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DEVISING DIGITAL THEATRE WITH A PURSUIT IN LIVENESS

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Performing arts were gravely impacted by the 2020 global pandemic. By April 2020, theater companies across the country cancelled 95% of their events with no certainty of when they would reopen to the public (2021). Americans for the Arts estimated that the United State's arts and culture economic sector has suffered a financial loss of \$15.2 billion. With 66% of all venues reporting a "severe financial impact" (2021). This resulted in devastating unemployment for artists, technicians, producers and theater staff. Cancelling a production only weeks even days before the show opens is uniquely devastating for everyone involved. Months and years of preparations are lost in an instant. Many artists ranging from small independent companies to large theater venues turned to the internet, grasping for a momentary life raft. One year later we are beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel, with the hope of returning to gather at the theater once more.

Historically, closures of performance art venues had occurred during times of war or pandemics. But the United States had not experienced anything remotely similar in nearly 80 years. In the early months of theater closures there was a sense of urgency to retain relevance, while also coping with the drastic loss of income and opportunity. If theaters insisted on the purity of performing to a live audience they risked their very existence. The internet became the new and only viable stage to post performances. Theodore Adorno realized that mass market capitalism is and was viciously unsentimental to artists and stated, "Anyone who does not conform is condemned to economic impotence which is prolonged in the intellectual powerlessness of the eccentric loner. Disconnected from the mainstream, he is easily convicted of inadequacy" (Horkheimer et al. 106). Adorno continues, "Mass culture...inculcates the conditions on which

implacable life is allowed to be lived at all” (123). If theaters were to survive, there was only one choice to make.

The internet was soon awash with recordings and home made digital content. Artists made a determination not to let this catastrophe bury the production of art. Large theater venues dug into their archives to stream old recordings of performances in an effort to receive donations, but there was also a genuine willingness to share these performances free of charge to the general public. This was an extreme adjustment for traditional theater companies. They had never before shared any versions of their productions on the internet let alone done so for free. New York Metropolitan Opera posted performances of operas like Philip Glass’ *Akhmaten*, a highly prestigious performance that was sold out for months in advance, and now it was streaming for free to be watched in your own living room (Feldman).

Other smaller companies chose to create theatrical content intentionally with the internet in mind. Most were pre recordings of performers in their homes using a simple camera on their phone or laptop; no fancy lighting, no elaborate costumes, just the artist and whatever they had available to create something in isolated conditions. It was exciting to view these artists keeping creativity alive in a time of unprecedented uncertainty, allowing audiences to have small bits of enjoyable distractions to connect with. As time went on the internet became saturated with performance content from not just across the country, but from theaters across the world.

Nicholas Berger, a theatre artist and writer published an article in the Medium that stated, “Theater makers don’t need to provide a supply of art that there isn’t a demand for. Let’s use this time to engage with the world not as artists, but as audience members, consuming a medium different from our own. We don’t need this rushed, frantic grab at a return to normalcy. We don’t

need to keep up the illusion that theatre is still going” (2020). The article generated a surprising backlash from artists across the country. It is true that theater doesn't need to feel responsible to continue to make art in times of crisis. Artists don't need to guilt themselves into staying productive or relevant when circumstances are extremely limited and not fully in their control. For other artists living in economic precarity, the obligation to produce art was a choice strikingly similar to the decision theaters had to make. The “choice” was a question of survival.

At the same time this moment is powerfully unique in that artists do have a limitless virtual platform to engage in. Maybe, for the sake of the artist's sanity it's important to still make work. Maybe it won't make any meaningful difference to the general audience member, but it can still be a way to connect with a community of artists that are willing to explore this uncharted world of theatre making. Maybe it's a perfect moment to express ideas, loss, and grief amidst the social chaos.

The internet has emerged as a platform for theatre makers to devise virtual performances, which question the art of theatre in new ways; bringing life to new possibilities of audience engagement in something that's not quite theater and not quite film. As Andre Bazin famously wrote, “The cinema calms the spectator, the theatre excites him” (410). Whether or not digitally devised theater squares that circle remains to be seen, but what it does do is provide lifeblood to a critically threatened art form. The world of the virtual is not going to disappear after the pandemic recedes. Its trajectory is going in one direction and it will grow exponentially and lead the development of future technologies.

For most of modern history, the event of live theatre has been in direct conflict with the emerging technologies like film, cinema and most drastically the television. Philp Auslander's

Liveness argues, “at the level of cultural economy, theatre (and live performance generally) and the mass media are rivals, not partners. Neither are they equal rivals: it is absolutely clear that our current cultural formation is saturated with, and dominated by, mass media representations in general, and television in particular” (7). When viewers were able to watch a live event mediated through the television in their own homes it brought a new level of intimacy and immediacy that film and theatre never had. Culturally there is a dominant preference towards mediated performances. By the end of the 20th century theatre was now competing for audiences in a culture fully integrated with mass media entertainment. Broadway producer Margo Lion’s was quoted, “we have realized that we are all competing for the same entertainment dollars in a climate where theater isn’t always first on the list” (9).

Now, over 20 years later we’ve seen an even more dramatic shift of media and technology integration into our lives. The internet has globalized entertainment and the technologies of cell phones has given us instant access to it all. Internet platforms give access as both viewer and creator. It’s become readily apparent that content producers don’t have to be traditionally famous to become a superstar on the internet. Performers are now regular people with their phone sharing content that is virally spread through likes and repeated shares of others. “All the world is the stage,” by Shakespeare is now literal. The pandemic has forced theatre artists to use the internet as a way to gather some form of cultural purchase, solidifying theatre’s direct competition with mass media. This time however, the competition is futile. Without the ability to gather in person to witness first hand the living humans performing on the stage, can theatre even really exist?

The question depends on how one defines what theatre is, what it isn’t, and what it can be. If people are not able to gather in person, can theaters somehow recreate the feeling in the

virtual world of the internet? Technology has evolved to the point where the internet can be leveraged to connect and communicate with others in real time. In using this technology theatre makers have a way to generate a new form of theatre that is neither film or an in person performance. It's something in between. For this current moment, the conclusion hinges on the concept of liveness.

The term *liveness* has been a strong distinction for theatre makers in the time of the pandemic, because it's the one thing that can still be attained in a virtual reality. It distinguishes itself from media that is prerecorded and viewed at a future time. Liveness describes the event as a one time occurrence that happens only at that specified time for both the audience and the performers. Similar to the idea of a live, in person performance that happens once and is not seen again. Auslander expands on this idea:

“The live is actually an effect of mediatization, not the other way around. It was the development of recording technologies that made it possible to perceive existing representations as “live.” Prior to the advent of those technologies (e.g., sound recording and motion pictures), there was no such thing as “live” performance, for that category has meaning only in relation to an opposing possibility” (7).

It's interesting that the concept of seeing something live is a modern construct and is understood only in relation to our cultural saturation of prerecorded material that can be consumed once or repeatedly. As compared to the ephemeral experience of witnessing a moment live and then only relying on the memory of that moment once it's over. Without being able to experience theatre in its original form we can see the significance of theatre as uniquely distinct from all

forms of mass media entertainment. In the absence of traditional in person liveness theatre artists are experimenting with different forms of virtual media as their stage.

The release of *Hamilton* is a perfect example of theatre's attempts at conforming to mediated entertainment. It is a recording of the original production with set, costumes and original actors who were filmed on a stage, knowing that they are performing for an audience that is watching them in a different place and time. The audience is witnessing the performance from the point of view of the camera itself. Almost imitating the feeling of seeing it from the front rows of the theatre. The streaming of *Hamilton* also gave the ability to view the recording over the internet anytime, at home, while traveling, or on a phone; giving new control and access to the viewer. Eliminating the scarce commodity of buying a high price ticket for a premium seat or even being near New York to experience the performance. This allowed the viewer the experience of place, of being at a NYC Broadway play. The viewer was seeing it performed on a stage and not on a photorealistic setting as in a cinema feature.

Another way to capture theatre is through a "live stream" event where the audience could gather with others at the same time across all time zones and collectively watch a real time theatre performance. Display counts of the number of viewers let the performers and audience know how many other people are watching the show. Additionally the chat function allows audience members to share their voice within the performance. Here Arts Center provided "online programming" that featured as they describe in Playbill, "Among the virtual offerings are #stillHERE, a weekly live stream featuring a HERE artist who invites viewers to share in the creation of new work; HERE@HOME, weekly broadcasts of full-length productions previously presented at HERE; and #COVIDEO, a sequential, community-built work of video art that is led by HERE

artists and staff that the public is invited to participate in” (Clement). These types of programming were occurring with theater companies around the nation. Salt Lake City Pioneer Theatre Company had “The Show Goes On...line”. The Synetic Theater in Washington D.C. developed “Synetic Streaming” as a subscription service (New Desk). These are only a few examples of online streaming that, if equitable, will most likely continue after the pandemic is over.

A third way of experimentation is utilizing live stream platforms, like Zoom, as the stage. This is where actors are performing in real time to a virtual audience witnessing it in real time (despite delays, lags and technical glitches) Jared Mezzocchi, a multimedia artist, was part of the artistic team in the online production of *Russian Troll Farms*. It became an icon for live virtual theatre, and New York Times Critic’s Pick (Green). It was originally written for the stage, but was adapted specifically for a live virtual performance. Jared described this transition to virtual as a site-specific engagement.

“The theatre industry is being thrust into a site-specific venue called the internet. Like any other site-specific process, the unconventional performance environment should inspire us to define what makes theatre theatre and celebrate how our form can adapt to any space it inhabits. This present moment places us in an exciting crossroad between former traditions and the emergence of technical and multi-platformed storytelling” (Mezzocchi).

A virtual performance I attended *Where Are You? (Digital)*, which was a part of the Mabou Mines series SUITE/Space 2020 (Berry) was a devised piece that used Zoom -and all it’s functions- to share their stories. The actors utilized the zoom functions of turning off and on the camera, positioning themselves in their homes with intentional scenery or props, other functions like sharing screen, making the actors appear to be in the same space by having the same cos-

tumes, props (and magically passing props to the other actors). The New York Neo-Futurist did a similar performance, *CyberWrench*, using the functions of Zoom (Jones). They also chose to invite the audience to participate in performances by sending the actors responses through the chat or even inviting them to turn on their personal camera and interact live with the actors. This was an innovative way to foster a level of intimacy that is experienced similar to an audience member being invited on stage.

The fourth way of experimenting digitally is to utilize cinema technology of (CGI) i.e. the green screen where an actor is placed into a completely different environment than their actual physical space. This requires the accessibility to both software and hardware. Green screens, tripods, high end graphic cards, modern computers that can handle a large amount of processing power. These technologies allow the artist the ability to customize their compositions, layering, and other visual effects. These are some examples of different types of virtual stages. Theater company Molière in the Park adaption of *Tartuffe* as a live streamed performance which overlaid the actors onto a virtual background (Green). Another is the virtual performance of *Fefu and Her Friends*, directed by Jay Scheib with collaborators from MIT, Harvard and Wellesley to create an immersive virtual world that the actors were layered into, making it appear as though they were actually inhabiting the virtual spaces. (“Fefu and Her Friends”). Then there’s the idea of using virtual reality platforms to create the full digital experience for actors and audiences. *The Seagull on The Sims 4* used The Sims platform itself to adapt Anton Chekhov’s play *The Seagull* (Shaw). It’s a wild idea that I would have never dreamed of if it wasn’t forced on me by the pandemic. These digital stages are only beginning to emerge and with the advancements of the digital technology they will continue to expand in range and creativity.

In the fall of 2020, I had the opportunity to create a work of digital theatre. The proposal was an adaption of Albert Camus' *The Plague* set as a devised virtual performance. It was accepted into the Sarah Lawrence Main Stage Theatre Performance Series. Adapting *The Plague*, was a way to study historical fiction and nonfiction stories of societies that had gone through horrific pandemics. Camus' novel elucidated the chronic anxiety of the contemporary moment. The piece's aim sought to explore how the play's performers were collectively and individually coping with the disruptions of the pandemic. The process was understood to lead to a formal presentation, but the most compelling aspect asked how we as a group could use our experiences to make a meaningful expression of ideas through collaborative art making and to do so entirely through a virtual medium.

The desire for connection became the connective tissue that allowed the group to continue the pursuit of theatrical art over a virtual platform. The plan was to use the devising process to make a community around an idea. The devising process is different than starting with a traditional script. Devising requires organic group discussions, processing challenging concepts, and maintaining a supportive and cohesive community. The book *Making a Performance* states that devising is uniquely suited to the creation of collaborative based art.

“The practice of devising has been instrumental in enabling theatre-makers to develop artistically satisfying ways of working by stretching the limits of established practices and reshaping their creative processes... The appeal of devising performance for practitioners lies in its pliability and porousness. The invented tradition of devised performance has, of course, no single aesthetic or ideological objective; its strategies and methods are indebted to a wide range of cultural fields including political and community theatres, physical theatre, performance and live art... Devised performance is closely connected to the context and moment of production, and

new practices have been invented to extend contemporary notions of what performance might be. Devising has, therefore, the flexibility to enable theatre-makers to address matters of personal concern, to interrogate topical issues, and to extend the aesthetics and reception of performance” (Govan et al. 10).

Along with the devising process, there are two key components that we wanted to have in the work. The first was to have the performance happen in real time. We were committed to the idea that the performance be as live as possible. The component of liveness could be maintained by a real time production that occurred in the moment, with all the glitches, delays, and non-uniform sources of internet services and equipment. The second was to emphasize the process of connecting as humans in the time of profound loneliness and uncertainty. The work was to be ensemble generated, which would allow each artist to incorporate their personal stories and talents.

Rehearsals were conducted on Zoom, but the hope was that the experience would transcend beyond the virtual boxes. The use of other forms of digital media, writing, and dance were ways we could subvert the virtual confinement. The first task was determining how to create a virtual space that was somatically inviting to each of the collaborators. Working over Zoom is exhausting and the addition of all virtual classes added to the fatigue. Rehearsals were four hours a day, six days a week, coupled with graduate level course work we had to consider innovative ways to avoid virtual burnout.

Directing the rehearsals was similar to what would be done if we were in person, however communication with the performers was essential. It ensured that each came to rehearsals ready to engage physically and mentally. This couldn't be like a class where one showed up and sat with glazed eyes in front of the screen. The performers needed to set up their personal space

so they could move around and feel creative in their body. The warm-ups, or check-ins at the top of each rehearsal were the most important time to bond as a group. In order to utilize the time effectively we played theatre games, improved acting prompts, and other things that served as ice breakers in a virtual environment. Some warm ups worked and some didn't, but the goal was to invite a sense of playfulness and normalize failures in a safe non-judgmental environment. The following were some devices used to build community that worked well on a virtual platform.

Check-in prompts:

1. Rose-Bud-Thorn. This game was used to determine how our physical and mental wellbeing were that day. Rose is something great that is happening, Bud is something you are looking forward to, and Thorn is something that isn't going well and may require support from others in the group.
2. Bad T-shirt phrases. This game comically imagines bad logos or T-shirt designs as a way to get to know each other and to invite joy.
3. Simple check-ins asking if there are "access needs" that need to be met for the performer that day.

Warm-up prompts:

1. Somatic exercises, full body stretching and breathing exercises were a wonderful and needed way to get ourselves beyond the screen and into our body.
2. Acting improvisation prompts - things that could be done on Zoom where the performers would improvise with each other.
3. Learning exercises to embody cinematic film techniques. The performers had to become familiar with this new type of stage. The camera distorts the visual space so it's important to know where the sight lines are located. The per-

formers could also create cinematic effects like zoom and panning by how their body moved in relation to the camera lens. Like a zoom-in could be created by the performer coming closer to the camera and appear like the lens is zooming to a close up of their face.

There were multiple ways we worked as a group to make the material and content for the piece. According to their interest, the performers divided into three groups: writing, media, movement. This division into groups also helped with avoiding fatigue with being on Zoom all day. The writing group focused on script generating material. It also had group discussions and improv games to provide a way into the writing process.

Generating prompts and discussions

1. Group discussions and personal writings on themes including: What is utopia? What does it mean to live? What are the characters (personal relationships) in your life and what are your interactions like now in quarantine with them? Write a realistic narrative of your experience during the shutdowns.
2. These prompts would then be made into scripts. The performers could choose parts of their writing to create a full scene or section of dialogue.
3. After these scripts were created, which was a process over a couple of weeks, the performers were asked to take one or two and transform them into a different script entirely as a new genre. e.g. if they had created a dramatic scene they could be asked to turn it into a comedy or even an opera. One of the most memorable scenes that was generated was a performer who turned their script into a Zoom call opera. The first call they spoke lines from the novel, *The Plague*, next they sang the lines of the novel, and the final call began with

them laughing and gradually reverted to each crying. It was incredibly enjoyable to engage in this way, particularly while working with a virtual setup.

The media group was prompted to use different types of media, digital and physical material, to generate pre recorded video collages. The assistant director was in charge of this group and did a wonderful job in generating material and teaching the group new techniques to use with digital media.

Generating prompts

1. What are your forms of comfort media? The performers were asked to find movies or television series that gave them comfort in times of sadness. With clips from these sources the performers were then asked to distort the clips using video and sound effects. It distorted all forms of media comfort that wasn't accessible in this time of isolation.
2. Stock images. The performers gathered stock images and randomly set lines of dialog to the slide show. This generated strange and comical clips that read as a commercial or advertisement.
3. There was also an opportunity for the group to generate their own prompts. Some chose to write songs, create magazine collages and their own films. One performer created a series of stop motion films using post-it notes on a window.

The movement group developed a series of gestures based on the writing that was shared from the writing group. One of the performers was asked to take these gestures and choreograph them into a sequence that incorporated full body movement (most of the gestures were just upper body movements). The group worked on the full body movement for a few rehearsals and then

taught it to the whole ensemble. Working with the on campus theatre department, the movement group constructed a green screen that covered an entire wall and the floor for the performers to do the movement in front of. By using the green screen the background of the performers was removed and it was replaced with a digitally constructed stage. Each performer set up a time to be filmed individually in front of the green screen. Their movement didn't have to be the exact choreography, but it needed to retain the essence of the movement. Then with the footage, the performers were collaged into a digital stage giving the appearance that they were performing together. The song that they danced to was a song created by one of the performers.

To incorporate live movement the ensemble learned the choreographed series of upper body gestures. They were collaged together using the same green screen technique. When using Zoom it is incredibly difficult to synchronize movement. Everyone hears and responds differently to the music and the lag in feed increased these differences. However, the quality and attention the performers gave to each movement was very beautiful to watch and the asynchronicity supported the thematic content.

In the span of 4 weeks the group successfully generated a lot of material. The next step was deciding how to present the material. Many of the performers wanted to act out the scripts compared to just reading them. This was ambitious considering the dwindling number of rehearsals that were left. The designers were on board as well. The downfall was the way we were imagining using virtual backgrounds as part of the compositions were not suited for the software we were using.

In order to move away from having the performers confined to the Zoom squares, the decision was made to use Open Broadcasting System (OBS) as the platform to make the visual compositions with the performers and then stream it back into a Zoom Webinar. OBS is an open

source program that is free to use. The software is continually updated and revised by people using the program. It's a platform that is regularly used for gaming and live streaming of events before the pandemic. Many realized it was a great way for people to control how they appear on other streaming platforms like Zoom, Twitch, and Youtube. However, it has significant limitations when it comes to making multi layered scenes with different forms of visual media.

The remarkable thing about OBS is that it can screen capture the performers gathered on Zoom. By screen capturing each performer's Zoom window they can then be arranged in a new composition. Then through OBS scene creation layers can be added to the captured video of the performer with other media, such as a virtual background or scenery that is designed to look like the performers were all together in the same environment. There can be multiple scenes created that could be changed as the script progresses. In theory, one could compose the entire script with virtual backgrounds and layer all the actors together, but in practice it becomes an inordinately complicated process.

To digitally layer the performers, each had to have their own setup including a green screen, webcam, and special lights to light the green screen appropriately. It was surprising how difficult it was to have the performers set this up themselves and unfortunately, every performer had since returned home to disparate home states. Having them all in separate time zones created a different lighting problem as well. The lighting is essential for the green screen to work and despite a significant effort, it never quite came together. The task of consolidating all of the unique scenes and virtual backgrounds that each performer was interacting with was monumental. When all the media was finally put together the OBS software and the available computer hardware couldn't handle the requisite processing needed for the media to be played at the same

time. The system crashed repeatedly, but to their credit all of the performers and designers were patient and flexible throughout the tech process.

Despite all of the challenges the ensemble successfully presented the full performance to a live virtual audience. It was thrilling to see it all come together. At the conclusion of the performance I solicited feedback from each of the members. This was one of the responses:

“The connections and friendships I made while working on Plagued never felt forced, they just magically came to be during the devising, creating, and performance process. Theatre is a truly collaborative art form, and none of the work I devised or performed for Plagued would've been nearly as good if it wasn't for the other collaborators I worked with on the show. It was because of Plagued that I learned how to use photoshop and continue to develop my skills in video and sound editing, along with movement and writing. The ensemble of Plagued constantly gave me ideas that made my pieces and performances better and more well rounded. I also constantly felt supported and safe whenever we were in rehearsals; I could truly create, learn, and develop connections without any worry or fear of being judged. I always felt supported by my fellow collaborators, even by the end of the first rehearsal. We saw each other almost every day for a long time, and we could've just ended up being acquaintances or connections we had made and that would've been it. But I felt that everyone that was part of the Plagued team was a friend I had gained by the end of the process, and of course, and beautiful artist” (Submitted 03/12/21).

Following this performance experience, significant questions remained about the utility of digital theatre. It seemed like the technology and access thereof were not quite ready to be fully integrated during a live stream with media visual compositions. It cannot be emphasized enough that there needs to be suitable processing power and access to high end computers is dependent on the financial resources available. And while the free software is usable, it is not de-

signed with theatrical dramaturgy in mind. It requires a sophisticated knowledge of how the software is designed, its functions, and its programming. The user then must understand how to utilize them in order to tell a story. Jared Mezzocchi who has been experimenting with live digital performance throughout the pandemic as sight specific work stated, “On Zoom, we have to ask those same questions: What are the ins and outs of it? So I spent the entire summer reverse-engineering Zoom. What does each button in the preferences mean? Not what it does, but what it signifies... Take hiding non-video participants. That’s not just a switch. It’s a potential tactic that we could use in storytelling to turn things on and off, and to be able to see that people are hiding in space. That’s interesting, dramaturgically, even if I don’t have the script for it yet.” (Fuchs). In a different essay he urged theatre makers to resist using filmed recordings as the performance. “Theatre’s decision to make films, which is currently happening nationwide, is exposing a fear of technology alongside a mistrust of liveness, and it is leading to a dependency on specific usages of technology that are irrelevant to our form once we return to being in-person. This is such a waste of an opportunity! And it is imperative that the community understand why and how to overcome their fears” (Mezzocchi).

I appreciate the enthusiasm of using this time to experiment with digital theatre, but I can understand the fear that Jared is referring to. It’s not the fear of performing live, rather it’s the fear of relying on a technology that is unfamiliar to theatre makers. The language of technology has to be learned and developed just like any other. Theatre makers don’t necessarily have the resources available to attempt this steep learning curve. With the production of *Plagued* I had to rely on the media designers who were themselves trying to learn about the software and hardware requirements as they went along. We were essentially building the plane while we were flying it. When something went wrong they didn’t have the knowledge or experience to swiftly

make the changes to correct it. This creates the burden of uncertainty and impacts the overall workflow.

At the same time, when there is access to the right equipment for merging live video with digital media it can be an exciting medium for theatre making. Once I had access to the Isadora software, a large computer processor, full coverage green screen, multiple tripods and web cameras and a full willingness to be adventurous and frustrated at the same time, I could then embark into the world of virtual theatre.

The devising process for my thesis solo began with research ranging from social media culture to self identity. Without knowing if I would be able to return to the campus of Sarah Lawrence I continued researching forms of digital theatre. One performance that resonated with me was “Pixel” in which the digital technology wasn’t just used to create a scenic background; it was also used to create projections on the stage that the performers interacted with (VanHemert). This use of interactive technology sparked an interest in using digital media as a medium to interact with as part of my solo.

Continuing on this path, the next area of research explored the theory of theatre and technology and came from several distinct sources. Jennifer Parker-Starbuck wrote a compelling and thought provoking piece that argued that human beings are living as cyborgs in this contemporary digital culture. Parker-Starbuck’s book *Cyborg Theatre Corporeal Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance* states:

“The cyborg emerges as one such merging, a “cybernetic organism” comprised of part organic/living organism and part synthetic/technological material. Ranging from the fictional imaginary of Frankenstein’s monster or Star Trek’s Borg to the reliance upon eyeglasses or hearing aids, to literal prosthetic limb extensions and internal mechanical valve replacements; to the

conceptual interfaces such as “smart” weaponry that “thinks,” or the augmentation of non-human bodies such as insects that are being mechanically augmented, the cyborg has emerged in fiction, popular culture, science, the military, and in daily life as a representation of the often tangled line between bodies and technology” (1).

As I contemplated the idea that humanity was already a form of cyborg due to our digital dependency, it begged the question, how exactly are our organic bodies being morphed and affected in ways we might not fully recognize or understand? What are the long term implications of the corporeal and digital merging? Consider the quantitative use of social media where our physical identities are able to be altered or transposed into a simulacrum. The assumed personas or avatars of ourselves are no longer bound by the strictures of our physical reality. This cyborg or avatar experience is a creation of internal imagination and virtual space is so entrancing that it subsumes our tangible reality. Contemporary individuals can start to believe it is an extension of who they really are as a human being. These cyborg identities manifests itself along a spectrum of simulated reality ranging from deep fakes to freedom of expression or the totality of what a person pursues. Legacy Russell expanded on the idea of using the internet as an escape from the physical politics of the body, stating:

“With the early avatar of LuvPunk12, I cloaked myself in the skin of the digital, politicking via my baby gender play, traveling without a passport, taking up space, amplifying my queer blackness. This experience of machinic mutiny was foundational to me, and gave me the courage to let go of the ambivalence that comes with fear of fossilizing in formation inherent to the upheavals of adolescence. I found family and faith in the future with these interventions, shaping my personal visions of a self that could be truly empowered in being self-defined, a futurity that social decorum regularly discouraged for a queer Black body” (17).

The empowering nature is an attractive drive for continuing to live in a virtual world where one can feel safe to define and express an identity. However, social media can also dilute our sense of self and relation with others. The crux of these two spaces is that we believe what we see, which means that our culture has become so enmeshed with social media it is hard to distinguish what is real and meaningful. It's seductively easy to believe what is posted on the internet as a form of truth if it confirms the individual's prior convictions. One alarming example is the advancement of technology that allows individuals to appear as some else. Before we've relied on video as being the truth, as photos could be altered, but now video can be altered without detection. An example of this are posts on TikTok of what appears to be Tom Cruise, but it is a complete fabrication ("No, Tom Cruise Isn't on TikTok. It's a Deepfake").

Another example of social distortion is the traction enjoyed by social media influencers. It's become very hard to identify the reality of their identity because what they post online is manipulated to appear authentic, but it is heavily filtered and manicured to project a social ideal. In the documentary, *Fake Famous* the creator shows multiple ways that contestants could take photos that would allow them to appear like they were influencers (Berman). They took pictures and videos that were set in fancy hotel resorts, or in lavish vacation locales. In reality they were in their own backyard. Not only can influencer's pictures and videos be altered by the creators, the followers themselves are fake accounts that were purchased to like and comment on an influencer post. The technology has surpassed our capabilities to know what is real. This is both terrifying and fascinating and it inspired me to learn how these technologies work.

As an experiment, I learned how to use software now freely available to make what's called lenses and augmented reality. The app, Snapchat, has a downloadable software called Lens Studio. Through watching Youtube videos I learned how to use this software to make digital

masks that morphed my appearance in multiple ways. I could make myself look more presentable with blemish reduction or make up enhancements, or I could make myself look completely ridiculous with disproportionate facial features or even incorporating pictures, videos and three dimensional creatures. In playing with these functions I considered merging the idea of a beauty influencer with the lens technology in altering appearances.

Jaclyn Hill is a famous beauty and makeup influencer on Youtube with close to 6 million subscribers. Her videos caught my attention because of how different she looked with and without makeup. She alters her appearance so drastically that I would not be able to distinguish her as the same person. It reminded me of the beauty filters that could make a person digitally appear dramatically different, but still believable as real. Jaclyn's personality on camera is perfect for creating an influencer character. I wrote a script verbatim from one of Jaclyn's videos to introduce myself as the influencer in my solo. I did alter it for the final performance, but you are able to see the structure on the original video I modeled it after (Jaclyn Hill 00:15–03:25).

In Lens Studio I made a screen capture of myself making the different lenses as if I was a beauty influencer in a tutorial video. Using this technology it recognizes the facial structure and creates a geometrical mesh that I could distort in any way I wished. The program shows how the face is being altered in a real-time preview video. I screen captured this preview to then edit later. With these captured images as a video I could edit them in a way that blended with tutorial videos made by Jaclyn. I used her voice (speeding up and slowing down) as the narrator or instructor of the how-to process. It became a comedic collage of comparing the process of altering one's face digitally as opposed to physically, yet what was most interesting for me was how the perception of myself was altered. Watching my face morph digitally caused me to forget how I actually look in reality. Digitally I could make my eyes bigger, my skin clearer, and make my

smile symmetrical when in real life it is asymmetrical. And when I had the lens filters on I started to believe that's how I actually looked. When I took the filter off and saw my real facial structure it was an uncanny experience of remembering my own face.

After which, I built a world for my character and determined which ideas to incorporate. I was very excited by the possibilities, however it required additional skills beyond what I'd learned from making theatre. I was entering into a new world with a new language and an inter-lacing web of communities. Each software has a different language and tools at its disposal. Some are more complex than others. What's surprising is how many resources are available to learn about the software programs. There are Youtube tutorials, social media groups, other forums and learning material freely available online. With all this information I began to understand enough to start creating, but it was a rough and frustrating process. The learning curve was not easy to master. For example some of the tutorials available weren't helpful or were outdated and I had to adapt all the information to a theatre making process. If something wasn't working I could spend hours on youtube and still not solve the problem. Several questions that were asked on a forum and never received a reply. There were still links of information that I had to learn by simply trial and error.

There were two artists that inspired me during this time. One was Valencia James who is a movement artist experimenting with new media in dance and theatre. During the pandemic she worked with a design team to make Volumetric Performance Toolbox, which as they describe, "An open-source prototype for volumetric dance performance in Mozilla Hubs. We envision this as a set of tools that allow movement artists to capture and stream their performances in real-time from their own living spaces, using minimal equipment, and viewed by a virtual audience of real

people. The performance would be accessed via web browser across most devices and not limited to virtual reality headsets” (2021).

With this hardware setup, Valencia can dance in her living room and the image is coded to show up three dimensionally in a three dimensional environment. This virtual environment is a platform called Mozilla Hubs. People can build their own world and invite other people to experience it through the online platform. The participants enter in as a simple 3D avatar. Valencia is dancing in the digital space with an audience of avatars, representing a live virtual audience, in this virtual world. This was a game changer. The notion that technology had advanced sufficiently to allow our own avatars watching another avatar on a virtual stage was exciting and conflicting. It's that gnawing fear of the uncanny; that one day virtual reality will be the only reality. Still the idea of interactivity in a live performance inspired me to continue the pursuit.

The other artist was Miwa Matreyek. She is a performing artist who first started as an animator. During her grad school work at CalArts, she began experimenting with animation as a component in live theatre. The group of collaborators eventually formed the performance company Cloud Eye Control (Swed) and Miwa continued to pursue her solo work in animation with live performances. She came as a guest artist to Sarah Lawrence where we got to watch her full piece *Infinitely Yours*, and ask her questions about her process. Having this brief time with Miwa gave me a better understanding about how to form my own solo work I was trying to make as a digital theatre piece. Miwa's process uses shadows and animation that are projected onto a screen. The actor's shadows or their body themselves interact with the created animation. In her solo, *Infinitely Yours*, it was a detailed animation that interacted with her shadow, making it appear as though she was in the animated environment or interacting with the other characters (Dambrot). Miwa used the software “After Effects” to make the animations. I was similarly us-

ing After Effects for animation, but I still had to find a virtual platform for my stage. It wasn't until I could access Isadora software that I could start to conceptualize how to present my ideas as a digital performance.

Isadora is a program specifically designed with the theatre in mind. Initially it was used for projections and interactive media devices with the performer on stage. But during the pandemic the developer made it possible to connect the program to a virtual camera similar to how OBS connects to Zoom. In fact, I used the OBS camera function on Zoom to display my performance, including the virtual environments, into the Zoom screen itself. Isadora gave me the platform to create the layered compositions, visual effects to the live camera feed and a solid working software that could be cued and triggered on demand. It was the key to putting all my different media pieces together.

Unlike the OBS program, Isadora could show the digital stage in real time without a lag effect. This meant I could work with the animations clearly as well as synchronizing the sound. It's also more powerful and user friendly by which I mean I didn't have to code and download plugins to work with my computer to get the effects I was searching for. The virtual effects could be made on video and the live stream video. The programming required to build the scenes and composite all the media was another skill that needed to be learned. Again there were tutorials that allowed me to figure out the basics, but like other programs there are multiple ways to get an effect. Trial and error was once again the process. Except with Isadora it was originally designed for the stage and has been around for quite awhile, there were a few professors from Sarah Lawrence that could help me with questions (saving me hours of Youtube training).

With Isadora as the chosen platform, I built each scene that followed the written script. I was able to program the scenes in such a way that they could be controlled by the stage manager,

alleviating the worry about the technical side of the performance. Since this was my first time using Isadora, the programming could have been better. I had scenes that required internal cueing, which can get really confusing for the operator. Because of time constraints (I didn't get a handle on Isadora until about 4 weeks before the performance) I would experiment with the program, find out how to make the scene possible and then leave it. If I had more time I would have made chains of cues that could auto follow without manual internal cueing. It wasn't until the week of the show that I started to master the concept of how to chain the cues together.

The scenes called "the Void" were a live video of myself in an empty space with a white background. In these scenes I developed virtual effects on the live video of myself. In one section I was working on the idea of multiple selves to speak to the idea of a copy of a copy, or "the poor image" (Steyerl 31) that is experienced in our digital reality. Also the ideas of encountering oneself as a virtual double, the uncanny nature it possesses, and this idea of a recognition of one's own inevitable death became the through line idea of my solo. Matthew Causey writes about these ideas stating:

"The question of the real and the virtual and the position of performance in technoculture by isolating a critical moment in new media performance works specifically and technoculture in general, when the presence of the double takes place through mediated duplication: the simple moment when a live actor confronts her mediated other through the technologies of reproduction. (32) ... The uncanny experience of the double is death made material, unavoidable, present and screened" (33).

These ideas fascinate me and makes me frame the use of social media or versions of our avatar selves in virtual spaces as encounters and confrontations of recognizing one's self as human. As a simple expression of these ideas I constructed a series of scenes that had my live video

image encounter the replicated virtual image of myself. By replicating and reflecting the live video I could create these multiple selves. I particularly was amused when I was able to reflect my video feed so it looked as though I was talking to myself and then multiplied myself to appear like my reflections of the reflection were talking together as well. The audience wouldn't be able to know which is my "real" embodied self. I created this scene in Isadora in a few ways. There are video effects called reflection and flip already programmed into the software. I could put these effects on my live video, copy-paste, and multiply the live stream. For the other Void scenes I made a series of cues on the live video so the character could interact with these effects over a course of time through entrances and exits or movement within the frame.

Along with encountering multiple images of myself, I played with the idea of "self" as forms of different media animation that could be interacted with in real time. One example of this were the images of my five year old self after her first ballet performance. Through the use of Procreate I could rotoscope (or trace) over these images to make a series of images to look like the baby ballerina was a moving animation. I placed this animation with a layering of videos in Isadora. There was the background video, then the animation, then a live video of my hand.

Another example which was much more complicated was the interaction of animated environment and virtual puppets. First, I made the puppets which were actual physical toy objects that I altered. Then I took a picture of them in front of a green background to isolate for later making a transparent background and cleaned up the images using photoshop. Then I used After Effects to animate the toys to walk, wave, and dance. This became a media layer that I could use in Isadora.

With all the animated media I could create triggers in Isadora to make them appear and disappear on cue. Because the interactions were so complicated I tried to avoid internal cues and

instead use what is called in Isadora, features like envelope generators, trigger delays, and computers that would automatically cue the next scene by recognizing a number value it's assigned. To illustrate this I will describe the series of cues that happen in the last few scenes.

1. On the cue of my snap the stage manager presses 1, 2, or 3 to have the animations enter the scene as well as assigned sound effects for each animation.
2. After cue 3 is triggered it has a comparator that is activated based on an assigned time stamp of the video. The comparator activates the music that is programmed as a completely different scene in order for it to play across multiple scene changes.
3. Then on a visual cue the stage manager changes to the next scene which plays a video and triggers the fading in and out of the music and street sounds.

To put into perspective, the time span of creating the animations and the Isadora programming here is an example. Using After Effects it took me 8 hours to figure out how to animate one of the toy puppets to dance. The animation was only 18 seconds long. Then (again after multiple hours over 2 weeks) I could start programming it into Isadora. The programming of the chain of animations took me multiple attempts, Youtube tutorials and then a few hours for the actual programming. Moving into the future in working with animation and programming at least I will have learned the systems.

Because the process of animation takes such a long duration of time and produces only a few minutes of content I needed to add a new component to the solo. As a simple experiment I started filming myself turning through magazine pages. It was a fashion magazine that had images of women with high fashion clothing and make up. I was captivated by the moving images and seeing the faces flip, morph and change as the pages turned. I layered the videos together

altering the opacity to randomly arrange a progression of the moving pages. As the faces would morph with the page it seemed to paralleled the idea of the experiments I was doing with the digital face lens alterations. This section became one of my favorite parts of the solo. It was a different form of media medium and slower pacing that gave a subtle meditative moment compared to the fast pacing of the rest of the solo.

Overall the process was challenging, however I do feel I've found a new passion for technology in relation to theatre. The skill I've developed in this process will surely be an asset to me as I continue to make solo art and collaborative art making. However, more than anything are the questions that linger as I think of the future of live theatre in relation to technology. Who will be the artists that continue to develop these forms of virtual theatre and how will that evolve when the pandemic recedes? Once we are able to return to the theatre will we see a new adaption of our use of media art in our live performances in physical spaces. It's exciting to think that the artists using the technology are part of the the development of this technology. Like we've seen in the current situation, the technologies of live virtual platforms that were being used in ways that weren't intended to be used when they were developed. The technology creators began to adapt to what the artist needed as they imagined greater possibilities in how to use them. With the platforms themselves, we are entering into uncharted territory that is only beginning to be understood as potentially dangerous when it comes to privacy. The more of a digital foot print one has by signing up for virtual programs, the more one's information is bought and sold without knowing where, to who, and when. We as artist using these platforms need to be mindful of these dangers for ourselves and for our invited audience members.

Again it takes me back to the uniqueness of live theatre in a physical space, meeting with other humans to experience something together. We have this opportunity as theatre makers to

really dig deep into why we choose to make live performance art. Jamie Gahlon wrote a beautiful essay *Devising Our Future Through a Commons-Based Approach* saying, “that the first step isn’t necessarily knowing every next step, but *being able to imagine in the first place*” (2021).

Imagining a future for theatre and human society is an exciting call for artists and one that I joyfully accept.

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