

DIGITALIZING THE PERFORMING ARTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN LATVIA: TRANSFORMATION OR SURVIVAL TACTICS?

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Abstract

The article seeks to answer the question of whether the transformation and acceleration of digital content in performing arts during the COVID-19 pandemic are determined situatively or are a naturally stable trend initiated by the development of ICT. It focuses on the theatre industry in order to understand whether theatre performances in the digital environment and the use of digital elements in performing arts do not create a confrontation with the necessary sense of physical presence.

The research data showed that the practices of using digital environment elements and digital technologies in the creation of theatre performances were both 1) a **short-term** solution, as it allowed staging a play, working with actors remotely, as well as creating products that are available to the audience in conditions of distancing requirements, and 2) gave an acceleration to the spread of digital innovations in the theatre industry in general, which was especially manifested in the works of directors who are open to the search for new experimental forms and the ambition of artistic excellence in theatre art, thus generating a **long-term** development potential. On the one hand, the sense of presence, including physical presence and simultaneity, is still recognized as the most essential feature of theatre and also a certain measure of quality. On the other hand, it is recognized that the possibilities of digital solutions,

Culture Crossroads

Volume 24, 2024, doi <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol24.411>

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ISSN: 2500-9974



including artificial intelligence and other technological resources, may also change and erase the boundaries between the real and digital environments in performing arts as well.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, theatre industry, digital transformation, social connectedness, sense of presence, simultaneity, “liveness”.*

Introduction

Compared to other culture and creative sector industries, such as literature, media, design, architecture, cultural education, etc., the consequences of COVID-19 are felt the most by representatives of the performing arts, such as the opera, theatre, contemporary dance, and music industries, which have been directly affected by the restrictions on public events [Latvian Academy of Culture 2020: 25]. At the same time globally and also in Latvia, various forms of “quarantine culture” new hybrid art forms and genres, alternative art communication formats evolved, indicating a process of accelerated transformation towards innovation [Radermecker 2020; Mak, Fluharty, Fancourt 2021; Hylland 2021; Bradbury et al. 2021]. For example, in Latvia, a study on the impact of the pandemic on the cultural and creative industries revealed that the proportion of the population consuming arts on the Internet had increased from 19% to 45% [Latvian Academy of Culture et al. 2020: 29]. During the pandemic, the role of the digital environment in both creating and channelling arts products grew. The restrictions on presence attendance forced cultural organizations to look for new ways how to reach audiences, and one of them was various digital solutions and online events. In the survey of cultural organizations it was concluded that in the last two years 56% of the surveyed organizations have implemented some digital solutions [Laķe et al. 2022: 86]. The data show that the attitude of cultural organizations towards the digital cultural offer in the post-pandemic period is ambiguous – for some organizations, the digital offer is permanent and currently happens more often (21%), while for an equal part it has decreased (19%) [Laķe et al. 2022: 86].

Digitalization of the theatre environment with the search for new forms of textuality has been observed in Latvia since the beginning of the 21st century, using video projections, animation, augmented reality, and other techniques offered by the metaverse in theatre performances [Lēvalde 2020: 39]. However, “digital metamorphosis” was forcefully driven by the restrictions of the pandemic, causing intense discussions about whether the performing arts in digital format are “real theatre”? Is this an actual digital transformation or just survival? During the research it was found that there are three different trends in the views of those working in the theatre industry. Directors and actors believe that even the highest quality of digital

solutions cannot replace the experience of physical presence in the performing arts [Rutkēviča 2020; Keišs 2020]. Scholars' and theatre critics' views are ambivalent, ranging from neutral to excited about a new, open theatre that is "in line with the global world" [Lēvalde 2020; Svarinska 2020]. In terms of audience, for instance, young people who prioritize digital content feel comfortable, because they have no nostalgia for traditional theatre, which the older generation longs for.

Thereby, the article seeks answers to the question of whether the transformation and acceleration of digital content in performing arts during the COVID-19 pandemic were determined situatively as a reaction to the situation of limited resources or whether they were a stable and global trend initiated by the development of ICT. Our focus is on the theatre industry in order to understand whether the representation of theatre productions in the digital environment and the use of elements of the digital environment in the creation of theatre performances do not create an experience of physical presence. The aim of the study is to examine whether the new digital delivery strategies in Latvia can be seen as a tactic for short-term survival, or whether they contain long-term industry development potential. Do digital forms of theatre have sustainability potential, and under what conditions?

Social studies, as well as different studies in humanities and arts [e. g. Ford, Mandviwalla 2020; Houlihan, Morris 2022; Bissel, Weir 2022;] show that performing arts institutions, including theatres, are under increasing pressure to accept the manifestations of digital transformation. Digital technologies are changing not only how the audience engages with art but it affects the whole cycle of creating a theatre performance – starting with the director's creative idea, the creation and form of the production of the play, as well as the place where the theatre performance is shown. However, it must be recognized that the initiatives created by the digital transformation in the cycle of creation and communication of the theatre performance are very fragmented, and it is not yet possible to evaluate them systematically and make certain generalizations. Therefore, our research approach is related to an in-depth study of the anatomy of a single performance, aiming to shed light on these processes with special emphasis on the interpretation of the analyzed processes based on the director's experience. The theatre director's experience and reflection on all stages of the production cycle of the particular play chosen for the analysis is interpreted in the context of the time when it was staged and published, namely, two months after the establishment of epidemiological restrictions in Latvia. It is a time when, under the influence of distancing requirements, face-to-face art experience is normatively impossible; at the same time, it acquires a special value in the perception of both creative persons and the audience. This context has a decisive importance in the choice of the object of analysis and the approach, where the experience of staging a performance is studied in the discourse of the sociology of art, namely,

focusing on the effects caused by epidemiological restrictions in performative art. The conceptual and empirical scale of the study does not foresee such analysis of the director's performance, including the artistic techniques, which would be based on the methodological principles of theatre art criticism.

The findings of the study are illustrated by Elmārs Seņkovs' digital performance "The Iranian Conference" (a play by Ivan Vyrypaev), created by ESARTE company, which in 2021 received the highest award at the national level for performing arts in the category "Event of the year in the digital environment", which was first established because of the pandemic.

Reason and focus of research interest

The choice of the research topic is based on three main intersected dimensions, namely, during the epidemiological restrictions of COVID-19 the experience of physical distancing arose massively in society, and digital solutions were integrated into the offer of theatre art. At the same time, discussions about the role of presence in performing arts and about its importance, possibilities, and sustainability in the context of digital forms of art offer were brought up. This, in turn, forces us to focus on researching the perspective of both theatre makers and audiences in order to conceptualize the relationship between digital solutions and the phenomenon of presence in the theatre arts field.

One of the greatest changes in the consumption habits of culture and art was caused by a lack of physical presence. The World Health Organization in its recommendations for "COVID-19 Response" has marked the difference between physical distancing and social proximity, inviting people to communicate through social media platforms and communication technologies, thus encouraging and sustaining virtual social connection within families and communities:

It is therefore important that while practicing physical distancing, people should maintain and even increase social proximity through non-physical means, for example, through social media platforms and communication technologies [WHO 2020].

At the same time, the *World Happiness Report 2021* emphasized that physical distancing during the pandemic became a risk factor for well-being and mental health. Thus, naturally, people increased their use of digital media as a means to connect during the pandemic [Okabe-Miyamoto, Lyubomirsky 2021].

Living in conditions of physical and social distancing and with feelings of fear and a sense of physical threat, there was a growing need for social experiences that would compensate for such a sense of social isolation and insecurity. In this situation,

the concept of social connectedness becomes relevant, which can be defined as the experience of belonging to a social relationship or network [Lee, Robins 1995], or else – as a short-term experience of belonging and relatedness, based on quantitative and qualitative social appraisals and relationship salience [Bel et al. 2009]. The concept of social connectedness is mostly applicable to group activities such as leisure, exercise, cooking, befriending, arts and crafts social activities, etc. [Bowins 2021]. It is quite natural to consider how social connectedness deeply affects quality of life and health [Deitz et al. 2020; Swarbrick et al. 2021].

Research shows that the arts can be one of the factors that greatly promote social connectedness. For instance, HEartS, a public health study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) striving to advance our understanding of how arts and cultural engagement in the UK can support people's lives, revealed that "the majority of respondents (82%) perceive their arts engagement to be linked with feelings of social connectedness at least some of the time. The forms of arts engagement most linked with feelings of social connectedness were attending a live music performance, watching a live theatre performance, and watching a film or drama at the cinema or other venue" [Perkins et al. 2021: 1208].

At the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions, the culture and creative sectors, just like tourism, lost 90 percent of their turnover, thus being included in the list of economic sectors that have been hit the hardest. Because of this, during the pandemic, organizers of cultural and arts events offered ways how to save the industry with the help of new, digitalized art forms. It helps to ensure physical distancing while maintaining social proximity. At the same time, regarding the performing arts, it has to be admitted that, especially during the first stage, the situation was characterized by *ad hoc* solutions and a combination of idealism, voluntarism, and amateurism [Hylland 2021]. There is no doubt that this situation also caused frustration within the industry itself:

Theatre and its practitioners have been deemed non-essential in this moment and our refusal to acknowledge this has resulted in disposable digital work that dismantles the very intimacy our form demands. We're being asked to exit the stage, not give an encore [Berger 2020].

Digital environment also in Latvia was filled with a large range of performative art products. As a result, the number of productions of theatre performances, compared with the previous years, significantly increased [Rieksta-Ķenge 2020]. Critics admit that the offers during the pandemic have become so intense that it is even possible to choose several of them within one evening. At the same time, "with each new performance, e-theatre processes become more and more refined and well thought

out, because the viewer's attention has to be competed for" [Ulberte 2020]. Gradually, the ways in which performances were offered to the audience have improved in terms of quality. Video recording technologies for performances developed; other audiovisual formats were used; performances were created on various online platforms, etc. Quoting performer, writer and theatre maker Bianca Mastrominico,

Our process has gradually shifted into experimenting with making our live presence digitally 'alive', and the screen-space has become the primary environment in which the image/body of the performer exists, moves, interacts and reacts as if in a primordial cocoon, in which signs and meaning are reinvented through responsive interaction, while also testing the limits of the virtual space [Mastrominico 2020].

All these processes, in turn, created a basis for the continuation of the discussions about the role of presence in the theatre industry, despite the fact that it's really not so easy to find anything else to add on this topic [Sherman 2013].

The role of physical presence in the performing arts events: theoretical perspective

Questions about the role of live versus mediated art experiences have already been discussed in art science, art sociology, and anthropology, where the main debate is the claim that the live event is "real" and that the mediated is "unreal". As media theorist Friedrich A. Kittler notes,

Once the technological differentiation of optics, acoustics, and writing exploded Gutenberg's writing monopoly around 1880, the fabrication of so-called Man became possible. His essence escapes into apparatuses. Machines take over functions of the central nervous system, and no longer, as in times past, merely those of muscles. (..) So-called Man is split up into physiology and information technology. (..) Romanticism notwithstanding, numbers and figures become the key to all creatures [Kittler 1999: 17, 19].

In these discussions, the face to face or physical presence experience is prioritized over the mediated experience, as pointed out by cultural theorist Philip Auslander: "The common assumption is that the live event is "real" and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real" [Auslander 2008: 3].

With the reference to Jean Baudrillard that the definition of the real is that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction, the "live" performance, according to Phillip Auslander, can be defined as "that which can be recorded". Thus, definition of live performance, according to him, is "a performance heard or watched at the time of its occurrence, as distinguished from one recorded on film, tape, etc." [Auslander 2008: 56]. Liveness indicates the situation when "the performers and the

audience are both physically and temporally co-present to one another” [Auslander 2008: 60; Auslander 2012: 5; Auslander, Es, Hartmann 2019].

The dependence of performative art on “the presence of living bodies” is also emphasized by critical theorist Peggy Phelan, who highlights the nature of performance as nonreproductive art *per se*:

Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance [Phelan 1998: 148, 146].

Theorists of performance studies Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye with the reference to the etymological data of the noun ‘presence’ argue, that in representational theatre it is precisely a performance of the relationship between the ‘I am’ and what is *in front of* or *before* that constitutes the ‘dramatic action’ to which spectators are witnesses [Giannachi, Kaye 2017: 8]. Presence, accordingly, is the medium through which the subject engages with as environment [Giannachi 2012: 52].

In the context of the interpretation of the empirical material of this study, the concept of presence has been aptly described by artist, writer and performance maker Tim Etchells in response to Gabriela Giannachi’s question about the implications of the word ‘presence’. Etchells emphasizes aspect of synergy between performer and audience:

I mean, in an era in which everything is fragmented and mediated, the live actor is the one who stands up and says ‘I am here. You can look at me’. There’s a huge simplicity to a lot of the live work that we have done – a sort of peeling away of things to the point where we are often standing in a line at the front looking back at the audience – and very much measuring this body on the stage and this bunch of people watching; measuring the distance between the two [Etchells, Giannachi, Kaye 2012: 190].

In the Latvian theatre industry, critics and professionals are using the concept of *sense of presence* (*klātbūtnes sajūta*), which is similar to Auslander’s concept of *liveness* in the sense of the pre-digital era, when this category was seemingly able to be “captured” outside of rapid technological development [Auslander 2012; Auslander et al. 2019].

It is worth adding that, compared to other forms of performing arts, theatre is very popular in Latvia. The traditions of Latvian professional theatre date back to before the establishment of the national state and are related to the period of constructing Latvia’s national identity in the second half of the 19th century [Struka 2022]. Nowadays, for 1.8 million people, there are 24 professional theatre art companies, half of which receive public funding [Latvijas Jaunā teātra institūts 2023]. Networks

of professional theatre associations and participation in international organizations have traditionally been developed in Latvia.

The pandemic has triggered the digital transformation of the performing arts in Latvia in two often interrelated directions – digitization, which focuses on converting data from analogue to digital format, and digitalization, which is a process whereby various areas of social and cultural life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures [Brennen, Kreiss 2016].

At the same time, the situation has raised questions for the industry, such as how to live in this “screen reality”? Do innovative products lead to a redefinition of the “real theatre”? What is the value of digital formats for theatrical productions when physical presence experiences are available?

Trying to answer these questions, a problem emerged during the research. On the one hand, the opinion that digital solutions cannot replace the experience of live presence in the performing arts still prevails among the theatre art professionals as well as among the audience [Tišheizere 2020; Rutkēviča 2020; Lēvalde 2020; Laķe et al. 2022]. On the other hand, it must be recognized that the digital environment provides effective benefits both for the creation of new art forms and for the inclusion of new audiences, including young people.

The aim and methodology of the study

Thus, keeping in mind the above, the aim of the study is to examine whether the new digital delivery strategies can be seen as a tactic for short-term survival or whether they contain long-term industry development potential. Do digital forms of theatre art have sustainability potential, and under what conditions?

For the purpose of contextualizing the research questions, a qualitative content analysis of media and professional theatre art publications was made. The results of the content analysis formed the basis for the selection of one specific performance as the research object.

Empirical research design is based on a qualitative approach, using a case study – the anatomy of the creation of one play – Elmārs Seņkovs’ performance “The Iranian Conference” by Ivan Vyrpaev. “The Iranian Conference” depicts the formal meeting of intellectuals of various fields, their wide-ranging conversation, and assessment of the situation in the Middle East. At the same time, it is a discourse of Otherness that questions the categories of openness, empathy, and love in the context of human values in the 21st century.

Within the scope of the case study, the director’s reflection and experience regarding the motivation of the play’s production and the choice of techniques during the COVID-19 period were brought up to date, and the director’s subjective

assessment regarding the role of the used artistic and digital technological techniques in a long-term perspective was established. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews with the play's director, other theatre directors, actors, theatre scholars and critics, as well as a focus group discussion with young theatre and film industry professionals. At the same time, the opinions of theatre and film industry professionals were used for context assessment and data interpretation.

The case study selection rationale was based on three aspects, namely, the play was acclaimed for excellence by theatre critics;¹ it has received the national award in performing arts in the category "Event of the year in the digital environment 2021"; and it has been included in the "Latvian school bag" offer, which is a prestige state-funded cultural education programme for school students that allows them to get acquainted with the best works in various fields of arts [Latvijas Nacionālais kultūras centrs 2022].

Research findings and director's perspective

The director's opinion was chosen as the main source in the research of the topic in order to identify the vision of a creative person about the manifestations of digital transformations in all stages of the theatre production cycle and to constitute a future vision of the related issues based on the experience of artistic creativity.

In the course of the research, the performance director Elmārs Seņkovs was interviewed, and was asked questions regarding (1) motivation and prerequisites for choosing the play and the digital format; (2) the role of sense of presence or liveness in the performing arts from the artist's perspective; (3) possibilities of the digital format, including reflection on audience needs and attraction of new audience segments; (4) a perspective on the use of digital solutions, also after epidemiological restrictions.

In order to emphasize the director's "voice" and point of view, the researchers' conclusions are argued with quotes from the transcription of the director's interview.

¹ For example, this is what critics wrote about Elmārs Seņkovs' performance "The Iranian Conference": "The show created by director Elmārs Seņkovs and a selection of Latvian actors on the online platform zoom.us "The Iranian Conference" is considered to be the leader in the short history of Latvian e-theatre. A two-hour long show that has almost everything that can keep the viewer glued to the computer screen" [Tišheizere 2020]. Also: "In this, let's say, not very exciting format, which differs little from TV news and discussion broadcasts, Seņkovs has managed to create a work of art, which can be followed with unrelenting interest for almost the entire two hours. Elmārs Seņkovs is affected by the theme of "The Iranian Conference" – how liberal society tries to build a relationship with what is unclear and incomprehensible" [Čakare 2020].

Stage of development of a creative idea: motivation and prerequisites for choosing the play and the digital format

Research findings from a director's perspective revealed that, regarding the motivation and prerequisites for choosing the play and digital format, two approaches could be outlined. Firstly, this was influenced by the individual psychological mood caused by the forced professional downtime imposed by the distancing requirements:

It was a time when all creatives were overwhelmed by the stupor that everything was being pulled off like a stopcock, ... an unprecedented feeling that everything was stopping, it turned on the feeling of inertia that something had to be done.

Secondly, a significant part of the motivation was the ambition determined by the professional role of the director and the desire to prove himself in a new – digital – format. This side of the motivation also represents the above-described assumption of performing arts professionals that the digital environment is naturally associated with a mediated product, which in the context of theatre art means its second-rateness, inauthenticity, “artificiality”, thus – lower quality. This orientation created a certain challenge for the director to try to create in the digital environment not only something accessible to the audience but also a high-quality art product.

The first observations were that initially many artistic projects appeared in the digital environment that were thoughtless, entertaining, of a private nature, without real artistic value, ... there was no hope that the audience would need it, I was sceptical, then I thought – it is easy to criticize what a digital project should be in the theatre art that could captivate, you must try for yourself!

These two lines of motivation also represent, to some extent, the short-term and long-term dimensions. Short-term, because the pressure created by idleness to maintain the inertia of professional activity loses its justification with the end of the restrictions of COVID-19, but long-term, because the need to prove yourself professionally in the newly learned digital theatre environment by creating a show of high artistic quality remains.

In describing the development of the creative idea, the director emphasizes that he tried to create a theatrical performance in zoom online format while claiming maximum artistic quality. As criteria for this quality, the director cites his goals: to preserve documentality as well as “closeness” to the conventional theatre form, which presupposes physical presence and simultaneity.

Regarding the sense of presence in the context of “The Iranian Conference” production, the director claimed that:

It was important that the show “fits” into the theatre format. I paid a lot of attention to documentaries, ... we recorded each actor where he was, and I paid special attention to how each actor created his environment. (..) Documentary and a sense of presence is created by the absence of editing and expressive close-ups of the actors. (..) Documentary and spontaneity were ensured by the fact that I wanted to hurry to be ready at the given time – 2.5 weeks of work, and it was ready.

Production stage of the show: the role of a sense of presence or liveness in the performing arts

The possibilities of the digital environment can also change the practices of staging a performance, for example, by using an online format in rehearsals. Physical presence and bodily contact are essential features of theatre art. The director argues the importance of these aspects by referring to his experience working with actors.

Regarding the importance of the sense of presence in the performing arts on the whole, the attitude of the actors towards it is very clear, according to the director – they need a physical presence very much.

The actors all say that they want to touch physically. I don't know if people can do without physical touch, it is very important for an actor to feel a partner. Applause and loud appreciation are very important. This is the purpose for which they do something, any artist is an artist to be recognized.

Reflecting on the role of the presence effect in working with the actor during the production of the play, the director sees a special authenticity, only characteristic of face-to-face work, which is largely determined by the unpredictability of the situation. The director interprets the latter factor as the opposite of the predictability factor of the digital environment. Still, working with actors in presence is considered a priority, especially when valuing the possibility of an error.

I really like working with a living person, with his psychology, with his unpredictability... virtual reality provides a programmatically predictable result. ... but for a living person, an actor in a performance, there is a possibility of error. This is a very interesting and valuable thing in the proceedings of live theatre. That's what I'm most interested in, any mistake creates drama. The mistake is conflict, conflict is drama.

In the director's view, the precondition of presence during the production and rehearsals of the play is an essential part of the creation and value of the theatre performance, as it gives it a unique dramaturgical value based on the practice of presence, including artistic mistakes and failures.

The effects of digitization on attracting new segments of the theatre audience

From the director's point of view, one of the most convincing benefits of using elements of the digital environment in theatre is the creation of a connection with those segments of the audience that prefer the cultural and artistic experience obtained in the digital environment. The director admits that creating this connection requires a particularly high level of empathy and understanding of the values and feelings of the target audience.

The director highlighted several possibilities, offered by digitalization, especially emphasizing the possibilities of reaching a young audience:

If young people prefer to be in the digital environment, then artists must respect this, and be able to tear them away from TikTok with their offer ... I have to make a show so, that they don't even open the phone. I have to use the signs and symbols that young people recognize...

On the other hand, theatre as an environment could compensate for the deficit of presence and intimacy in the everyday lives of young people.

Another, albeit difficult path: in the theatre we can talk about what "technology does not speak" – about human feelings, delicate areas, delicate matters, ... a place where a young person sees touches, intimacy, fragility ... Maybe theatre should remain conventional and give the young audience something that they will never get on a tablet.

The director's opinion is ambitious: the live theatre experience can act as a compensatory mechanism for the deficit of physical presence and related emotions and feelings in the human experience caused by the digital environment. In his vision, the value of the communicative and social attraction potential of the theatre could increase in the future.

The use of digital solutions in the theatre industry: effects and perspective

The director's opinion on the interaction between the digital environment and live theatre contains two thematic lines. One is related to the blurring of the boundaries of art forms and genres and the acceleration of these processes under the influence of digital innovations. The other is related to the increase in the instrumental value of theatre, its potential to become a testing ground for scientific discoveries and innovations.

As one of the most important benefits of using digital solutions related to blurring the boundaries of the arts, the director sees the possibilities of expanding the audience's experience, which works similarly to the film art.

Theatre is a work with time – we can compress it, stretch it, travel in time and space, we can create a social theatre of empathy and experience, give people the opportunity to visit war zones, etc. The digital environment opens up new opportunities.

The new technologies, which contribute to the possibilities of expanding the experience, serve as a technological basis for the development of new genres of theatre. It can become the basis for creating an experiential theatre. The director emphasizes that the processes of the fusion of genres have started and have been going on for several decades, but now they are particularly visible.

The digital format intensifies the blurring of the boundaries between genres and art forms.

The digital environment, of course, demolishes the stage space, it continues the transformations initiated by the theatre – efforts to break out of the theatre house (immersive, inclusive, audio performances...), development of interdisciplinary art forms – dance art with theatre art, theatre art with audiovisual art, etc. There are no boundaries in performative art... The digital environment also allows you to tell the story in many different ways.

At the same time, the need to preserve the special identity of the theatre and the specificity of the artistic language is recognized, and the need and desire to continue the traditional theatre format still remains as a very important aspect among theatre professionals. First of all, a view of the epidemiological period of COVID-19 as a crisis that is transitory has appeared:

We hoped that it was a temporary and passing moment. The situation of having to stop the art process and try to exist only in the digital environment, also in art, was interesting, it was worth learning, but we lived with the idea that it was temporary. Theatre, however, requires a moment of live encounter.

The depreciation of the digital format of performances was represented very clearly in the interviews:

Although digital performances have all the parameters of theatre: time, space, dramaturgy, actors, I hoped that I would not have to stage digital performances in the future. Uniqueness is important for the theatre. Digital theatre cannot compete with live theatre.

As already mentioned, the second thematic line, as the director views the interactions between the digital environment and the theatre, is the possibility of expanding the utilitarian and instrumental value of the theatre art product in the future.

Regarding the perspective of the use of digital solutions after epidemiological restrictions, the director outlined several possible fields, such as the idea that digitalization can help communicate innovations or play an important role in the distribution and popularization processes of the performing arts. The director pays special attention to the potential of art to serve as a communication platform for innovation and scientific discoveries:

I would really like to use technology more so that the theatre can surprise, show new discoveries in science.

Even more, the director believes that with digitalization, theatre can become a field of experimentation for virtual socialization opportunities and for new technology tests. Such a vision reveals the artist's desire to give theatre an additional function – as tester of the ethical potential of science communication and innovation. The director admits that he, as an artist, is also subjectively interested in the scale of technological possibilities, not only their potential to create a reliable duplicate of reality but also the ethical issues of using newly created technologies:

...waiting for scientists to create effective and widely usable virtual reality technologies.... To test and understand how far science can take us. Will we be able to socialize without leaving home?

I also want to use everything that allows me to ask questions: do we need it (technological innovations)? Is it dangerous or not dangerous to humanity? If I use bots, do I want to know if they are a threat to our future or not? It is important not only to use technology for selfish purposes but also to ask questions about its value.

In general, the director admits that the question of the effect of presence as an integral feature of theatre art is only a question of the level of technological development. The director claims that the digital environment can probably compete with the sense of presence, but this could only be achieved with a very high level of innovations:

If the digital environment wants to compete with "live theatre", then they must have high-class technologies, like 5D effects – with scents, lights, air... We can move towards the effect of the presence of theatre art in virtual reality, but whether it

will succeed depends on whether scientists succeed in creating the effect of authentic presence in a virtual environment. I believe that with effective technologies, scientists manage to keep us in the virtual environment more and more...

Such a vision points to the long-term changes that digital transformations and technological innovations bring to theatre art, affecting also the most essential feature of theatre art – the phenomena of presence and simultaneity.

Conclusions

The research data allow us to conclude that the situationally (during the COVID-19 pandemic) provoked practices of using digital environment elements and digital technologies in the creation of a theatre art product were both 1) a **short-term** solution, as it allowed staging a play, working with actors remotely, as well as creating products that are available to the audience in conditions of distancing requirements, and 2) gave an acceleration to the spread of digital innovations in the theatre art industry in general, which was especially manifested in the works of directors who are open to the search for new experimental forms and the ambition of artistic excellence in theatre art, thus generating a **long-term** development potential for the new value dimensions of the theatre art product and for the audience.

The search for these new forms is accompanied by an internal and mutual discussion among those working in the theatre industry about the limits of theatre as an art form and about maintaining its specificity and quality in conditions when elements of the digital environment are used both in the creation of the performance and its distribution. The sense of presence, including physical presence and simultaneity, is still recognized as the most essential feature of theatre art and also as a certain measure of quality. At the same time, it is recognized that as the possibilities of the digital environment, including artificial intelligence and other technological resources of this environment, develop, the definitions of “presence” and “simultaneity” may also change, erasing the boundaries between the real and digital environments in theatre art as well. As it is emphasized in UNESCO’s vision of the future of culture,

We need to work to ensure that culture is accessible to all, and that the full diversity of humanity’s cultural expressions can flourish, both online and offline [Ottone 2020].

The results of the research revealed a dilemma regarding the fact that digitalization is currently considered a short-term solution on the one hand and a potential platform for new art forms on the other. Is it possible to deal with it?

The answer is “yes”, but with a condition: the digitalization of the performing arts has long-term potential only if it is not opposed to the sense of presence or liveness and can provide the effect of presence. It is crucial to point out that presence in this context is seen as a prerequisite for high-quality performance, but the ideas about the fact of presence, which is reinterpreted as a “feeling of presence”, can differ. This sense of presence can also be achieved with various artistic expressions and/or technological solutions.

The research data also create a basis for a new discussion in at least two directions. Firstly, the director’s subjective reflection on the integration of digital solutions at different stages of the production cycle of a theatre performance draws attention to potential transformations in the value of the theatre. Special attention is paid to the fact that with the spread of digital transformations, the experience of a theatre performance can acquire a new emotional, communicative, as well as utilitarian value and role [Troilo 2017]. Secondly, the artistic activities of creatives, including theatre directors, during COVID-19 revealed new manifestations of resilience in art, especially in the form of transformative resilience [Frigotto et al. 2022] in theatre. The field of research questions and discussions is expanding, which affects the endurance of theatre as an art form, especially in conditions where an intense wave of innovations affects both expressions of presence, audience behaviour and consumption habits, as well as artistic taste and society’s symbolic and value systems.

As a final remark, it is useful to refer to a sentence by Father Augustin in “The Iranian Conference”:

The point is not to look for a new form. Content also needs forms. Look not for new forms, but for necessary forms.

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This research is funded by the Ministry of Culture, Republic of Latvia, project “Cultural and creative ecosystem of Latvia as a resource of resilience and sustainability”, project No. VPP- MM-LKRVA-2023/1-0001