

Jurgita STANIŠKYTĖ

Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania

REINSTALLING THE FOURTH WALL: DIGITAL PERFORMANCE AND SPECTATORSHIP IN (POST-)PANDEMIC ERA

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Summary. Theatre can be interpreted as a place where various modes of participation in the community or patterns of citizen behaviour can be rehearsed. In pre-pandemic Lithuanian theatre (as well as theatres of other Baltic countries) various forms of audience engagement were conspicuously emerging, ranging from physical co-creation practices to interactive forms of entertainment. After the global lockdown of theatre institutions the emerging forms of “virtual theatre”, ranging from performance recordings to zoom theatre, redefined the role of theatre spectatorship, in particular the notions of “active”, “passive”, “collective”, “individual”, fundamental for the understanding of the role of publics. Analysing the abundant examples of “pandemic theatre” one starts to think about the return of the digital “fourth wall”, where audiences are becoming distant spectators. This poses important questions to theatre research: whether these forms of theatre are strengthening the feeling of passivity and isolation, serve as platforms for much-needed psychological escapism or offer a critical revaluation of the essential principles of theatre art.

With the help of two case studies, this paper will define and analyse the prevailing practices of pandemic Lithuanian theatre and will outline whether and how the fundamental categories associated with the spectator’s experience of theatre have changed in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: post-digital performance, (post-)pandemic theatre, Lithuanian theatre; digital cultures, virtual theatre, audience engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Although the return of Lithuanian theatre to a conventional regime after the pandemic and quarantine disturbances was quick and, at least outwardly, without major aesthetic consequences, the impact of the last three years on the performing arts has been reflected upon by many theoreticians as fundamental. A number of published studies conclude that theatre – as an institution, concept and practice – underwent seismic change during the pandemic.¹ Many agree that the pandemic and the quarantine first and foremost changed the nature of the theatrical experience and the forms of its interaction with spectators. However, other theorists argue that it is the interpretation of the ontological nature of theatre itself that is undergoing a radical shift, with far-reaching implications not only for theatre practice but also for theatre research.

In the first moments of the pandemic, the awareness of their social responsibility, the desire not to leave their audiences at home alone, the necessity to

“sing out anxiety” (Donna Tartt), or in some cases the “necessity to perform” or “discourse of legitimation”, led the theatre makers in Lithuania and internationally towards creative innovations in digital space. However, at least in Lithuanian theatre, those sought alternatives to in-person theatre were quickly abandoned right after the restrictions were lifted. Nevertheless, it is obvious that unprecedented socio-political circumstances have provoked the necessity to rethink the fundamental categories of theatre, which have been at the centre of scientific debate for some time and, after the pandemic, have become much more urgent not only for theatre theory but also for practice.

Some theorists see a liberating political potential in (post-)pandemic change. According to the authors of “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”². However, as Ulf Otto argues, this potential will only be activated if the theatre reflects on its

current politics of inclusion/accessibly and the more general question of access to the theatre: “Instead of envisioning some high hybrid transmedia future that remixes late bourgeois ideals with early internet euphoria to claim some all-inclusive telepresence theatre, I propose the very opposite: taking absence seriously and rethinking performing arts from the concrete reality of exclusion”.³

The main axes of the post-pandemic theatrical debate focus on several binary oppositions that have long dominated and essentially defined the modern characteristics of theatre art and its intrinsic models – liveness/mediation and presence/absence, both of them linked with notions of assembly or bodily participation as an important part of theatrical experience. With the help of two case studies, this paper will define and analyse the prevailing practices of pandemic Lithuanian theatre and will outline whether and how the fundamental categories associated with the spectator’s experience of theatre have changed in the post-pandemic era.

POST-DIGITAL, POST-PANDEMIC OR POST-PERFORMANCE?

An important part of the post-pandemic debates around performing arts focuses on the concepts of “digital liveness”, “post-digital performance” or “post-performance” as a consequence of a radical shift in understanding of theatrical experience. Pre-pandemic debates about the relationship between digital and non-digital and their converging character are rethought anew in the post-pandemic environment. “Porous boundaries” between various notions of digitality/virtuality and performance were already discussed during pre-pandemic times, coming to the conclusion that complex mediations between human and non-human performativity, technological tools and audiences are not mutually exclusive.

Building upon Nick Couldry’s definition of “online liveness” and “group liveness” Philip Auslander concludes that “the experience of liveness is not limited to specific performer-audience interactions

but refers to a sense of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated temporal co-presence with others known and unknown”⁴. Digitalisation accelerated by pandemic lockdowns opened the space to reflect anew the concept of “liveness” as a condition of viewing rather than the nature of the object – the thought uttered by Auslander already in 2012: “Liveness is not a characteristic of the work itself; it is a description of how we chose to engage with it”⁵.

The concept of “digital liveness” was embedded into many pandemic theatre practices, because the impossibility of physical co-presence forced theatres to strongly rely “on a sense of liveness established through shared virtual spaces and often a higher degree of interactivity between performers and audiences”⁶. It turned out that presence can be understood as a level of audience engagement or attention. As Sarah Bay-Cheng remarked in her account on pandemic performance “in a digitally connected and networked world, participation creates presence [...] people do not participate “by being there”; people are “there” by participating”⁷.

Paradoxically the notions of active and passive spectatorship apparently are equally valid both in online or “live” theatre: “full-bodied, full-attention, full-energy presence” can be found in online performance just as passive audience members checking their phones during the event can be encountered both in Zoom theatre as well as sitting in the physical theatre hall. Building on Roberts Blossom’s definition of presence as attention rather than physical presence in space Sarah Bay-Cheng observes, that “this focus on attention positions presence less as a binary effect, and more as a value, something more readily engaged by some performances than by others, rather than something experienced – or not – by physical proximity”⁸.

The term “post-digital performance”, coined by Matthew Causey in 2016 became one of the most used concepts while describing the experiences and theatre practices of (post-)pandemic era. Causey outlined the strategies of post-digital performances as “thinking digitally” or, in other words, hacking

the modalities of the digital, but not contingent on any particular technological interface⁹. According to Tamara Radak, “with digital becoming the standard – or in some cases, only possible – form not only of theatre but of communication more widely during the COVID-19-related lockdowns, the notion of “postdigital” as a term that blurs boundaries between physical reality and technological simulation has gained renewed traction, one that Causey and other early theorists of the term could hardly have predicted at the time”¹⁰. Building on Causey’s modalities of post-digital performance and on her own analysis of *Dead Centre*’s performance “To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)” Radak proposes the notion of “post-digital co-presence”, which can be characterised by the following characteristics: “first, a blurring of the lines between embodied and virtual spectatorship as well as between the organic and the virtual more broadly; second, temporal co-presence and real-time interactions with the remote audience; and third, an increased sense of emotional alignment with the remote audience in lieu of physical proximity”¹¹.

Furthermore, based on the theatrical practice of the pandemic, it can be argued that post-pandemic theatre should pay attention to the study of the interaction between non-digital and digital, to the critical evaluation of the specificity of media and “metatheatrical thematizing” (Radak) or self-reflective investigation of the tensions arising from these encounters. Metatheatrical commentaries and acknowledgement of performance’s mediation are, according to Radak, an important part of “post-digital performances” that “serve as yet another way of reinforcing the affective ties between performer and audience”¹².

Notwithstanding the myriad of ripe possibilities to actualise and test pre-pandemic theoretical notions of digital spectatorship and performance, many pandemic theatre practices and their commentaries were strongly transfused with nostalgic notions of liveness, presence and communal experience lost in the face of forced relocation to digital during the periods of lockdowns. Some scholars interpret this nostalgia as “a blooming prose of legitimization

[...] by asserting once more ideals of the past”¹³. According to Ulf Otto, these attempts of almost ritualistic confirmation of the theatre model of the past centuries based on the ideal of assembly and concept of presence were so prevailing because they reaffirmed “theatre’s central place in society and declared its output to be political regardless of legitimation, guaranteeing the continuity of the institution and immunizing it against critique”¹⁴. However, it is precisely these models that were radically questioned during the pandemic lockdown periods.

If one initiates the rethinking of ontologies of performance from the perspective of institutional critique, “presence” then can be interpreted politically, as an instrumental tool of theatre legitimation, that becomes redundant and loses its explanatory power in the ecosystem of the data-driven approach of digital humanities. Furthermore, in order to understand the ongoing transformations of “(post-)pandemic performance” one needs to move away from traditionally hierarchic understanding of theatrical presence and absence. According to Ulf Otto, “by conjuring a ‘digital theatre’ that is thought of as extension of an event of social interaction into some virtual space, to overcome the lack of physical encounter during the pandemic, we are effectively projecting old categories onto new media, thereby missing precisely what is new about the new media in the first place”¹⁵.

Therefore, the most impactful consequence of the pandemic, according to Otto, is not so much a shift in the forms of performance making but rather in the forms of performance knowledge making – the so-called “datafication of theatre”, that “radically questions the privileged position of eyewitness”¹⁶. By proposing the concept of “post-performance” Otto invites us to abandon altogether the idea that “performance is the essence of theatre” and replace it with the understanding of theatre as “multi-modal data”:

“Theatre that exceeds its dispositive enclosure within the event and can no longer be contained within the here and now because streaming

*suddenly became second nature, an essential part that neither replaces nor reproduces the performance, because it is already a part of it. [...] Post-performance theatre has become both less and more than before: less, because it has lost its essentials, and more, because it can now connect to plenitude of non-essentials and envisions entirely new forms of assembly that are neither composed only of humans nor reduced to representing the social*¹⁷.

The disruptive scenario of the functioning of theatre as “big data” in the networked ecosystems of digital cultures is not only viewed optimistically, but it can be interpreted as an attack on the epistemology of theatre itself. At the same time, it does not remove the appeal of the other scenario outlined by Otto: the search for new interactions and definitions of theatre unconstrained by media-specificity.

DIGITAL FOURTH WALL: AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT IN LITHUANIAN PANDEMIC PERFORMANCES

In pre-pandemic Lithuanian theatre (as well as theatres of other Baltic countries) various forms of audience engagement were conspicuously emerging. Almost in every other production, be it commercial theatre or experiment venues, one was able to encounter practices of audience participation. They ranged from physical interactions between actors and spectators to performances based on the central role of audience members; from playful collective games, carnivals or immersive experiences to performative encounters with different social groups within the realms of their social milieu. Some of these productions were openly manipulating their audiences into specific forms of emotional engagement and social empathy, while others served as tools for deconstructing the manipulation mechanisms of contemporary society of spectacle. Nevertheless, most of them were based on the need to investigate the challenges brought to theatre as a media by interactive digital cultures.

User-oriented digital innovations accelerated the participatory impulse of theatre culture: as a

result, the notions of interactivity, participation and engagement have permeated almost all areas of contemporary society, theatre practice notwithstanding. New technologies and social media platforms successfully multiplied new forms of creativity, they offered innovative channels of distribution and won the hearts of ever-older audiences. It seemed that user-oriented digital media technologies were forcing theatres not only to open up their models of representation but to rethink theatre-audience relations in general. Theatre institutions were trying to “lure” audiences by employing not only aesthetic but also innovative audience development strategies: they persistently invited publics to actively participate, co-create, communicate, striving to spread the message about the engaging and participatory nature of theatre among its loyal fans and future followers¹⁸.

Paradoxically, during this moment of the so-called participatory turn in pre-pandemic Lithuanian theatre, there were almost no examples of virtual or digital theatre practices, with only a few marginal attempts at mixed media or hybrid productions that would include live streaming techniques or partly virtual participation. Together with this lack of practical interest in digital theatre in pre-pandemic Lithuania, there was very little theoretical analysis about virtual, AR or digital performance as a progressive practice for future theatre. A general understanding of digital performance in the Lithuanian context was based on international examples (The Blast Theory, Rimini Protokol) as well as theoretical works and was regarded as an extension of possibilities of “live” theatre, with much bigger possibilities for interaction and audience engagement¹⁹. For a moment it seemed that this technologically enhanced performance of endless participation possibilities should considerably contribute to the renewal of theatre aesthetics and poetics as well as help to attract new audiences. And then the pandemic hit.

After the global lockdown of theatre institutions the emerging forms of “virtual theatre”, ranging from live-streaming of pre-recorded performances to zoom theatre, once again redefined the role of

theatre spectatorship, in particular the notions of “active”, “passive”, “collective”, “individual”. Although initially widely welcomed as a form of solidarity and social responsibility, in the long run, these models of the theatre started to strengthen the feeling of passivity and isolation, serving mainly as platforms for much-needed psychological escapism rather than a critical re-evaluation of the essential principles of digital mediation or ontology of theatre art. Eventually, the grids of Zoom or Teams platform became not only the emerging iconography of social distancing but a prevailing model for theatre performance.

In the Lithuanian context, the first performance specifically designed for an online platform was “#Protest” by “Kosmostheatre” and director Žilvinas Vingelis (2020). According to the creators “#Protest” was an anti-utopia “inspired by circumstances of quarantine and aimed at analyzing the boundaries of theatre (as well as) themes of loneliness, isolation, social distance, online communication, limits of expression, fear and responsibility”²⁰. Broadcasted live from the actors’ home “#Protest” told the story of the future utopian world of Monaksia, where people live in isolation and are closely monitored by an authoritarian state. “#Protest” offered no interaction and was based on a schematic story of a romanticised quest for individual happiness. It used a digital platform not as a subject matter or deconstructive tool but rather as a metaphor most suitable for the narrative of digital anti-utopia. Virtuality here was, according to Carver and Beardon, a “thematic devise”²¹. Ironically the story itself was told in a very linear manner, narratives were clearly fixed and unilateral, the viewers were left passive, their perceptive experience being similar to those of watching TV series, or tele-spectating. In the case of “#Protest” as well as in some other instances of Zoom theatre performance became, according to Andrew Starner, a televisual enterprise that presents action remotely or at a distance²².

Indeed, while analysing such examples of pandemic theatre one starts to think about the return of the digital “fourth wall”, where audiences are becoming

distant spectators, while online platforms serve not as sophisticated mediums for interpretation of the real and interaction with it as Gabriella Giannachi has described²³, but rather a technological prosthesis for simply maintaining contact with audiences during lockdown.

A more sophisticated approach towards digital realities was present in the performance “The Flicker” (“Mirgėjimas”) – an interactive social media performance for the social media platform Facebook, created by Augustas Gornatkevicius, Paulina Okunyte and Gytis Dovydaitis for Kaunas National Drama Theatre (2021). “The Flicker” was devised specifically as a piece of digital performance, rather than simply pre-recorded translation or Zoom theatre. The starting point of the performance embraced the main aspect of virtuality, observed by many scholars of digital culture – according to Giannachi, the medium of virtuality itself acts as a theatre²⁴. Or as the creators of “The Flicker” try to assert, digital space is indeed a place of performances.

“The Flicker” was a durational performance happening four evenings in a row in a private Facebook group centred around conspiracy theories. It strived to disclose the ability of social media not only to manipulate the real but also to use the pre-designed forms of emotional manipulation that are indeed theatrical and performative in their nature. Performance embraced the invariably different way of operation of online reality, its intrinsic difference from everyday activities and its ability to distort the real. According to Giannachi, virtual reality is not an objective reality but someone’s work of art, in which a space for the viewer has been left more or less open²⁵. Precisely these limits between “more or less” of social media, its potentiality to provide a stage where one can become someone else, a character in virtual performance as well as its ability to coerce the users into specific patterns of behaviour (scripts if you will) – is at the heart of “The Flicker”.

The virtual in this performance has itself become the object of art. Flexibility and plasticity of time are embraced in “The Flicker”, at the same time

questioning traditional assumption about time and place in theatre. The audiences are highly active in the construction of the narrative and contrary to conventional theatre the outcome depends on the audience present that evening in a Facebook group. The narrative of performance is not clearly fixed, the reality of pace and presence is held open to question, multiple perspectives are present and made explicit. Textual commentaries and dialogues become the features of interactive performance-making. During the performance interactive and inclusive nature of social media appears to be democratic and liberating as well as oppressive and atomising at the same time. This way touching upon issues of social constructions, performative identities, subjugation and resistance, relationships between truth and fiction "The Flicker" demonstrates the seductive and dull, illusionary and menacing nature of digital democracies.

"The Flicker" was indeed one of the few examples of pandemic online theatre that provided a critical perspective on digital cultures, demonstrating that "technological optimism" was not enough justified and digital media is used less for the production of more transparent participatory governing models and much more for the political manipulation of data, dissemination of fake news or playful forms of self-centred entertainment. Having lived in a situation of constantly extending quarantines for almost three years we can conclude that pandemic models of encapsulated individualism have indeed affected the understanding of theatre spectatorship as a communal, collective and critical practice. It is particularly interesting that the promise of interaction and engagement as well as the subverted relationship between audience and theatre in post-digital or digital performances was not fulfilled instantly due to media specificity but rather as an effect of artistic conceptual thinking that goes beyond media.

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Notes

¹ Monika Pietraz-Franger, Heidi Lucja Liedke, Tamara Radak, "Editorial: Presence and Precarity in (Post-)Pandemic Theatre and Performance," *Theatre Research International* 48, 1 (2023), 2.

² Pietraz-Frengel, Liedke, Radak, Ibid., 3.

³ Ulf Otto, "Re-socializing Emptied Spaces: A Queer-feminist Performance, the Theatrical Apparatus and its (Post)pandemic Epistemology," *International Journal of Performance Art and Digital Media* 29, 1 (2023), 100.

⁴ Philip Auslander, "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, 3 (2012), 6.

⁵ Auslander, Ibid., 7.

⁶ Pietraz-Frengel, Liedke, Radak, Ibid., 3.

⁷ Sarah Bay-Cheng, "Digital Performance and Its Discontents (or, Problems of Presence in Pandemic Performance)," *Theatre Research International* 48, 1 (2023), 11.

⁸ Bay-Cheng, Ibid., 14.

⁹ Michel Causey, "Postdigital Performance," *Theatre Journal* 68, 3 (2016), 427–441.

¹⁰ Tamara Radak, "'Dying... to Connect': Postdigital Co-presence in Dead Centre's To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)," *Theatre Research International* 48, 1 (2023), 41.

¹¹ Radak, Ibid., 40.

¹² Radak, Ibid., 48.

¹³ Ulf Otto, "Post-performance: Pandemic Breach, Big Theatre Data, and the Ends of Theory," *Theatre Research International* 48, 1 (2023), 27.

¹⁴ Otto, Ibid., 30.

¹⁵ Otto, Ibid., 30.

¹⁶ Otto, Ibid., 26.

¹⁷ Otto, Ibid., 35.

¹⁸ Jurgita Staniškytė, "Spectatorship, Politics and the Rules of Participation: Re-discovering the Audience in Contemporary Lithuanian Theatre," *Nordic Theatre Studies* 30, 2 (2018), 99–114.

¹⁹ Monika Meilutytė, "Interaktyvumas teatre: spektaklio struktūros bruožas ar komunikacijos proceso rezultatas?" *Menotyra* 26, 2 (2019), 74–88.

²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/kosmostheatre/posts/180628370215119/>

²¹ *New Visions in Performance. Impact of Digital Technologies*, Ed. Gavin Carver, Colin Beardon (London & New York, Routledge, 2005), 170.

²² Andrew Starner, "Remote viewing: a brief historical inquiry into theatre and social distance," *International Journal of Performance Art and Digital Media* 29, 1 (2023), 226–244.

²³ Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres* (London & New York, Routledge, 2004), 156.

²⁴ Giannachi, Ibid, 151.

²⁵ Giannachi, Ibid, 155.

Jurgita STANIŠKYTĖ

Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Kaunas, Lietuva

ATKURTI KETVIRTĄJĄ SIENĄ: SKAITMENINIO SPEKTAKLIO IR ŽIŪROVO SĄVEIKA (PO)PANDEMINIAME TEATRE

Santrauka

Teatras gali būti interpretuojamas kaip vieta, kurioje išbandomi įvairūs dalyvavimo bendruomenėje būdai ar piliečių elgesio modeliai. Prieš pandemiją Lietuvos (kaip ir kitų Baltijos šalių) teatre pastebimai ryškėjo įvairios žiūrovų pozicijos aktyvinimo ir dalyvavimo formos – nuo bendrų kūrybinių praktikų iki interaktyvių pramogų. Po visuotinio teatro institucijų uždarymo karantinų metu atsiradusios virtualaus teatro formos, pradedant spektaklių įrašais ir baigiant „Zoom“ teatru, iš naujo apibrėžė teatro žiūrovo vaidmenį, ypač „aktyvaus“ / „pasyvaus“, „kolektyvinio“ / „individualaus“ sąvokas, esmines publikos vaidmens suvokimui teatre. Analizuojant gausius „pandeminio“ teatro pavyzdžius ryškėja tendencija, kurią galima įvardyti kaip skaitmeninės „ketvirtosios sienos“ sugrįžimą, kai spektaklio auditorija paverčiama atsiribojusiais ir pasyviais žiūrovais. Tai kelia svarbius klausimus teatro tyrėjams: ar tokios skaitmeninio teatro formos stiprina pasyvumo ir izoliacijos jausmą, ar veikia kaip psichologinio pabėgimo nuo tikrovės būdai, ar siūlo kritiškai įvertinti teatro meno esmę.

Šiame straipsnyje, pasitelkus dvi atvejo studijas, apibrėžiamos ir nagrinėjamos vyraujančios (po)pandeminio Lietuvos teatro praktikos, taip pat analizuojama, ar ir kaip po pandemijos pasikeitė esminiai žiūrovų patirties teatre modeliai.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: poskaitmeninis spektaklis, (po)pandeminis teatras, Lietuvos teatras, skaitmeninės kultūros, virtualus teatras, auditorijų įtraukimas.

Gauta 2023-06-05

Parengta spaudai 2023-09-18

Jurgita STANIŠKYTĖ

heads the Faculty of Arts and is a Professor of Theatre Studies Department at Vytautas Magnus University (Kaunas, Lithuania). She has published numerous scientific and critical articles on contemporary Lithuanian theatre in the context of the processes of Baltic stage art, performative aspects of post-soviet Lithuanian culture, audience research and development. Jurgita Staniškytė actively participates in various scholarly and artistic organizations as well as international and national research projects. Jurgita Staniškytė is the Board member of HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) and the Governing Board member of EU Joint Programming Initiative (JPI) on Cultural Heritage and Global Change. She served as a chair of the Board of “Kaunas the European Capital of Culture 2022”.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3031-7044>

E-mail: jurgita.staniskyte@vdu.lt