

Abstract

The Theatrical Employment System in Crisis? How Working Conditions Are Changing in Theatre and Elsewhere

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In the last two decades, work and organization studies have increasingly referred to the creative industries in order to study the effects contingent and project-based work as well as flexible and highly competitive labour markets have on individuals and organizations. This conference contribution seeks to relate these debates to systemic crisis in European theatre, with a focus on the German repertory theatre. The paper addresses a dimension of this crisis that has its roots in theatrical working conditions - conditions that have never been particularly favourable for workers but that have become even worse, starting in the 1980s and even more so in the recent past.

First, an overview is given on how work and working conditions have been changing in the world of work in general, highlighting marketization and its ambiguous demands towards workers. In the so-called creative industries such developments have started much earlier and research on artistic labour markets has come up with some general characterisations of artistic working conditions.

In a next step, the German theatrical employment system is introduced from an institutionalist perspective. Based on qualitative empirical studies conducted by the author, the role of a shared lifestyle of theatre workers, oriented towards bohemian ideals, is illustrated. Recent changes of working conditions and employee relation in theatre are then analysed by taking a closer look at labour market entry, artistic traditions, economic pressure since German reunification and developments towards work intensification and self-optimisation ('acting as sports').

It is argued that aesthetic body and gender norms as well as labour market characteristics and economic pressures shape and reproduce working conditions and career prospects that are disadvantageous for women performers. Since these working conditions and career prospects are still based on an artistically legitimized labour demand they are difficult to change in the near future. However, the #MeToo debate as well as a growing movement towards collective articulation of theatre artists' precarious work has recently brought a new dynamic into a highly institutionalised employment system that tends to prioritise artistic norms and traditions over decent working conditions.