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Cyberformance and the Cyberstage

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Abstract: Investigating the historical and cultural emergence of grafting the internet technology into the contemporary theatre practice, this paper discusses the socio-political character of the cyberspace use as a theatrical stage, suggesting the term cyberstage to describe this phenomenon. Drawing on Helen Varley Jamieson's definition of cyberformance, a "live performance that utilises internet technologies to bring remote performers together in real time, for remote and/or proximal audiences" (Jamieson, 2008, p.34), the use of cyberstage is analyzed in the following three online performance cases: Helen Varley Jamieson's Make-Shift (2010), a networked performance collaboration with Paula Crutchlow, Dries Verhoeven's performance Life Streaming (2010) and the Royal Shakespeare Company's production Such Tweet Sorrow (2010). The substructures of an internet-based theatre have already been set, attracting many contemporary artists to experiment with that tool, foregrounding questions about the future of cyberformance and the theatre presence in cyberspace. The paper discusses the developmental potential of cyberformance as dealt with by Dixon (2004), Jamieson (2008) and Kattenbeld (2010).

Keywords: Cyberformance, Cyberstage, Online Theatre, Make-Shift, Life Streaming, Such Tweet Sorrow

Introduction

FROM THE EARLY 1990s theatre practitioners have been using the internet to experiment and produce alternative performances, resulting in the creation of a new theatrical form. Although various terms appeared to describe this phenomenon, such as *intermedial performance, virtual theatre, cyberdrama, telematic performance, cybertheater, cyberperformance, hyperformance, cyberformance, digital performance, online theatre and networked performance*; theatre, and the art of theatre performance as a whole, still does not have a strong presence in the net art movement. However, the development of the internet to a basic communication medium of our era, its interactive and entertaining character, as well as the use of the cyberspace as a socio-political platform demonstrates the historical and cultural emergence of grafting the internet technology into the contemporary theatre practice, challenging the notion of the cyberspace as a space free from socio-cultural influences. Borrowing Helen Varley Jamieson's definition of *cyberformance*, as a 'live performance that utilises internet technologies to bring remote performers together in real time, for remote and/or proximal audiences' (Jamieson, 2008, p.34), the term *cyberstage* will be deployed here to portray the use of cyberspace as a theatrical stage. Referring to *Make-Shift* (2010) cyberformance about the earth pollution, *Life Streaming* (2010) performance, a rectification of the 2004 tsunami's media representation and *Such Tweet Sorrow* (2010) reproduction of *Romeo and Juliet* story through the social networking platform of Twitter, the paper discusses the socio-political character of the *cyberstage*.

All the Word's a Stage

The internet, from its early days to its commercialization, has been used by artists, resulting in the creation of the net art movement (1994) in cyberculture, while terms such as *intermedial performance* (Albersmeier and Roloff, 1989), *virtual theatre* (Lanier), *cyberdrama* (Murray, 1997), *telematic performance* (Salz, 2004) *cyber theater* (Chatzichristodoulou, 2006), *cyberperformance* (Causey, 2006), *hyperformance* (Unterman, 2007), *cyberformance* (Jamieson, 2008), *digital performance* (Dixon, 2007), *online theatre* and *networked performance* appeared to describe this new theatrical form. From 1988, online chat-channel *Internet Relay Chat* (IRC) creation by Jarkko Oikarinen and the 1990 early gaming MOO program development into Lambda Moo online social community software by Pavel Curtisa, a series of online experimental theatre performances began. In the early 1990s, Hamnet Players have performed parodies of text-based Shakespeare's plays in IRC channels, such as *Hamnet* (1993) and *Pcbeth* (1994), at the same time as the Parkbench (Nina Sobell and Emily Hertz) created live web performances called *ArtisTheatre*. During 1994, the Plaintext Players began performing in PMC Moo, while Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Roberto Sifuentes explored interactivity in online performance. One year later, the first *cyberstage*, ATHEMOO, an online conference and performance MOO was created by Juli Burk. The same year, the PALACE graphical avatars interactive chat room and the CUseeMe videoconferencing application were launched to the public, offering new creative tools to media theatre artists and researchers until Douglas Bagnall, in 2004, created the revolutionary UpStage, a *cyberformance* stage software produced for the Avatar Body Collision theatre group.

However, as Patricia Junk (2005) argues in her article *Performers go Web*; theatre is the only traditional art form that does not yet have a strong presence in cyberspace. Indeed, despite its direct contact with new technologies from the *deus ex machina* (*Ἀπὸ μηχανῆς θεοῦ*) of the ancient Greek theatre to the revolutionary introduction of electric light in the 1890s and the contemporary multimedia performances, theatre artists, theorists and reviewers react critically on any new technological change challenging the established theatre's structure of each era. The term theatre, in this paper, is not used to describe the space where a live performance takes place, but the art of theatre performance as a whole, including all the acts being required for the realization of a theatrical performance, such as the text, the actors and the audience.

The internet has been in existence since the 1960s, and has grown into a key communication medium and a powerful tool of the twenty first century for ideas and opinions, as marked by its recognition in 2011 by the United Nation as a human right (2011, p.4). The invention and growth of the internet had a revolutionary effect on the future of information technologies as the consumers have the option to actively interact by publishing information, rather than being just passive recipients. The United Nations report (2011, p.6) suggests that unlike any other medium of communication, such as radio, television and printed publications based on one-way transmission of information, the internet represents a significant leap forward as an interactive medium. Thus, the internet network, by connecting distant devices, creates *cyberspace*, a shared space where the information resides. Internet users, estimated by the International Telecommunication Union to meet and exceed two billion (United Nations, 2011, p.4), have access to this new Web-world, where everything is easily found, copied and dispersed. The World Wide Web, *inter alia*, offers games, movies, music, TV programs, newspapers, and even online books and libraries. Thus, the internet has turned into a new

form of entertainment space, leading media commentators to believe that “entertainment would never be the same again” (Walsh, 2009, p.3) or as Heiner Muller says: “Nothing is the way it stays” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 174). Furthermore, as mobile phones are superseded by smart phones, smart communities have developed worldwide, using the internet as a socio-political platform. For example Trikala, the first Greek digital city, offers free wireless internet to its citizens since 2004, while e-Trikala’s (no date) main areas of expertise include e-transportation, e-education, tele-health services, as well as online civil services for the democratic development of its community office. In cyberspace, according to artist, researcher and academic Steve Dixon (2007, p. 463), the personal is political, supporting the view of the web and installation artist, Shu Lea Cheng, that “community” is what the internet is mostly about.

Theatre, not only as a type of entertainment, but also as a social art and consequently as a political act which reflects the world we live in, should make use of that interactive digital world. In this respect, theatre practitioners must look to internet technology for new ways of producing performance, while performance also needs to address these fast changes of the technological advances. By experimenting with chat rooms, webcams and free online software applications, such as Facebook, Myspace, Messenger, Twitter, UpStage, Blogs and web-pages, artists and researchers can investigate new ways of producing low-cost, interactive performances in the socio-political space of cyberspace, allowing the audience to be creative in their everyday life with simple things. This chapter refers to the free character of the internet medium in relation to this low-cost characteristic, rather than to describe a democratic medium, owing to its debatable freedom of speech.

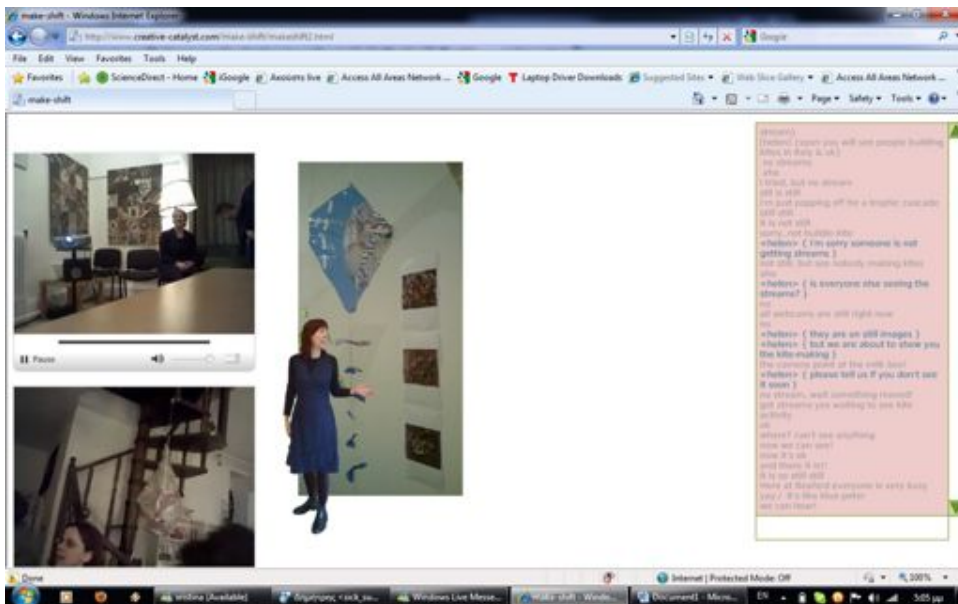
According to Chiel Kattenbelt (2010, p. 29), theatre as a hypermedium pre-eminently provides a stage to media. However, considering the above internet’s characteristics, it can be suggested that the internet and its cyberspace, unlike other media, do provide a stage for the theatre. The Shakespearian quote “all the world’s a stage” becomes feasible through the worldwide internet which offers ‘performative’ spaces, such as chat rooms, IRC channels, MUDs and MOOs, virtual environments and communication applications based on avatars, web cameras and text logs. The term ‘performative’ is used here to describe the ability of cyberspace to bring into existence a performance act because of its interactive character. Birgit Wiens (2005, p.108), rightly underlines that it is not enough to interpret the internet as the “largest theatre in the world” because it is of greater importance to identify and analyze the emergent economic, social and political implications and interactions of the internet with the physical space and society.

All the Word’s a Cyberstage

Is the internet a space or a tool to reflect our self/inside space? Theatre, by using the cyberspace as a theatrical stage, troubles the notion of cyberspace as a space figuring into this endless debate. Thus, according to Helen Varley Jamieson (2008, p. 32), artist, researcher and founding member of the Avatar Body Collision, a third space is “grafted from the real-time confluence of the stage and remote locations”. Conversely to this respect, Dixon (2007, p.462) argues in his comprehensive study of new media in performing arts, *Digital Performance*, that cyberspace should not be termed as a space at all, as the sense of being elsewhere is mental and metaphoric. However, he acknowledges that the discussion of cyberspace as a space can be useful and highly appropriate, as the chat room is often experienced as a distinct

location and meeting point. This chapter develops this debate about the theatre and cyberspace by exploring the notion of cyberspace as an in-between space and not space, *spaceless*, where the participants are present and absent at the same time, *bodyless*, in a live and mediated experience, *liveness*. This suggests the use of the term *cyberstage* to describe the phenomenon of cyberspace use as a theatrical space.

In her Master's thesis *Adventures in Cyberformance: Experiments at the interface of theatre and the internet* (2008), Jamieson proposes and analyses the term *cyberformance* as a "live performance that utilises internet technologies to bring remote performers together in real time, for remote and/or proximal audiences" (Jamieson, 2008, p.34), identifying the above *spaceless*, *bodyless* and *liveness* notion of cyberspace. According to Jamieson (2008, pp. 34-39), *cyberformance* is "live/ ly", meaning that although it is mediated, it takes place in real-time. Because it is "situated in cyberspace", it is "digital" and "distributed" in the geographical sense. It also "has attitude", owing to the unexpected element of the online performance. Moreover, in terms of technology and context, cyberformance is "resourceful" and "transparent", as the computer is plainly part of the performance, although still "unfinished" due to its interactive character. Drawing from the above definition, the use of the cyberspace as a theatrical stage is analyzed in the following three online performance cases: Helen Varley Jamieson's *Make-Shift* (2010), a networked performance collaboration with Paula Crutchlow, Dries Verhoeven's performance *Life Streaming* (2010) and the Royal Shakespeare Company's production *Such Tweet Sorrow* (2010).



Make-Shift (2010) Print Screen. Left: Audio-Visual House Streams. Centre: Avatar and Background. Right: Chat Room

Helen Varley Jamieson continuously experiments with the internet as a venue for live performance, producing *cyberperformances* and workshops on UpStage as well as organising the UpStage festival every year and developing its potentiality. Jamieson's last production,

Make-Shift (2010), a cyberperformance about recycling, approached interactively the subject of the political responsibilities into peoples' daily actions, which transform the world we live in. The on-site and online audience created kites by using their recyclable rubbish, while a discussion on the earth pollution was taking place on UpStage. Jamieson (2008, p. 35) uses the term "on-site" or "proximal" to describe an audience that exists together in the physical space, where the performance takes place, in contrast to the online, distributed and audience.

Although *Make-Shift* was staged on UpStage, a commercial streaming company was used for the live streaming of the performance, as UpStage is still a very limited *cyberstage*. *Make-Shift's* focus on the on-site audience members created a distance with the online ones, who were mainly beholders rather than participants of the performance. However, despite the physical and performance distance, the online audience members were all part of the same team, sharing technical problems and information in relation to the performance and weather forecasts. They were even informing each other any time they managed to reconnect on UpStage. The meeting of an audience from different locations and time zones in the *spaceless* cyberspace, discussing everyday issues, is by itself a very powerful part of the *cyberstage's* socio-political space.



The Audience inside the Van-Internet Café during the *Life Streaming* Performance. Photo by Tim Mitchell

Apart from Helen Varley Jamieson, theatre maker Dries Verhoeven directed *Life Streaming* in 2010, which was an online performance, looking at the use of the internet as a communication tool for connecting distant people in order to share experiences. Based on a one-to-one online audience-performer relationship, each member of the audience in London "chatted" with a member of the troupe located on a beach 8,000 kilometres away, through an application

similar to Skype. *Life Streaming* is a great example of the use of the *cyberstage* as a socio-political platform. Breaking geographical and cultural barriers, the *bodyless* cyberperformance commented on the media presentation of individuals as passive victims, focusing on the case of the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia. The audience was asked to leave their shoes and their personal belongings before entering into a specially built van-internet café outside the National Theatre, next to the Thames River. Although the whole performance was set up in the *cyberstage*, the ending brought the audience back to the real space by having warm water flood the van in London as the performers, 8,000 kilometres away, ran towards the sea. This created a feeling for both parties of being in the same *spaceless* place at the same time and sharing the same experience together, despite the *bodyless* condition.



The 'Virtual Touch'. *Life Streaming*. Photo by Maarten Van Haaff

In contrast to the above *Make-Shift* example, Verhoeven's *cyberformance*, due to its one-to-one character, did not leave space for the audience to feel sidelined. Verhoeven's use of the internet intended to directly involve the spectators in his performance and create a personal contact between the performers and the audience. As a matter of fact, the audience was so attached to the performers and their stories that in the end most of the participants continued to send them messages. Dixon (2006) uses the term 'virtual touch' to describe these moments of real contact and intimacy between the actors and the audience across the network, commenting on the performance dialogue between the physical and virtual bodies and the physical and virtual spaces.



Such Tweet Romeo Twitter Screen Shot (Romeo, 2010)

On the other hand, The Royal Shakespeare Company presented a modern way of performing *Romeo and Juliet* through the platform of Twitter (*Such Tweet Sorrow*, 2010). The audience followed and interacted with the characters' life through real-time hypertext updates and tweets, such as video, pictures, web-pages and text logs posted on Twitter for over a period of five weeks. According to Geraldine Collinge, the production manager of the *Such Tweet Sorrow*, Twitter is a way that the story of Romeo and Juliet might be told today (Cavendish, 2010). Thus, the choice of the specific online platform by the Royal Shakespeare Company is a commentary on the digitalisation of contemporary society, where the recording of the event is more important than the event itself.

According to James Barrett (2010), who played Romeo, the great thing about doing the performance on Twitter was audience participation. "It was very strange because in some ways it was the most isolated performance I think I could ever do as an actor – but then there was an immediacy of everything because of the way that the audience could give you feedback straight away". In fact, notwithstanding the physical distance, the audience is more connected to the performance, due to the interactive and social character of the *cyberstage*. As Steve Dixon notes in his article *Adventures in Cyber-theatre (or the actor's fear of the disembodied audience)*:

although the actual physical distance between performers and audience is increased, interactive communication changes the nature of the spatial barrier since the spectator seems as present and often as prominent as the performers within the performance space of the computer monitor proscenium (2004, p.118).

Conclusion

As an online environment in which communication takes place, *cyberstage* is a socio-political in-between space and non space, where the participants are present and absent at the same time in a live and mediated experience. The *spaceless*, *bodyless* and *liveness* characterisation of *cyberstage* references the binary nature of cyberspace's materiality and immateriality, while its socio-political character also references its global nature of the online environments. Although *cyberformance* remained inactive during the last decade, wobbling between Upstage and Second Life software applications, the abovementioned examples expose the scope for improvement and for further development of this experimental form. Notwithstanding the different aspects of the *cyberstage* use, such as the web-cams streaming in *Make-Shift*, the one-to-one online chat in *Life Streaming* and the 'hypertextuality' in *Such Tweet Sorrow*, these cyberperformances discoursed on the 'performative' feasibility of the *spaceless – bodyless* world of the socio-political *cyberstage* and created alive 'communities' in the cyberspace. The substructures of an internet-based, socio-political performance have already been set, attracting an increasing number of contemporary artists to experiment with the internet as a space and bringing into question the future of *cyberformance* and the theatre's presence in cyberspace as a whole.

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About the Author

Christina Papagiannouli

Born in Greece in 1985, theatre director and musician Christina Papagiannouli gained a Degree of Harmony at the age of 17. The next year she entered the Drama Department of Faculty of Fine arts of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) where she studied for five years on different theatre's specializations: including acting, directing, film studies, light, set and costume design, and dramaturgy, pedagogy and performance theory. In 2006 she studied as an exchange student (Erasmus) for one year at the Drama Department of University of Kent. During her undergraduate studies a research on the use of technology in postmodern theatre was completed, focusing on the work of the Wooster Group. In 2009 she finished her music studies with a degree in Violoncello and she returned to United Kingdom, in order to start her MA in Theatre Directing at University of East London. Continuing her research on the use of technology, her practical dissertation focused on the use of surveillance media. In September 2010 she followed the directing course How to Rehearse at Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). Today she is concentrating on her practice-based PhD at UEL with thesis title: Etheatre Project: Directing Political Cyberformance. The cyberstage, issues of 'spaceless'-'bodyless'-'liveness' and interactivity.

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