

Personal Perspective through Digital Art in Contemporary Theatre and Performance

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Abstract: Using certain camera techniques and visual effects have been proven means of showing personal perspective in movies throughout the years. However, little research has been done with regard to such means of portraying a personal perspective in theatre. Therefore, we propose a theoretical study of the field, in order to outline previous work. Moreover, we will base our theoretical frame on three contemporary examples: (a) *The encounter*, directed by Simon McBurney, where the personal experience is shown through the use of aural effects and the audience closing and opening their eyes, creating a distancing or immersion effect; (b) *Ubu Roy*, directed by Declan Donnellan, where the personal perspective of the character is shown through a mix of digital and non-digital means, such as a first person camera and changing the movement-style of the actors; (c) *The Loneliness of Stones*, directed by Gelu Badea, in which the personal perspective is shown through projecting both abstract and non-abstract visual elements on stage, along with the use of a first-person camera. Through comparing these three productions which have very different aesthetics, we can better isolate the concrete instruments used by directors to change the perspective from an objective one to a subjective one in theatre. This procedure is harder in performance art than in film, due to the limitations of theatrical means. The conclusion of our presentation is that digital art is used in theatre to show the personal perspective of the characters, the cast and the directors. We argue that it is exactly because theatre has limited means of perspective-shift in comparison to film that theatre makers use technical and digital solutions for this specific staging need.

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I. Introduction

In a private conversation held during the Matei Vişniec Theater Days International Festival in Suceava, we were talking with director Alain Timar

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about contemporary theatrical means. The French director was telling us that today we can no longer appreciate from a theatrical point of view shows that "look good." With technology so advanced and inexpensively available in any theatre, from lighting to projections and sound design, it's very easy to make shows that "look good." We understand, then, that although theatre was, at its origins, "the place where we see", today a radical dichotomy appears between the aesthetical and the theatrical. The beautiful is no longer a feature of the quality-theatre-performance, and the spectacular is becoming something too easily and oftentimes gratuitously achieved in today's theatre.

A theatre performance in which technology only has the role of beautifying the stage images risks relegating the specific elements of theatricality to the background. Beyond all the permutations in theatre and performing art in the post-modern context, we strongly believe it is crucial to (re)place the actor at the centre of the theatrical act: The tool of the actor is his/her self. Mentally, physically, and emotionally, the actor gives of themselves in service of the play in production. The actor is the vehicle for communication into which the audience may place themselves for the original—low-tech—VR experience. As the avatar for all of us gathered watching and listening in the audience, the actor is the irreducible unit, the individual human embodiment in the living fiction unfolding onstage. In a sense, the actor's body is one inhabited by many. Thus, the actor's body itself is quintessential in the theatre experience.

It is where technology and technical means end up on the first place and end up "stealing" the viewer's eye, that the actor is reduced to being just one of the image-creating factors. The actor becomes a puppet that performs a series of actions in a beautiful lighting, with an emotional sound background, in front of projected images that contain the message of the performance.

So, as a director and as a pedagogue, we ask ourselves where is the line drawn between the necessary technical intervention and the aestheticizing technical intervention. Is it possible to have such an objective demarcation? Alex Olszewski, in his handbook dedicated to the use of projections in theatre, offers the following view on the subject: „Designers should ask themselves why digital media should be used in a production. How can technology and digital media help tell the story, create meaning, and become essential to the audience experience? The answer to these questions comes down to the specifics of each individual show, but keep in mind this basic question: «What story

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are we trying to tell and how does the inclusion of digital media help us tell that story effectively?»»”

Therefore, to become truly necessary to the theatrical act, the use of technology in theatre must have a concrete function in the performance, inextricably linked to the purpose of the show. However, the purpose of theatre is not to tell a story. Telling a story is only one of the means by which theatre achieves its wider objective: that of conveying an ideational content (whether it is a political thesis or not). Additionally, in a world where we have extremely quick and easy access to thought-provoking content in a variety of mediums and modalities, from television, to digital content, to streaming, to gaming and more, the purpose of theatre must be to convey an ideational content not only specifically, but fundamentally different, essentially different from the other available means. Why does the viewer leave the house, travel to a specific location (having financial and time costs), enter a crowded space, where they see a cultural product that they cannot stop and restart at will, where they have to follow some strict rules of conduct? Why doesn't he turn to a streaming service or check his news feed on his favourite social media platform to get cheaper and faster access to topics selected by a special algorithm for his interests?

Of course, our question is a broad one, which contemporary theatre has been trying to answer since the 1920s. However, it is a relevant one, because through the use of technology, theatre borrows the means of the mediums from which it needs to attract its spectators, and by doing so, it becomes closer to precisely what it is trying to delineate from. The function of technology in theatre must be different. The thesis of this article is that the function of technology in theatre should be in the area of constructing personal perspectives, of the artist and of the characters, on the fictional world they construct. This type of perspective, we believe, remains the prerogative of theatre and of theatricality in the face other media and of multimedia.

II. The imaginary perspective of the spectator – *The Encounter*, directed by Simon McBurney

The use of technology in theatre has its origins in Greek theatre. Technical devices were used in ancient tragedy to show the apparition of gods or supernatural beings and to present moments that transcend the earthly, such

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as Medea's departure on a dragon-drawn chariot at the end of Euripides' tragedy. Similarly, Simon McBurney faces an impossibility when creating *The Encounter* (2015 – *Complicité*), a show based on Petru Popescu's *Amazon Beaming*. He has to represent an Amazonian jungle on stage, which is beyond difficult to achieve from a plastic point of view. For McBurney, scenographically rendering the idea of an Amazonian jungle was insufficient. Watching the performance, it becomes extremely clear that he wants to convey to the audience the experience lived by the main character of the novel. For this, conceptualizing the space of a jungle and rendering, capturing or conveying its key features, as happens in the process of traditional scenographic transposition, was not enough. At the same time, a naturalistic work process, an exact imitation of the jungle, would have proved, first of all, extremely expensive. Moreover, it would have also likely failed in conveying more than the still-shot of a jungle, in conveying the immersive and subjective experience of the jungle trail.

Thus, the English director turns to technology to achieve the desired effect: namely to render the jungle and the journey through the jungle using audio means, using spatialized sounds and using live sound effects. The use of audio rather than video (as would have been the projection of a jungle in the background of the show) had a double function: on the one hand it reduced the artificiality inherent in current video technology and on the other hand it allowed a greater degree of freedom in relation to the public. The show is interactive, which is much more difficult to achieve using video technology than audio.

Through technology, *The Encounter* also manages the whole problem of audience-stage relationships. The performance begins with the performer giving a speech to the audience. Here the technology, namely the headset microphone that Simon wears, constitutes in itself a cultural quote, of all the discourses with social and psychological themes that we are used to, especially through the lens of TEDx. The performer then presents the very technical means he is going to use and how he will use them. The use of voice processing and the amplified rendering of the actor's voice in the flesh constitute an element of dissonance, as Hans-Thies Lehmann also notes: "Traditionally, the sound of the voice acted as an aura around a body, whose truth was its word, and which promised no more and no less than the identity of a man. From which it follows that the game of the new media technology, which breaks down the actor's presence and especially his body-vocal unity, is not child's play."

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Later, during the performance, the use of binaural audio technology becomes the mark of immersion in the fictional world of the show, in the story. Simon McBurney's image of the world we live in becomes increasingly dull, and the image of the jungle, as captured by a narrator whose stage identity becomes increasingly vague, takes shape more and more strongly. By using such a complex sound design, we arrive at a construction of a world that is impossible to reproduce physically on stage, but also at a deconstruction of the identity of the actor-performer. In addition, the use of sound space as a key element in the construction has a peculiar aesthetic effect. With our eyes open, we are put in front of a clear post-dramatic set, in which the technical means to be used before us are presented. With our eyes closed, we are in front of a hyper-naturalistic show, in which we are almost brutally transposed into another space, which we cannot see as artificial or fake. So, the play between the various technological instances and the dramaturgical structure of the performance is used in *The Encounter* as a means of approaching the audience and the performer, as a near naturalistic means, not as a means of distancing and revealing the theatrical convention.

III. The character's subjective perspective - *Ubu Roi*, directed by Declan Donnellan

Moving on to Declan Donnellan's staging of the text *Ubu Roi*, by Alfred Jarry, produced by Cheek by Jowl in 2013, we find ourselves in front of a classic, theatrical, 'fourth wall' setting. We have a background with two doors with a series of grooves and ornaments in the wall. In the centre of this wall we have a sketched-up fake fireplace. To the left of the space there is a wooden table and four white plastic chairs. On the right we have a sofa. The furniture is contemporary. The chromatic of the set is dominated by white. The floor is covered with a white carpet.

It's interesting how the video projection appears in this type of space. Despite the theatricality of the set, the projection reveals itself as inadequate, incongruous with the scenographic construction. There is no special place created for the video projection, it is made on the entire back wall of the set, so it seems somewhat improvised, forced, separated from the rest of the set construction. This is consistent with the projected images themselves, which are captured using a handy-cam, made to appear trembling and reinforcing the

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fact that they are live-captured images. Here also we are dealing with a highlighting of the used technical equipment, even if not as strong and obvious as it was in the *Complicité* production.

It turns out that in contemporary theatrical aesthetics, compared to other artistic media such as film, theatre does not try to hide its means of production. Cinema tries to achieve the maximum possible verisimilitude, through editing, through computer generated images, through sound effects, etc. Theatre, knowing that it will never be able to reach such a level of realism as to compete with film, chooses to expose its impotence, resorting to a cruder, but also apparently more personal type of construction.

In Donnellan's show we encounter again the need to transcend the limitation of theatre. A film can have a very large number of shooting locations. Theatre, however, is limited by the surface of the stage. One of the first ways the lead actor uses the camera is to take it backstage, where we have a number of other rooms, including a working kitchen where characters cook. The idea of a portion of the world being captured on stage is radically contradicted, showing us that the fictional world does not end behind the background of the stage but continues *ad infinitum*. Of course, in the construction of the performance, we are shown that the fictional world cannot be escaped, that it is a continuum. Here, then, we have another example by which technology is used in theatre to render the impossible, in this case a scenic world that seems to never end, that is not bounded by the stage.

Again, this technique is also a naturalistic one. It is deliberately naturalistic to present a world "as it is", one of the basic limitations of theatre in this regard being precisely its reduced surface. Although in these shows we have a strong postmodern aesthetic, the effect of the technology used on stage seems to have the opposite function: to deepen the realism of the show. The purpose of the projection in this performance sequence is to outline the identity of the represented-space, of the world in which the characters live. How do they eat, how do they cook, how do they live, what do they do all day long? All these elements are not discursive, they are not ideational contents, but they only make the characters and the space more believable.

Regarding the video camera itself, it carries a dual function, one psychological for the character and one construction-related function for the audience. Following the realistic-psychological line, the character uses the camera only as another toy in his great boredom. Donnellan creates a context in which Jarry's text is possible: a boy from an upper-middle-class French

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family is terribly bored at a dinner party thrown by his parents with another couple of friends, and he imagines the entire action of the play during this dinner. For the frame of the show to work, the director needed a number of ways to portray his boredom. The austerity of the set, the banality of the discussions between the parents, the lack of any points of interest for the character or the spectators constitute such elements.

Through this boredom, the character begins to use the video camera, which becomes a new means of relieving boredom. Using close-ups on a series of mundane actions and objects, we are shown and reinforced that even the most interesting things that happen are, in fact, completely devoid of meaning and interest to us, but also to the character. This is the construction-level function for the spectator that makes it possible for all the action of Jarry's play to take place in that space. Jarry's world, full of betrayals, passions and comic absurdity, is a counterpoint to the frame of the show.

The digital doubling of characters becomes relevant in this context. Nadja Masura writes about this technique: „One of the most utilized Digital Theatre effects is the video other or the Actor's Double. The idea of doubling the actor onstage with his own image lends an air of the uncanny and self-introspection. This effect most often includes the playback of prerecorded media to which the onstage actor responds, but it can also include the projection of realtime video footage from performers, usually off stage.» [...] In the case of a living actor set against the 2D video actor, there is a perceptual difference which can open up a visual and ontological dialogue between the body of the Actor and the imagebody of the screen character. Here the actor is othered by the contrast to his or her project image.”

In *The Encounter* we were dealing with a doubling of the character in the Brechtian sense, where we saw the actor and the character on stage in succession, as two different instances. Here, in addition to the actor and his digital avatar, we have a third instance: the character inside the frame. This triple pose (character - digital double - imaginary character) is another extremely difficult element to achieve without technical means. So, discussing the valence of technology in the construction of stage identity, technology does not only help us portray more believable or deeper characters and fictional worlds, but also allows the multiplication of stage identities of the same person. Thus, the presentation of emotional changes or leaps in time become much easier to achieve than in the absence of technical means.

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Returning, however, to the discussion at the beginning of the article, regarding the boundary between the theatrical and non-theatrical use of the technology, it is precisely the ease of using these means that becomes a danger. In *Ubu Roi* we see such an instance: the transition between the world of "today" and the world of "Jarry", an imaginary world, is made through a change of lighting, the appearance of a specific sound track and a change in the acting technique. The lighting and the sound have the significant impact. It is a conventional, already clichéd type of construction, very easy to achieve. It is debatable whether the use of video camera and projection is not yet another unnecessary extra-theatrical element in the performance, another way to show us very directly whose perspective is being adopted in the performance and to show us the direction of the character's attention. At the same time, it is also debatable whether such a conventional stage technique is a mannerism or a contemporary form of codification, a practice that has solely become mainstream.

IV. The imposed director's perspective – *The Loneliness of Stones*, directed by Gelu Badea

Gelu Badea directs, in 2023, at Târgu Jiu, the play *The Loneliness of Stones*, by Flavius Lucăcel, a text awarded at one of the most prestigious dramaturgy competitions in Romania, but not staged until now. The play follows the dissolution of a couple whose child has autism, capturing the distance that appears between family members due to everyday conflicts. Gelu Badea, both in his directorial and pedagogical activities, advocates not using projections and excessive technical means: „Contemporary theatre is suffocated by smoke and snow machines, machines that make rain possible, machines that produce fog and heavy smoke, microphones that distort the actor's voice, video or static projections, telephones or video cameras that take live pictures. However, we cannot ignore all these crutches of the theatre. We also find ourselves every time we stage a show in front of directorial solutions that involve this entire technical arsenal.”

In this show, Gelu Badea uses projection and live video images with several separate purposes, all stemming from a directorial need of his. First of all, the technical team of the show is on stage, although the Elvira Godeanu Târgu Jiu Theater, where the show is produced, has a dedicated space for the

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technical team. So, we are dealing with a revelation of the technical means, but with a twist: the technical team also becomes a character. They all wear sunglasses and respond to certain technical elements of the show, such as light cues. They do not interact directly with the fictional world of the show, with the characters, but they lose their civil status, as non-participants in the show. They become a permanent fixture of the show.

One of the members of the technical team operates a handy-cam, whose images are projected onto the backdrop of the stage. As the audience enters the theatre hall, the technical crew films them. Beyond the recognition of technology as an integrated part of the show, by duplicating and exposing the presence of the spectators in the hall, their presence and their position as an integrated part of the performance is also recognized. It is a technique used in many contemporary performances, which also has the role of making the audience self-aware: „Digital Theatre provides a space for dialogue between the individual body and that of the other. By setting the actual, “live,” co-present human body against its mediatized other, the hyperreal, which can include cyber and cyborg characters in the form of video images, 3D avatars, or robots, a dialectical moment occurs between the concepts of human and machine.” After seating the audience in the hall, the camera will only follow details from the stage in the projection, closing this frame and, implicitly, the fourth wall. In addition to framing the projection, this creates a bridge to the end of the show, when all the spectators are united using a red thread, and each spectator receives a small ball of red wool to take home. The emphasis on communion and community is built from the first moment of the show, but not THROUGH technical means, but ALSO THROUGH technical means. The technology in Badea's performance originates in the dramatic need of the play and is supplemented by specifically theatrical means.

Unlike Donnellan's performance, the handy-cam projection in *The Loneliness of Stones* does not aim to adopt the character's perspective, but to function as a focus and zoom vector. The projection follows a series of close-ups at various points in the show, revealing gestures and objects, such as the book a character is reading or the show's inventory of objects. Projection makes actions that are normally non-theatrical possible and feasible on stage. For example, the autistic child (played by a very old actor), draws a lot. It is a refuge of his, but also a means of expression. Using the video camera, viewers can see what the child is drawing, transforming and re-contextualizing his stage activity. Only through this technical means does the stage activity become fully intelligible. The effect is profoundly cinematic: "Although

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theatre directors often use a considerable array of techniques to 'direct' their audience's attention (gestures, lighting, blocking, stage composition), the effect is less oriented than in film. Also, a distinction is made in that a theatrical audience is more aware of themselves and their collective reactions as an audience and hence less anonymous." Through the technical media we have an insight into the mind of a character who, by his way of being, cannot express himself properly. We are dealing with a completion of the missing lines of the play's text, using extremely concrete stage actions, but which can only be revealed through technical intervention.

Taking character doubling beyond what we saw in Donnellan's show, Badea uses childhood photographs of the actors on stage, which are treated as childhood photographs of their characters. He projects frames captured live with these photographs, arriving at the following human-media dialectic: we see the projection of a real, printed image of the actor as a child, at the same time seeing the photograph-object in the hand of the character who looks at the same image as a photograph from his own childhood. By creating multiple multiplications, possible variants of interpretation are also created, which is most suitable for an art that wants to delineate itself from the mass cinema production, which has a very clear and direct message and line of interpretation. Moreover, this dialectic complements the message of the show, which is based on the idea of some archetypal human experiences: the couple, the disintegration of the family, the guilt of the child in the face of the unhappiness of the parents, the communion with those around, the experience of being excluded and so on.

All the elements listed above recommend Gelu Badea's performance as a true post-cinematic work, at the level of the technical construction used, as defined by Piotr Woycicki: „Thus, post-cinema can be exemplified by a variety of hybrid art forms such as contemporary intermedial theatre, but also computer games, DVDs, virtual realities, installation work, websites and happenings. Their characteristics often emphasise non-linear narrative forms, audience interactivity, the witnessing of the process of production of cinematic images or an experience of aesthetics of flux, to give but a few examples.”

V. Conclusions

In conclusion, the use of technical means in contemporary theatre is often due to a reflex and it being convenient. Beyond how easy it is to achieve powerful effects using these technical means, they have a very important role in contemporary productions, which springs from the dramatic and theatrical needs of the plays. Among the most important functions of media technology in this context is the adoption of a stage discourse perspective. The technical means allow a doubling and a refocusing of already existing elements and refocuses the stage discourse, either on the story itself (*The Encounter*), on the character (*Ubu Roi*) or on the discourse of the artist (*The Loneliness of Stones*). To capture the distinction between performances that use the technology only for effects and those that use it out of an intrinsic artistic need, we choose to use the term inter-media theatre, in favour of multi-media theatre, as defined by Piotr Woycicki: „In that sense, intermedial theatre is essentially a hybrid art form encompassing theatre, film, live performance, computer generated virtual realities, communication technologies and so on.” Multimedia assumes that there are several sign-systems of equal importance on stage. In such a mix, we risk omitting that the essence of theatre is theatre: the unmediated meeting of the actor with the audience coupled with the artistic discourse of the creators. Using the term inter-media, we can better understand that there are performances where the final meaning of the stage action will be understood at the intersection of theatre with one or more different media used for rendering the stage content.

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