VIRTUALLY PERFORMING THE SPACE

Report from IETM Autumn Plenary Meeting in Budapest, October 6th, 2015

by Vassilka Shishkova

Virtually performing the space

The goal of the session was to discuss the opportunities and risks created by social media platforms, which can also be used by the performing art sector. Can the digital tools enable their users to express what they want and how they want? Are these platforms killing the live quality and appeal of the performing arts or do they represent a new possible form of participatory theatre? Is virtual space the new public space?

Moderator:

Corina Bucea - Fabrica de Pensule, Romania

With:

- Sarah Ellis - Royal Shakespeare Company, UK
- Ulf Otto - University of Hildesheim, Germany (virtually)
- Mirko Stojkovic - University of Belgrade, Serbia
- Nick Tandavanitj - Blast Theory, UK

The presence of an absence

'We use shared presence not to create spaces or events but to establish connections'.

The meeting's opening was performed virtually, in accord with the theme. Ulf Otto (University of Hildesheim, Germany), one of the invited panelists, couldn't join the meeting and his written thoughts were presented virtually following his instructions: 'I proposed to the organizers that I still could say something today about virtuality, if only they could find a double for me, somebody who would lend me his or her body and

voice. And since you hear this right now, they must have found somebody. I hope it is a good looking body and has a nice voice and that you like him or her.'

The main question in Ulf Otto's text was whether the convention which makes the virtual possible is the same that makes theatre possible. The convention, which forms presence of the absence, as he called it using the body-substitute.

The theatre, like virtuality, is built over **the idea that we could meet to witness something that is absent**, to make a ghost alive by witnessing. For a role is nothing but a text; but when it is played in theatre, it gets its own character, it becomes something 'real'.

The virtual is built over the idea that there is some place where we could meet, the idea that we could be present in some cyber space or second life. One of the offsprings of this idea is that there could be some theatre in this other space. According to Ulf Otto, this is rather a 90s idea. **There is no virtual, it never existed.** We cannot be present in a database or a network as we cannot be present in a telegraph or a wire. Information technology does not create space but connects spaces. Our new media don't work like the theatre, they work like the telegraph. Technologies do connect and the prerequisite for any connection is first, the absence and then, the volume of entities that could be connected.

In social networks of today we don't need to be present in a certain place as in the age of TV. **We only need to be connected and to stay connectable.** This is regarded as precondition of individual success and

picture: Vassilka Shishkova

making things connected and connectable is a recipe for business success.

Instead of some virtual space that some people try to sell us the idea of, we are experiencing a reality that is connected in more and more ways, that is full of sensors and where people, cars and fridges are connected into even more crisscrossing networks. There is nothing virtual about this. Therefore, it is very important who makes these connections, who controls them and who owns them. The bad news is **they are owned by private institutions whose sole purpose is financial profit.**

In theatre we need an audience to witness an absence and through this to bring reality in. In mass media we need the presence of an audience in order to create an event that can be broadcasted. What is the case of presence in the Digital Age then? Ulf Otto believes that 'We now use communal presence for live communication to exchange contacts for some real communication that will take place later, not here and now but online'.

If theatre wants to be open and relevant in the Digital Age, it will need realising its potential to establish such connections. Theatre will gain relevance to nowadays only if it is willing to say good-bye to the narcissistic idea that everything is to happen within the live event of a performance.

picture: © Balázs Turós

Theatre is virtuality

Acknowledging that virtual is a tricky subject to explore, Sarah Ellis (Royal Shakespeare Company, UK) started off with a more general set of questions: when we look at the significant social change that takes place due to the digital technologies, what could the role of culture be. What is culture: it is a shared experience; and theatre is a shared experience too.

Theatre - the black box - is a virtual space because it is about believability: someone said a chair is a spaceship and we all agree with it and the chair indeed functions as a virtual spaceship! Hence, we might say, that performing arts professionals have been into the virtual world long before technologies reached it. The question is what can we do with these virtual spaces and how can we make them real public places although many of them are owned by companies. This is an important task to accomplish because **the online world is being mirrored in the real one**. Culture is capable of asking the right questions. It gets society to think – that is what culture does at its best.

'Whenever we are presented with a piece of technology, be it an online space or a raspberry pie or an oculist rift, you don't just do what everyone else does.

You do something, you tell a story that is different. That is what virtually performing the space is'.

Therefore the question is not about the virtual space or the technology but about the performing arts professionals and whether they want to be in it and to perform there.

Apparently, The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) where Sarah Ellis is head of digital development, are willing to enter the digital / virtual space and they do it quite well[1]. Amongst numerous digital projects of RSC Sarah referred to: MyShakespeare website, where RSC showcases new work that interpreted Shakespeare online and is created by commissioned artists, poets, technologists, coders, writers, musicians and students; Shakespeare's digital heartbeat, and the intricate experiment of how 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' would look like online through social media. The live streaming lasted for 3 hours and the social media response lasted much longer, with more than 3000 pieces of content shared and a reach of 30 million people on social media.

'It doesn't mean that everyone saw the whole thing but we really reached 30

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1   Check here for Guardian's detailed interview with Sarah on RSC's online projects (published on 20 January 2015)

million people online. For me, the interesting bit around here is that we could. And the possibilities it gives us'.

Answering a question about how this huge institution was introduced to the digital world, Sarah Ellis explained that *digital technology* has been used throughout the institution on all levels. 'We introduce innovative technologies in our everyday work, not just for the digital projects. Furthermore, I am not working with dedicated digital team but rather work with everybody in the company. Otherwise they will think of the digital as something external and this won't work'.

Correlations between computer gaming and theatre

'When we create an online work we are always seeking the sense of presence'.

Nick Tandavanitj based his observations on the virtual and the real in the corpus of works of his company, Blast Theory, interactive art that mixes live performance and digital broadcasting. What they cherish the most in their work is the excitement of real life presence in one place together with others and the thrill of creating mixed spaces blurring the boundaries between virtual and real. Actually, they would refer

to their work not as a space but rather as connection, a channel, a condition for presence. 'When we create an online work we are always seeking the sense of presence'.

Mirko Stojkovic added that there is no particular separation between virtual space for gamers and for artists. There are role playing games, multiplayer online role playing games with servers hosting players' communities. You have to accept the convention of the game. If you choose to log in as an ork, you have to be stupid and hate humans. In the online game you have to behave in the expected and predefined way of your virtual persona. What is probably more interesting to us as performing arts professionals is the moment when freedom steps in.

There is the phenomenon of underlined emergent gameplay (video game mechanics that change according to the player's actions) like in Quake for example. Recently emergent gameplay has become so complex in its variables that the game designers cannot calculate it, cannot predict it (especially in cases of glitching), i.e. it has become close to real life richness of choices outcomes.

The **lack of emotions** is what Mirko Stojkovic identified as one of the problems in virtual space. In gameplaying, the goals are usually achieved through destruction and the environment is highly competitive. In case the boundary between the virtual and the real world is fading, then this spills back to our world in lack of empathy. He supported this statement with the solemn example of a gamer that died in real world and when his brother told the sad news to his gaming community, they were mostly interested in the distribution of his virtual assets of a player in the game.

Being optimistic, Sarah Ellis noted that one could be a psychopath in real life without any influence from the virtual world. Further on, the conversation between the panellists evolved around the topics of private and personal space, the volume of data users share and the digital traces that are left, the cases of bullying or online harassment and more.

In conclusion, the main focus of interest for performing arts was identified as where and how do virtual and real stage interact, because a huge field of opportunities opens up there. It is a space where culture and theatre can experiment what this shared experience is all about, how do artists and audiences interact into this new environment.

Q&A session

Some statements on the difference between virtuality and augmented reality, the role of the gaming industry and automobile technologies (and even porn) in developing the virtual space marked the beginning of the broader discussion. 'We should take the toys from the corporate world and use it for making our art', was heard from the audience.

In connection with the example of gamers from younger generations using their video game avatars' special moves to express emotion in real life, Willie White (Dublin Theatre Festival, Ireland and IETM President) remarked that this phenomenon is developing a new language that is to be learned. The social values of this language have to be interrogated.

A question about how does digital form impact the content of the artistic work was raised from the audience.

Citing the vast experience of RSC in the field of digital interpretation of classical content, alongside with the 400 years of history of how Shakespeare's plays change in interpretation and in interaction with the audience, Sarah Ellis confirmed that **form does influence the content in many ways.** Digital representation with the option to follow just parts of the play, to interact with it actually is not much different from the Elizabethan times when the audience wasn't at all sitting quietly in the theatre (to say the least), immersed in the play from beginning to end. In case of online media, there is considerable strain on the viewer's attention span; many agents are simultaneously competing for the viewer's attention[2]. For this reason, when a play is being 'staged' in digital media the centre of interest is set on what can be achieved through various fractions of the play that happen to catch the viewer's attention in certain moments rather than through perceiving the piece as a whole. Contrary to a movie or a video game, **technology with its various methods of interaction gives both the viewer and the artist a sense of open possibilities that is also inherent to theatre.**

What becomes interesting is what can be done with the snippets of narrative and the users' shared content in the digital media.

What will be the next thing in the virtual technology world?

The next thing would probably be about the convergence of real and virtual and about bringing environments together. The direction of technology innovations is set to achieving absolute simulation.

Technology is constantly changing the world from the beginning of human civilization on. Most often than not, technology served people to fight wars. Maybe this time it will not divide people but bring them together.

Technology provides for the infrastructure of social interaction. It would be interesting to observe its influence on the real world. Technology will bring some sophistication to the visible world through broader implementation of augmented reality.

Our job as performing arts professionals is **not to protect the theatre but the people.** When new languages evolve we cannot just keep resorting around the 20th century metaphors. We need new ones that would be in line with the new life, entities and technologies.

Digital innovations are just new tools; what we should worry about are still the same things: **content** and **values**.

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2   Report 'Think Again. Tech and Media Outlook 2016'