

Etudes: an online theatre & performance
studies journal for emerging scholars

This Will Never Catch On

By Colm Summers

Abstract

This Will Never Catch On is an article about the future of theatre. It outlines how theaters have integrated technology in their work since the crisis began, and what we can learn from that work about the essence of theatre-making. *This Will Never Catch On* proposes that the effects of coronavirus on the theatre will be as significant in the history of theatre as the invention of photography in the history of painting. It imagines the post-Covid-19 audience and challenges readers to propose their own definitions for a theatre after the crisis. It is a call-to-action for a 'yes, and' approach to theatre, technology and the use of technology in the theatre.

This Will Never Catch On

By Colm Summers



The view from an upstairs window, Le Gras, Burgundy, France. The earliest known surviving photograph, taken by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in 1826 or 1827. Known as the first photograph.

In recent weeks my Theater Directing class at Columbia University has met with our teacher, Brian Kulick, to discuss Shakespeare. Each class begins with a brief preamble before we get down to the pentameters, in which Brian asks us simply, “How are you guys doing?”

“What have you been up to since I last saw you?”

Usually, these introductions are an opportunity for gossip and goings on around town. So and so’s got a new show opening, or one of us

has seen something that blew our minds (or bored us to tears). These conversations always buzz with excitement. There's something kinetic about being around that table. The energy is that of excited novitiates swapping secrets. There is something in the air that unites us, that binds us together.

In the last weeks of term when we, like the rest of the world, entered the Zoomiverse, our preamble changed dramatically. When Brian asks, "How is everyone doing? What have you been up to?" the answers come dull and plaintive:

"You know."

"The same."

"Nothing much."

Looking at the pixelated silence, Brian says,

"You know... this Zoom thing is... It's... I don't know about you guys but it's like...what Kindle is to books, Zoom is to people!"

Since theaters everywhere shuttered down, theater people have made valiant efforts to make do on the platform. There have been Zoom readings of new plays. Plays written for Zoom. Zoom residencies. Endless Zoom. More and more often, peers of mine make some variation on Brian's Zoom lament: "it's just not the same." As we move into a winter of pandemic fatigue, Zoom fatigue is also on the rise.

Regardless, the crisis has had surprise silver linings: access to expertise, new collaborations, archival productions and – most excitingly – a worldwide conversation about the essence of theater itself. You might say that's cold comfort to the thousands out of work. I agree.

Nevertheless, that question about the essence of theatre, has rarely been so apposite. For that is the question which this forced acceptance of the Zoomiverse proposes: "what theater will survive this crisis of the artform's two most essential elements, the elements of liveness, and of the

audience?” In this essay it is not my intention to describe that theater, but a philosophy for discovering it, in terms of how another art form escaped a brush with apocalypse.

Historically, the provenance of innovation in the theater tends to be sub-disciplinary. Innovation emerges parallel to and contingent upon developments in the other arts. This is particularly true of the modernist avant-gardes. Surrealism in painting and poetry begets surrealism on the stage. The theater inherits and cannibalizes the avant-garde as it emerges in other forms. Notable exceptions to the rule include dadaist performance art, futurist synthesis, and queer performance practice.

Despite theater’s unique interpolation of other art forms (and perhaps because of this interpolation), it has been slower to innovate on *its own fundamentals* than its cousins in dance, music, painting, sculpture, and the literary arts. This virus has thrown into relief the need to reimagine the theater from the ground up. It is a critical juncture, a threshold, as unique a moment in the history of theater as the Photographic Moment was in the history of painting. The theater is dead, long live the theater. What was the Photographic Moment?

The earliest known photograph, taken by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in 1826 from an upstairs window of his home, looks out on a stark horizon. The contrast is high and the forms are aggressive. A white triangle (the roof of an outhouse) protrudes towards us like the threat of an uncertain future. Looking at this photograph, it’s hard to believe that the invention of photography would change the world. It seems absurd to think that this muddy, monochromatic abstraction would change the art of painting forever, and ironically, precipitate the rise of abstract art.

When photography was introduced, representational painting was defunct. It was suddenly irrelevant whether a Master could paint the Tuileries Gardens realistically. You could do that with a camera. Suddenly, it

was what Manet could do *with paint* that made painting, well... painting. With the rise of photography, the purpose of painting had changed forever. So it is not the reality of the figures in Manet's Garden, but the forced foreshortening and the faceless modernity of his cacophonous *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* (1862) that makes it both a masterpiece, and quintessentially a painting. The end of painting precipitated its true purpose. Could the same be true of the theater in our Zoom Moment?

It is my hope that in this dimming of the theater world, we too go back-to-basics. That we reexamine the canvas, and the brush: What does this word "live" mean? What does this word "audience" mean? It behooves us to ask how we have looked at these fundamentals in the past, and how we are looking at them now. Here's my best shot at two very general definitions, to help us out:

1. Liveness: Action in real time before an audience.
2. Audience: The group participating in the art.

I look forward to your disagreements.

Sometimes, in digital time, there's a Zoom glitch and everything momentarily speeds up. Somehow, I in New York have had time for a five-second freeze-frame, followed by rapid acceleration and then – impossibly – I rejoin Dublin in time to hit my cue, apparently without missing a beat. I say my line, responding not to my partner, but to the glitch.

Yesterday I spoke to a playwright friend about a reading of her new play. We joked that the interminable New Play Pause was doubly as interminable over Zoom. Not so much zoom as slog. "It wasn't *live*," she said, "it was like watching paint dry."

Last week, in the virtual space of his masterclass, a dance teacher said, "Jon, I can't see you, but I can hear you. Can you mute so we can't also hear your kids." On the zoom grid, an audience member is a pod of audience members, not just Jon, but Jon's kids too.

The fragility of these fundamentals of theater experience are thrown into relief by our new reliance on technology, which suggests to me that they are in need of repurposing. Let us cast ourselves forward in time, to a world after the pandemic. Perhaps in doing so we will learn a little about what to do now.

When we return to theaters, storytelling in real time before our eyes will be radical, not only because it will be risky to gather together, but because the audience psychology will be changed in every way. Physically, they may have to sit further apart. Emotionally they will have weathered not only the virus, but the financial depressions and mental health pandemics to follow. They may be vaccinated, but they will be infected with a very powerful story about the danger of time spent in a space with other bodies.

They may, as Dr. Fauci recommends, no longer shake hands. They may no longer embrace. They will be the post-Covid-19 audience. They will be the post-Covid-19 theater. Clapping will have a new meaning. Until now, they have reserved it for essential workers, or protest songs. The theater cough will be frightening. There will also be need. They will need to laugh. They will need relief. They will want to remember what intimacy looks like. There will also be high expectations. They will want to know that sitting together is worth the risk. When we return to our “de-densified” theaters, sitting alone together might even be a bit dangerous.

There is a chance that theater will be transgressive.

How can we use this technologically bound moment to prepare for this future theater? There have of course been many movements for integration of technology and theater. I think of my first job, as an assistant at the Wooster Group. Elizabeth LeCompt and her people were way ahead of the theater-on-screen game. How prescient their work feels now. I think of Katie Mitchell, with her “live cinema.” I think of my

colleague Nicholas Johnson, working on Beckett's *Play* in Trinity College Dublin's virtual reality laboratory. We can learn borderland-lessons from these pioneers in performance and technology, about mediation, synchronicity, hypertextuality, gamification, etc., etc.

At the end of the day though, I have a nagging doubt. I suspect you have it too. That the digital is simply inimical to the theatrical. That all this determined but inexperienced work in virtual reality will be abandoned when that future theater is possible. I fear this doubt inhibits my ability to respond to this moment. On one hand, failure to embrace the tools before us would be a mistake. On the other, we cannot forget who we are.

Let us recognize this as an opportunity to re-invent the fundamentals using the tools before us, while remembering that the art of theater is an art of people, and that people need to touch and be touched. Theater is the art of being together. The people in the little squares of Zoom look like our friends and colleagues and famous people and family, but they're not all there. They are disembodied. Distracted. Occasionally decapitated by a pixel wind.

Recently, my brother recommended I watch his favorite rapper's gig on the videogame *Fortnite*. "This will never catch on," I thought, but then I did watch. With no theater in sight, it was one of the most theatrical experiences of my pandemic so far.

Then, as I revised this essay for publication, I got Covid. As I watched the seasons change from isolation, my window became a proscenium on reality. I was a one-man audience member to a show called *New York in Fall, 2020*.

As I flip-flopped from zoom projects to my window to this essay, my determination that I could sustain the theater by defining it in such technical definitions as 'liveness' and 'audience' faltered. The theater does something that neither *Fortnite*, Zoom nor the view from my window can.

Regardless of how we invent our way out of this crisis, be it in online rehearsal rooms or in-person but socially distant, the crisis has cost us that most human aspect of the theater, which we need most of all in Fall of 2020—to be together. That exigency makes our purpose clear.

This morning I Zoomed into a meeting, as preparation begins on another virtual production. At the tea-break I caught myself looking out the window. The grey November day looked like Niépce's photograph. I was watching the people go by, but really I was thinking of the rehearsal rooms standing empty uptown. To 19th Century painters, photography must have seemed crude, maudlin, maybe a little distasteful. It must have felt like the end of painting. To 19th Century painters, there must have been moments of hopelessness.

As the production team returned to their Zoom squares, I prepared to present them with contingency plans, should the virus blockade our production in August of 2021. As I spoke, the screen froze. A glitch. My colleagues' frozen faces epitomized the situation of all theater-makers, stuck in a moment for which we are ill-equipped. Yet we must try to be together. I looked out the window and waited. This will never catch on.