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‘It’s not just about technology!’: Creativity as a driving force for nurturing the development of skills for digital performance

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ABSTRACT
The Covid-19 pandemic enforced a rapid migration to digital performance making due to a long period of restrictions and closures of performance venues. Despite very limited provision for digital skills training in the HE performing arts programmes pre-pandemic, and the lack of skills, tools and resources encountered by makers during the lockdowns, many examples of innovative digital practice emerged during this time. This paper looks at three cases of innovative performances that emerged during the pandemic out of necessity. These cases suggest that digital skills and competences are very important for performance makers, but making successful digital performance is not necessarily dependent on the mastery of specific technical skills but rather a creative use of digital technologies. As the HE sector still comes to terms with what digital skills are and how they might be delivered in the higher educational setting, this paper aims to inform discussion about training for future performers/performance makers so they can effectively fulfil the current and future opportunities ‘the digital’ offers to them. Nurturing creativity and encouraging experimentation seems crucial to the future development of digital performance and we advocate educators keep this at heart when adopting new (digital) performance pedagogies.

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Introduction
Twenty-first century workplace and education settings have transformed and rely heavily on digital technologies (Kolade and Owoseni 2022). As discussed by Ragnedda, Ruiu, and Addeo (2020) digital skills, competencies and digital technologies are increasingly attributed value and, like other forms of capital, can accelerate innovation but are subject to social inequalities. Unexpected external events of the COVID-19 pandemic magnitude can further accelerate the need to innovate for survival. Del Vecchio, Lazio, and Lezzi (2022) note the performing arts and live events industry has continued to innovate in...
response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has altered the way members of the public interact and audiences experience and engage with arts.

In the case of theatre, the closure of performance venues and a long period of restrictions on audience numbers enforced a quick migration to digital platforms in a desperate attempt to connect with audiences and create at least some opportunities for work (Webb and Layton 2022). Whilst many industries moved seamlessly to online working, the multi-sensory aspects of live performance proved more difficult in translating to digital formats. Sentiments related to a sense of incompleteness, or a lesser quality of aesthetic experience from interaction with digital content, initially detected in the arts community as many professionals themselves did not regard digital services as equivalent to those offered on site (Oswald 2021).

A dramatic change in circumstances, triggered by the pandemic, initiated a period during which all performances had to be made, offered, and consumed digitally. Live streaming from spectator-less venues and Zoom performances from the homes of actors emerged widely as typical survival strategies. They provided some, albeit limited, experience. Some other practitioners and companies responded with a purposeful programme of digital performance works. Some of these innovations emerging during the pandemic focused on how to make digital performance more interactive. But, it is worth noting that experiments in digital performance have a long-standing history. As some authors observe, they have been influenced in many ways by the rise of the internet and opportunities related to connectivity and interactivity of a ‘digital domain’ (Bianchi, Mastrominico, and Schrag 2022, 123).

Remaining present and artistically productive continues to be the goal for many performance-makers, who operate in much changed context engaging in a mixture of both, traditional and digital, performance production. In addition, the performance makers are under the pressure to respond to other current challenges, such as for example, the environmental and the cost of living crises. While we explore the potential of digital performance for long-term business resilience and environmental sustainability, we must consider the skills required for digital performance making and staging. Being digitally skilled and literate seems now more important than ever for both established and emerging performance makers. Yet, despite a common reference to the importance of digitalisation in the Higher Education (HE) curricula (QAA 2019), there is currently little explicit provision for digital skills training in Dance, Drama and Performance (DDP) programmes. Little, beyond some initial classification of digital skills for work and career offered by Webb and Layton (2022), has been agreed so far.

The importance of digital learning widely embraced in both pandemic and post-pandemic contexts (González-Zamar and Abad-Segura 2021; McCauley 2021; Beetham and Sharpe 2019) has been somehow central to recent discussions, however, some like Ehlers and Kellermann (2019) suggest that future skills for success are not confined just to digital ones.

In an absence of agreement on a sector-wide coordinated approach to digital skills development, we pose a timely question about how future performers and performance makers can be trained most effectively to fulfil the current and future opportunities ‘the digital’ offers to them. We would like to further expand the current understanding of digital skills for performance by drawing on three selected cases of digital performances, some of which emerged during the pandemic out of necessity.
These cases of performances from Creation Theatre, Telepresence Project and Rob Myles, will showcase performance making under the conditions of lockdowns and isolation. They will provide a ground for discussion on how use of technology and digital competencies are understood by selected digital makers, how they afford new creative opportunities, and their implication for performance education. It is hoped that these experiences and lessons can inform designing of the performance curricula and other skills development initiatives in the performance sector that collectively strives to present ambitious creative and unique content for audiences to enjoy and be challenged by.

A rapid move towards digital performance during the COVID pandemic

With long-lasting social restrictions preventing audiences from experiencing live shows in theatres and other venues, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the cultural sectors and its workers (Webb 2021). Numerous studies confirm the loss of performance opportunities and subsequent loss of jobs and financial and operational difficulties arts and cultural organisations in the UK experienced (e.g. Bradbury et al. 2021; Creative Scotland 2021; O’Brien et al. 2021; O’Brien, Taylor, and Owen 2020). A larger societal impact has also been acknowledged in relation to the importance of arts in influencing the coping mechanisms of both artists and audiences, and impacting their overall well-being (Bradbury et al. 2021). Without a doubt, the pandemic has transformed the ways performances are produced and how audiences receive them such as through digital platforms and the metaverse (Reis and Ashmore 2022), thus changing the audience behaviours.

Immediately after the lockdowns, digital performance has been discussed as one of the key strategies for these sectors’ post-pandemic recovery encouraging exploitation of innovative digital solutions (Chatzichristodoulou et al. 2022; Webb 2022). Whilst initial motivations focused on developing resilience and future-proofing of the performance work in case of similar damaging crises and closures, the long-term efforts are likely to refocus on digital making to achieve sustainable and greener production models. Importantly, the notion of digital practices is not completely new in the performing arts sector. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, for many organisations and individuals working in the performing arts, the uptake of digital practices would have been limited mostly to marketing, promotional, planning and archiving activities (Webb 2021). Now digital technology is increasingly used also for the making and delivery of digital performance.

Defining digital and telematic performance

Although the pandemic has heightened interest in digital performance, this area of work has a long and well-established history, with many companies and artists whose work is grounded in digital practice. Steve Dixon’s seminal work on digital performance offers an overarching definition, where digital work is ‘all performance works where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery form’ (2007, 3). Telematic performance defined as the ‘science of the long-distance transmission of computerised information, including video screening’ (Kelly 2010: 50) also applies to other ways of referring to digital performance (see
Brooks 2014; Brown and Hauck 2008; Popat 2017). In discussing Roy Ascott’s pioneering work in telematics, Edward Shanken notes that Ascott’s work offers ‘perceptive insights into the past, present and future implications and possibilities of human-machine relationships’ (2003, 2). This relationship between human and machine has never been more prescient in the current climate of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR).

Other terms used to describe what is broadly termed as digital performance include intermedial, multimedia, transmedial, interactive digital performance, Internet performance, podplays, new media performance, cybertheatre, mixed media theatre, computer theatre, and virtual theatre (see Klich and Scheer 2012). For Ascott though, telematic art is essentially concerned with presence in which our ‘telepresence is distributed throughout the Internet. We are both here and there, out-of-body and reembodied, dematerialised, and reconfigured at one and the same time’ (Shanken 2003, 375). Although telematic presence is virtual, humans engage with each other using the same basic qualities as when physically co-present, a position argued by Susan Kozel (2008) in discussing technology and phenomenology. This online presence is also recognised as important by Klich and Scheer, who note that multimedia work is ‘often used to describe digital systems organised around [an] online environment’ (2012: 8). Despite definitional variations, digital performance is broadly work made using technology and mediated, at least partially, through technology.

The ways in which digital performance can be defined are multi-faceted and present both difficulties and opportunities. Unlike other forms of theatre such as Naturalism and Epic Theatre, which emerged at specific moments and are almost frozen in those times, digital performance continues to evolve as technology does. Various definitions of digital performance agree that it is something with the use of computer technology at its core (Dixon 2007; Klich and Scheer 2012; Blake 2014). More recently, Chatzichristodoulou et al. (2022) defined digital content production as modalities that include pre-recorded streamed events, live intra-media performances, and live streaming. However, it may be more useful in 2023 to consider digital performance in relation to all performance, given that we are all now digitally infused, which implies that all performance that is made, has somehow been influenced by the digital. As Chatzichristodoulou et al. suggest, ‘digital practices, which used to belong to the fringes of performance experimentation, seeped into the mainstream, informing the very nature of theatre and performance as we know it’ (2022, 2). We are not suggesting that all performance should be rebranded as digital or that the term digital performance should be cast aside. Rather, we suggest that there are no fixed rules about what constitutes performance, digital or otherwise, and what disqualifies it from being digital or digitally informed.

**Skills for digital performance**

In this ever-evolving context, it is difficult to precisely define the notions of digital performance literacy. Despite the enormous spirit of innovation that has emerged amongst performance makers to date, particularly during the lockdowns, little is still understood about relevant skills and competencies required to confidently use technology to make digital performances. There is no doubt that continued interest in new digital opportunities will only reinforce the need for new sets of skills to be acquired. These might involve a range of specific technical and co-production skills as conceptualised...
by Webb and Layton in ‘Skills for a Digital Performance Framework’ (2022). There is, however, an expectation to engage audiences in more interactive ways, and to offer them a greater ‘digital value’ than through tried and tested models of delivery such as live streaming popularly used. As the world of practice evolves, so does the skillset required to perform a job well. Equity – the performing arts trade union – advocates that education and training should equip students with essential professional skills, as well as the foundational knowledge needed to manage portfolio careers as self-employed workers. This knowledge must engage with the digital making and ensure that professional artists understand their legal rights in performance produced for digital consumption, given that it can potentially be reproduced and manipulated in perpetuity (Steadman 2022).

Particularly after the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital literacy seems more important than ever, and relevant skills and competencies are inherently expected to be mastered by all performance graduates. Van Larr et al. (2020) call for continued monitoring and assessment of digital skills of creative workers. In line, Webb and Layton (2022) argue that DDP education should support development of digital skills across degree programmes, something that is also strongly advocated by Jisc (2014) and Advance (2020) in their discussions of digital literacies across all subjects in HE curricula. Digital skills are now considered important meta-skills for successful working lives (SDS 2022). Both established and emerging performance makers need to seriously consider and focus on the development of these skills if they want to achieve long-term resilience and sustainability. However, there seems to be currently a lack of clarity in terms of what these skills encompass, specifically in the context of performing and performance-making, and how they might be delivered across DDP programmes.

Changes in performing practices during the COVID-19 pandemic: case studies

To gain more understanding of what digital performance practices involve and what digital skills they might encompass, we examined three cases of digital performance. Desk-based research, involving also watching and interacting with three digital productions, was supplemented by empirical evidence obtained following principles of qualitative research methodology and using a semi-structured interview guide. It involved interviews with a performance company and an independent performance-maker to gain their experiences and views. The interviews were analysed thematically and summarised in tables. In addition, a voice of students and academic was captured to further inform the paper. It did not appear in the paper verbatim, but the viewpoints particularly around learning about digital performance making and learning about it online during the pandemic became a useful anchor for discussion about skills and learning needs.

This section describes three examples of performance that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic out of necessity. Each will be described briefly as a case-study, with a focus on capturing the innovation in production and performance delivery. These cases aim to showcase specific experiences, which might not be representative to all performance makers. At this stage, our objective was to identify key themes to inform discussion about how we might want to proceed with adaptations to the existing educational programmes of current performers and performance-makers at university level training.
Case 1: The Witch of Edmonton (Creation Theatre)

Creation Theatre’s response to COVID-19 in 2022 involved producing a virtual show (2021, 2022a, 2022b), *The Witch of Edmonton*, a contemporary version of a Jacobean tragedy, first performed in 1621. It was broadcast at 11pm using software called Auditorium which allows audience members to engage with digitally streamed performance as if they are in a live theatre space. Lucy Askew (2023), CEO and Creative Director of Creation, shared that Auditorium, which was developed using funding from Innovate UK, was designed to replicate the physical theatre experience. They created it to help people feel ‘main screen’ with the theatre stage as a main focus and audience members ‘around the edge’.

> When you’re in the theatre, you’re aware there are other people watching with you. You know they’re there, but you’re not really looking at them most of the time; you’re mainly watching the stage, but you’re aware these people are also here with you sharing the experience. We wanted [the main screen] to feel like the main focus.

The performers and the audience appeared on a screen and were visible to each other but represented by an avatar, which created opportunities for greater openness and co-presence (Figure 1). Each performer occupied their separate physical location although they appeared together on screen. Viewers watching this performance saw actors appearing in front of rudimentary backdrops, reminiscent of 1960s Hammer Horror (Figure 2) or Italian Giallo films. Askew suggests this aesthetic, which is achieved by using simple green screen technology, creates a certain flatness, which ‘has potential to become an art form in its own right’. In earlier digital work where actors were performing remotely, such as *The Brothers Grimm*, the company members were sent little sets to perform which she believes ‘draws on a kind of theatrical legacy of scenography’. The skills needed by actors in performing digital work were initially quite basic such as ‘lighting themselves for their green screens, setting up their green screens, getting their cameras working and putting their own virtual backgrounds on. Often, they were controlling the virtual backgrounds themselves’. As Creation’s digital work became more advanced, they began using vision mixing software ‘like you would do for live TV mixing’.

![Figure 1. Auditorium showing audience members and avatars (Auditorium screenshot).](image-url)
comments that, as actors became less responsible for facilitating technology, they could concentrate on the best way to use a webcam for performance. She recalls this acting challenge as falling ‘somewhere between theatre and film acting’, adding clarification that ‘it doesn’t have to be as naturalistic, but that’s partly, I think, because of using virtual backgrounds and the clunkiness of it’.

In The Witch of Edmonton, Askew reveals that the performers worked in various locations using only green screens and basic webcams. Often, the challenges occurred when an actor’s Wi-Fi dropped and they were ‘lost’ from the performance, or moments when ‘the lighting wasn’t quite right or the transition between two scenes when actors weren’t quite in the right place. But this gives it the danger and the liveness that makes it theatre rather than TV’.

For Creation, their early days of producing digital performance meant a good deal of experimentation. Key to their success was using regular digital stage managers who were familiar with the company’s work. In practice, this meant that a few actors could work in a single location, allowing them to focus on their performance, rather than technical proficiencies. The Witch of Edmonton, like other productions, also incorporated ‘branching videos’; pre-recorded content that could be mixed with live sections, which Askew notes, was a challenge for some performers who found it difficult to find the narrative arc in their performances. Most significantly, ‘creativity and bravery’ were more important than technical or digital skills. Askew explained:

We were just using normal stage managers and we paid for them to do a £7.99 course online in how to mix. That was their training and then they were off. It really is just creativity and a bit of bravery. The online support groups and forums are available to help when you can’t work out how to do something technical; you just Google it and you find endless videos and pieces of advice.

The most important skills for digital performance may be those that are yet to be learned and, in many cases, those with responsibility for teaching these skills do not even know what they are yet.
Case 2: Telematic Quarantine (Telepresence project)

As the pandemic took hold and lockdowns were introduced around the world, performance makers began searching for ways to continue their work. Sermon et al. (2022) discuss their research and practice in telematic performance providing insightful practical knowledge on how to work digitally, be accessible to all and provide ‘opportunities for low cost creation and production techniques for remote performers using standard home computing equipment to deliver online live theatre productions to global audiences’ (2022, 54). Sermon’s long-established practice of making digital and telematic performance has been profoundly influenced by Roy Ascott (University of Brighton 2016) and has often involved performances staged in galleries where spectators are present both physically and remotely. Telematic Quarantine was a new experiment in bringing performers together whilst all being simultaneously remote. In using Skype, controlled by an iPad (which is featured prominently on screen) and YouTube to broadcast the performance, Sermon (2023) was drawing on technologies that have become familiar to many people, especially during the lockdowns.

In Telematic Quarantine, a single performer is joined by several others from around the world, each using basic green screen technology to appear as if they are physically co-present, via ‘a customised Skype connection to bring the international performers into Sermon’s home in Brighton’ (Telepresence Stage 2021). Whilst there is no story as such, the performance theme is dominated by the COVID-19-induced lockdowns. As the performers act their way through the host’s ‘home’, there is a sense of them navigating their way around the ‘stage’ as they look at themselves on a screen to help establish their position. The host performer, Paul Sermon, controls the images and effects from an iPad. It feels very much like performers adapting to a new space for the first time. A moment when two performers arrive at Sermon’s front door and appear to ‘knock’ exposes the vicissitudes of telematic performance, as they simultaneously appear inside and outside the house. There are many more ‘tricks’ used during the performance that further exemplify

Figure 3. A scene from Telematic Quarantine (YouTube screenshot).
a surreal and comic nature of the show; for example, when the performers appear as if existing in a cartoon or when Chris Whitty appears in the bathroom mirror (Figure 3).

In a scene in the garden, the central character’s image is duplicated. A moment between characters touching when making a self-portrait along with other such encounters are comic in nature and make the whole experience seem playful. Other comic moments emerge from the dialogue itself: ‘Sir, why does your house smell like … technology?’ asks one of Sermon’s visitors. ‘It’s my home brew’, he replies. When two characters start interacting with objects found in their own physical spaces, bringing them into the virtual space, the sense of playfulness and improvisation is heightened. Through malfunctions in technology, a character appears as a disembodied head (Figure 4). In another moment, a visitor appears to have problems with audio and is seen to be adjusting her laptop settings whilst standing in the virtual street.

In citing numerous examples from telematic performances, including Telematic Quarantine from 2020, Sermon et al. (2022) demonstrate the possibilities for making live digital performance from home locations around the world. The study suggests there are many possibilities for creating digital work with basic IT equipment. These are novel yet widely accessible low-cost performance creation and production techniques.

Case 3: The Show Must Go Online, TSMGO (Rob Myles)

Rob Myles (2022a, 2022b) is an actor and director in Scotland whose The Show Must Go Online has achieved critical acclaim. Before the pandemic, his work was mainly in the form of traditional theatre such as making work for live performance venues. Between March and November 2020, he made a weekly Shakespeare production resulting in 42 performances or ‘episodes’. Each episode was rehearsed and produced on Zoom and then broadcast using YouTube. The performances emerged from in-between the squares of rectangles showing performers (Figures 5 and 6). Myles’s prior experience of online and digital performance was limited. He only started working in this medium as a response to the situation where theatres closed and many creatives had contracts

Figure 4. A scene from Telematic Quarantine (YouTube screenshot).
cancelled. Myles had to rapidly learn new digital skills as well as working out how to coordinate rehearsals with actors and technicians across multiple locations and time zones.

As audiences interact with a digital performance very differently from traditional theatre audiences, Myles considers audience engagement to be a major challenge for digital performance makers. He feels that there are real questions around curation of the audience experience which goes beyond ‘being interactive’. He confidently assured, however, that ‘we can create a new distinct audience for a new and distinct product. That’s what video games did. And right now, we’re in the generation of digital theatre’. He admits that many of the skills he learned during the early stages of his online productions were more important than technical digital skills. He thinks that sole focus on prescriptive technical digital skills is too narrow and limiting. But, despite...
the need to know these kinds of skills, Myles thinks that other skills are more important and that a narrow focus on technical digital skills might be ‘dangerous’, as toolkits with how-to-guides ‘can become prescriptive and almost imperialist’. He thinks training should always be ‘a useful preparatory aid for people to enter digital theatre’.

Like Creation Theatre, Myles admits he learned many of the skills through inexpensive online courses and free advice where the need arose. Skills he needed for making of TSMGO were not about technical proficiency. Myles most appreciated skills including project, backstage and people management (including volunteers), leadership and filmmaking skills. Specific digital skills included managing a feed from Zoom to YouTube, using MailChimp to manage applications, and engaging with Twitter as a means of communicating with audiences. There were also performing skills to learn, particularly for many of the actors featured in TSMGO who had limited or no previous experience of performing online. They had to (re)learn how to act ‘online’ and engage with the ‘flatness of the [web] camera’, which as he explained ‘doesn’t have depth of field so you can’t create any kind of illusion of depth of distance, and so the vocal expression became essential to the likeness of the character’.

Myles thinks, as a medium, digital theatre has its own way of storytelling that allows for innovation and definition of an artist or company’s identity. For him, innovation in making digital work comes from working in both digital and physical spaces, as he explains: ‘there can be a reciprocal relationship between stage work and digital work which raises questions about the broader theatre ecosystem’. This is something Askew also notes about Creation’s site-specific and digital work that often attract audiences who seek different experiences with the same, yet different shows when experienced in person and online. For some audiences, the pandemic has contributed to change of preferences, for others (like older and people with health problems) it gave them opportunity to finally take part. Myles values that digital performance appears to be more democratic as ‘there are fewer gatekeepers’ and more opportunities for developing ‘new audience that is willing to come back regularly’. He explained:

We can be like YouTube which has created its own genre of stars. Digital theatre could well create its own genre of makers that maybe could sustain themselves, so it’s another avenue through which arts practice can be done productively and well. I think the other thing is accessibility; it’s way more accessible to people that can’t get into a lot of these traditional places. And it’s also cheaper because you can get more people to watch it, you’re not limited by audience capacity.

Not without challenges, but these are clearly exciting opportunities for current performance makers who want to introduce audiences to new forms of digital theatre through creative uses of accessible platforms and techniques.

**Discussion: necessity and creativity as drivers for performance innovation**

These three cases suggest that key innovations in digital performance resulting from the pandemic are not, as one might expect, about using the latest technologies for smarter ways of working. Rather, the innovation is found in the creative ways that performance makers produced work using basic equipment such as green screens, inexpensive webcams, and digital platforms. Whilst some technologies used to broadcast performance are quite sophisticated, such as Creation Theatre’s use of a virtual Auditorium, the
basic idea of remote performers appearing to be co-present can be achieved relatively easily and cost-effectively (Sermon et al. 2022). Based on the digital performance practices that emerged during the pandemic, it seems that creativity has driven innovation, most likely because of the closure of theatres.

The innovative digital performances made during the pandemic often had an improvisatory feel. Airing such work-in-progress would perhaps not be considered by many artists and companies in other circumstances, particularly in the face of resources limitation and lack of practical skills in making of digital performance. But cancelled work that was due to take place in-person forced a quick transfer to online formats. In many cases, as in the presented cases, performances simply moved from a collective of physically co-present performers to a variety of formats broadcasted through Zoom and/or YouTube. Others, like Creation Theatre, used a purpose-made Auditorium to make and present performance digitally. In all cases, regardless of the method and digital tools used, a great degree of learning happened. These cases confirmed, as in Chatzichristodoulou et al. (2022), that approaches most used to create digital content out of necessity imposed by the pandemic were those that used off-the-shelf technology to share (and/or sell) pre-recorded content or live events, or a combination of these two, which is a tactic Askew identifies as a recurring feature of Creation Theatre’s digital work. Despite the lack of skills and experience, performance-makers often pursued just-in-time learning (Gordon 2014), utilising a multitude of instructional videos available on YouTube. Creation Theatre and Rob Myles admit learning many of the skills through inexpensive online courses and free advice sought where the need arose.

Being creative in approach rather than technical proficiency seems the most important aspect of the recent digital experiments in performance. It seems that digital performance, given its still emerging nature and the unknowns of its possibilities, is a form that promises many novel creative opportunities for makers and spectators alike. These can help artists and the entire sector maximise digital opportunities to their advantage, following the pandemic-induced changes in behaviours and expectations of audiences (Bradbury et al. 2021). Remaining digitally literate seems important for long-term resilience and sustainability of both established and emerging performance makers working in the current context of the performing arts sector’s post-pandemic recovery. Understanding a digital world as a place for sharing performance with audiences of today and tomorrow, seems pertinent to the agenda of digital skills development. For the Higher Education sector that is seeking to address the employability needs of the students on DDP programmes and competitively position graduates as highly-skilled professionals (Advance 2020), these findings might seem counterproductive. However, there is vast learning to embrace here as the HE sector reflects on how future performers and performance makers can be trained most effectively to fulfil the current and future opportunities ‘the digital’ offers to them.

The most poignant lesson from analysing our three cases suggests that educators and makers are perhaps too preoccupied, or are made to believe, that the answer to interesting, captivating, immersive digital performance of high artistic value is dependent predominantly on the mastery of specific technical skills. A high level of technical proficiency in applying and handling specific software that assists making of performance in digital formats is not necessarily all that is needed most at present. Myles expressed that the specific skillsets concerning ‘how to’ knowledge are transient and are likely to change
as the practice of digital performance evolves. Live streaming is already considered an old technology. Similarly, web conferencing platforms such as Zoom, which is commonly used by artists as well as by the business and education communities, may in the future offer more imaginative features for creative makers. Like traditional theatre spaces, customised platforms such as Auditorium, will also evolve over time accordingly with needs of theatre makers and audiences. This is not atypical to any form of technological innovation, which tends to bring new opportunities, but with no guarantee for ideas and practices that derive from these solutions to take off, create a value and thus remain in a sphere of public interest.

Askew noted that ‘a lot of students and people coming into the industry have barely seen any digital theatre. If you asked them what digital theatre they’ve seen, it’s usually just a streamed performance’. However, the array of new formats and opportunities arising for makers who want to exploit them fully or partly, the digital world (Del Vecchio, Lazioi, and Lezzi 2022) is wide open. In discussing Phoenix Dance Theatre’s experiments with virtual touching, in which performers appear to be physically interacting whilst being remote, Sermon et al. remark that a ‘real sense of wonder and delight is commonly experienced by those working within telematic environments for the first time, and the strange intimacy of virtual touching is frequently a highlight’ (2022, 61). These kinds of experiences are like the rehearsal room or devising workshop moments when something inspiring happens through improvisation or combining tried and tested elements in a new way.

The experimental nature of digital performances presented in the cases highlights intuitive ways in which performers are learning to interact in the moment rather than attempting to create a clinical version of performance. Creativity appears to be equally, if not more, important than the technology itself. Like the rehearsal room or a studio where devising takes place, the digital space can become a global playground for artists, performers, technicians, to make performance without fear (Sermon et al. 2022). In this sense, Myles regards the creation of digital performance, still in its early days of experimentation, as more democratic, safer, potentially less costly and more inclusive. Askew shared this sentiment particularly around connectivity with audiences who previously did not feel a part of the theatre ecosystem or community. It seems obvious to say, but when performance makers and audiences feel able to embrace truly democratic ways of making and watching, such performance becomes a unique space of innovation. Innovation seems linked with being adaptable. Askew commented that Creation adapted particularly well to digital theatre because they are open-air producers ‘used to working in environments that are largely out of our control’, therefore being prepared for disruptions and unplanned surprises, like a performer’s disappearance from the screen due to connectivity issues (Case 2).

After the experience of working through the COVID-19 pandemic, performance makers seem to understand well the need for ‘live digital’ that offers truly immersive and/or interactive experiences to engage audiences. They now face a possibility of making performances for a new generation of digital theatre goers without the constraints of physical buildings, geography, and expensive rehearsals, all particularly pertinent during a cost-of-living crisis. These opportunities of making performance alone or in close collaboration with professionals from other artistic and technical fields (e.g. game and app developers, or film/TV and other screen arts) can contribute to a development of resilient and
inclusive practices while informing a long-term strategy for the sector so heavily impacted by the pandemic (Webb 2021). Whilst the exploitation of cross-industry collaboration might not have been an opportunity available to every independent maker, a rapid rise in production of digital performance during the pandemic showed a great deal of determination and creativity. Practitioners were able to find appropriate tools and platforms successfully incorporating them into their practice, often by simply experimenting. This is a well-known approach of trial and error, or learning on the go that accompanies many, if not all, creative endeavours suggesting creativity, not technology, leads digital performance making.

This contrasts a common reference to the superior importance of digital skills development in HE curricula (QAA 2019), for which provision in the performing arts subjects is limited. As Webb and Layton (2022) suggested, perhaps because of little clarity over what precisely digital skills encompass, this mirrors a lack of definitional agreement around digital performance itself (Dixon 2007; Chatzichristodoulou et al. 2022; Webb and Layton 2022). A diversity of ways in which digital performance was made during the pandemic, reminds that artistic practices seem to escape narrow or too prescriptive classifications. It suggests that arts practice needs a different approach to digital skills training than, for example, the one deployed for IT and cybersecurity professionals. Education for these highly technical professional routes seem prescriptive and graduates in IT-related programmes end up with a concrete list of skills, techniques and competencies in programming, data harvesting and manipulation (Webb 2020). The arts education training is of a different nature and has a different purpose. Yet, the question of how to support development of digital competencies remains valid and important considering we are all now digitally infused by technology present in all areas of our lives, which involves experiencing performative arts and events.

In the same way as virtual tours or walkthroughs have been successfully utilised in museum and curatorial practices, such as those offered by the Louvre and British Museum, high quality digital performances are likely to find their way to the hearts of some paying audiences. In time, they may become widely accepted and normalised by the sector and society. A shift to digital production and consumption, along with analogue traditional delivery, can have a tremendous effect on popularising the artform, making it more accessible to excluded audiences, such those with disabilities (Wallace 2022), as well as contributing to a substantial increase in jobs in this precarious and competitive industry (Webb 2021). If that happens, a discourse of digital performance as being of a lesser quality, or consumable only if free, as Oswald suggested (2021), will also change. Some encouraging examples of programmes in digital performance are emerging in the HE sector, addressing the live digital focus in performance education (e.g. QMU 2022; Buckinghamshire New University 2022; UAL 2022). It will further help in promoting digital practice as an opportunity for performance makers and artists to reach digital audiences and monetise digital projects (Mastrominico 2022), and change the perceptions around value of paid-for digital content. Digital theatre can develop its market in similar ways to YouTube. An integration of digital innovation in the performance artform – packaged as a product of high artistic and commercial value – is an essential part of digital uptake and shift in performance consumption.

Given the pressures for resilient and sustainable practices (Gilyeat 2021), future performers and performance makers must be trained effectively to take advantage of existing
(mainstream) and new (emerging) digital technologies. Currently, at the outset of a new wave of interest in digital formats and performance, the education and creative sectors need to mostly focus on encouraging creativity and innovation in practice. A series of actions need to support this idea. On the one hand, as recommended by Webb and Layton (2022), investment in digital access and infrastructure is a key to eliminate a digital divide, remove digital barriers and provide sufficient grants for artistic experimentation and consumption. On the other hand, training and skills development related to digital performance making for both makers and educators/trainers are important. However, as Myles pointed out and as we argue in this article, encouraging digital creativity and curiosity seems the most important priority for the education sector in support of the development of digital performance at this moment in time. This means that before we can pave the way forward for innovative digital performance education practices, we must return to the question of the purpose of arts education.

It seems that unchangeably and crucially, the role of arts education is to nurture creativity, imagination, and intuition and to encourage experimentation and discovery. The same seems to be true now when we are trying to make sense of and incorporate digital formats into performance education. As Blake (2014, 12) suggests, ‘we need to be careful not to treat the digital – or the theatre – as an established or stable object of investigation, either historically or in the present’. It seems that a task at hand is predominantly about nurturing and encouraging digital creativity understood as a process of thinking and imagining different ways of making digitally consumable and sharable work and interacting with existing and new audiences. Digital creativity implies a making in digital realms by using digital tools and platforms, but it indicates a creativity-led digital performance making, which requires cognitive, analytical, and critical skills along with reflection and awareness of how use of different technical tools might lead to different artistic outcomes. It also entails an element of surprise and freedom when working in not yet familiar territory.

Digital creativity thus can be argued to resemble a more traditional process of performance-making but necessarily acknowledges the technological system that supports, enables, and reproduces digital creative outputs. Helping future makers and performers to become creative through practices of critical exploration and experimentation must be accomplished first. Acquisition of specific digital skills and competencies will follow.

Conclusion

The many future possibilities for digital performance are still unknown. It seems that having access to the most advanced technology gives little or no advantage. Like early pioneers of other forms of theatre, working in situations of similarly limited resources, digital performance makers currently have opportunities to break new ground. Whilst the pandemic has highlighted inequalities in many areas, it has amplified the potential for digital performance to reach new audiences and inspire new makers. On this optimistic note we conclude our discussion with a mini-manifesto for digital performance, perhaps offering some provocations for anyone making and watching in new ways. We also warn against blindness by the immediacy digital making offers. In 1909, the Futurists, who embraced all new technology, stated that ‘this wonderful world has been further enriched by a new beauty, the beauty of speed’ (Danchev 2011, 5). In the twenty-first
century, speed has become more of a curse as it pushes everyone and everything to a
state of inertia because there are too many possibilities to be realised within our own life-
spans. With these opportunities and awareness of potential consequences in mind, we
call for five actions to be embedded in digital performance-making practices and followed
in education.

A Mini-Manifesto for the future of digital performance: nurturing creativity to drive
development of digital performance

1. ‘Try again. Fail again. Fail better’ (Samuel Beckett). Ignore instruction manuals and
   how-to guides. Learning through playing, experimenting, and failing is far more pro-
ductive and rewarding.
2. Embrace the glitches and ghosts in the machine. Like ‘real’ performance, digital live-
   ness is full of potential mistakes and mishaps.
3. Collaborate with others. Working digitally means you can connect with anyone, any-
   where and for free.
4. Do not wait! Work with what you have. Construct your own studio. Make your own
green screen. Experiment with positioning desk lamps, webcams, and smartphones
to create new effects. Creativity is more important than the ‘best’ technology.
5. Take your time - create slowly with reflection. Making digitally does not have to mean
   creating quickly. Take hold of technology and use it at your own pace; do not let tech-
nology take hold of you.

Notes

1. The project worked with a range of companies including Creation Theatre, Pigeon Theatre,
   Guttersnipe Theatre, Red Ladder, Sharp Teeth Theatre, and Improbable.
2. See details of technical set up / equipment needed in the handbook developed by the
   authors: https://www.telepresencestage.org/uploads/case-study-pdfs/Telepresence-Stage-
   Handbook.pdf

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