

Meet Me Through the Webcam: An Ethics of Participatory Performance Practice in the Age of Zoom

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Looking back now, almost a year and a half from when the scales tipped irretrievably towards global crisis, I was surprised to see how quickly I initially embraced the Zoom Quiz. It was only the 22nd March – the day *before* the initial official UK-wide lockdown began – when I attended my first, hosted by my good friend Ben. Here, you can see the results of the '30 Seconds to Create and Wear The Best Headgear' round (which I'm pleased to announce my wife – bottom right – obviously won).

By the summer – and you can tell it's the summer of 2020 because I'm sporting a very-much not-fetching lockdown-beard – I had resorted to hosting Zoom DJ sets for friends and family across the UK and beyond – streaming tailored playlists into their living rooms for a socially-distanced dance, in which the chat function became the text-based stand in for the conversations in the smoking area, the toilets, or the after-club kebab shop.

Whilst I remained physically *disconnected* from my friends during this time, I was shocked to find how intimately *connected* I felt during these sessions. Whilst I spent each 'set' in front of my laptop, switching tabs between Zoom and Apple Music, I came away from each night with the 'feeling' that I had spent an evening dancing with my friends. I was uplifted, tired, and well-socialised. Discussing this notion with friends recently, they also shared the same feeling. It was as if, in some small way, the act of dancing together had opened up some 'space of connection' – one that existed 'between the webcams' in which we had danced, caught up, and (badly) sung along to cheesy hits together in.

During this time, alongside my social life becoming intrinsically connected to online videos, so, too, did theatre across Britain. The most prevalent example of this – racking up over 12 million views across the whole programme (Richards, 2020) – was the National Theatre's weekly, free-to-stream recordings of their roster of previous productions. At 7pm on Thursday nights for each of the sixteen weeks this programme ran, viewers could access a show that they had missed out on (providing free access to audience demographics who may have not been previously able to access this material due to cost,

location or availability). I question the ‘theatricality’ of these events, however, in applying aspects of the continually developing investigation into the integrality of ‘liveness’ within the definition of theatre; from Peggy Phelan (1993) to Phillip Auslander (1999) and Matthew Reason (2004) particularly. To go back to Phelan’s original argument in which, as Reason (2004) summarises, she ‘locates her definition of performance in qualities of the live’ – she states that ‘Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented [...] once it does so, it becomes something other than performance’ (Phelan, 1993, p.146). Following this logic, the National Theatre’s weekly release of recordings was something *other* than performance in and of itself. At the time, it was described as the Netflix of Theatre, and it is prescient that, by the end of 2020, the National Theatre had released their own subscription streaming service – *The National Theatre at Home* – to be accessed by subscribers through their TVs.

If we are to continue to apply ‘liveness’ as central to the definition of performance, perhaps performance practice in the age of Zoom, in this sense, was to be found in the wealth of companies, artists and practitioners that transferred their practice to the webcam. Neideck et al. (2021) brilliantly describe an ‘exercise in salvage and resilience mediated through a range of digital windows’ that surely resonates with a number of companies who shifted their performances to a Zoom-based format during lockdowns, in which both performers and audience can be isolated in the relative comfort of their own homes. Whilst such performances re-centred liveness within the experience of online theatre, they also enclosed performance within what Neideck et al. define as the ‘digital window of the Zoom screen’.

Whilst Neideck et al.’s reflection on a number of productions which shifted into the Digital Window, the main frame (pardon the pun) of their research centres on the ‘window’ of Zoom becoming the performance space – the window in and through which productions are both staged and observed. They define this window as ‘like an actual window [...] designed to be used two-ways, for gazing and witnessing simultaneously. It requires at least two bodies in mutual gaze, and although there are many spaces in which these bodies exist. They come together in the “real” place of the digital window, which controls time, perspective and participation’ (Neideck et al, 2021). Such an application adequately describes the multitude of student, amateur and professional performances that blurred the line between

table read and production by having actors perform to camera, within the digital window – with Zoom’s inbuilt functions such as screen-highlighting and virtual backgrounds becoming simple digital tools to replace scene changes and sets.

However, I proffer that Neideck et al.’s use of the term participation, here, raises particular issues regarding the application of the Digital Window as the ‘place’ of performance for certain forms of Zoom-based participatory practice developed during lockdown. Going back to my initial hypothesis regarding my experience of *feeling as though* I had met with my friends in a space ‘between the webcams’ during Zoom-based DJ sets, I want to briefly describe two digital participatory productions that, in their application of Zoom as a performance platform, actively broke down the ‘Digital Window’ as described by Neideck et al. in order to – in my opinion – instead, generate a third, liminal space in which the performers and participants interacted.

Importantly, both performance projects – Django Pinter’s *Four More Walls* (2020) and Jess Starns’ *Virtual Walks* (2020) – were produced throughout lockdown with support from Project Phakama’s Digital Artist Bursary fund. I have been fortunate to work with Phakama over a number of years and across various projects and have come to understand their methodology and ethos as an insider. Currently celebrating their 25th anniversary, the company facilitate participatory arts projects based on their ‘Give and Gain’ framework. As Katie Beswick describes it, this methodology is ‘a non-hierarchical approach to arts practice, where each participant, including the facilitators, is understood to have something to offer and something to learn from the creative process’ (Beswick, 2016). As an example of an applied arts company focussed on process over product, and the importance of equal participation, Phakama are considered exemplary. During the first UK lockdown, the company wanted to ‘encourage ways of staying socially connected and increasing solidarity’ (Phakama, 2021) by opening up a ‘Digital Artist Bursary’ in the form of seed funding to participatory artists who ‘were finding creative ways to move their practice to digital formats, and who were reaching out to participants feeling isolated’ (Phakama, 2021). The emphasis, here, is on participation and connection – with an aim to find ways to facilitate participation by utilising the tools available in the online space.

Django Pinter's *Four More Walls: Tales from The Elephant's Trunk*, began as a series of virtual devising workshops and culminated in an 'online interactive storytelling experience' (Phakama, 2020) in September 2020. The piece utilised computer program Isadora in combination with Zoom to blend animation with live webcam-feeds of both actors and performers – quite literally inserting both participant and performers into a third virtual space. This combination then enabled live interaction between participants and performers within this space - varying from young participants being inserted into animated journeys through their webcams, to participants using the Zoom whiteboard function to draw new items into a physical 'house'. As Django explained to me, his method of using Isadora in order to create participatory digital theatre is still developing, but initially stemmed from a 'lot of looking at Zoom theatre [happening during lockdown] and thinking [...] why is *this* live? Why is this on Zoom? You could have just recorded this' (Pinter, 2020). What 'sucked', in Django's opinion, was 'simply adapting a piece you were going to do live [in a theatre] for Zoom – because it wasn't made for that. What [he] wanted to do was take the advantage of the medium [making work that] is bespoke for the medium it's created in' (Pinter, 2020). In combining the functions of Isadora and Zoom, a new space – which I see as an intermedial, liminal third space – is opened up, in which participants and performers meet and interact, leading to Django seeing such work as 'site specific' (Pinter, 2020). The overall sense of the piece was, quite literally, an 'opening' of the Digital Window – live digital participation that broke apart what we had as both audiences and employees, by that point, come to expect from Zoom. The project was not content in simply translating performance to the constraints of the Digital Window, but by combining different programs built upon – and revitalised – what could be possible.

Similarly, Jess Starns' *Virtual Walks* combined Zoom with Google Street View in order to enable participants to take each other on virtual walks anywhere in the world. The project stemmed from Jess' own experience with her Grandfather. She recounts times sat with him on the sofa whilst he would use Google Street View in order to take her on 'walks' around his hometown in Ireland – 'he would show me where he went to school, where my great grandparents were buried, where the shops were...' (Starns, 2020). By opening up this experience as a virtual performance project, Jess enabled participants to 'host' walks – as individuals, pairs or groups – for other participants around the globe. These walks,

in which ‘hosts’ take participants on a virtual tour, complete with narration, varied from visits to hometowns, to recounting memories from holidays, to tours of particular museums – even virtual walks close to the ‘hosts’ home which they were unable to physically experience during Lockdown. Importantly, Jess emphasises the significance of facilitating accessible participation, collaborating with people ‘to make art in a way that perhaps feels like we’re not making art’ (Starns, 2020). Whilst the project differs in aesthetics to *Four More Walls*, through facilitating an empathetic, communal space through the combination of Google Street View and Zoom, Jess places participants within the virtual space – enabling them to take each other on journeys in a way that promotes connection, collaboration and communion. As she explained to me, friendships were built up during the course of the project, with participants coming back throughout the programme to go on each other’s walks together.

In building participatory performance from the virtual tools available during lockdown rather than simply translating previous practices to the Digital Window, both *Virtual Walks* and *Four More Walls* provide something *more* than what was quickly described as ‘Zoom Theatre’ during 2020. Through focusing on Phakama’s ‘Give and Gain’ methodology, each combined digital tools to bring participants together in a third, liminal space, whether an animated mountain or a virtual reality street. Importantly, both projects allowed those in isolation to meet within this space, with several participants across both projects shielding in their homes and even one audience member of *Four More Walls* participating from hospital. Arguably, a majority of digital theatre accessed throughout lockdowns – and particularly the most popular forms if we are to take the National’s output as that – created a disconnect between audience and actor in disrupting the essentiality of liveness, these projects broke through the Digital Window in order to offer connection *through* and beyond it.

Additionally, as we all became used to hosting (or at least participating in) calls on various video conferencing platforms, the common meaning of the word ‘Host’ dramatically altered in 2020. However, as McAvinchey et al. describe, Phakama’s participatory framework is built around the etymology of hosting as ‘mutual, reciprocal [...] protection, shelter or companionship’ (McAvinchey et al, 2018, p.41). If participatory performances such as *Four More Walls* and *Virtual Walks* are able to

open up the Digital Window, through the innovations that occurred – and are still occurring – in the wake of global changes to the theatre industry, perhaps they are able to bring participants together in a liminal space between the webcams. And whilst we remain unable to meet in a physical theatre or arts space, perhaps it is through the hosting of these performance makers in which we can find protection, shelter and companionship.

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