Theatre and Technology: New Media as a Creative Medium

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Abstract

Incorporating new media in the theatre has radically transformed how performances are created, performed, and witnessed. This paper examines the influence of new media technologies such as digital projection, virtual reality, augmented reality, live streaming, and social media on theatre's art, industry, and audience. It discusses how these technologies have stretched creative potential, opened access, and reconfigured the historic relationships between performers and spectators. Moreover, the essay touches on issues of authenticity and impermanence of live theatre in the age of digital technologies. Through examining case studies and available critical writing, this research contends that although the new media poses challenges to conventional theatrical standards, it enriches and reinvigorates the art form overall.

Keywords: Theatre, New media, Technologies,

Introduction

Theatre, an ancient art form, has always evolved to suit changes in cultural and technological contexts. New media in the present day—comprising digital technology such as like the internet, virtual reality, and interactive media—are an influential force moulding contemporary theatre. This paper investigates how these new digital technologies revolutionize theatre production, performance, and interaction. It delves into the benefits of greater creativity and accessibility and problems surrounding authenticity, artistic integrity,

and what "liveness" is in performance. New media utilises many digital technologies and platforms that reshape and reevaluate people's communication, information, and interaction with the world.

They come in a vast formation, including social media sites and video streaming sites, as well as emerging technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence (AI). They are transforming industries, society, and how people interact with their worlds.

Evolution of Theatre with Media Technologies

Theatre has long adjusted to evolving technologies, employing them to tell stories better and engage audiences. Over the last few decades, new media technologies have heavily impacted theatrical production. Digital scenography, perhaps the most striking development, uses projection mapping, LED screens, and real-time animation techniques. Such technologies allow for flexible, visually stimulating environments that can change smoothly along with the narrative, merging visual art and live performance (Tajtáková & Škola Manažmentu V Trenčíne, n.d.).

Another significant advancement is in automated lighting and sound design, which now rely on digital software systems for precise timing and effects. These systems allow for intricate, synchronised designs that were previously impossible or extremely difficult to execute manually, pre-programmed lighting and sound scores that evolve alongside the actor's performance, deepening the connection between technical and human elements (Tajtáková & Škola Manažmentu V Trenčíne, n.d.).

The introduction of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) has provided new avenues for theatrical storytelling. These technologies allow for immersive, multisensory experiences in which audience members can interact with characters or explore digitally constructed environments. Productions like The Under Presents by Tender Claws are a prime example of this trend. This live theatre and game hybrid uses VR headsets to put audiences squarely inside the narrative space, combining pre-recorded material with real-time performances by live performers. As Sarah Bay-Cheng and others maintain in Performance

and Media, such works are evidence of the transition from spectatorship to participation as the distinction between audience and performer blurs ever more.(Vinay Kumar et al., n.d.).

Moreover, digital puppetry and motion capture technology have opened new possibilities for animated or hybrid performances. Such practices enable actors to command virtual performers in real-time, generating fresh stage aesthetic languages. These technologies augment, not supplant, the traditional theatre, but its inventive vocabulary instead, providing creators with new avenues of challenging conventions regarding space, time, and story.

Expanded Audience and Accessibility

The new media have greatly expanded the reach of theatre, making it available to a broader audience transcending geographical, economic, and social boundaries. One of the most revolutionary changes in this context is the introduction of live streaming and digital archiving. Online channels like National Theatre at Home and BroadwayHD have allowed theatre companies to broadcast good-quality recordings of their productions and have gained an international audience that cannot access live productions (Sullivan, n.d.).

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to speed the theatre industry's move towards online engagement. Through lockdowns, many companies and solo artists looked to Zoom, YouTube, and Instagram Live as a means to share their productions.There was a boom in online performances during this time frame, such as rehearsed readings, site-based digital theatre, and interactive shows. While these digital shows lacked bodily immediacy present in live theatre, they enabled new ways of engaging audiences and new types of storytelling. The pandemic hastened the rethinking of liveness that pushed artists and institutions to rethink presence, participation, and performance. This change encouraged many to switch to hybrid formats that blend elements of live as well as digital, resulting in adaptive forms which continue even within a post-pandemic era.

Aside from the performance delivery, new media contributes importantly to promotion and audience connection. Platform Social media sites such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have become a key part of theatre companies' and artists' marketing arsenals. They announce productions, create communities, stimulate discussions, and post behind-the-scenes material.

This online presence enables more excellent direct contact between artists and audiences, building loyalty and enthusiasm. Additionally, user-generated content, including fan reviews, memes, and video clips, broadens the scope and reach of productions outside of the stage. The internet changes audiences from passive viewers into co-creators of meaning and cultural context"(Chatzichristodoulou et al., 2022; Sullivan, n.d.).

Although more technology has become accessible to more individuals through new technologies, there is a necessity to acknowledge the digital divide, the disparity between those with access to stable devices and internet and those without.. This divide illustrates continued inequalities of cultural access and participation. However, the net result of new media has been to decentralize and diversify the theatre audience beyond the older, frequently elite, theatre audience(Sullivan, n.d.).

Changes in Narrative and Performance

Digital media influences not just form but also content and narrative structure::

The rise of new media has transformed theatrical production and distribution and reshaped the very nature of narrative and performance. Conventional theater tends to be linear, written, and staged with a clean division between viewers and performers. New media introduced non-linear interactive forms of storytelling in which the dividing lines are obfuscated and traditional performer and audience roles re-envisaged. Inspired by computer games, social media, and transmedia, some modern performance enables the audience members to decide which paths a narrative will take or engage with players, creating diverse possible outcomes. These digital approaches dismantle fixed narrative structures, encouraging spectators to actively participate in the unfolding story (Epner & Saro, 2009).

A key development in this space is the incorporation of digital avatars, CGI characters, and virtual performers, sometimes alongside human actors. This physical and digital performance merging expands theatre's visual and narrative language. For example, motion capture productions allow actors to control digital figures in real time, creating fluid and fantastical characters that could not exist in traditional staging. Such innovations invite comparisons to video game aesthetics and animated film, yet they retain theatrical elements like live timing and audience interaction. These experiments challenge conventional notions of presence and

embodiment in performance, forcing artists and audiences to reconsider what counts as 'live' or 'authentic' (Pérez, n.d.).

Liveness is further complicated by performances entirely in virtual environments, where actors and viewers meet in digital spaces. One notable example is the VR theatre piece The Under Presents, which merges live and prerecorded interactions inside a surreal, immersive world. Performers wear headsets and interact with users in real time, though the stage exists only in cyberspace. Such mediatised performances highlight the fluidity of presence in contemporary theatre, where physical co-presence is no longer a strict requirement for shared experience.

Additionally, audience interactivity has become a defining feature of many new media-infused performances. Instead of passively watching, spectators may be asked to solve puzzles, respond to choices, or move through different performance zones, sometimes in real-world locations augmented by mobile apps, as in the case of immersive theatre companies like Punch-drunk. In such cases, the audience is integrated into the dramaturgy—this change turns theatre from a presentational to a participatory event.

And, the new media's effect on storytelling and performance practice is a pattern shift in how stories are told and lived. These changes in theatre are to be more experimental, separated, and collaborative, and demand that audiences and artists learn new skills and sensibilities.

Challenges and Criticisms

Despite its benefits, new media pose challenges:

While integrating new media into theatre has unlocked exciting creative and logistical possibilities, it has also raised significant challenges and critical concerns regarding the essence and future of theatrical art. One of the most persistent criticisms revolves around the loss of liveness—a core attribute that defines traditional theatre. In digitized or virtual performances, the immediate, shared presence of actors and audience is often diminished or removed altogether. The distinction between live and mediatized performance has become increasingly ambiguous, leading some critics and purists to question the authenticity of

digital theatre experiences (Pérez, n.d.). Although mediated performances can be compelling, they may lack the spontaneous energy and unrepeatable nature of live, in-person theatre.

Another concern is the commodification of performance in the digital realm. As theatrical works become digitised and distributed like streaming content, they risk being consumed in the same way as television or film—on-demand, individualised, and potentially passive. This shift threatens to erode the communal and temporal uniqueness that traditionally sets theatre apart. The streaming model may reframe theatre as a product rather than an event, where "aesthetic and social rituals" are replaced by screen-based convenience (Abugh & Kayode Ademiju-Bepo, n.d.). In this context, theatre might lose its critical and cultural function as a site for collective reflection.

Access to technology also presents a practical barrier, particularly for underfunded artists and marginalised communities. High-quality digital theatre requires expensive equipment, specialised knowledge, and reliable internet access. This creates a digital divide, where well-resourced companies thrive online while others struggle to maintain visibility. Although digital tools promise inclusivity, they can ironically reinforce inequality by favouring those with technological literacy and infrastructure (Tajtáková & Škola Manažmentu V Trenčíne, n.d.). Thus, while new media have the potential to broaden access for audiences, they may simultaneously limit participation for certain artists and regions.

Moreover, the reliance on screens and digital interfaces introduces issues of distraction and disconnection. Audiences consuming theatre via personal devices may multitask or disengage more easily, reducing the depth of the theatrical experience. Unlike traditional theatre settings that demand sustained attention and offer a social environment, digital platforms compete with countless other stimuli. This dilution of focus can affect audience reception and performer energy and feedback, which are often shaped by real-time audience reactions.

Though new media bring new tools and ways of engaging, they urge theater practitioners and theorists to re-evaluate the form's values and limits. The tension between modernism and tradition remains precarious, and working on this ground necessitates a critical sense of digitization's potentialities and limitations.

Case Studies

- **Complicité**, a UK-based theatre company, integrates video, soundscapes, and real-time digital manipulation to expand narrative depth.
- **Punchdrunk** redefines theatrical space by merging AR and mobile apps with physical performance ("Punchdrunk").
- **National Theatre Live** captures live performances with cinematic quality, distributing them worldwide through cinemas and streaming ("National Theatre at Home").

Conclusion

As this essay has demonstrated, new media—from live streaming and social media to virtual and interactive design—have broadened the art of theatre, making it more inclusive, innovative, and versatile in a rapidly evolving cultural landscape. New media have allowed theatre to become a global phenomenon, break free from the determinism of physical spaces, and build immersive, interactive worlds that undermine traditional modes of storytelling.

Yet these advances come with caveats. The transition towards mediatised models of performance poses questions about liveness, the dissolution of liveness, and the commercialisation of art. Factors making digital theatre so attractive—ease, dissemination, and ease of use—also have the power to thin the ritual and community bases of traditional theatre. The digital divide is a sobering reminder that everyone does not equitably access these technologies and that equity remains at the heart of any new technological evolution for theatre in the virtual arena.

Despite these challenges, the interface between theatre and new media cannot be seen in terms of opposition but should be seen as collaborative and co-evolutionary. New media does not replace traditional theatre but expands its reach, enriches its creative arsenal, and extends invitations to new kinds of portrayal and participation. As theatre artists and institutions continue experimenting and adapting, they reaffirm the medium's resilience and relevance in the digital age. The theatre of the future will necessarily be hybrid, a mixture of physical and virtual, present and recorded, local and global, and will further redefine what can be done by the performing arts. By keeping abreast with the possibilities offered by new media and

retaining theatre art's fundamentals, theatre as a venue for imagination, understanding, and humankind's human link can also carry on living its life to the fullest.

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