemic ingeniously by resorting to virtual adaptations, recordings, and other alternative forms of theatre. The study also revealed how practitioners were forced to see the

future of theatre and comedia in the light of digitalisation if there was any hope of salvaging the performing arts. In another study, Duarte et al. (2021) pointed out how Portuguese, Spanish and Brazilian contemporary arts companies took to expanding digital activities, kept participating in art fairs hybrid models, continued to focus on internationalisation, and advocated the strengthening of public policies towards the sector and partnerships as key strategies to overcome the crisis.

### **Responding to the Loss**

To respond to the loss of income, three steps were taken: lobbying for reopening, innovative fundraising, and pivoting online. The management team had meetings with the Minister of Communications and Multimedia (KKMM) to lobby for the reopening of the arts sector despite the pandemic. They presented the data on the arts community's loss of livelihood, and proposed stages of reopening. Innovative fundraisers were also conducted from March 2020 to November 2020. A #SaveYourSeat campaign was launched where the public could sponsor a seat at its main theatre, Pentas 1, for RM50-RM1,000. Within 2 weeks, 98% of seats were sponsored, and a total of RM98,350 was raised. An online show, *Indicine Live: Quarantine Edition* was also produced entirely online. Additionally, the team began experimenting with streaming past performances on YouTube, for a donation, before adopting a paid/ tickets system via CloudTheatre, which the centre now uses for its online performances.

### **Reopening and a New Business Model**

A thorough study on adapting an appropriate business model has been argued comprehensively by Peñarroya-Farell and Miralles (2022) when they examined multiple case studies involving firms in the creative arts and culture business in Spain. Their study is significant in the sense that it brought to the fore the importance of the Business Model Adaptation (BMA) procedure where implementation is assessed through three stages: reaction, planned adaptation and stabilisation. This study also pointed out a key finding that involved theoretical implications. It was found that BMA in very hostile environments is better understood under the lenses of emergency management theory and improvisation capabilities. This scenario is relevant to the context of this study in many ways in that the new normal implemented stemmed from an improvised and planned adaptation through open innovation and the acquiring and mobilisation of new technologies.

### **The Three-Pronged Categorical Approach**

Beginning July 1, 2020, performing arts centres were allowed to open gradually. KLPAC used a three-pronged categorical approach to its reopening. The categories

were Holistic Framework, Customized Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), and Readiness Check. Under the Holistic Framework category, the centre conducted mandatory health screenings for all its staff, provided physical distancing markers on main pathways and seats, regulated centre-wide sanitisation, conducted staff training as well as audience education, and implemented a contactless experience from purchasing of tickets to leaving the theatre. For customised SOPs, the centre provided standard operating procedures which were individualised; one for the audiences, one for the students and teachers of the academy, and another for cast and crew of performances. The readiness check ensured all departments of KLPAC were well-prepared for reopening. This included a check on the status of the SOP development, the infrastructure acclimatised to the pandemic, staff well-trained in SOP handling, and communications strategy done for the public.

The new business model created and used since the pandemic has been a 100% contactless model. Whether it be for live performances, online shows, or on demand (pay per view), KLPAC now has a system with no over-the-counter sales. Tickets are purchased solely online, and the old system of ticket collection at the box office has been abolished. Patrons buy the tickets online and scan their E-tickets at the entrance of the theatre.

### **Producing Theatre for a Live Online Audience**

The POV (Point of View) technique to simulate audience interactivity was an innovation that emerged out of the so-called limitations brought on by the pandemic. Post-pandemic, this ingenious idea is an example of how the Emergency Management Theory came into play as proposed in Peñarroya-Farell and Miralles (2022). This invention first took centre stage at the IUCEL2022 Proceedings 433 Description of the Research/ Innovation/ Invention/ Design by proposing a technique of creation and presentation to an online audience, via the POV technique introduced by Braverman (2014). The innovation of Producing Theatre for a Live Online Audience: The POV technique to simulate audience interactivity, did two key things. It replicated in-studio “creative jamming session” via hybrid Video-In-Studio rehearsals. It enabled students to create and present their creations (performance skits) to the lecturer who was watching via video on ZOOM.

Secondly, the POV technique was used in filming performances. The narrative of the script used the videographer to represent the audience of the story. The videographer filmed the entirety as if he were the audience. When the audience eventually watched it from the POV of the videographer, they experienced the “first-hand” point of view. Inspired by two pedagogy frameworks: Sayers’ (2013) “Mantle of the Expert” theory and Braverman’s (2014) POV technique, the audience was able to explore the parameters of their issues (pandemic) based on the existing knowledge this issue presents (online technology). Using the “what if” philosophy as the basis of



experimentation, this innovation is a catalyst to giving online audiences an immersive experience when they watch the performance remotely. This has given rise to further endeavours at KLPAC, in line with reducing the gap between the needs and wants of all parties involved.

### Conclusion

This study has shown how trying times forces a re-negotiation of indoor spaces in a way. As a civic structure that brings creative types together, KLPAC has re-defined the way it looks at art and how it is to be brought to a wider audience, even in times of duress. It has to date, explored partnerships in hybrid spaces through the community's engagement and attempted to use the new business model to initiate a wide range of creative civic spaces that are both face-to-face and remote that would foster business start-ups, job opportunities, products, services, and income generation. Perhaps KLPAC could become a trendsetter and a potential platform for education, community, and workplace engagement in the long run. Moving forward, more significant effort and attention is needed to understand not only the art community's needs and preferences, but also the stakeholders' and audiences' expectations in terms of the best way to consume art and all its wonders given the dynamic nature of the physical and cultural aspects which KLPAC embodies.

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