



das
zeitgemäße
theater



Annual Report
2025/26
Saison



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Annual Report 2025/2026 Season

An Austria-wide, cross-institutional analysis of structural challenges in the cultural sector.

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Summary

The nonprofit and independent association *Das zeitgemäße Theater* (dzth) is an interactive platform that addresses key gaps in the cultural sector. It offers insights and provides concrete impetus for change regarding contemporary theater practices. In this way, it highlights issues and shares knowledge so that theater professionals can initiate change themselves.

The dzth's first annual report documents the organization's activities during the 2025–26 season. It is based on 60 documented accounts of experiences, collected through initial contacts with affected individuals working at nine publicly funded theaters.

The analysis shows that the most frequently reported problem is not the misconduct itself, but the lack of effective responses to it. The 60 accounts of experiences included in this analysis contain a total of **84 identified legally relevant offenses**, including those in the areas of criminal law, compliance and ethics, contract law, equal treatment, employee protection, and the employer's duty of care.

Across the individual incidents, recurring patterns emerge: fear of negative consequences, leadership failures, inadequate reporting and complaint processes, a lack of accountability, communication deficits, as well as shortcomings in employee protection and in human resources and organizational development.



1. The Association

Das zeitgemäße Theater (dzth)

Das zeitgemäße Theater was founded in September 2025. The organization brings together people from diverse backgrounds in theater practice, organizational development, law, cultural management, and communication. We are united by the conviction that privately and publicly funded theaters should serve as spaces for our democracy—both outwardly and inwardly.

1.1 When Silence Was No Longer an Option: The Founding of the Association

Das zeitgemäße Theater emerged from the observation that, although numerous challenges within the cultural and theater sectors, particularly regarding work culture, abuse of power, discrimination, boundary violations, and professional protection mechanisms, have been known for years, they have not been adequately addressed.

Power itself is not the risk.

Rather, it is power without responsible accountability.

Before taking action ourselves, we first sought dialogue with those institutions and agencies that, in our view, should be responsible for education, prevention, counseling, and structural improvements. Through numerous conversations, inquiries, and outreach efforts, it became clear that while awareness of the problems existed in many places, concrete measures were often lacking or pursued only sporadically.

This way, no progress will be made.

Based on this experience, we became convinced that additional impetus from civil society is necessary. As a result, *das zeitgemäße Theater* was founded—with the goal of making information accessible, bringing abuses to light, promoting expert discourse, and contributing in the long term to a contemporary, safe, and professional theater and cultural landscape.

1.2 Knowledge for All.

An initial focus was on establishing an independent information and knowledge platform. The goal was to make relevant information, legal frameworks, and practical examples accessible to cultural professionals free of charge and anonymously, thereby creating a foundation for guidance and exchange.

1.3 Attitude Alone is not Enough. Responsibility requires Tools.

In addition, the association conducted ongoing orientation and professional exchanges for and with employees at state-funded cultural institutions in Austria and Germany. The dialogue encompassed various levels within the organizations: individuals facing conflict or stress, as well as works council members, managers, executive boards, and other decision-makers. The topics ranged from issues of prevention and organizational development to conflict resolution and the development of professional protection and complaint procedures. Two training centers for theater professionals commissioned the association to conduct workshops for emerging talent.

1.4 Networking does not stop at National Borders.

Last season, *Das zeitgemäße Theater* participated in professional conferences and networking events across Europe, such as in Strasbourg in October 2025 and in Munich in June 2026.

The challenges that emerge through the association's work are not discussed solely at the national level. Just one month after the website launched in September 2025, the association became a founding member of the European initiative *ARTs · EMIS (European Mission for Inclusivity and Safety in the Arts and Cultural Sector)*, which includes member organizations from Belgium, France, Ireland, Germany, and Spain.

The challenges are European in scope.

Das zeitgemäße Theater was invited to participate as an Associated Partner in the Erasmus+ cooperation project *FAIR STAGE—European Program for Gender-Based Violence Prevention in Creative Industries*, which is comprehen-

sively funded by the EU. The project brings together organizations from several European countries and develops common prevention standards, protection protocols, and training and continuing education programs for the cultural and creative industries. All project results will form the basis for a reference standard that can be applied across Europe. Charlotte Koppenhöfer, member of the association's board, serves on the project's international advisory board, where she contributes expertise in the fields of theater practice, psychology, crisis management, and labor law. *Das zeitgemäße Theater* is particularly involved in the expert discussion on protection mechanisms, training and continuing education, and the development of long-term, effective prevention and accountability measures in the cultural sector.

Prevention. But please, no whitewashing.

While work is underway at the European level to develop standards, protective structures, and prevention models, it became increasingly clear over the course of the season that Austrian practices also require a systematic evaluation of the experiences gathered.

1.5 Good Practices deserve Recognition.

In addition to addressing problematic situations, the association is committed to highlighting positive developments. This recognition demonstrates that contemporary theater can be created even under seemingly limited conditions..

For this reason, “das zeitgemäße Theater of the Season” Award was established.

This award honors theaters and projects that set positive standards through a contemporary organizational culture, transparent decision-making processes, respectful collaboration, and responsible conduct. The goal is to highlight successful examples of best practices and to focus not only on shortcomings but also on successful steps forward. Last season, the *Schauspielhaus Wien* impressed the independent jury—composed of *Annette Dasch*, *Karoline Exner*, *Murali Perumal*, and *Julia Riedler*—in an anonymous review process.



2. What Practice Reveals

With the increasing number of feedback responses, orientation meetings, professional exchanges, and accounts of experiences, a knowledge base developed over the course of the season that allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and structural challenges across institutional boundaries.

The following insights therefore not only provide an assessment of the association's work but also represent the first Austria-wide and cross-institutional analysis of structural challenges in the cultural sector.

This is based on 60 documented accounts of experiences and feedback from staff members at nine publicly funded Austrian theater institutions specializing in musical and spoken theater, as well as from festival and summer theater companies. These are supplemented by the association's exchange and networking activities throughout the 2025/26 season.

Over the course of the season, the analysis of these experiences gave rise to another focus of the association's work:

the systematic examination of recurring patterns across institutional boundaries. What sets this approach apart is not the examination of individual incidents, but rather their cross-institutional analysis. This has resulted, for the first time in Austria, in a comprehensive picture of recurring structural challenges across different venues, genres, and roles.

The insights from the 2025/26 season, as applied to *Das zeitgemäße Theater*, address issues of work organization and personnel management as well as discrimination, sexual harassment, abuse of power, and challenges related to labor law, social security, and occupational safety. It becomes apparent that these are often not isolated individual cases, but rather structural and procedural challenges that occur in similar forms at different theaters and across different genres.

Where patterns repeat themselves, accountability has failed.

While many discussions in the cultural sector remain focused on individual incidents or institutions, *Das zeitgemäße Theater* takes a different approach. The insights gained are systematically documented, categorized, and evaluated. The goal is to reveal recurring patterns, identify structural problems, and analyze the conditions under which knowledge gaps regarding labor law obligations, boundary violations, discrimination, or organizational missteps exist.

Consequently, the association's work is not limited to the transfer of knowledge. It aims to gain robust knowledge from practical experience, contribute this knowledge to national and European discourses, and thereby help develop contemporary standards for safety, professionalism, and appropriate working conditions in the cultural sector.

2.1 When Responsibility Becomes a Duty: Legal Analysis

The following legal analysis is based on 60 documented accounts of experiences from nine publicly funded theater institutions. The events described make it clear that certain forms of work organization and management practices entail risks. However, the existence of such risks does not mean that misconduct inevitably occurs or that comparable conditions are found in all institutions. The analysis therefore describes existing risk factors, not the general state of the Austrian theater scene.

The accounts provided reveal 84 legally relevant incidents. The following classification summarizes these into overarching categories.

Criminal Law

8 accounts pertain to matters relevant under criminal law.

The reported incidents predominantly involve serious defamation by individuals in positions of hierarchical authority. In three cases, severe physical or sexual assaults were described.

Compliance / Ethics / Abuse of Power

20 accounts pertain to compliance or ethical violations

The accounts primarily concern abuse of power, conflicts of interest, poor leadership, and active obstruction of ethical behavior and compliance efforts.

Contract Law

16 Critical Issues

A large portion of the cases at hand involve classifications that disadvantage employees. These include, for example, classifying employment relationships as "artistic" even though the actual work consists of administrative tasks. In several institutions, there is also a practice of changing an employee's status from "worker" to "salaried employee" after a certain period of service. Further-

more, instances of unilateral contract amendments and the denial of legitimate claims for payment have been reported. It is also notable that relevant collective bargaining agreements sometimes stipulate matters that must be regulated in individual contracts, yet these are not addressed in practice. Instead, there are repeated instances of inadequately drafted employment letters.

Equal Treatment

21 reported violations of the GlbG

The reported incidents primarily involve sexual harassment, harassment based on gender, and gender-based unequal treatment in pay and fees.

Worker Protection

8 reported violations of employee protection regulations

Two categories dominate here: First, there are chronic violations of **maximum working hour limits**; second, safety standards in theaters are as high as those on construction sites. According to the reports, statutory safety requirements are not being adequately met.

In two cases, existing training obligations toward apprentices were not fulfilled.

Employer's Duty of Care

11 Verletzungen durch Direktionen

In 11 cases, theater management violated—sometimes repeatedly—its duty of care as an employer. In most cases, this involved the **protection of physical and mental health as well as personal integrity**. This often results from a failure to take corrective action after a report has been filed. In one case, the protection of the compliance officer was also violated.

Inadequate Reporting Systems

It is noteworthy that 51 accounts of incidents (representing 85% of the documented incidents) were not reported to the respective theater management teams despite their legal relevance.

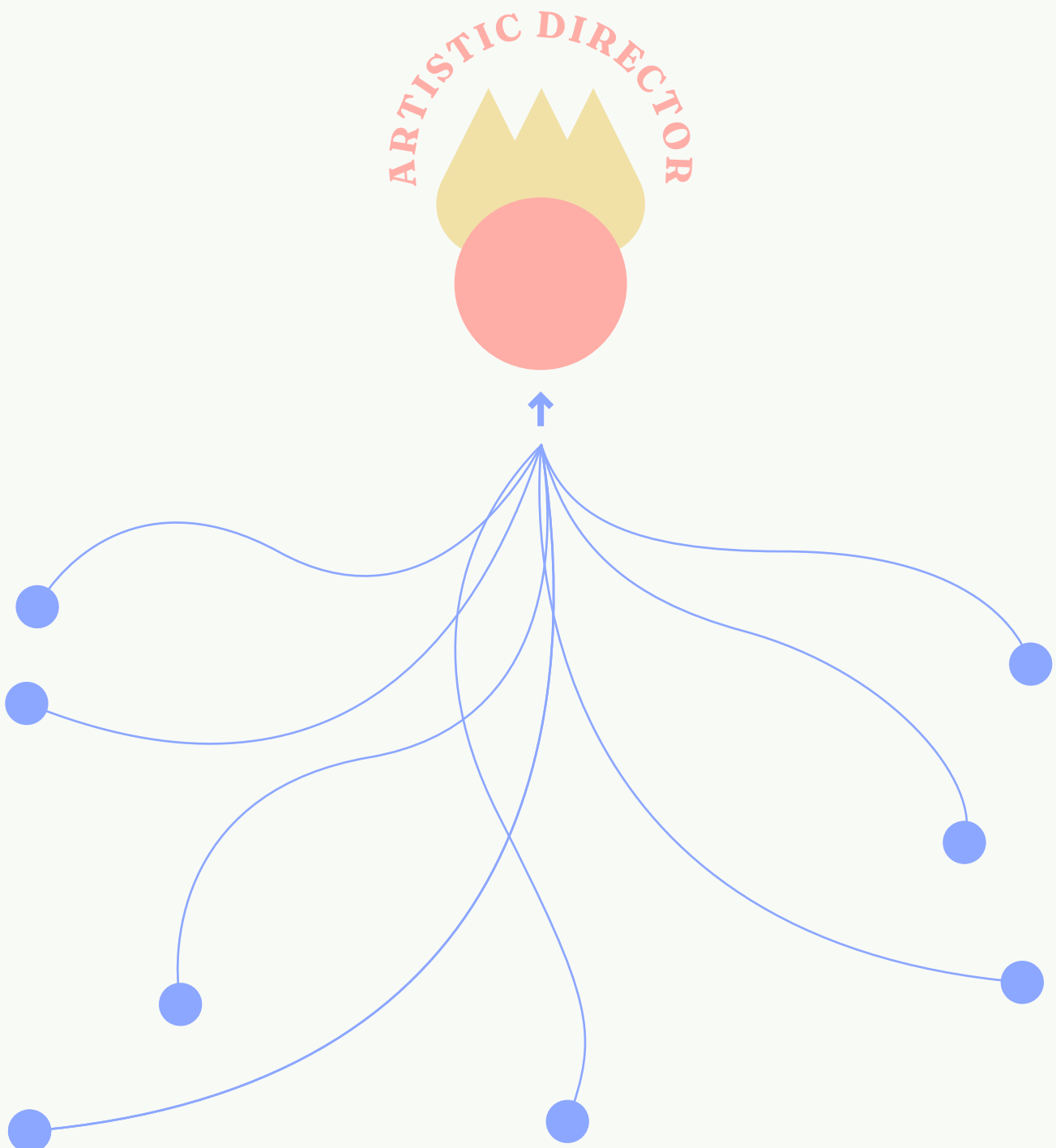
The employer is obligated to respond to reported incidents and to implement necessary corrective measures. Where no report is made, no response can take place.

At the same time, numerous accounts show that existing reporting channels are lacking, unknown, or not being used. Many reports end with the explicit decision by those affected not to involve management.

This gives rise to a fundamental problem: misconduct goes unreported, necessary measures are not taken, and existing risks persist. Effective and trustworthy reporting channels are therefore essential for ensuring that accountability can be upheld at all.

The Organizational Chart

Furthermore, our research has shown that not a single one of the nine institutions in question has an organizational chart—outlining responsibilities and escalation procedures—that is accessible to all employees. This leads employees to believe that the only point of contact must be the Artistic Director.



2.2 A Recurring Pattern: Few Problem Areas, Many Symptoms

The most frequently reported issue is not misconduct itself, but the lack of effective responses to misconduct. Most of the events described cannot be reduced to individual misconduct but point to deficiencies in leadership, organization, and accountability. Sexual assault, discrimination, or bullying are often merely the moment when an underlying organizational problem becomes visible. Uncertainties often arise from differing expectations, a lack of guidance, or an unclear understanding of one's own responsibilities.

The following thematic clusters describe recurring patterns that can be identified across institutions.

A culture of Fear and Psychological Insecurity–The Great Silence

The accounts repeatedly indicate that those affected and witnesses fear negative consequences if they seek support or report incidents. Statements such as *“That just makes everything worse,” “Then everyone will be mad at me,”* or *“I’d rather not contact the works council”* run through numerous reports.

Typical patterns:

- Fear of negative consequences
- Lack of trust in support services
- Avoidance of reporting incidents
- Withdrawal of witnesses
- Social sanctions (such as bullying) against those who offer support

The accounts suggest that seeking help is perceived as riskier than remaining silent.

Leadership Failure

Numerous accounts point to problems in leadership behavior and in the handling of leadership responsibilities. These issues affect different institutions and departments but follow similar patterns.

Typical patterns:

- Managers are difficult to reach
- Agreements are not honored
- Conflicts remain unresolved

- Decisions are not justified
- Fear of managers
- Leadership through intimidation, shouting, or threats
- Responsibility is supposedly delegated upward (“*The boss decides.*”)

The accounts suggest that leadership tasks are often understood as a function of power rather than as a responsibility for providing direction, communication, and conflict resolution.

Failure of Reporting and Complaint Mechanisms

It is particularly common for existing reporting and complaint mechanisms to fail to have the intended effect. In some cases, there are points of contact that are not trusted. It is repeatedly reported that reports go unaddressed, so that the situation persists, or that those affected and witnesses receive no feedback on further steps.

Typical patterns:

- lack of trust in reporting mechanisms
- lack of response
- lack of transparency
- unclear lines of responsibility
- direct dependence of reporting offices on management

The mere existence of a reporting system therefore does not appear to be a sufficient prerequisite for its effectiveness.

Accountability and Governance

The accounts repeatedly point to shortcomings in accountability, transparency, and governance. Decisions are **not justified**, selection processes remain opaque, and sanctions are applied **inconsistently** or are **not imposed at all**.

Typical patterns:

- lack of traceability in decision-making
- favoritism or significant discrimination against individuals
- lack of consequences for misconduct
- unclear lines of responsibility
- lack of transparency

The events described suggest that responsibility, decision-making authority, and accountability are often insufficiently linked.

Communication and Participation Deficiencies

Numerous accounts of experiences point to inadequate communication within the organizations. Information is often shared informally, belatedly, or not at all. Opportunities for affected employees and departments to participate are not apparent.

Typical patterns:

- Contract changes without advance notice
- Lack of information provided to departments
- Informal channels of communication
- Lack of involvement of those affected
- A general lack of established standard communication processes

The accounts suggest that communication is often dependent on individuals rather than being organized structurally.

Safety Issues

The accounts reveal recurring shortcomings in how safety issues are handled. This applies both to traditional occupational safety and to the professional management of physical and psychological safety in day-to-day work..

Typical patterns:

- incomplete safety briefings
- lack of safety inspections
- failure to prioritize protective measures
- Dismissal of intimacy-related issues
- Lack of support following hazardous situations

Compliance with safety standards appears less like an active leadership responsibility and more like the individual initiative of specific employees.

Discrimination and Diversity Competence

There are repeated reports of incidents of discrimination as well as difficulties in addressing related reports and complaints.

Typical patterns:

- unprofessional handling of diversity
- insufficient awareness-raising
- lack of response to reports
- stigmatization of supporters
- lack of learning processes following incidents

The accounts suggest that reports of discrimination are often treated as isolated cases rather than serving as a basis for systematic improvements.

Personnel and Organizational Development

There is also a recurring theme in accounts of unclear responsibilities, a lack of direction within the organization, and difficulties in filling and developing roles.

Typical patterns:

- inadequate preparation of managers
- flawed selection processes
- lack of succession planning
- unclear roles and responsibilities
- lack of escalation channels
- lack of transparency regarding responsibilities

The reports indicate that key elements of professional human resources and organizational development are often inadequately established or communicated throughout the organization.

Many Symptoms. Few Causes. Major Omissions.

Despite their diversity, the issues described repeatedly point to the same underlying problems: a lack of psychological safety, poor leadership quality, insufficient accountability, and weaknesses in organization and communication.



3. Conclusion

The analysis has shown that the challenges described cannot be reduced to isolated incidents or individual institutions. Despite differences in functions, disciplines, and organizational structures, similar patterns recur.

These findings are expressly not intended to be a description of the entire Austrian cultural sector. However, they do show that comparable challenges exist across institutions and that a systematic examination of these challenges can add value to the professional discourse.

At the same time, it becomes clear that prevention requires more than just codes of conduct, training sessions, or formal reporting systems. Effective prevention requires that responsibility be clearly assigned, decisions be made in a transparent manner, and reports be handled consistently. Protection does not arise from the mere existence of tools, but rather from their credible and consistent application.

The challenges highlighted in this report do not affect institutions alone. Supervisory bodies, funding agencies, and cultural policymakers also bear responsibility for ensuring safe, professional, and contemporary working conditions. Where public funds are allocated, there is also a responsibility to ensure that governance, worker protection, equal treatment, and accountability are effectively guaranteed.

Monitoring Is Not the Responsibility of an Association

This report is not intended to be an ongoing task for an independent, volunteer-run association. In the long term, the systematic, cross-institutional collection, analysis, and publication of such findings should be carried out by those bodies that have the appropriate legal mandate, resources, and public funding to do so. The measures derived from these findings should be overseen by supervisory bodies.

Imprint / Contact

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Charlotte Koppenhöfer (Chair), Tine Wesp (Deputy Chair)

Purpose of the Association: The purpose of the association is to promote and advance democratic, non-discriminatory, transparent, and health-promoting work cultures in privately and publicly funded institutions of the performing arts—particularly in the field of theater—within Austria and through international exchange.

Legal Status: The association is a nonprofit organization that does not operate for profit in accordance with the provisions of the Austrian Associations Act.

Supervisory Authority: Vienna State Police Directorate (LPD Vienna)

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das
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Das zeitgemäße Theater
is a place where the
future is negotiated—
on stage and behind the
scenes.



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