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Editorial

Theatre in the Digital Age

> "The theatre not only assimilates technologies; it represents
> their changing interface with theatre, and so with the technologized human."
> (W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare, Technicity, Theatre)*

Theatre has often been described as the medium of the here and now, the art of the moment, the most elusive and temporary, precisely because of its physical embodiment in the reality of the stage. Yet it is undeniable that in the past decades, the digital medium has infiltrated the theatre as well as all other forms of cultural production, and by now the appearance of digital technology on stage has become almost commonplace. The COVID-19 pandemic forced theatres – together with many other aspects of our social and cultural existence – into the realm of the digital, where once again the differences persisted, if not increased, between the haves and the have-nots; institutions with already available technology for recording, streaming and storage, or sufficient backing for investing in the required technology, fared better during the challenging times of social distancing and closed theatre spaces than amateur, fringe productions or venues/troupes relying only on ticket prices. As the essay collection *Lockdown Shakespeare* makes it clear already in its subtitle, the long-term closure of theatres that has never been experienced in human history, at least not on such a global scale, also brought about *New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation* (ALLRED, BROADRIBB and SULLIVAN 2022). The physical distance forced on a medium that by definition thrives in the bodily co-presence of performer and audience had an impact on our notions of liveness (ALLRED 2022), on audience participation (AEBISCHER and NICHOLAS 2022), on theatre education (HARTLEY et al. 2022), and more.

The archive took on increased significance for the same reason – theatres who could simply make already existing recordings accessible could continue to have some income during the lockdown period as well. But our increased reliance on digital repositories also pointed out the potential weaknesses of such archival systems, and initiated further research and development in the field. Although databases and various digital

storage systems have been around for a long time, our experience of the pandemic made us realise how ephemeral digital data can be, and reminded us that theatre in itself is an art form that is by its very nature ephemeral. In the words of Sylvaine Guyot and Jeffrey S. Ravel:

> This general sense of anxiety about access and long-term digital preservation, one that is particularly familiar to academics, archivists, and librarians today dealing with issues of online open access and conservation of digitally-born objects, resonates as well with those of us who study theater history. In our case the very object of study, the moment of past performance, is an ephemeral, ever-retreating event that is dauntingly difficult to study. (GUYOT and RAVEL 2020)

At the same time, the Digital Age, as we conceive it, does not constitute a historical or ontological category. Rather, it represents a phenomenon that engenders a distinct subject, one who is not at ease in traditional spaces such as the theatre. The term 'digital' primarily denotes technology, specifically the processes of digitalisation in general and the digitalisation of culture in particular. At its most abstract, digitalisation refers to the technological capability to engage with various facets of life not through physical proximity but via the distance of a mere click. Prior to this digitalisation individuals were compelled to leave the comfort of their homes to access work, postal services, banking, or various forms of entertainment. In contrast, digitalisation enables these activities to be conducted from home. Instead of boarding a bus, one simply clicks an icon, entering the algorithmic space to complete necessary tasks. Digitalisation, a phenomenon of great magnitude, began in the late 20th century and reached maturity in the 21st.

The digitalisation of our works and days has given rise to a particular subject, whom Byung-Chul Han refers to as the 'hypercultural tourist' (HAN 2022: 82–83), a product of hyperculture. Han asserts that 'where everything is presently available, there is no sense of departure and arrival. The hypercultural tourist has always already arrived' (HAN 2022: 82–83). This suggests that the defining characteristic of this subject is the present perfect tense. The present perfect excludes temporal and spatial references; it is this lack of specificity that lies at the core of the subject's identity. The journey of this subject lacks a beginning and an end, existing solely in the demythologised present that has already been perfected. Han further argues that 'hyperculture produces a singular here. If heterogeneous contents lie adjacent to one another, there is no need for the 'trans'' (HAN 2022: 82–83). In our era, the digital realm appears to consist of these 'singular here'-s, which are contextless, unrelated nodes. These nodes exist in clicking distance 'adjacent' to each other, yet do not engage in dialogue, lack hierarchical ordering, and possess no intelligible structure or inherent meaning. Movement among them does not entail transitioning, as this would imply an underlying structure or intention. Thus, clicking from one piece of content to another does not represent a journey from one point to another, but rather a movement of the finger on the mouse or mousepad, devoid of the hermeneutical concern for constructing a coherent narrative.

In this context, the culture of the digital age differs significantly from previous cultures, such as those that produced the theatre, as we have known it until the recent past, and other cultural phenomena. Digital age cultures are 'unbounded, de-sited, and de-distanced' (HAN 2022: 83), meaning they evade identity fashioned and understood through limitations, distinctions, anchors, and distances – concepts that presuppose an underlying structure and desire for identity. This absence of a quest for identity results in a chaotic universe of adjacent pieces of content, where subjects cannot but become isolated, lonely, lacking a sense of direction. These cultural phenomena intensified with the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, as lockdowns confined people to their isolated homes, increasing loneliness on the one hand and reliance on and exposure to hyperculture on the other.

The heightened processes of hyperculture oppose the essence of theatre. Theatre, as a cultural product, relies on principles antithetical to hyperculture. It is the art form of the here and now, the specific site and distance, and the distinct moment. Theatre thrives in the unrepeatable moment of creation, where the work of art emerges before the spectator, sometimes in response to specific spectators in a specific moment of social history. Theatrical performances occur in specific sites, on specific stages, within specific buildings – these are not neutral containers but cultural sites that contribute to the act of creation through their histories and uniqueness. The creation of theatrical art requires distance, such as the distance from the reality of the spectators, which presupposes the identity of both the performance and the spectator's reality, and an identity forming distance from other theatres. This distance exists only if all locations are simultaneously connected and divided by it. It is, therefore, almost symbolic that during the pandemic, when hyperculture was imposed, theatres were closed. The antagonism between the digital age's hyperculture and the theatre underscores an exclusionary relationship, adhering to the principle of '*tertium non datur*' – the third is not given, either this or that.

The apparent antagonism between hyperculture and theatre is, however, not the conclusion but the beginning of another narrative, as the articles in this issue of *Theatralia* amply testify. Theatre is not only characterised by features that oppose hyperculture but it is also an institution that reflects on its status quo and the societal concerns that drive its productions. This reflective nature generates an antagonistic dynamism and an economy of negotiation between hyperculture and theatrical culture. This economy of negotiation involves not a harmonisation of strictly exclusive generic markers but rather an immersion into each other's spaces. Hyperculture accommodates theatrical content alongside other forms, while theatre engages with hyperculture, utilising its technology and creating a myriad of forms of hybridity or thematising it.

Yet the Digital Age has been here with us for longer than the pandemic, fostering a rich trajectory of interactions between the analogue and digital realms. This opportunity, marked by the coexistence of the human corporeal presence and disembodied /intangible code, presents a fertile ground for constant exploration and experimentation. The artistic domain, notably theatrical performances, thus, continues to delve into these dynamic possibilities, their allure heightened in the post-pandemic

landscape, which not only underscores the enduring relevance but also emphasises the enduring potential of this intriguing interplay that has been, and continues to be, explored by performers and productions.

The various ways in which the Digital Age has entered the theatre include some straightforward technological developments that we no longer question or even observe, as we take them for granted. Special effects and other parts of stage machinery are increasingly created or controlled by computers – light and sound are produced or directed by partially or fully pre-programmed machines that cannot simply replace human labour but can augment it, creating illusions that have previously been impossible on live theatre stages. Another increasingly common practice, particularly since the pandemic, is the streaming of theatre productions, providing an impression of live (or 'as live', that is, recorded and later distributed) participation for spectators, even though what is shared is neither space, nor even time in some cases. One can argue that the essence of theatre is in the co-presence of performer and spectator, yet it is hard to deny that these new forms of virtual theatricality are equally capable of providing a similar form of theatrical illusion and immersion - in many ways, digital theatre is even more inclusive and accessible, opening its space to invite the disabled, the geographically distant, the one with social anxiety, and more.

It is true that by denying the experience of sharing the same space between audience and performer the theatrical experience can also undergo fundamental changes. Recorded theatre loses the power of the one-off, the ephemeral, unrepeatable moment in time that can only be experienced in the here and now – at the same time, even recorded theatre retains its difference from the cinema, and is capable of providing at least an illusion of the physical space where the recording of the once live performance took place. Another invention that makes creative use of digital technology – in fact, a whole set of various technologies – is telepresence, which creates the impression of live co-presence and actual interaction for participants divided by geographical distance. Telepresence does not create virtual space – participants stay and act within their own, very much physical space – but digital technology allows them to interact in real time, with the illusion of a shared space created by telematic technology. Although the technological background required for such interaction is not entirely new, its widespread application was also brought about by necessity, when video-conferences became the only possible form of interaction in many – educational, business, or other – scenarios. This is different from streaming: 'liveness is key to telematic communication and, as a result, live-streams do not constitute telepresence collaborations, nor do recorded performances – synchronous interaction is key to the experience' (GORMAN, KANNINEN and SYRJÄ 2020: 25). Yet the technology gets a particularly innovative role when it is applied in a theatrical context, as the telepresence project designed by Tampere University in Finland, and Coventry University in the UK can testify. Within the framework of the project, students engage in discussions, rehearsals, and even performances of dramatic works, interacting and forming actual connections with student groups in faraway locations. With the added benefits of sustainability due to considerably reduced travel costs and carbon footprints, what

began as a playful interaction with new technology, and continued as the only possible (safe and legal) form of interaction during the pandemic, will most likely continue to remain as an alternative medium of theatre-making in the future.

In this issue of *Theatralia*, the reader will find several sections, some of them directly connected to the ways the digital can be involved in theatre making, others addressing various issues concerning drama and theatre. Yet each of these sections, in fact, every single piece of writing included in this issue has one thing in common: they deal with various forms of theatricality that appear to have some sort of relevance for the here and now, for our age where even the more traditional art forms are imbued with an awareness of what digital technology is capable of, and how it can and has already changed our understanding of the theatre.

In the Spectrum section, Barbora Dolanová and Lukáš Kubina look at military reenactments, a genre – or rather a mode – of cultural memory that exists at the intersection of history and fiction, of historiography and theatrical performance. Anna Leon investigates the career of Elsa Enkel, an early-twentieth-century German-born dance artist active in Greece, and the way she navigated contemporary social expectations and carved herself a position in between the popular and elite spheres of the entertainment industry.

In the Yorick section, dedicated to theatre in the digital age, we have included two articles that approach the question from opposite directions: the one by Natalia Skorokhod offers a very broad overview of the variety of ways in which digitality can appear in theatre and drama, exploring a Russian theatre festival that has embraced what the digital world can offer, partly out of necessity, and partly based on the recognition that the traditional ways of creating, consuming and critiquing theatre and drama have undergone fundamental changes. Some of these changes have been caused by the pandemic and the forced periods of lockdown and social distancing, other factors that influenced theatre making include Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, but we also need to acknowledge the simple but obvious fact that digital tools are endemic in our world, and they offer the most convenient and most logical solutions for production and storage, while they are also viable alternatives for some aspects of access to theatre. Gabriella Reuss, on the other hand, takes a single theatre production and observes the ways digital technology impacted the production, from the most minute details of the soundscape and the visual effects used on stage. As the production in question is an example of puppet theatre, she asks pertinent questions about how the material qualities of puppets are contrasted with the embodied presence of live actors, and how these two types of liveness can be accompanied - sometimes enhanced, at other times overshadowed - by the intangible virtuality of digital elements. We have also included an interview with Natálie Káčová, Wei-lun Lu, Čeněk Šašinka, and Alžběta Šašinková, the creators of an educational experiment entitled 'Virtual Reality as a New Medium of Understanding Culture,' which employs an immersive virtual reality theatre for the

purpose of teaching students not simply Chinese language, but also Chinese culture. Finally, a selection of reviews of various performative events and recent publications completes the issue.

Zsolt Almási and Kinga Földváry

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