Dream *by the Royal Shakespeare Company: a dystopian experience of live performance, between avatars and virtual reality*

by Ester Fuoco

ABSTRACT: If, by definition, the performing event could not do without the co-presence in space and time of spectators and actors (Brook 21), history has shown us how profound reflections on the possibility of shifting the fundamental axes of theater have nevertheless come about. The increasingly substantial presence of video within performances, even if filmed in real-time, is one example that has called into question the fundamental concept of *hic et nunc*. The creation of performances for a single spectator has altered the anthropological binomial community/ritual in addition to the "non-human" entity of the performer, from metal theater to cyborg performance (Schrum). The Royal Shakespeare Company's new production (2021) *Dream* will be analyzed to discuss the particular artistic experimentation that has become widespread in the Covid era. This production, which is a technological performance watched by more than 20,000 people worldwide in just three days, brings performance and gaming technology together to explore new ways for the audience, a remote spectator, to experience live theater (Aebischer 21). As live play performances and readings continually crowd virtual platforms, theater is undergoing a radical shift from stage to screen and cyberspace. However, will these new formats survive in the post-pandemic times?

KEY WORDS: performing arts; virtual theatre; entanglement; transmedial performance; embodiment

The New Normal is based on the premise that
something has shifted. [...]
We are making new worlds faster
than we can keep track of them,
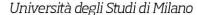and the pace is unlikely to slow. (Bratton 3)

INTRODUCTION

We have witnessed a radical rethinking of performing arts foundations in the last twenty years, resulting in a space no longer identifiable within temporal boundaries and a time concurrently moldable and even more often perceived as a continuous present. The shifting role of the performer is no longer necessarily embodied by a human. The dramaturgy has moved towards the concept of multimodal scenic writing and the spectator, who is no longer bound to a specific role or function, nor necessarily physically present. This essay aims to implement transversal disciplines, such as anthropology, aesthetics, and media studies, in the existential and theoretical analysis of the artistic object to analyze the phenomenon of theatrical hybridization and the increasingly adopted use of transmedia narration. In this case, a mixed–reality performance is "a mixing of the real and virtual and their combination of live performance and interactivity" (Benford, Giannachi 1). This study will focus on the attempt to define a new audience engagement implemented during the period of confinement due to Covid–19.

Let us start with Steve Dixon's definition of Digital Performance:

> [...] the term "digital performance" broadly to include all performance works where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery forms. This includes live theater, dance, and performance art that incorporates projections that have been digitally created or manipulated; robotic and virtual reality performances; installations and theatrical works that use computer sensing/activating equipment or telematic techniques; and performative works and activities that are accessed through the computer screen, including cybertheater events, MUDs, MOOs, and virtual worlds, computer games, CD–ROMs, and performative net.art works. (Dixon 3)

Many scholars have noted that the advent of this performance genre has led, on the one hand, to a semantic disregard of some unambiguous definitions attributed to theatrical art; on the other hand, the tendency to use hybrid "container" words, such as performance, multimodal performance, cyber theater, among others. With the beginning of the 21st century, the spectator has been overwhelmed by a rampant

proliferation of computer-based performances, to an algorithmic theater, which paradoxically turned out to be the only way of artistic creation in a time of the present-day characterized by the limitations imposed by a historical moment of social distancing.

The rapid and continuous evolution of stage space is a defining aspect of theater, coinciding contemporarily with the image–space proper to the art of cinema, where one can enjoy the ritual use of the image in the presence of (but mediated by) a technological apparatus. The spectators within a creative context, or those with well-defined relationships of mutual exchange between individuals who are part of the same social, ethical, and aesthetic circumstances, become facilitators of this new theatrical experience. Spectators give life to a path of transformation and regeneration of the habitus by redefining relationships between the individual and the community in the fabric of contemporary theater. They can also, therefore, identify themselves in the digital network, in virtual space, in different formats, and in a "system" understood according to the definition of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure as an "organized totality, composed of solidarity elements that can only be defined in relation to each other, according to their position in this totality" (Morin 114–115).

Before continuing, let us briefly clarify the debated issue of liveness within performance studies:

> that encompasses a wide range of often seemingly contradicting concepts, such as ephemerality and recording, as well as disappearance and remains. The two most prominent debaters in the field are arguably Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander. Their varying positions have generated many more critical reviews and invited expanded arguments by other performance studies scholars such as Mathew Causey, Steve Dixon, Jennifer Parker–Starbuck, Daniel Sack, Chris Salter, and Rebecca Schneider. (Kim 3)

The idea shared here is that of Steve Dixon, who notes Auslander's disregard of the phenomenological point of view linked to perception and relative differences in our reception of live and mediated forms of performance (Auslander 8). According to Dixon, being present does not limit spectator *liveness* since phenomenological experience tends to differ according to the media or modality of performance, be it live or recorded. Dixon concludes that viewers experience a qualitatively different perception of the performance depending on the presence and absence of live corporeal bodies. "Watching film, video, and digital media is a more voyeuristic experience than watching live performance, since in the literal sense of the word, the onlooker is looking from a position without fear of being seen by the watched" (Dixon 130).

In many ways, Dixon's position transposes the centrality of immediacy—a key concept that television studies have taken into account in articulating vitality—into the immersive experience of the viewing subject. As is well known, the word *théatron*, from which the term "theater" is derived in contemporary languages, appears for the first time in the Greek literary texts of the 5th century BC. It derives precisely from the verb *theàomai*, "to see," and can designate both the place where one is witnessing a show and the collectivity of spectators engaged in that show. The term "spectacle" itself, from

the Latin *spectacŭlum*, derives from the verb *spectare* and refers to the sphere of "looking." We want to underline that there is no hint of a concrete, physical presence in what one looks at, while an actor and a spectator's participation (not the presence) is undoubtedly considered fundamental and constitutive. In fact, audiences often experience a new performance environment in the contemporary era, easily accessed on their mobile, desktop, or tablet via the app or websites.

During the contemporary pandemic era, the theatrical space forcibly or experimentally chosen is the immaterial one, guaranteeing a mediated and safe co-presence of actor and spectator. This phenomenon has proved to be a survival tool for companies and theaters not suited to technological experimentation. For decades, it had already found its legitimization of study in the genre of Performing Studies. The introduction of the deferral of stimulus—as it occurs for secondary orality set in motion through the mediation of writing—inspires a sort of secondary sensoriality, activated when polyalphabetic reception occurs in a mediated form. Thus, we could identify seeing and hearing in the era of technical reproducibility analysed by Walter Benjamin, observing and perceiving "at a distance," both in space and time.

The development of new media is changing our models of perception. For this, Buffardi and de Kerckove[1] offer a necessary third step, defined as a tertiary sensoriality experienced through multimedia systems and the network, cascaded down to a tertiary sensoriality, modified and modifiable through the median of various interfaces. Here, in this area of hyper mediation characterized by fragmentation and heterogeneity, where the process and performance are emphasized rather than the finished artistic object, one could place the mixed reality performance chosen as the starting point for the analysis of this essay.

Theater is a modular, synaesthetic, and immediate hypermedium by its constitutive nature. Its hybridization with new technologies, complementary and re-mediated (Bolter, Grusin 21) in the performative context, allows one to increase expressive linguistic potential, reaching what is defined as an enhanced theater. It is a dramaturgy not entirely processed and predefined that allows interpolation, and the user modifies the contents. In this context, the spectator is seen as a user and a producer, co-author of the interactive relationship created in the performative context, even more so than in traditional theater.

The new media create a communicative space that constitutes an environment for relationships and communication. We, the users, spectators, or prosumers, already delegate the materiality of our digitized bodies daily to the immaterial space of the network and social networks, becoming trans conductors ourselves. Given the desire to present a paradigm change already underway for more than twenty years in performing studies, it is natural to define the virtual or computer-based theater as an effective tool during the live show production block in 2020 and 2021 during the Covid 19 pandemic. A hybrid format became an unpublished language for some theater companies,

guaranteeing the total non–interruption of the relationship between performing art and the public.

DREAM, A LIVE INTERACTIVE PRODUCTION BY ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

Dream is a show staged in March 2021, resulting from a collaboration between Manchester International Festival (MIF), Marshmallow Laser Feast (MLF), and Philharmonia Orchestra supported by the Portsmouth de Montfort University and several other partners. The project is also one of four Audience of the Future Demonstrator projects, supported by the government Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund, which UK Research and Innovation offer. Initially conceived as an immersive live production to be represented in the spring of 2020 in a disused H&M store in Stratford-upon-Avon, the show was then considered an experimental format suitable for exploring the intersection between live performance, immersive media, and connective virtual spaces. During the time of the Covid 19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions, this project became an operation of necessity and forced resilience, aimed at reaching a large audience restricted to a mandatory lockdown. The worldwide public had the opportunity to attend the show online for free or access the *Dream Lobby* for a nominal fee. Audiences could visit the virtual lobby before the performance to explore the world of *Dream*, interact with performers, and find out more about the production and its running times.

This transition from an in-person format to a direct and remotely performed one involved an enormous effort by the seven actors involved. However, it was not the first time that the artistic director Gregory Doran and his team experimented with virtual reality. In fact, in 2016, the British company's hi-tech production of *The Tempest* saw actor Mark Quartley hooked up to motion sensors to evoke a vision of the pixie Ariel hovering like a ghost above the stage—with an effect worthy of the tale of the Bard.

The phenomenon of diffusion of a theatrical subgenre definable as algorithm or computer based (Pizzo, Lombardo, Damiano 15) requires a brief contextualization:

> (the) VR activity has progressed in cycles since its invention. The term Virtual Reality is attributed to pioneer Jaron Lanier in 1989. Its definition created significant difficulties from the outset. Researchers wondered whether it should be defined by the type of technical apparatus it employs (the iconic "Head Mounted Displays" in particular) or by other more general principles or dimensions that determine immersion and presence in these virtual environments. Defining its "essence" has triggered intense philosophical and metaphysical elaboration. With the advent of a new generation of consumer devices, an intermediate definition seems to have been adopted: virtual reality has become a market that offers "on–demand" experiences. (Le Calvé 17)

Suppose theater stimulates both the perception of a world that exists independently of our will and gives itself as an object to our gaze as something inevitable and objective and the apperception that the spectator feels aware of being a

sentient subject of a perceptive phenomenon during the show. In that case, we can affirm that subjectivity in appropriating the object presented and seen live transmits an emotional coloring to these contents, in relation to an experience, attentional conditions, as well as to the emotional properties to which it is connected, by virtue of the mere acting and its related empathization, the apperceptive activity itself (Masura 234).

What about spectator involvement in a remotely enjoyed live show? Suppose the action, when observed or imagined, is inhibited. In that case, the motor cortical circuits are activated, even if not with the intensity of an action (Gallese, Guerra 81–82), which affects the fruition of a work such as *Dream* and the gamification operation implemented. In the absence of a recognizable realism at an intersubjective level, an involvement linked to the identification with embodied simulation may be lacking.
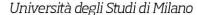
Dream takes the spectator into an oneiric world using digital characters that live actors perform. They used the latest gaming technology, live broadcast techniques, and performance technology to enable the actors and audience to interact in real-time. Each performance is unique, as the audience behaves differently at each event. All that is needed is a computer, a mobile phone, or a tablet. *Dream* does not have a defined dramaturgical structure; instead, it is presented as a virtual live performance implemented for tableaux vivants, for suggestions that recall the world of Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The screenplay, curated by Pippa Hill, is presented in fragments with a transmedia narrative that evolves through images in an immersive sound environment produced live.

The user or spectator's journey begins in the foyer, greeted by a Puck (EM Williams) visible in flesh and blood. He then enters the enchanted forest, where his actual human image transforms into a faceless 3D avatar, similar to a mannequin character. The performer's body transforms in shape but not in its ontological nature of simulacrum. It appears as a synaesthetic subject, that is, as one who experiences the nascent order of things that coagulate under our eyes from an inarticulate background. We are witnessing hybrid, liminal performative corporeality that is not yet entirely accepted, although certainly widely experienced. In the Heideggerian sense, this existence arises between two states of being. In this regard, the study carried out by the philosopher Roberto Diodato, featured across various volumes, on the aesthetic and philosophical status of the subject and virtual object is fundamental:

> Virtual bodies are *intermediary* realities […] for two fundamental reasons:
> a) They disrupt the dichotomy between "internal" and "external": they are neither a simple cognitive product of consciousness, images of mind—because the user is aware of experiencing an *other* reality—nor are they simply "external realities" to the mind—because they are always dependent on the actions of the user. […] virtual bodies are neither simply images, nor simply bodies, but rather image-bodies. […] The virtual body is therefore configured as a subjective-objective chiasm.
> b) (…) the image-bodies appear to be relatively stable and to abide in time, but like events that happen to us (or appear to happen to us), they exist only in interaction. (Diodato 31–32)

In the case of *Dream* we are witnessing a kind of composite performance, in which we cannot only refer to virtual reality, but we must also speak of telepresence, in which the use of computers, telecommunications, and robotics is a way to conjoin two or more real-world locations (Saltz 70), in our case the studio where the actor and our homes perform. The meeting will lead to a journey to nowhere, in a cyberspace dimension where one floats between the real and the simulated.

There are not only presences or images in *Dream*. Music is not merely a didactic or background detail; it helps make the viewer participate in the immersive video and audio experience. The music is symphonic and majestic, composed of a mixture of three parts played by 100 musical instruments of the Philharmonia Orchestra. In addition, there is a layer of interactive music created using a tool called Gestrument, which allows the performer to add a musical signature to gestures from the performance.

> There's just something really human and communal about 100 musicians playing together, so we just want some Big overwhelming beautiful music that makes people feel immersed. At moments they will be frightened and there will be moments of wonder, but at the heart of it we want people to find a sense of a communal experience—that's the glorious thing about what an orchestra can do. We also want it to feel that you know that what you're seeing is live. The way the performers move and interact with the sound world will mean that every show is slightly different. (Ritchie 1)

In an interactive experience, spectators with an "audience plus" ticket have the opportunity to "embody" a firefly that guides them along the character trails with its light (Lennox 6). This venture entails "launching" spheres of light on the scene to illuminate it. When this happens, the screen divides, and a three-dimensional map appears on the right side, where one can direct the sphere of light and follow it into the area in which the scene takes place. Simultaneously on the left side of the screen, the virtual scene in progress remains visible. The user, diverted from the initial immersive experience, focuses on the map on the right side and the actor—represented by a dot—moving inside it. The spectator launches the sphere of light as close as possible to the actor, hoping to see the unfolding scene on the left side change.

The virtual forest has a remarkable appearance with a whirlwind of animations that draws the audience into this in-between in a hypnosis-like state. Every detail, from the leaves to the spirits that inhabit this fantastic world, displays a technological virtuosity similar to the one used in the most sophisticated video games. Thus far, observers have raised two critical issues regarding this experience. One is that the spectator may become addicted to the 40-minute performance, feeling like an intense video game player, with synthetic actors becoming little more than pre-packaged avatars in front of him or her. The other is the significance of the interactive component since the audience does not effectively determine the movement of the actor but rather the movement of the firefly.
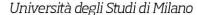
To counter any feelings of being or becoming only a passive cinematic viewer in front of an image frozen in the frame of a screen rather than attending a live performance, director Robin McNicholas breaks down the fourth artificial wall and shows, at times, the animation in progress. Breaking the pact of illusion between spectator and actor, the viewer enters the digital box behind the scenes and witnesses the theatrical actors firsthand in the seven square meter studio in Portsmouth's Guildhall. In the studio, a cube measuring approximately 1 meter tall, the audience finds actors wearing VR headsets and jumpsuits covered with motion sensors recorded by 48 cameras.

In forty minutes, the path of the Puck avatar follows a dynamic rhythm as he meets Cobweb (Maggie Bain), Moth (Durassie Kiangangu), Peaseblossom (Jamie Morgan) and Mustardseed (Loren O'Dair), the actors. They perform in motion capture suits in a wired-up space that captures their movements and translates them onto the audience's screens. We are witnessing a performance with a peculiar trans–spatial and trans–temporal form, since it is made of an electronic materiality (it is not at all immaterial) that cannot be circumscribed with objective point coordinates (Diodato 59-60).

TOWARDS A NEW THEATRICS?

Now we do not know what art is and we have attributed to theater a definition that is sometimes too precise, but we know that in art as in theater the relational being of the image unfolds—or of representation, "the personal power of the imagination, the impersonal and irresistible force of the imaginary "(Diodato 113). The question of whether the experiment of the English company is definable as a dystopian current of what is canonically considered theater therefore naturally arises. A consequence of that alienation of the viewer (Debord 15) caused by an image that increasingly replaces reality is the vision of a virtual show that replaces a live performance. Not having an objective answer to provide; indeed, the one described above is an aesthetic experience that finds its sublimation in its specificity. We find the created atmosphere, not the substance, in a relational or medial form. An atmosphere is a primary perceptive reality (Diodato 114–115) in which the spectator enjoys, in a dimension that strongly recalls the dream world, a liminal performative action. The discourse on interfaces and human-machine communication has proved to be a core component in the development of many contemporary sectors and a proper means of resistance and resilience in the past two years to the pandemic event. Following Nelson Godman's nominal relativism and having examined the example of the Dream live performance as a valid alternative to live show productions during the pandemic era, we should ask, "When is it theater?" rather than "If it is theater?" Perhaps the most appropriate question is, "What is this new way of doing theater?" This aesthetic approach releases spectators from predefined artistic categories and mental schemes that anchor them poorly to tested but ineffective logic. Above all, it allows us to integrate science and art fluidly. New

technologies meld with theater without the latter denying its anthropological and ritual component. The reaction of contemporary theater or, more correctly, of the performing arts to the "new normality" cannot be formulated only in terms of acceptance or resistance but by redefining the characterizing norms of this new theatricality.
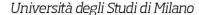
For Goodman, verbal and non-verbal language, comprising gestures, architecture, music, and arts, are symbolic systems. These do not represent "reality" nor merely express feelings and emotions; instead, they have syntactic and semantic ways of elaborating versions and interpretations of phenomena (Goodman 60-72). With *Dream*, we are witnessing the implementation of a dramaturgical system as a set of reciprocal interactions, producing simultaneous and gradual intra-actions as the pc screen mediates them. In the new technological revolution, we see the formation of a three-dimensional virtual reality protocol interoperable with networked systems and devices. *Dream* demonstrates how immersive technologies, including virtual reality (VR), are ideal interfaces for the new high-tech paradigm.

Dream is an operation that can signal a turning point for the future of theatrical and live productions. While counterparts such as NoProscenium offer equally interesting insights on production, *Dream* boasts a prominent company that produces it in the theatrical panorama. This factor could mark the beginning of an approach to this kind of production and significant figures of the international cultural world.

It is not only performative experimentation but an exciting manifestation of artistic leadership at a difficult time to provide new tools and technologies for a whole sector. Implementing a strategic and dynamic process of broadening and diversifying the public and improving the overall conditions of use is the first step toward theatrical audience development. This production undeniably introduces Shakespeare to a vast new reach—around 8,000 viewers in a week—spread across the globe. The concept of community becomes a more global conception; the viewer is aware, thanks also to a counter placed at the bottom of the screen, to share the show's vision with numerous other spectators, at the same time, albeit from a different place. An audience that responds to new characteristics caused by current digital contexts does not directly endure the contents of the communication or embody a community that responds uncritically to it with consumption.

Dream and numerous experiments in recent months have met with considerable international success thanks to those "new audiences" who have assumed the prosumer role both by participating in the production of various online contents—posts, comments, images, and shared videos—and passively, through their own online behaviors—research and selection of some contents (Jenkins 31). These are known as the so-called "networked publics" or connected publics, which refers to the new digital connection between cultural practices, social relations, and the development of media technologies.

Suppose the sense of reciprocity, looking and being observed, and a fundamental element of the theatrical dimension as a co-constructor of meaning is lacking in cyberspace (Han, Bergs, Moorhouse 16) in this sort of "nowhere". However, the feeling of sharing the performance with thousands of other connected users worldwide is not

lacking at all; instead, it means being part of a shared experience full of encounters and connections. Moreover, the viewers witness a performed event simultaneously as they partake in it, view it, and therefore cannot pause or go back as if it were a film. The difference is the medium of the performance - a screen in place of a stage. The spectators must have heightened attention spans and interactive capacities. Their attentional and interactive capacity must be alert. There is no second chance to see the performance again. It is the unique and ephemeral value of theater, albeit intermediate or technological theater.

Whether this format can survive or become a notable trend even in the post-Covid 19 era remains essential. For the moment, we can only rely on the words by the RSC Director of Digital Development Sarah Ellis:
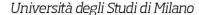
> Where we hope it goes from here is that we will be able to embed some of these technologies into how we make Theatre more generally. I think this is part of where theatre is headed in the future, I don't think it's a homogenised situation, it's a part. We are creating an 'and' not an 'other' or a "thing". We are hopefully providing a new set of ways you can make theatre for future audiences. (Ellis 1)

Lastly, we can affirm that Dream shows how, in spite of the participatory dynamics often associated with XR devices, the viewer can feel and perceive everything outside of the process, and that he or she can more or less benefit from it, enjoying an experience with an aesthetic power assigned to special technologies that act as facilitators. Beneficiaries or consumers of the contemporary art product are potentially unaware of and hypnotized by these images belonging to a fallacious reality created by the artist/technology binomial, slaves to these new ways of experiencing. This is certainly not an unprecedented phenomenon. Aristotle already suggested that slaves were "living instruments" of action: "Every object of property is a tool for life, and property is a set of tools: even the slave is an animated object of property. These considerations therefore make clear the nature of a slave and his essential quality. A being who by nature does not belong to himself but to another, despite being a man, is therefore by nature a slave; and he who belongs to another, despite being a man, is an object of property: and an object of property is a tool ordered to action and separate" (Aristotle IV BC, I, 4, 1253 b, 30-35).

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Ester Fuoco has a PhD in Digital Humanities and in Histoire et Sémiologie du Texte et de l'Image. In 2022 she obtained the French qualification of Maitresse de confèrences en Arts du spectacle. In 2021, she won a research grant at the Institute of Biorobotics of the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna for robotic development and experimentation in the Performing Arts. She is currently a Post-doc Researcher at IULM University with a two-year project entitled "*Teatro Onlife: convergenze creative e di fruizione tra live, digital e transmedialità".* Her research and publications are in the areas of Contemporary Performing Arts, Aesthetic of Digital Performance and Theatrical Anthropology. Her recent publications include the book: "Né qui, né ora*: peripezie* mediali della performance contemporanea" and the essays "Rendre visible le mouvement du temps"; "Performance without Actors: The Theatrical Docu-Fiction"; "L'anamorphisme du corps béante sur la scène numérique"; "Carnefice o spettatore? L'ingaggio spettatoriale in The Repetition. Histoire(s) du théâtre di Milo Rau".

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1939-7100

fuocoester@gmail.com