The role and importance of digital skills in the production of digital performance

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Unpublished: 04/09/2022

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):

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The role and importance of digital skills in the production of digital performance

For performance makers, the Covid-19 pandemic meant an enforced migration to digital platforms due to the closure of performance venues and a long period of restrictions on audience numbers. Whilst many industries moved seamlessly to online working, the multi-sensory aspects of live performance proved more difficult in translating to digital formats. Many of those working in the performing arts would argue that the bodily co-presence of performers and spectators is a necessary ingredient for live performance, yet there was a surge in performance being offered and consumed digitally because of a dramatic change in the context triggered by the pandemic. Live streaming from spectator-less venues and Zoom performances from the homes of actors emerged widely as survival strategies and provided some, albeit limited, experience. Other practitioners and companies responded with specially made offerings, for example, a purposeful programme of digital short artworks ‘Scenes for Survival’ by the National Theatre of Scotland. More innovative examples of work, such as Creation Theatre’s ‘Alice: A Virtual Theme Park’ and the Royal Shakespeare Company’s ‘Dream’, utilised the possibilities of technology to its fullest extent and have placed themselves at the forefront of digital work as digital theatre innovators.

Remaining digitally literate and relevant seems now important for long-term resilience and sustainability of both established and emerging performance makers. Yet, despite this rapid rise in production of digital performance there is currently little provision for digital skills training in performing arts offered by the Higher Education (HE) sector. Although there is a common reference to the importance of digitalisation in HE curricula, there is lack of clear direction in terms of what these skills are and how they might be delivered. Some initial contribution in terms of classification of digital skills for work and career in performance have been made (Webb and Layton, 2022) based on the review of Dance, Drama and Performance (DDP) programmes offering. Little, however, is still known about how different stakeholders view this important agenda depending on their roles, experiences and expectations. In this paper, we present the findings from a qualitative research conducted in Scotland with digital performance makers, educators, and students. Key themes emerging from interviews indicate that developing skills concerning with the ‘remote’ making or aesthetics of performance are as important as the specific technical skills (e.g. proficiency with applying specific software and handling hardware). These skills might change as the practice of digital performance evolves over time. Currently some pressure is palatable as there is an expectation that digital performance is to offer something different to a simple performance streaming by engaging audiences in much more interactive way.

Therefore, we pose a timely question asking how future performance makers can be trained most effectively to fulfil the current and future opportunities ‘the digital’ offers to performance makers. Developing a new generation of theatre goers without the constraints of physical buildings and expensive rehearsal processes could become an important resilience strategy for the sector heavily impacted by the pandemic.