

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

All the World's a Screen? They're Used to It

Is theater even theater when you watch it on your laptop? Ask the artists who've blurred the boundaries between live and filmed performance for years.

By Alexis Soloski
Feb. 3, 2021



For this 2005 performance of "House of No More," [Big Art](#) Group juxtaposed actors onstage (here Edward Otto and Heather Litteer) with their screen images. Nan Melville for The New York Times

About a year ago, when such things were possible, a friend and I bought cheap, same-day tickets to a preview of "West Side Story," directed by the Belgian auteur Ivo van Hove. Our assigned seats were in the second row of the orchestra, on the extreme left, below the lip of the stage. Which means that we saw most of the performance via the 30-foot-tall LED display at the back.

When it comes to watching theater onscreen, I guess we were in the vanguard.

Before lockdowns began, a screen onstage signified experiment, adventure, risk. As sporadic components of live performance for a little more than a century, projections, film and video have helped artists explore ideas of present and past, presence and absence, flesh and pixel.

But screens, of course, are everywhere now, with theater delivered to laptop or phone or virtual-reality goggles. Which might signal the birth of a new hybrid form or a tenuous version of an older one, a 2-D placeholder for a 4-D experience that a pandemic has made almost impossible.

A lot of nights spent clicking from Zoom to Vimeo had left me with a question. So I asked it to a handful of actors, devisers, puppeteers and directors who have incorporated screens into their works for at least a decade, plus a few academics who think about technology and performance. Here it is: Is any of this onscreen theater really theater at all?

Van Hove, at least, seemed confident of the answer. "Yes, this is theater," he said, speaking by telephone, of the productions he's recently directed, like the four-hour "Kings of War" for Internationaal Theater Amsterdam. These livestreams allow actors and audience to meet at roughly the same time, if not in the same space.

He has integrated screens into his work since the mid '90s, beginning with a production of Camus's "Caligula," as a way to investigate public and private space. "I use it always, not to beautify things, but to tell something which I can otherwise not tell," he said. He mentioned his 2007 production of "The Misanthrope," in which a camera followed the actors out onto the street while a live feed relayed their argument back to the audience, a maneuver he repeated more recently with "Network."



The Belgian director Ivo van Hove is well known for using video projections on stage, as in his 2020 Broadway production of “West Side Story.” Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Screens have served other artists differently. Since the 1970s, the Wooster Group, the legendary Manhattan company, has assimilated the available technology of the day, from slide projectors to VCRs to 360-degree film. “If you have a naturalism for the modern age, it has to incorporate these things,” Kate Valk, a longtime Wooster Group member said, speaking by telephone.

Sometimes that assimilation was lighthearted, as in the B-movie-style-footage that enlivened “House/ Lights”; sometimes mournful, as in “Fish Story,” from 1994, when Ron Vawter, a company member who had died of AIDS the year before, played a role via TV monitor. “The ghost in the machine,” as Valk put it.



In Gob Squad’s “Kitchen (You Never Had It So Good),” from left on video, Sharon Smith, Sean Patten and Sarah Thom are looking for Simon Will, who stands in front of the screen. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

For the members of Gob Squad, a Berlin-based company that has brought shows like “Kitchen (You’ve Never Had it So Good)” to New York, screens offered as a way to hide from the audience, to become more ghostly themselves. “We were very shy,” Sean Patten, a founding member said, speaking via Zoom. “We found it easier to talk to a camera, and have that relayed live to the audience.”

Deployed onstage, screens contrast different styles of acting and being, creating what Valk describes as “this frisson, between the screen, the very seductive screen, and the live performer.”

In shows like “Flicker” and “Shelf Life,” the New York-based company Big Art Group showed human actors standing alongside and between their onscreen selves. In performances by the Chicago company Manual Cinema, audience eyes move up to the sophisticated animated film screened above the stage and then down to the messy, sweaty frantic world of the puppeteers and musicians staging it.

But mess and sweat aren’t Covid-era friendly, so Manual Cinema, like other groups, has moved its shows exclusively online, which means that the variance between live actor and screen has pretty well collapsed.

In previous Manual Cinema shows, each audience member had to decide what to watch — the people or the animation. “You’re cutting your own edit,” Sarah Fornace, a Manual Cinema artistic director, said, speaking by telephone. In their “Christmas Carol,” which they livestreamed in December, the camera edits for us, controlling our gaze, limiting interaction and choice.

“There’s a fascism to the medium,” Patrick Foley said of online drama, in a recent conference call with his Fake Friends collaborator Michael Breslin. The two are creators of “Circle Jerk,” one of last year’s more successful online works, which took inspiration from Wooster Group shows, multicamera sitcoms and Instagram stories. The show used a type of camera popular with YouTube influencers. Was this theater? “If it’s not theater, at least it’s theatrical,” Breslin hedged.



Cat Rodriguez in “Circle Jerk,” one of last year’s more successful online works. via Fake Friends

Valk, busy rehearsing the Wooster Group’s “The Mother,” which she hopes to perform in person, has seen a few Zoom shows. She’s not sure if they feel like theater. “Because it is only on my screen, and I’m in my home, maybe theater is turning inside out. I don’t even know what’s happening to us or to theater,” she said.

Then again, with most theaters still closed, questions of ontology don’t interest her. “We’re in the middle of a long game. Do we have to rush and say what is theater and what is not theater?” she asked.



Scott Shepherd, left, and Ari Fliakos in “To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre),” a 2002 Wooster Group production that made characteristic use of screens onstage. Richard Termine for The New York Times

Whether or not onscreen theater feels like theater may depend on whether it offers a feeling of liveness, with all the potential for error and surprise and invention and anything-could-go-wrong-at-any-moment contingency that liveness affords.

“Liveness can be networked,” Caden Manson, a founder of Big Art Group, said, speaking by telephone. “If you have the risk of disconnection or mishap, you’re there.”

When Gob Squad conceived “Show Me a Good Time,” a livestreamed 24-hour endurance event, in June, they built a section into the top of every hour when an audience member could call in and shape the performance to come.

“We didn’t want to make a piece where we’re just performing to a camera, and it doesn’t matter if people are watching or not,” Patten said. “We wanted it to somehow matter.”

Still, the company doesn’t plan to do more livestreams. “Each of us has very present in our minds the real theater experience and how this is not it,” Patten said.

That’s in part why some troupes have declined to meet the technological moment. Elevator Repair Service, a vanguard New York company that has used screens on occasion since the ’90s, prepared a brief Zoom piece for the Prelude Festival in October, but they don’t intend to make more. Onscreen theater just isn’t theater, John Collins, the artistic director, argued, first on Twitter, then via telephone.

Instead of finding multiplatform solutions to pandemic problems, he instead advocates “taking a big deep breath and facing that void as a way of learning something about what we do.”

When live theater does return, however masked and piecemeal, perhaps not everyone will have learned the same lesson. We could see an embrace of screens, and the access they provide, often at a much lower price point than live theater, or a real allergy to liquid crystal display.

Sarah Bay-Cheng, the dean of York University’s school of the arts, predicts that online theater will continue in some form, especially as it may attract digital natives who resist putting away their phones and don’t mind a little mediation. “Hybrid is going to be really important,” she said on a Zoom call.

Then again, the reopening of theaters could also invite a retrenchment, a back-to-basics return to what Marc Robinson, a Yale professor, described over the phone as “a embodied sweaty togetherness, a utopian idea of naturalness and immediacy.” Some of us will never want to see another screen or breakout room again.

For now screens are what we have. And as I’ve tried to think through the frustrations of experiencing theater this way, I’ve realized that the difficulty may owe less to screens themselves and more to the distractible brains and fidgety bodies watching them. (Basically, I blame myself.) Because theater isn’t only a form, it’s also a place and a phenomenon and a state of mind.

As spectators, we depend on certain conventions — darkness, say, or peer pressure — to focus our attention. When we watch alone, on a laptop, it’s too easy to look or click away. But if we can meet live performance online with the full force of our own presence and concentration, then maybe theater can happen here (wherever here is). Even as we all know it’s not quite the same thing.

Patten explained one difference. “The saddest thing about screen-based shows? There’s no applause at the end,” he said. “The stage manager just ends the meeting.”