

Editorial: Presence and Precarity in (Post-)Pandemic Theatre and Performance

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The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the arts. Deserted theatre venues were one of many signs that the time, as Hamlet would have it, was *out of joint*. The pandemic struck at the heart of theatre and performance – their liveness. As many of us followed these developments (mostly) glued to our screens, theatre – as institution, concept and practice – began to undergo another seismic change. Its very presence had to be redefined.

Various theatre archives began to open for publics around the world. Streaming services and digital plays made theatre available to new audiences. At an early stage of lockdown, the National Theatre in London, for instance, launched the National Theatre at Home initiative, thus enabling audiences to view performances from the theatre's archive on YouTube for free. In June and July 2020, the Old Vic produced a series of special live performances of their show *Lungs*, starring Claire Foy and Matt Smith, as part of their newly launched OLD VIC: IN CAMERA series. Other institutions and companies, like the Oxford-based Creation Theatre, produced entirely new shows for Zoom. Of course, such and similar endeavours had been under way even in pre-COVID-19 times. Over the past decade, we have seen the rise of live-to-cinema broadcasts: the National Theatre, for instance, began the NT Live initiative in 2009 and the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford in 2013.¹ Online livestreaming of the performing arts, which audiences typically watch from their homes,² has developed in parallel. Livestreaming has also been used by theatre festivals, such as the Berliner Festspiele, which put on Forced Entertainment's *Table Top Shakespeare* in 2015. During the pandemic, livestreamed and pre-recorded performances, as well as those specifically designed for Zoom, became the standard, and often the only possible, format for putting on a show.

Despite the severity of the circumstances that had brought about this change and exacerbated existing precarities in the theatre sector, the pandemic-related restrictions and lockdowns also provided practitioners with the opportunity to experiment with new forms of theatre-making and explore alternatives to in-person theatre. This moment of crisis was, thus, also approached as an incentive to innovation, as a motor for creativity and heightened improvisation, particularly since the theatre industry had to reinvent itself in order to maintain an economically feasible position. It was also a moment that spotlighted theatre's role in (virtual) community-building. In an article

entitled 'All the Screen's a Stage: A Transmedia Manifesto', theatre artist Jared Mezzocchi draws attention to digital theatre's potential to reform the institution and build an 'anti-racist, anti-oppressive, accessible theatre'.³ In his ardent call to challenge an oppositional logic of in-person versus digital theatre, Mezzocchi notes that 'the emergence of digital platforming over the pandemic provides us [with] the opportunity to redefine and recontextualize space, gathering, inclusion, and connectivity that tears at the fabric of gatekeeping'. For him, as for many practitioners whose responses to the pandemic have been collected in Caridad Svich's *Toward a Future Theatre* (2021), (post-)pandemic theatre emerges as a space that challenges extant hierarchies and hegemonic structures with regard to accessibility and knowledge production. In this context, the (post-)pandemic refers both to the actual theatrical events reimagined for the pandemic times and to those reimaginings as possible blueprints for theatre in the post-pandemic future.

All these transformations have called into question the 'essence' of the theatrical/the performative and forced theatre critics to rethink their stance towards their own critical practices. When performance is transferred – and translated – onto the screen and can be watched at one's own convenience, 'liveness' as a defining criterion seems to become redundant. Until recently, the two main positions on liveness and 'the live' have been represented by Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan. Auslander argues that 'the live' is historically and semiotically dependent on the recorded, and that 'genuine liveness' lacks technological intervention;⁴ for Phelan 'a performance's only life is in the present'.⁵ However, as Auslander has also argued with reference to the updated edition of *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (2008), 'the historicity of the concept of liveness, the way that the idea of what counts culturally as live experience changes over time in relation to technological change'.⁶ This becomes especially apparent in the context of (post-)pandemic theatre and performance: liveness is, similarly to the live theatre broadcasting context, not to be seen as anchored in the nature of the original but is to be regarded as a 'condition of *viewing*'.⁷ Watching a performance or a recording of a performance together with others is thus constitutive of 'digital liveness'. Premised on the impossibility of physical co-presence, (post-)pandemic theatre and performance have strongly relied on a sense of liveness established through shared virtual spaces and often a higher degree of interactivity between performers and audiences. As such, they can be seen as another step in the development toward spectator-centric theatre that scholars such as Lavender, Zaiontz and Alston have identified for immersive events.⁸

As much as it has accelerated digitalization, the pandemic has also put an uncomfortable spotlight on the tight intertwining of presence/liveness and precarity in theatre and performance. It has unveiled and exacerbated the precarious situation of the arts today. 'We are concerned that British theatre is on the brink of ruin', opened a letter to the then prime minister Boris Johnson signed by ninety-five creatives. Due to its heightened financial dependence on audience engagement, the cultural sector, for instance in the UK, was severely affected by the lockdown and the necessity of physical distancing. A number of theatres reported on their financial difficulties, despite the governmental rescue packages for the arts. The pandemic

forced many landmark venues to fight for survival – a fight that some have lost. It pressed theatre-makers to continue to produce even as financial trouble, exhaustion and fear were felt by many. Freelance theatre-makers were particularly affected by the closures of venues. A 2021 report by the FMTW (Freelancers Make Theatre Work) community demonstrates that the additional pressures of the pandemic aggravated existing ‘critical vulnerabilities’ resulting from the freelancers’ ‘forced dependency on the sector’s existing infrastructure and organisations, unstable margins of income, significant overheads, and a lack of basic employment protections’.⁹

Even before the pandemic, the theatre sector as a whole had been characterized by growing precarity in times of New Economy. As a concept, precarity has been mostly used to refer to unstable work conditions and unsteady incomes. It has been described as ‘a new norm that has moved from the peripheries of (European) societies to their centres’¹⁰ in the aftermath of neo-liberalism. Its impact on class relations has also been seen as radically transforming collective and individual identities. Next to this narrow understanding, precarity has also been used as a philosophical frame to denote a ‘general, pervasive ontological condition of vulnerability, displacement, and insecurity ... characteristic of transhistorical and existential forces’.¹¹ The articles in this special issue take up both aspects of this concept, which have gained a new sense of urgency today.

In fact, *Presence and Precarity in (Post-)Pandemic Theatre and Performance* draws attention to the intertwining of presence and precarity in (post-)pandemic theatre and performance to outline the variety of such displacements, vulnerabilities and insecurities and the effects they have on theatre practice and criticism. By drawing on international (Canada, Germany, Austria, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Poland) critical and practical responses to these transformations, we aim to offer impulses for a future thinking on and practising of theatre. Integrating both critical articles and video essays, this special issue also presents an invitation to reflect on and potentially expand the possibilities of critical practice.

Since 2020, a number of publications have taken on the task of responding to developments in what has been variously termed viral, pandemic and digital theatre. Among these, Pascale Aebischer and Rachael Nicholas’s *Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study and Digital Toolkit* (2020) constitutes an early, yet crucial, point of reference. While it specifically concentrates on Creation Theatre’s and Big Telly’s adaptation of their work from analogue to digital, Aebischer and Nicholas’ methodology and especially their engagement with pandemic audiences is applicable to digital performances more generally. Aebischer’s *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of Pandemic* (2022)¹² offers a first-person phenomenological history of experiencing a variety of Shakespeare productions during 2020. Other recent publications include Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb and Erin Sullivan’s edited collection *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation* (2022),¹³ which includes a variety of reassessments of the aesthetics of streamed performance, and focuses on topics such as liveness, immersion, the use of screens and presence. These preoccupations resonate with those of the present special issue. Barbara Fuchs’s *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a*

Time of Pandemic (2021) helpfully conceptualizes virtual theatre as a hybrid form that combines film and theatre aesthetics as well as being a lifeline for artists. Fuchs highlights theatre's potential to become a source of 'solace' and investigates the transformed 'conditions of both theatre-making and viewership'.¹⁴ In a recent themed issue of the *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, entitled *Covid-19: Theatre Goes Digital – Provocations*, editors Maria Chatzichristodoulou et al. argue that 'the impact of Covid-19 on live events cannot be underestimated'. Setting out to explore 'the future of live theatre and performance as we know it' and 'how Covid-19 will transform the industry going forward', the focus of the contributions ranges from the ramifications of specific technologies such as Zoom for theatrical aesthetics to 'practice-led' approaches to the digital archive.¹⁵ Caridad Svich's *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations during a Pandemic* (2022) presents a much-needed platform on which artists and theatre-makers have the word, both critically assessing what lockdown has revealed about the state of the art of funding for theatre and the precarity of this sector and bravely envisioning the art form's future.¹⁶ In their combination of assessment and provocation, these conversations mirror a specific tone that characterizes much of (post-)pandemic theatre scholarship as well.

In dialogue with internationally established experts and early-career researchers from the fields of performance, media and theatre studies, as well as theatre practitioners, this special issue identifies, describes and conceptualizes some of the creative and theatrical processes and practices effectuated by the pandemic. It aims to understand how this particular historical moment shapes the experiences of and expectations towards (post-)pandemic theatre and performance. The papers address the two key themes of presence and precarity through different theoretical lenses, using contemporary case studies of performances staged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first two articles set the scene for the issue as a whole, providing a historically informed theoretical context for thinking about contemporary theatrical (and critical) practice. The subsequent articles speak to these foundational considerations by focusing on particular, local, developments and their intricacies. Finally, the accompanying video essays provide practitioners' responses both to the economic and to the technological precarity of theatre in (post-)pandemic times. Scholars and practitioners from Canada, Germany, Austria, Poland and the UK thus jointly offer a range of international perspectives towards theatre in times of crisis.

Sarah Bay-Cheng's opening article, 'Digital Performance and Its Discontents (or, Problems of Presence in Pandemic Performance)', provides a historical overview of a century of mediated performance. While doing so, she engages with questions of embodiment, presence and absence. The article asks what we can learn from film and media history and how our digitally enhanced contemporary moment might shape the experiences and expectations of theatre(s) to come. Following on thematically from Bay-Cheng, Ulf Otto explores contemporary theatre's entanglement with digital cultures. He proposes to view contemporary theatre as (big) data, drawing out the epistemological implications of this claim. Developing a novel frame of reference based on actor-network theory, Otto advocates for a reconceptualization of theatre beyond performance by focusing on the discourses of legitimation that compensated

for the loss of presence in German theatres during the pandemic. The article provides a lead-in towards the subsequent case studies, supporting its theoretical considerations with examples of contemporary (post-)pandemic performance in Germany, such as the Festival *Niemand kommt* (2020).

Questions of (embodied and/or virtual) co-presence in connection with mediated forms of performance are also central to Tamara Radak's and Marlena Tronicke's articles. In "Dying ... to Connect": Postdigital Co-presence in Dead Centre's *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)* (2020), Radak addresses the tension between digital co-presence and embodied spectatorship in online and hybrid forms of (post-)pandemic performance through the lens of the postdigital. Building on Causey's notion of 'postdigital performance', the article analyses Dead Centre's livestreamed adaptation of Mark O'Connell's eponymous non-fiction book, exploring its playful (re)negotiation of the boundaries between performer and spectator, human and machine, the virtual and the real. Marlena Tronicke focuses on the political implications of precarity and the ambiguous role that the audience takes on in the context of *Scenes for Survival*, a series of short digital artworks co-created by the National Theatre of Scotland and the BBC. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of 'embodied precarity', she demonstrates how select monologues engage with the issue of bodily ontology, putting a particular focus on the role of the audience in this process. Tronicke's engagement with precarity paves the way for the final two articles in this issue, which engage more directly with questions of politics.

Richard Huddleson's contribution spotlights the problematic marginalization of regional, minority and minoritized languages (specifically Irish-language theatre) within the UK theatre economy. Focusing on the digital monologue series *Go mBeire Muid Beo (May We Be Alive [to See Each Other Again])* by Belfast-based Irish-language theatre company Aisling Ghéar and their wider sociopolitical contexts, this article seeks to document Irish-language theatre produced under coronavirus lockdown measures in Northern Ireland. This section is concluded by Anna R. Burzyńska's article, which examines the work of Polish theatre collectives and artists that managed to undermine the government's conservative guidelines and the capitalist urge towards productivity. It highlights the major strategies, such as procrastination, which were used in this context. Analysing the *Quarantine Project*, Burzyńska argues that it can be seen as a dress rehearsal or forerunner of a post-pandemic, post-capitalist, post-growth, more ethically conscious theatre of the future.

In the video essay section, we bring together voices of two theatre practitioners from both sides of the Atlantic, which present conceptually related takes on theatre and its audiences. In a short interview, Zoë Seaton (Big Telly Theatre Company, Belfast) considers the notions of presence and *in situ* liveness as contracts between performers and audiences that may have lost their validity today. When the familiar is hijacked, she suggests, the convergence of performance with the technological can contribute to new forms of enjoyment and play. In her video essay 'Theatre and Its Enchantments', Caridad Svich, a New York-based playwright, translator and editor, on the other hand, refers to the perennial dying of theatre. Svich also reflects on the

potential of the unstable, the imperfect, the uncontrollable and the glitchy in the processes of its aesthetic, social and political rejuvenation.

The virtual journey of our issue starts in Canada, takes us to different European countries, and then returns to the other side of the Atlantic. The issue focuses on the experiences of (post-)pandemic theatre located in the global North and speaks about those parts of the world the guest editors and contributors have been situated in. Even though our perspectives are thus limited by our localities, we hope that they may inspire further engagement with theatrical experiences in other geographical and cultural contexts to which we have had no access. As much as (post-)pandemic theatre and performance are still anything but a clear trajectory, we hope this issue will invite a dialogue that productively darts to and fro, imperfectly spiralling in unforeseen directions.

NOTES

- 1 Martin Barker, *Live to Your Local Cinema: The Remarkable Rise of Livecasting* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2013); Heidi Lucja Liedke, *Livecasting in Twenty-First-Century British Theatre: NT Live and the Aesthetics of Spectacle, Materiality and Engagement* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, forthcoming 2023).
- 2 Erin Sullivan, 'Live to Your Living Room: Streamed Theatre, Audience Experience, and the Globe's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Participations*, 17, 1 (2020), pp. 92–119.
- 3 Jared Mezzocchi, 'All the Screen's a Stage: A Transmedia Manifesto', *American Theatre: A Publication of the Theatre Communications Group*, 22 September 2021, at www.americantheatre.org/2021/09/22/all-the-screens-a-stage-a-transmedia-manifesto (accessed 10 October 2022).
- 4 Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999); Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- 5 Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 146.
- 6 Philip Auslander, 'Digital Liveness: An Historico-philosophical Perspective', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 34, 3 (2012), pp. 3–11, here p. 3.
- 7 Lauren Hitchman, 'From Page to Stage to Screen: The Live Theatre Broadcast as a New Medium', *Adaptation*, 11, 2 (2018), pp. 171–185, here p. 176, emphasis in original.
- 8 Andy Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (London: Routledge, 2016); Keren Zaiontz, 'Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance', *Theatre Journal*, 66, 3 (2014), pp. 405–25; Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- 9 *Freelancers Make Theatre Work*, 'The Big Freelancer Report (2021)', at <https://freelancersmaketheatrework.com/bigfreelancerreport> (accessed 10 October 2022).
- 10 Katharina Pewny, *Das Drama des Prekären: Über die Wiederkehr der Ethik in Theater und Performance* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011), p. 43.
- 11 Sharryn Kasmer, 'Precarity', *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (2018), DOI: [10.29164/18precarity](https://doi.org/10.29164/18precarity) (accessed 31 October 2022).
- 12 Pascale Aebischer, *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of Pandemic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
- 13 Gemma Allred, Benjamin Broadribb and Erin Sullivan, eds., *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
- 14 Barbara Fuchs, *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 3 and 2.

- 15 Maria Chatzichristodoulou, Kevin Brown, Nick Hunt, Peter Kuling and Toni Sant, *Covid-19: Theatre Goes Digital – Provocations*, special issue of *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 18, 1 (2022), pp. 1–6, here pp. 1 and 4, emphasis in original.
- 16 Caridad Svich, *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations during a Pandemic* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2022).

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