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Shifts: Reflections on practice in digitised and virtual theatre-making process[1]

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Abstract

Theatre-making as an organising frame is conceived as space (staging), where three roles – text, acting, and direction – bring the theatre-making to life. Within virtual theatre-making processes, the roles of those involved in making theatre are shifting due to creating in (re)imagined digitally punctuated spaces of deep listening, embodiment, and aesthetic choices. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the effects towards the 4th Industrial Revolution, forcing many slow transitioning spaces into a race for their positioning within the virtual space. Theatre-making has always been transitional. It has altered its ways of being in and (the use) of space and has already integrated the virtual within the creative practice to elicit alternate ways of thinking and being that offer shifts in how performativity and performance are theorised and understood. Where performativity may be seen as a space for effecting change, in theatre-making the performative is harnessed towards a (re)imagining of theatre in virtual space. Now the shift towards a more dominant virtual process and performance may merely be a further reshuffling or rearrangement of power, relationships, and authoring. This essay grapples with the question of what the new theatre virtual space is, what the new frames include, and which processes it teases out to suggest what the alternate roles, lenses, and tools may look like in virtual theatre-making going forward. Reflections on the possibilities of a new virtual theatre space are discussed here through documenting reflexive practice within an *ex post facto* research design. Pragmatic lived examples are offered by three diverse

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performing arts trainers and theatre-makers from their preferred vantage point, evoking ideas of hybridity. Theatre, process, and product(ion) are still the key components, but the new virtually staged space offers alternate ways of being which are vulnerable, expressive and diverse – all components that are pivotal to creativity and theatre-making.

Introduction

Space – whether a suspended pause, a blank area, an empty room, or a limitless cosmos – *performs*. As a concept theorised over centuries by philosophers, scientists, artists and dramatists, space remains complex and elusive… Space is the stuff of architects (who construct it) and scenographers (who abstract it); experienced by inhabitants (immersed within it) and spectators (who regard it) (Hannah, 2011: 54).

Peter Brook (1968: 9) encapsulated the thought of theatre as an 'empty space' where "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage". He portends the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear visible within our imagination and thoughts. And it is through his descriptions of theatre as being deadly, holy, rough, and immediate that the concept of theatre as space is entrenched. Space as a construct in both theatre and performance studies can be further ascribed to semiotician Anne Ubersfeld (1999: 4) who claims, "the theatre is space… we can define theatre as a particular mode of spatial organisation". Since Ubersfeld's offerings regard space as both theatrical experiences as well as the role/s that space plays in social, cultural, and political constructions of texts; several studies invoke the possibilities of theatrical space, classification of spatial functions and taxonomy of space in theatre. Gay McAuley's (2002) taxonomy on spatial relationship further provides a broad and in-depth investigation into space especially in defining conventional and non-theatrical spaces. All transpire to achieve a connection with the roles space plays in the communicative structures both literally and through meaning-making (Narayanan, 2021).

But one can say that there is no space, there are spaces. Space is not one, but space is plural, a plurality, a heterogeneity, a difference. That would also make us look at spacing differently. We would not be looking for one [space] (Libeskind, 2000: 68).

From spaces of deep listening, embodiment, and aesthetic choices, the roles of those involved in making theatre are shifting. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the effects towards the 4th Industrial Revolution, forcing many slow transitioning spaces into a race for their positioning within virtual spaces. This essay considers the pragmatics involved in theatre-making as roles of creative

theatrical space-making that has elicited alternate ways of thinking and being in the virtual.

The South African Sustaining Theatre and Dance (STAND) Foundation (2021) has conducted a survey of COVID-19 and its impact on the theatre ecosystem. In the dissemination of the results, there is a section that deals with the transference of stage works onto screen, documenting the spectator's response to online theatre. Whilst respondents indicated that they were prepared to pay to watch online theatre, 57.5% said they believed that theatre should be enjoyed live. The comparison was made to watching existing film and television streaming online that is favoured over watching theatre virtually. Which is further evidence that there is a need to focus on the delivery of theatre in a virtual platform that does not compete directly with the existing standards set by film and television, but that continues to embrace the theatrical and live performative norms.

This essay looks at the creative meaning generated through the roles of text, framing the acting, and direction as applied to virtual theatre-making. All three of these speak to the theatre-maker's organisation of actors in space, and how they focus on their remote surroundings, evoke deep listening, embodiment, and aesthetic choices. The pragmatic examples used to discuss these elements were all taken from explorations with actors in training as observed by academic staff of the Department of Performing Arts, Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). Each of these unique reflections are offered from the individual theatre-makers perspective and their chosen framing or (re)ordering of theatre into the virtual creative space. The first role, *text*, is discussed from the perspective of remote-learning rehearsals and how the actors discovered the benefits of bodyvoice integration with deep listening. The second role *acting* offers principles to explore theatrical staging of virtual duologues in remote places; whilst the third role of *directing* meditates on the idea of how technological engagements further question the role of director.

TEXT through bodyvoice in virtual space

When text-based work is performed on stage, it is the director who is responsible for making the text accessible to the audience as the primary source, by devising a concept that conveys a deeply felt personal witnessing yet communicates beyond the director as an individual speaking universally. For the intention of making the text accessible, Brook (2014) states that the director considers the visual elements, including: the nature of the text; the relationship between the text and the audience; and the relationship between the actor and the audience.

The text is activated through objects in space and time. Such objects include the scenic elements and the actor's body (Rozik, 2002: 110). The actor's body is therefore the core ingredient of theatre and the core 'object' that creates the world of the play. The actor applies their inner and outer resources to interpret the text through body and voice as the primary means of expression and thus they are

vital creative tools (Adrian, 2008; McGaw, 2011, Pia, 2006; Krasner, 2012; Chekhov, 1991; Morris, 2000; Zinder, 2013). The actor is required to direct their bodily instrument (body and voice) into expressive motion, in which they confine actions in directions, purpose and shape (Bainter, 2013: 92). The actions include physical actions and the speech act, so the actor uses their body to 'shape' physical action and speech (text) with specific purpose and quality to embody the requirements of the character and performance. Thus, the actor's bodyvoice becomes the core mechanism through which the director translates the text and tells the story.

In contrast, text written for film serves as a blueprint for all production elements. Baker (2013: 72) states that screenplays are often viewed as technical documents that can be equated to architectural drawings that provide a technical guide for the actor, cinematographer, sound designer, editor etc. Screenplays are subsequently characterised as being less reliant on dialogue or spoken text since visual footage and editing contribute significantly to the story telling. Meaning that many aspects of the story are 'shown' through film conventions rather than 'expressed' through the actor. The actor and the spoken text are merely two of the many visual and auditory aspects applied to tell a story in the collaborative process within filmmaking.

In our experience with the translating of live performance to screen we have noted that although the actor's body was not employed in a physical performed space the approach to text interpretation mirrored that of stage performance. In other words, the actor and director employed the performance text as primary source and then interpreted the text through the actors' bodyvoice, which echoed the storytelling convention applied on stage. Therefore, the shifting to a virtual filmed 'stage' does not necessarily imply a shift to film. Our 'shifting' of the theatre text to a virtual space was navigated in our rehearsal process of *The Farm*, a contemporary South African adaptation of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

The rehearsal process started in a traditional theatre space in February 2020 and after many disruptions to the process, was moved to virtual in mid-March 2021. Therefore, the text-based process that was planned for the physical stage had to be adapted to rehearsals on various on-line platforms. The actors often found their physical space restricted and at times connectivity was compromised to a point where we could not use video. Therefore, it was decided to base our initial exploration on further discovering the characters, relationships and developing nuance in the acting. The actors brought what they had discovered physically in the theatre space to a virtual space. In the virtual space, the characters engaged and expressed their intended emotional journey through text and had to adapt to finding new ways of working as an ensemble. Following the process, the cast was asked to submit a free reflection on how they experienced the process as actors, via an audio recording. These reflections and the director/lecturer's observations

suggest that although the process was challenging at first, it contributed significantly to their experience as actors in training. In certain areas the actors reported a stronger experience in what they sensed compared to exploration in the physical space. Because the process relied on video and sometimes only audio on-line meeting rooms, the text became the primary connector between the actors, the characters, and the director. Coupled with the fact that we experienced delays and sometimes due to poor connectivity audio only, the text as connector heightened the actor's listening and in turn elevated the intuitive response to the other actors/characters.

"I found a different side of acting, I learnt to listen", "I felt that I had to listen on a deeper level and that created reactions that gave me the foundation for the character". "It sometimes took a while to respond to the lines and that made the reactions more interesting". These experiences resonate with acting approaches such as Meisner who states that the actor is dependent on other actors to elicit a response. This elicits active listening and taps into the actor's instinct, who finds shifts in the other actor's behaviour and inflicts changes on the dialogue (Meisner & Longwell, 1987: 29-30). It potentially enables actors to observe each other beyond a superficial level, examining emotions, feelings, and thoughts (Krasner, 2012: 332).

In general, the actors reported that the prominence of listening and responding enabled a strong activation of the inner environment. "I sensed constant shifts between the inner and outer environment and how the inner affects the outer", "I became more aware of the character and her impulses and thoughts", "I learnt so much about my character, authentic stuff and certain situations felt more intense and intimate, it gave me a deeper perspective".

Another theme that emerged strongly is the fact that the rehearsal approach triggered the imagination. "I listened and started creating images, beautiful pictures", "I felt that I used my imagination even more than usual because you are alone in the space responding to all these characters". Which aligns with acting theory that asserts that the body and psychology are one and that the body should be trained to become sensitive to impulses. Chekhov suggests that the actor cultivates a well-developed, flexible imagination and a body that is sensitive to inner impulses (Chamberlain, 2009: 173), which should be in place to enable the actor to translate the inner event to an outer expression (Petit, 2010: 46). It may be suggested that the limitations of virtual rehearsals limited the in-person stimuli the actors received and potentially heightened embodied imagination which activated inner resources.

Although the text and interaction between the characters was the base of the process, embodied expression was actively encouraged within the limitations of the platforms we used. Rehearsals were initiated with guided somatic awareness explorations and actors were actively encouraged to sense and apply physical

bodyvoice impulses. These may be as large as gestures or as small as a shift in breath or the body advancing or retreating. "I became more aware of the way my body reacts, I could really feel it and I became more aware of my voice". "I felt the freedom to become more creative with my body and my voice", "I embodied more than I realised, I noticed, okay this happened now, my whole body responded". Therefore, although the rehearsal explorations were seemingly reliant on speech only, it translated to discoveries in embodied gestural expression. Chu and Kita (2011: 265) indicate that the connection between speech and gesture originates at a conceptual level where pre-linguistic thoughts are generated and organised into units suitable for speaking. These units of generated and organised thoughts could also be described as the activation of the mirror neuron system in the perception and production of familiar and meaningful gestures and mouth movements (Capirci et al., 2008). Gesture as a co-expresser to speech therefore clarifies the intent of the speaker and the perception of the listener. Thus, even though other actors were not present or visible, the act of speaking and listening engaged the gestural expression, arguably at an even more metaphorical level when actors are not in the same tangible physical space.

Framing the ACTING – gone virtual

In live theatre the staged frame is provided by the physical architecture of the theatre space. This may include such examples as the literal proscenium arch framing the stage opening, or the scenography frame offered from the design elements in an experimental black-box experience. Therefore, to render a digitised performance static framed space as theatrical, it is key for theatre performers and actors to actively engage with the frame offered by the recorded virtual platform in the manner they would a staged frame. The preferred landscape view offered by a projection screen (regardless of the smart device) allows for the spectator to engage with the whole stage area in one view, observing how the performer interacts with(in) this frame. It was found that it is important that a single composite frame be kept, offering both the performer and spectator options for participation. This contrasts with the film & television view of directing the focus of the spectator's gaze where the cinematography dictates. The filmed genre utilises the direction of focus as an aspect in the storytelling to guide the montage. It is thus scripted and storyboarded, where the plans are implemented as such with great attention to detail. Conversely, staged live theatre offers the performer greater leeway in working with the space and time elements available to them and to manipulate these in rehearsal until the preferred affect results are found in agreement with the director cast as the first audience member (Bogart, 2007). It is this possibility and agency provided to the actor in the moment of performance that activates the theatre space and enhances the liveness, further offering up a magnetic dynamic to the relationship the actor experiences with the stage and spectator. Therefore, as a virtual staging option, it is advocated to keep the one

composite frame that can be manipulated by the performers through their active use of their body in space and time.

Alternatively, if the camera were to take on a first-person view and engage with the stage action from the perspective of an active spectator, it would offer a different perspective to the liveness. First-person perspective has been explored in film – for example, *The Blair Witch Project*, and is reminiscent of the gaming world, where 'first-person shooter' is the preferred interactive mode of video gamers. This framing option may also offer opportunities to explore immersive theatre practices that allow the spectator to ostensibly choose what they want to look at. It was not widely adopted in filmmaking, as the hand-held movement of the camera was considered poor cinematography. Also, audiences compared it to the gaming world and felt that their autonomy to choose where to move and what to look at was curbed by the predetermined cinematography. For this essay, the selection of a single composite framing for the designated stage area is argued and advocated for because the spectator is afforded autonomy to participate by choosing the aspect/s they would prefer to focus on.

Towards a discussion on how effective a single composite framing of a stage/performance area is for transposing live performance to a virtual theatre space, this essay will utilise the lessons learnt from the explorations within acting training. In 2021, the compulsory transference from stage to virtual space during acting training explored the use of the Viewpoints acting modality to elicit articulation of space and time elements. Viewpoints (Landau & Bogart, 2005) is defined as: a philosophy of movement translated into a technique for training, creating ensemble and creating performance; a set of names given to certain principles of movement through time and space. Viewpoints speaks to the points of awareness the performer makes while working.

The training incorporated the nine physical Viewpoints clustered under the concepts of time and space. While the training acknowledged the additional vocal Viewpoints which were developed later and are specifically related to sound rather than movement, and that the physical and vocal viewpoints overlap each other and are constantly inter-related (Landau & Bogart, 2005; Lewis, 2012: 100), the training primarily focused on the physical Viewpoints.

By integrating the five spatial physical Viewpoints (indicated in italics), the following principles for transposing into virtual stage were determined through collaborative exploration:

- The virtual frame is important as it becomes your *architecture*
- Recording in landscape (horizontal) is better suited to virtual dissemination, and offers actors more opportunity for *spatial relationship*, *gesture,* and interaction

- Create *topography* and staging norms as you would if you were in the theatre; the performance language should not be changed by the space
- Explore interesting and alternative uses of perspective and *shape*
- Exchanging objects from one character to the other across spaces links the performance context
- Any acting style is accepted. However, consider that this is theatre for virtual space, not film acting, or just auditory performing 'talking heads'
- The character's relationship and status need to be clearly portrayed and evolved
- Using text on screen – as alternative intent, or interaction with characters off screen

The virtual frame is important as it becomes your Architecture

The placement of two distinct staged frames in one composite space (recording) was explored. The initial explorations had each staged area being depicted alternately within the full frame. Sometimes the staged spaces were alongside each other, sharing equal parts of the final recorded frame. In other instances, one place was superimposed within the other – thereby one frame was larger, with the other being a smaller frame overlaid in a corner of the first frame.

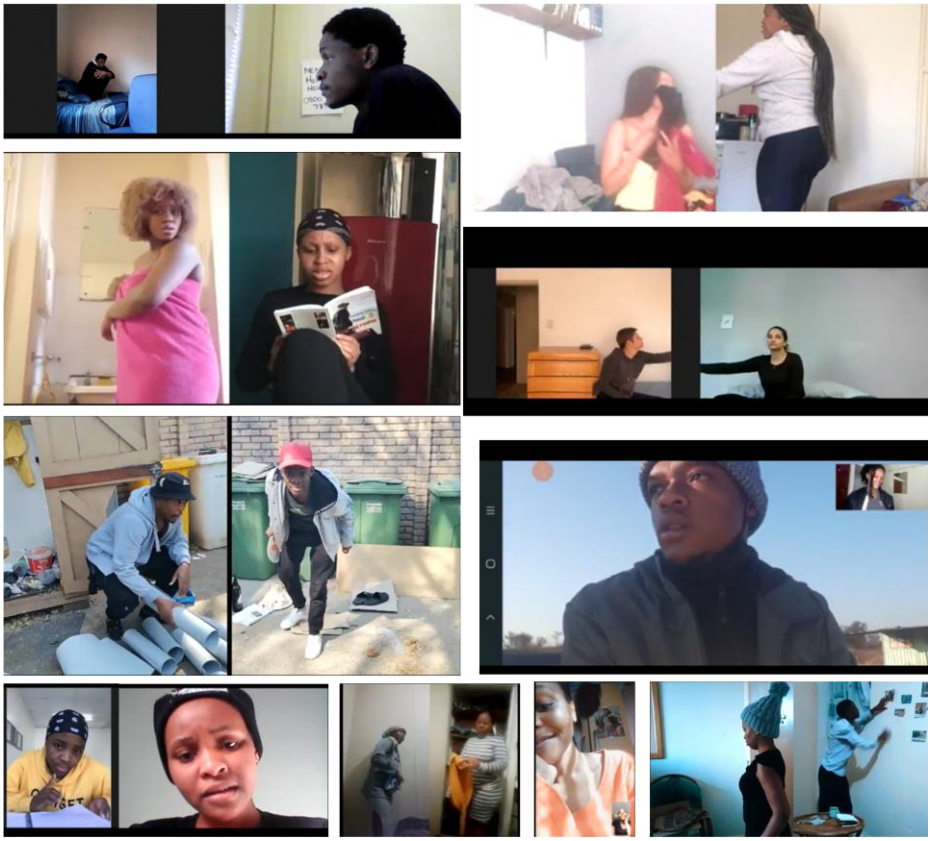

Fig 1. Montage screenshot images of acting scenes taken during the virtual presentations in 2021

Regardless of the frame placement, exploration was done into time elements of toggling between these two frames or viewing them simultaneously. It became apparent that the preferred option was to discontinue alternating between the two staged spaces. This allowed the spectator to choose where they wanted to look and to witness the actions and reactions (non-verbal communication) between the two characters. The gestures and kinaesthetic responses were more effective when both spaces were shown simultaneously. Whether the one space be superimposed on the other or whether both spaces be offered the same allocation within the composite frame was open for personal preference. Both were reliant on the use of the spaces in these formations to justify their performance choices.

Discovering 'interesting' shapes within the frame was useful. Instead of trying to locate the staged space in a place with a flat uniform background, to include angles, corners, and be conscious of the repetition of shapes both enhanced the illusion of a shared or juxtaposed space in one frame but also offered the performer more interesting angles to play off. For example, one character's space was the corner of the room, next to the door, with their partner's space adjoining it

in the frame, outside next to a staircase at a door. The two spaces were shown in the composite framed space by the two doors being the adjoining focal point. By the fact that these doors and spaces were obviously different, the spectator was invited in to suspend their disbelief and accept that this was a theatrical choice which allowed them to engage with the storyline.

Recording in landscape offers more opportunity for Spatial Relationship, gesture, and interaction

The recording of the spaces in landscape was the preferred choice. Not only does this articulate to the screening of the recording within a virtual platform that is designed for landscape projection, but it also supports the space for a staging of a character's non-verbal communication. To record both the staged spaces in landscape offered the characters space and opportunity to designate spatial relationships to one another (in their independent remote spaces) and within the independent staged place. The landscape option allows for action and placement within the combined frame that is intentional towards the non-verbal dialogue of the character.

Shape, spatial relationship, and gesture are all elements of space within the Viewpoint classification (Landau & Bogart, 2005; Lewis, 2012: 101-103) and are reliant on recording the scenes in landscape view to incorporate a visual 'staged' framing. The landscape view recording also offered the option to articulate and activate the framed architecture, where architecture as an element of Viewpoints, depicts the "environment in which the performer is working and how the awareness of it affects movement" (Landau & Bogart, 2005: 20-21). The architecture includes all that is seen within the landscape digital frame, including set dressing in properties and décor and perspective lines depicted by walls, corners, and the like. Furthermore, "in working with architecture, we create spatial metaphors, giving form to feelings such as I'm 'up against the wall'" (Landau & Bogart, 2005: 22-23). Everything in the space visible to the spectator is encapsulated in the element of architecture which is open to symbolic and metaphorical interpretation.

Staging – create topography and staging norms as you would if you were in the theatre.

The framed architecture articulates the staging. It was encouraged to retain what topography and physicality would have been utilised within the theatre space for the characters to not become static in the centre of the frame and only perform through their faces as 'talking heads'. It is cautioned that although the theatrical conventions of stage business, topography, and physical interaction be upheld its intention must be to create meaning. Characters should not just move for the sake of moving.

Further, the choice of expressive or descriptive staging should be used consciously and with intention for the theatrical message. "In staging a composition, it is possible to stage descriptively or expressively. Descriptive staging essentially repeats the external physical and vocal reality of the event being described" (Landau & Bogart, 2005: 146).

The language of the theatre is expressive and metaphoric as distinct from television, which is mostly descriptive. And yet, our profession often confuses languages and ends up using the descriptive language of television on the stage rather than the expressive language that suits theatre. For the camera, it would probably be most effective to replicate exactly what surrounds the character, the same spatial relations, objects and shapes, identical gestures, and furniture. For theatrical expression, which can encompass subjective, emotional aspects of the depicted moment, shapes can shift, and metaphors arise. "Description is prose. Expression is poetry" (Bogart, 2007: 37-38).

The landscape view of the framed staged spaces therefore offers up space for the actor to articulate in the expressive language of the theatre by consciously seeking metaphorical moments and intention through non-verbal communication with the character in a remote space, as well as offer interesting opportunities to invite the spectator into the meaning making process.

Perspective – exploration and interesting use of perspective shapes

In a theatre space, there are opportunities to use perspective to aid the articulation of meaning and intention within the performance. A character might choose to deliver an emotional monologue about a traumatic event by placing themselves in the upstage corner of the stage, opening a large spatial relationship between themselves and the audience. They might place themselves downstage in close proximity to the audience. Both are viable staging opportunities, rendering different empathetic responses.

When transposing stage to screen, the breaking of the frame by the character looking off screen, or reaching for something off screen, or moving in and out of the frame, is tolerated and encouraged. This implies a conscious manipulation of the spatial relationship and invites the audience in to engage with the action. Also, for characters to consciously move further back or come up to the screen (almost too close) plays with the depth perspective and enhances the interpretation of the two characters' interaction. The spectator may witness the face close-up to the camera as that character moves into the near proximity or 'in the face' of the other character.

It is important to note that this manipulation of the perspective should be done manually by the actor in relation to the camera, not for the camera to follow the performer or use zooming options to depict perspective. The manual

manipulation will bring the nuances of theatre spatial interaction within the spatial relationships to the recorded screen dynamics.

Exchanging objects from one character to the other across screens links the context across the remote spaces

In addition to bringing the use of conscious theatrical perspective and proxemics into a virtual space, the breaking of the remote designated spaces of independent characters links the context of the narrative. By exchanging objects from one to another across the spaces the illusion that the characters are communicating within the shared frame is created. For example, one character may 'pass' an object (a book, toilet roll, item of clothing) to the other character, by extending the gesture with the item out of the frame. The recipient then gestures to reach for the object, which magically appears within their space. If timed well, this interaction transports the spectator into believing the context more clearly. Also, it enhances the feeling that this exchange is being witnessed live.

The objects are afforded the opportunity to perform with the characters, and to contribute to the non-verbal communication. The use of time elements (tempo, duration, repetition, and kinaesthetic response) to interact with the objects proposes this aspect. For example, if one character slowly picks up an item and passes it carefully over to the other, then for the recipient to grab for it gingerly, bringing it swiftly into their frame – these actions may be read and interpreted for meaning-making.

Style - this is theatre for virtual space, any stage acting style is acceptable.

To transpose the theatre setting to a virtual setting does not imply using the norms designated for screen acting. Instead, any stage acting style is acceptable and should be embraced. Even if the choice is for the South African Bra Gibb (Gibson Kente (Solberg, 2011)) acting style that is external and stylised stock characters, the physical gesture and intentions should be included right through to the choices made regarding spatial relationship, the staging, and perspective use of the framing. If one were to merely transpose all actions into film and cinematography modes, this would negate the very intent to find the new virtual theatre making staging customs.

Viewpoints pertinently encourages the adoption and continuation of acting styles that inform character work, whilst employing the use of space and time elements to further augment the portrayal.

The character's relationship needs to be clearly portrayed.

The characters depicted in their independent remote spaces still need to present a shared context. Therefore, even more pertinent within the virtual stage depiction is the need to clearly articulate the character's relationship. This will improve the belief that these characters are intentionally interacting with one another from

within their separate spaces and supports the interplay of the characters' intent and transitions. Status (social, verbal, and physical) also increases the element of interaction between the characters. Work on status and use of text as a layer alongside the physical non-verbal communication is therefore vital as per the requirements for theatrical portrayal on stage.

Using written text – as alternative intent, or interaction with characters off screen

The use of written text also came up in the explorations. These were sometimes merely to articulate what the characters were saying due to poor audio recording or for further opportunities for interaction between the characters. An example was when an IM message popped up on the screen in one of the recordings. This was interpreted as a fortuitous mistake. It started discussions around the possibility of inserting text as a nod to the use of multimedia within staged performances. On stage, there have been various performances that have explored the staging of multimedia through depicting social media interactions, where characters may be communicating with one another, or perhaps even a third element.

The introduction of this kind of multimedia as a possible layer within the staged screen performance opens several interesting and explorative opportunities. The design elements would therefore become more apparent through focusing on scenographical elements that are vital to staged performance (Hannah, 2011).

Although for our explorations within the training environment for actors it was accepted that the actors themselves were experimenting with various apps and platforms, as well as scenographical elements, often it was fortuitous accidents that led to the excited realisations of what sound effects and specific ambient lighting enhancements may add to the offering. Undoubtedly working in collaboration with theatre designers would give the visual communication tools added value. It does lead to cautioning against bringing too many technical 'bells and whistles' into the performance – or offering expert editing effects – that may detract from the intent to work with the extant theatrical norms of staging.

These discoveries surrounding framing of the acting in virtual space, offer insights into how to adapt the staging without losing the theatrical, expressive, or liveness aspects that are inherent in theatre. To remember the staging adage of "less is more" (Roberts & Taylor, 1975) is vital. These discoveries also focus primarily on the actor to communicate the intention of the play, reverting to the essence of physical performance-making through manipulating the body in space and time. The focus on the actor/ing is advocated by many theatre exponents and is also vital to African performance.

The grainy image of theatre DIRECTING

In a grainy video of a virtual theatre presentation created by POPart Theatre[23] in 2020, we watched six plays in a space of 30 minutes. These plays were each written, directed, and acted out on virtual mobile phone platforms. We see close-ups of faces in one scene, dark shadows in another and brightly dressed actors in portrait form. We wonder in this new theatre what is the role of the director and that of the writer? What creative choices were made and by whom?

At the beginning of the recording the curator of the collection of plays, Dintshintile Matshitisho (2020) explains to the audience that the directors worked with actors via phone calls, texts, and voice notes. We wonder; was it really their vision? What role did the director play in what the actor created?

The work of theatre is to make, build, create characters and worlds that shift and change and hopefully move audiences. This work of role-making is the basis of the teaching we do in theatre. The instruction is role assignment. Here we teach students that the mechanics of theatre are split into different roles and responsibilities of production manager, director, actor, designer, light and sound designer, publicist, etc. This role responsibility matrix is broadly understood in traditional theatre with the playwright and director being central. Though the director, as a position, is relatively new in the history of theatre, we are enthralled by the idea of a singular vision, that the director is an indispensable member of the theatrical team and perhaps the overall "boss" of the production. The director's job is complex as they are both an artist and a coordinator. There are other theatrical instances where the role is not as dictatorial. In participatory theatre as seen in devising (collaborative theatre-making), theatre for development, community theatre, and what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1992) calls African Theatre; the roles and responsibilities of the ultimate visionary are sometimes shared. In feminist theatre, the director role is questioned. In this section of the paper, we meditate on the idea of how technological engagements in theatre or directing over small screens further question the role of the director. We suggest that the work we are doing virtually is not necessarily new; it is work that is already done by Community Theatre, Protest and Workers Theatre and

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[2] POPArt stands for People of Performing Art, providing a platform for the showcasing of some of the freshest work and ideas from some of the hottest emerging and established Performing Arts talents in Johannesburg. This is a small experimental black box theatre in the heart of Maboneng in Johannesburg. http://mabonengprecinct.com/archives/listings/286-fox-street-city-and-suburban-johannesburg-south-africa-popart-theatre

Feminist Theatre practitioners. In the making of the new virtual theatre the director's role becomes more and more peripheral. In their article "Story Circles: A conversation on Black Feminist theatre practices drawn from creating the play 'Postcards: Bodily preserves'" Lepere and Mlangeni (2020) suggest a decentring of the role of the director in theatre-making practices. In black feminist theatre-making practice, the role is one of facilitation. They are an enabler rather than a visionary, "a facilitating director who probed, encouraged new ways of creating and offered moments of reflection about the process and product" (Lepere & Mlangeni, 2020: 2). The question is then do we still need the director or is there a way to build and shift the role anew?

Mobile directing dramaturgy

Dramaturgy is used here to suggest a set of tasks to put together the scene. What Turner & Berrndt (2008: 4) write as the "practical process of structuring the theatre work's composition". Traditionally, "in-real-life (IRL)" teaching directing we teach the role that is consumed with the mise-en-scene. We engage students in techniques and theories that help one create and compose scenic practices. The other core teaching practice in directing is the engagement with directing styles of famous directors. The styles are acutely linked to theatrical historiography and movements. The history of theatre and styles is dominated by white males. Over the years, the debate and dialogue of an African female director has become important for students as well. Though this is still the core of our teaching, the principles of core styles shifted as some became banal when faced with the fact that the actors were in control of their scene-composition through self-taping. The mobile dramaturgy is locked in the small screen experience. The director, who normally directs the eye of an audience, now is tasked with shaping the composition of a screen. Like a painter the actor works as a brush and reveals the vision of a distant interlocutor. This has meant the episteme had to shift with the changing role.

To illustrate the shifts in, and mobile dramaturgy of directing styles, this section will discuss the Advanced Directing class process. In directing class 2021, as one of the assignments for the year, students were given a task to direct a staged reading virtually. The casting, rehearsals and staging would all happen virtually. Students in the class made use of cell phones and laptops. The majority engaged with classes and virtual experiences via their mobile phones. During the rehearsals and staging of the readings, the challenge for most of the students was the lack of props and furniture. Even though they were directing play readings, these elements affected the framing and context of their narratives. The director's desires to provide stage business for the actors, within their perceived limited space, resulted in keeping many performers static, restricted to their seats. The mobile dramaturgy gave the primary artistic role/process to the actor. They chose their props and furniture, and what made it onto the scene. The director's role was

one of helping the actor transform their found objects or chosen costumes into a vision.

Added to the missing tangible items of props and furniture was the concept of the missing directorial style. Students were asked during rehearsals to reflect on a chosen directing style and how it was being applied to the assignment. The question, with no right or wrong answer, was how have you implemented a directing method? Have you? Or are you improvising?

> ANSWER S1: At the moment I have not implemented a specific style to follow. Yet I'll be exploring different types through improvisation and workshopping online.
>
> ANSWER S2: I don't know how to put this, but I can call it improvisation. There is no style.
>
> ANSWER S3: Improvising. Making it up as we go along. Communicating more.

The responses reveal a struggle to apply the 'in real life' principles to the virtual scene. It also challenges the idea of teaching directing styles as if they are fixed unreformed processes. The inability to apply is both a problem of episteme and disruptive pedagogical engagement that opens the possibility of new directing styles. The responses allow us to interrogate the narratives we hold on directing and styles and the ways that these reflect a chronically colonial collective interpretation of theatrical history.

From the lack of directing style, the next possible way to engage with texts and the staging was devising processes. As mentioned, the participatory nature of theatre is not novel, and devising is also not a new tool for directors. So how have directors used participatory dramaturgy in devising their pieces?

> ANSWER S1: As a Director, I am privileged to be working with an actor who actually wrote the text that is expressed through Monologue reading online. Therefore, personal, and social knowledge is delivered through the understanding of the vision the writer had in mind. The actor expresses her vision. What she wrote. As a director, I am only accompanying.
>
> ANSWER S2: Due to the times we are right now, we both work on each other's schedules. We give each other time to reflect on our lives. What is happening at home, the day's events? We then submit readings and feedback on WhatsApp or zoom. On WhatsApp, we make time to submit and patiently wait for a reply.
>
> ANSWER S3: We communicate through WhatsApp a lot. The challenge at times is because we both aren't always online, but we make work.

The varying experiences of devices demonstrate a richness in terms of dramaturgical disruptions and possibilities. The WhatsApp rehearsal means different rules of listening and waiting from the director's side. The other challenge for some of the directors is giving instructions. How are choice and action scaffolded or structured for the actor?

> ANSWER S1: Via voice notes and E-mail I listen to his voice notes, type reply and send back written notes.
>
> ANSWER S3: We rehearsal through voice notes and video calls. Then after a session, I type and send everything we've discussed to help him remember.

Explaining further student 3 shared:

> ANSWER S3: He reads to me on voice note and then I give him feedback. The issue we're facing is the actor finding a private space for our rehearsals. Also, the space he finds has an echo, which makes it a bit challenging to work.

Devising is therefore a core process for the director in this encounter. The actor takes centre stage literally in the creation and composition of the scenes and in some respects unseats the director in their vision and creation. The director is left to trust and wait like an audience member on the choices of the actor. This is akin to Bogart's (2007: 42) claim that the director is the first audience member for an actor.

Discussion and conclusions

Based on our reflections on the three distinct processes discussed in this essay, we conclude that a virtual practice has the potential to mimic many aspects of the experimental black box theatre space. It can resemble theatre rather than film as it enables the creative engagement and contributing of actors and directors unlike the pre-planned story-boarded approach often found in film production.

Our reflections yielded interesting observations that could be considered for such processes in actor training. For example, connectivity challenges resulted in the use of both video or audio exclusively or together at times. This resulted in a heightened awareness of spatial dynamics when audio was not available and deeper listening when video was not used. This sensory isolation of interactive medium enabled the process to hone a specific element of engagement with the fellow actor. We argue that this can potentially be done more effectively in a virtual context as it would be difficult to isolate the visual or auditory in a live contact context. The focus heightened engagement with the fellow actor and enabled the actor to dig deeper into the experience of 'self', which contributes to the overall training of embodied actors.

It was reported that although the virtual space poses obvious spatial and interactive limitations, it activates the imagination in a different way. This enables the actor to bring options to the theatre-making process that may not have occurred in a live setting. It also enabled a sense of community and ensemble as all contribute from their own spaces to a communal shared space. This potentially evolves the role of the director who must navigate many personally unique aspects rather than merely organise bodies in time and space.

Directing becomes a collaborative process where the actor has increased autonomy to make choices. By knowing their set boundaries accessible through a composite framing, the actors may explore their choices in manipulating space and time to offer interesting and visceral interpretations. The director then acts as the first audience member and provides guidance and input into what is perceived, as opposed to dictating what should be achieved. This collaborative nature is further enhanced by the exploratory environment fostered by digitised engagement.

An overarching outcome from these explorations of theatre in virtual space is that you cannot ever get complacent. You must constantly question your work and challenge yourself. It is like the symbolic challenging of the creative self that Zonder (in Schweikardt, 2018) advises designers when talking about the balancing act of designing big musicals in small spaces: "Run at the wall at full speed. Sometimes you will hit the wall. Sometimes you will break through it. But when you break through it, it will be magical". The point is that you must give it a try. This article offers insights into what has already been tried but invites all who engage, to explore further. The boundaries of virtual theatre and performance spaces are shifting. The possibilities offered by technology are limitless, which we can explore in the future. We have just begun.

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