
The Development and Impact of Digital Theatre on Contemporary Performance Arts

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Abstract

An iconic revolution in learning institutions is digital theater where technology continues to gain momentum and enter many areas of learning. The work examines the incorporation of digital theater practices into the programs of traditional theaters and how it can help to improve the learning outcome, audience engagement and creativity in the context of the audiences who are the consumers of such artistic outputs. By analyzing case studies in various learning environments, the paper evaluates how technology and online platforms contribute to the transformation in the theatrical education landscape, not necessarily in post-pandemic times, but with the creative use of digital resources, including virtual performance venues, augmented reality, and multimedia storytelling, to support new expressions and collaboration among students. The study also mentions the negative aspects of digital theater such as inequality of resources, access, and the necessity to train the professionalism of teachers. Through qualitative interviews and quantitative survey, this study shall provide a view on how digital theatre can and fail to only complement but also redefine the educational boundaries in the practice of theatre. Finally, the findings will contribute to the discourse of theatre education future, which will be practical in terms of integrating digital solutions to facilitate inclusivity and adaptability in the rapidly changing world.

Keywords Digital Theatre, Contemporary Performance Arts, COVID-19, storytelling, Educational Institutions.

Introduction

Digital theatre is a type of performance art originating in modern times, where digital technologies are used in the production, creation and performance of theatre. It transforms the traditional theatre by means of live streaming, virtual and augmented reality, remote digital performances, and multimedia interactivity. The technological progress, the need of the audience to have easier access to the performance, and other factors, such as COVID-19, which necessitated other alternative forms of performance, are among the reasons that made digital theatre gain more popularity. Unlike other forms of theatre where the person has to physically go to a theatre, because of digitization, digital theatre breaks down geographical boundaries and enriches the viewing experience by providing a peep show of the narration and the artistry of stagecraft. Here, we will focus on the nature of digital theatre, its influence on the theatre and performance world and the ways in which the digital realm is transforming the future of performing arts.

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The use of digital technology as a necessary component of the performance is a characteristic of digital theatre, which is typically regarded as a live theatre performance. This fact represents a major breakthrough in the field of modern performance art. Unlike the conventional theatre where the whole performance is solely supported by physical stagecraft, digital theatre incorporates technology like projection mapping, use of augmented reality (AR), and pre-recorded film shots to broaden the scope of storytelling. As an example, the scenes that are considered to be impossible to perform on the stage are shot and shown in dynamism that combines live performances with the digital media to form the hybrid narrations. Such convergence mirrors the larger cultural movement toward media convergence -a term theorized by Henry Jenkins as the flow of content through numerous media channels (12) transforming theatrical spaces.

History tells us that theatre developed in tandem with technology, beginning with the mechanical inventions of Renaissance stagecraft, through the experimental application of video projections in the 20th century. This integration progressed faster with the digital revolution in the post 2000 era, and one of the pioneers of this type of integration was the British company Punchdrunk, who merged the immersive environments with the interactive digital components. In education, Daniel Jernigan et al. observe that this transformation places institutions in a difficult position to rethink pedagogy when they state that, “Theatre educators need to address the reality that digital technology is not a tool but a redefinition of the art form itself” (89).

Rationale for Digital Theatre in Educational Institutions

Digital theatre in the educational field has arisen both as an artistic practice and a technology instructional necessity. Graduates entering the modern theatre labour market must have acquired the so-called digital fluent level of competence as technology is incorporated into the performance spaces. Nevertheless, a lot of institutions still follow Stanislavskian or Brechtian models, which leads to the discrepancy between what is taught in classes and what is required in the industry. In their submission, Sarah Bay-Cheng writes, “Without incorporating digital elements in their programs, theatre design programs will be virtually guaranteed to fail at meeting the numerous challenges the performance art of our time presupposes” (112).

More so, digital theatre makes democratization of performances possible. Hybrid formats like live streaming are some of the solutions that allow students to share their productions with the audiences all over the world. This is in line with the UNESCO vision of delivering inclusive and quality education by using technology. However, not all traditionalists can keep up with

the change as they see digitization as a threat to the very essence of theatre which is the live one. And this is the tension that this paper attempts to address.

Objectives

This paper seeks to:

- i. Conceptualize digital theatre within theoretical frameworks of media convergence and performance studies.
- ii. Analyse audience engagement dynamics in digital versus traditional performances.
- iii. Evaluate the challenges and opportunities of integrating digital theatre into educational curricula.
- iv. Propose strategies for balancing technological innovation with the preservation of theatrical authenticity.

By addressing these objectives, the paper aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering actionable insights for educators and practitioners.

Conceptualizing Digital Theatre

Digital theatre is conceptualized by reimagining conventional theatrical components performance, space, audience interaction, and storytelling through the prism of digital innovation. It demands artists, directors, and designers to consider how technology can be used to improve or alter the theatrical experience, either through virtual stages or interactive narratives or hybrid performances that combine live and digital elements.

Defining Digital Theatre

Any form of performance such as Digital Theatre is multifaceted and cannot be reduced to a particular category. In fact, it describes best a symbiotic relationship between live performers and technology in which the latter is not supplemental but has roles of a building block of the ontology of the performance. This definition helps us realize that digital theatre is not similar to other types of theatre that adopt technology in a superficial manner (such as using a basic sound system or a microphone) due to its significance in terms of narrative and aesthetic designs. The *Tempest* 2016 by the Royal Shakespeare Company may be regarded as a typical example; the gifs of Ariel were captured in motion and projected on stage along with the actor performing the supernatural portions of the Shakespearean text. These are examples of the argument made by Daniel Jernigan et al that posits that “it is the digital tools that enable the

stage to transcend beyond its physical facade therefore creating relationships between the real and the virtual” (34).

Among the most growing controversies of the digital theatre discourse is the question of preference of one form of presentation over another. The point of contention is frequently the usage of pre-recorded projections as the means of simulating so-called impossible-to-stage scenes, such as underwater scenes and aerial combat. The blurry nature of the line between live and mediated performance can therefore be emphasized by the fact that traditional sense of liveness proposed by Philip Auslander is a historically contingent construct, which is constantly redefined by technological mediation. In this context, incorporation of canned background music into live performances further complicates the liveness discussion, where the line between immediacy, authenticity, and technological reproduction is blurred. Such hybridity questions the traditional aesthetics of performance in the context of digital theatre practice whereby practitioners and scholars must reconsider what is meant by a “live” experience in technologically augmented performance spaces.

Theoretical Framework

Digital theatre can be discussed through the media convergence theory. The concept of a flow between several media platforms presented by is reflected in the hybrid performances, where the actors perform a live acting session in virtual space, engaging with social media, or using AI-powered dialogue. Indicatively, in Theatre for One, using micro-performances through VR headsets, audiences could explore personal, digitally simulated spaces - a hybrid of theatre, gaming, and telepresence. This corresponds with the argument by Jenkins that convergence culture favors participation rather than passive consumption which is becoming more applicable to pedagogy in digital performance.

Meanwhile, Performance Studies scholars interrogate the aesthetic implications of digital integration. The idea of the post-dramatic theatre by Hans-Thies Lehmann that places more emphasis on sensory or technological exploration than on narration, can be applied to digital theatre, which is very fragmented and multimodal. According to Lehmann, “technology breaks down the Aristotelian unities of time, space, and action and calls viewers to create meaning by piecing together media” (89). These disruptions put educators in a position to reconsider dramaturgical training because now physical mise-en-scene and digital mise-en-scene have to be curated by students.

Historical Context of Digital Theatre

The use of technology in the theatre is not new. Lehmann states that “in the early 20th century, the avant-garde movements, like the Bauhaus stage experiments of mechanical sets and projections, were the predecessors of the digital practice nowadays” (62). Nevertheless, the introduction of such affordable digital technology (ex: projectors, VR headsets) in the 2000s triggered an international change of direction. Notable milestones include:

2007: The National Theatre of Scotland *Black Watch* projected video at the same time as live choreography to create a documentary contrast between the war zones and projections, which was described as a breakthrough in digital storytelling (104).

2013: Punchdrunk’s *The Drowned Man* employed RFID wristbands to personalize audience journeys through a digitally augmented, warehouse-sized set.

2020: The pandemic accelerated hybrid formats, as seen in the Royal Opera House’s *Live Cinema* series, which blended live orchestration with 360° camera feeds.

2023: Aniebiet Mbede, a lecturer in Akwa Ibom State University experimented with *Diary of a Pastor's Wife* and succeeded in a facet of digital theatre, one she termed *Multimedia*.

Educationally, Digital theatre education was early introduced in 2010 in institutions such as the University of California, San Diego, which developed digital theatre courses to educate students in motion capture and virtual set design. On the other hand, the more traditional conservatoires, like the RADA in London, were initially opposed to digitization due to a perceived erosion of physical training of the actors. This conflict is a reflection of the larger controversy about the place of technology in artistic education.

Digital Theatre in Education

An example can be found in the 2018 production of *Faustus 2.0* at the University of Kansas, a digital example of the pedagogical power of digital theatre. Students worked with computer science majors to create AI generated projections of Mephistopheles, which reacted to real time vocal inflections of actors. According to the director, Zachary Dorsey, the project enabled the students to redefine dramaturgy as an interdisciplinary, collaborative process- a skill that is essential in the modern theatre profession. Nevertheless, technical issues (e.g. software bugs in live performances) exposed inertial problems with integrating emerging technologies in curricula.

Digital Theatre and Audience Engagement

Digital theatre transforms the nature of the interaction between performers and audiences by establishing novel interactions and openness. Audience members are able to interact with

performances in real-time, in three-dimensional environments, through social media integration, and by participating in interactive digital platforms to facilitate interaction with performances.

This discussion addresses the ways in which digital theatre promotes audience participation, expands internationally, and develops novel engagement practices that disrupt traditional conceptualizations of spectatorship in the following ways:

a. Shifting Audience Perceptions

Digital or new media performative art transforms conventional relations between audience and performer because it causes them to interact, Auslander describes this as “the contract of liveness” (25). Compared to spectatorships confined by proscenium, digital performances, both hybrid (live/streamed), and immersive (VR/AR), require the audiences to move through and interact with multi-layered non-linear narratives. Indicatively, in a VR theatre production - *The Under Presents* (2019) - the participants had handheld controllers that enabled them to engage with the world, which made the audience more active participants rather than passive. These changes have significant effects in the pedagogy of theatre since learners currently have to foresee individually customized versatile participatory roles that is actually not the norm in most educational institutions. As Jennifer Parker-Starbuck explained, digital theatre makes students rethink their role as spectators because collaboration involves both knowledge and the ability to be sensitive.

This development in educational contexts imposes pressure on institutions to educate students on audience analytics. Students can use devices, such as heat-mapping software, that monitor viewer attention during digital performances and quantitatively determine engagement -a practice piloted at the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU since 2020. Nevertheless, such data-driven methodology threatens to make artistic influence metrics.

b. Interactivity and Immersion in Digital Theatre

Combining projections with augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) in theatre has redefined immersion, providing audiences with agency into narrative worlds. An example of such application is a stage play *Dream* (2020) by the Royal Shakespeare Company, where in-camera AR headsets were used to superimpose imaginary elements (e.g. fairies, magicked forest) onto live actors, forming a mixed-reality dramaturgy. These tricks are reproduced in the educational productions more and more. Students at the University of Michigan at the Stamps School of Art & Design created *Echoes of Elsewhere* (2022), an AR performance where participants could view hidden stories using a smartphone. According to Ekeke and Ekeke,

such projects can hone students in the art of technological innovation and narrative coherence; a vital tool when they become theatre-makers of the future (15).

Nevertheless, the issue of interactivity implies pedagogical issues in which students should not only learn the art of performance but also acquire techniques of coding, 3D modeling, and user experience (UX).

Audience Reception and Criticism

Digital theatre still elicits polarized responses across generational and pedagogical divides, indicative of aesthetic dissonance as well as the various educational voids of critical digital literacy

Audience Reception and Scholarly Criticism of Digital Theatre

Online theatre is still a controversial area of reception that depends on the generational inclinations, as well as ideological adherence to the norms of conventional theatre. The younger, more technologically up-to-date audiences tend to adopt the digital theatre and its interactivity and hybrid aesthetics as a brave new take on the art form. Conversely, as observed by Bassegy and Ekeke, traditional and older viewers are more likely to criticize its lack of pure “liveness”, being uncomfortable with mediated presence and interventions produced by algorithms. In an audience study of the Hamlet play performed on Broadway in 2022, Erin Sullivan uploads that 68% of respondents younger than 30 years old rated the experience as innovative, and 62% of those aged over 50 rated the experience as “distracting”, highlighting a generational gap in aesthetic response.

This polarization is reflected in other tensions within theatre education, with faculty conflicts over the implication of technology in performance training frequently leading to disciplinary silos. The ideological stakes of digital performance were long interrogated by scholars like Sarah Bay-Cheng, Steve Dixon and Matthew Causey. In her essay Digital Performance and Its Discontents, Bay-Cheng states that the pandemic increased a trend in the re-conceptualization of theatrical presence, compelling artists as well as audiences to rethink the limits of liveness. Dixon, the author of Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation argues about the aesthetic opportunities of digital integration but cautions against blind techno-utopianism. Meanwhile, Causey discusses the performative aspects of the digital embodiment and fragmentation of identity within the virtual space.

All these patterns of reception show an urgency in educational institutions to know how to become critically digitally literate, the skills that enable students to know when technological

elements contribute to the narrative richness and when they are a hollow display of hedonism. Digital theatre, as Sita Popat contends, does demand reflexive practice; a practice that not only poses questions of the ideological implications of technology, but also its aesthetics. In her writing, particularly in her *Digital Bodies: Creativity and Technology in the Arts and Humanities*, she gives a pedagogical approach that is neither overly innovative nor critical in thinking.

One of the first institutional responses to this challenge was the Ethics of Digital Performance course at Carnegie Mellon University which was introduced in 2021. This course places students in a challenge of interpreting case studies that are both at one extreme end of the techno-utopian spectacle and digital experimentation which can be described as being ethically dubious. With the help of this curriculum students are able to work with the question of authorship, agency and audience reception in technologically mediated performance and create a more sophisticated sense of the cultural and ideological dimensions of digital theatre.

The embrace of digital theatre, in general, is not merely a matter of taste but a side effect of the philosophical and pedagogic debate of which the future of performance as an area of concern is part. The input of academics and teachers as the discipline works to keep developing will play a crucial role in guiding creators and audiences to more conscious, inclusive, and reflectively critical practices.

Connections to Educational Theatre Practice

- i. Curriculum Design: Courses should incorporate courses on digital audience engagement (e.g., UX design of theatre, analytics tools).
- ii. Interdisciplinary Training: Collaboration with the computer science/media departments will serve to overcome any deficits in technical skills.
- iii. Ethical Pedagogy: Students are to critique commodification of participation in digital theatre (e.g. data privacy in interactive performances).

Digital Theatre in Educational Institutions

This section discusses how digital theatre is used in educational facilities, the effects it has on theatre training, curriculum development and student engagement. Incorporating digital tools like virtual performances, online collaboration platforms, and multimedia storytelling, educators can facilitate creative learning and increase access to theatrical experiences. It also explores the way in which digital theatre is changing the character of theatrical education,

training students to respond to the changing character of the industry, and to developing new methods of performance and production.

The Role of Digital Theatre in Theatre Education

Digital theatre is transforming teaching practices in African schools by combining traditional performance with new technologies. According to Gariboldi, we must approach pedagogy of theatre in a digital way. Students should be taught how to work both on “stage and on screen” (45). In the University of Lagos, by way of example, undergraduates in the Department of Creative Arts now employ projection mapping alongside virtual sets, which gives them the ability to reinterpret traditional Nigerian plays like *Death and the King’s Horseman* by Wole Soyinka digitally. Although this is a step to conform to the global standards, the indigenous stories are preserved, and this is critical to the relevance of the African theatre.

Curriculum Development and Teaching Methods

The most important thing in the updating of theatre syllabi is cross-discipline collaboration. Ekpe and Wekpe, among the leading theorists of African performance studies, suggested, “we need a curriculum constructed around theatre, media, and technology, that promotes hybrid art forms” (89). This model has been adapted in the Department of Drama at the University of Cape Town through the creation of courses like *Digital Stories in African Contexts* where students learn to analyze postcolonial ideas with the help of virtual reality and projection. This kind of program represents a more general pedagogical transformation toward technological literacy, which equips students to challenge and produce in the digital environments.

Challenges in Implementing Digital Theatre in Education

The African institutions have a major challenge to digital theatre despite its potential. Ekeke singles out institutional resistance: “Most teachers perceive technology as a western hustle that is tampering with the sanctity of oral and corporeal practices” (112). These problems are also compounded by financial constraints. According to Bode Ojoniyi, “universities in Nigeria usually do not have the facilities of high-tech production, and unstable electricity and poor internet connectivity suffocates creativity” (34). Such obstacles are why solutions that are context sensitive and do not ignore the local realities must be identified.

Best Practices in Teaching Digital Theatre

Models that work well focus on cooperation and flexibility. Udoudom Imoh et al., records a digital *Stories Telling Project* in Nigeria that involved students collaborating with local filmmakers to create AR-projected performances of Shona folklore, which allowed them to

create complex scenes on stage. According to Ravengai, “these kinds of projects democratize art in that the voices of the marginalized get control over their narratives with the help of technology” (18). Similarly, Bassey and Nwazue explore interactive storytelling in Nigeria. In the same manner, Jonathan Haynes notes that the University of Ibadan cooperated with private studios, where students will acquire practical knowledge in digital cinematography and live-streamed theatre (67). These projects show how powerful strategic partnerships can be.

Connections to African Educational Contexts

- i. Cultural Preservation: Digital technology makes it possible to reinterpret indigenous narratives, such as in the example of South Africa Virtual Ubuntu Project (2022) which employs VR to bring Xhosa oral histories to life.
- ii. Resourcefulness: Institutions such as the Kenyatta University in Kenya have used the mobile technology to do low-cost digital performances when there are gaps in infrastructures.
- iii. Policy Advocacy: Policy thinkers such as Samuel Ravengai demand national policies focusing on funding of digital arts in higher education institutions, to make governments appreciate the importance of theatre in digital economy.

The Future of Theatre Practice in Educational Institutions

The changing face of theatre practice in educational institutions is an indication of increased impact of digital developments on teaching, performance, and industry preparedness. With technology still radically redefining art, organisations are increasingly incorporating new practices that include virtual productions, interdisciplinary alliances, and hybrid performance models. Introduction of digital tools in the teaching of theatre is a challenge and an opportunity which will eventually equip the students to the changing and technological future of the field.

Impact of Digital Theatre on Traditional Theatre Practices

The digitization of the African culture and performance art is stirring controversy around the authenticity of cultures and innovation as it transforms the educational practice. Iyorza and Iseyen warn that, “although technology can provide more sophistication to the instruments of narrating the story, it is being used to undermine the core concept of community-based African theatre that is essentially oral and physical” (56). However, there are still other institutions such as the University of Ibadan, which reveals that digital aspects do not necessarily need to wipe off tradition; they can improve it. Their 2021 Ogun Awitenre

performance included Yoruba mythology and 3D visualizations of ancestral spirits, thereby establishing a conversation between the ancient and the modern. According to Ekpe and Okoronkwo, digital theatre is a continuation and redefinition; a re-contextualization of indigenous narratives to be consumed by the international audience.

Issues of ethics like commercialization of cultural heritage by means of digital reproductions are still burning. According to Ravengai, “blind following of western technologies can lead to cultural imperialism with the process of obliterating the local aesthetic values” (12). To curb this, such programs as the Kenyatta University in Kenya have placed their focus on ethical digitization, which trains students on how to use technology in a manner that does not devalue the African storytelling customs.

Sustaining Live Theatre in a Digital Age

Pedagogical creativity is needed to balance the idea of digital innovation and the maintenance of live theatre. Ekpe and Akpabio recommend making use of hybrid forms that use technology to enhance, rather than substitute, the kinaesthetic vibrancy of the live performance. The National Theatre in Nigeria live-streamed performances such as *Fẹ̀sòjaye* during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching rural communities through mobile devices. This project, according to Bassey, shows how digital theatre can be used to both democratize access and at the same time maintain the immediacy of live art. It is through educational institutions that the balance is important.

The Live/Digital Lab at the University of Cape Town trains students on how to create performances that integrate AR with physical performance, so that graduates are able to navigate between the two worlds. The future of African theatre, according to Umotong et al., rests on the belief that it can evolve without losing its distinct uniqueness.

Emerging Trends in Digital Theatre for Education

The concept of AI has already begun to make an infiltration into theatre curriculum in Africa. In South Africa, Tshwane University of Technology students develop identity dialogues in AI-generated plays that discuss identity after apartheid. Critics observe that AI challenges students by invoking authorship and cultural systemic biases in algorithmic fiction. In Kenya, Swahili poetry read by AI powered avatars is being tested in Strathmore University as intercultural interaction. But Monicah Mugo urges caution: “the avatars must reflect African modes of knowing, without being culture free as an effort to adopt western techno-futurism” (33).

Preparing Theatre Students for the Future

The need to have digitally fluent theatre graduates is increasing in Africa. Iseyen touches upon the necessity of curricula, which combines acting, coding, and critical theory. Africa Digital Media Academy, in Rwanda, is the first to introduce these programs with certifications in virtual production and digital dramaturgy. The field has become broad to include career opportunities in film, gaming, and virtual event design. An example is Nigerian graduate Aisha Bello who attributes her education in digital projection at Ahmadu Bello University to her employment at Netflix Africa by saying, “Digital skills enabled me to become the all-round in a competitive industry” (10).

Connections to African Educational Practice

- i. Interdisciplinary Labs: Universities need to create tech labs (e.g., the Digital Arts Lab at Makerere University in Uganda) to have students’ experiment.
- ii. Ethical Frameworks: There should be decolonial criticism of technology which was evident in the École des Arts in Senegal.
- iii. Industry Partnerships: Academia and the employment sector can be connected with the help of industry partners (e.g., Andela, Flutterwave).

Conclusion

The contribution of the digital theatre to contemporary performance and learning is debated here based on reflection of how technological development has influenced the practice of theatre, the experience of the theatre audience, and the institutions of learning. It also gives suggestions to future research, combining digital technologies in theatre learning, and ideas to facilitate innovation in digital theatres productions. To make the transition towards the use of digital theater in learning, it is necessary to introduce a balanced approach of using both modern and traditional approaches to teaching. The submission of Martin Baham et. al. is therefore as follows: Technology should be our story, not the storyteller (58). This is particularly sensitive in Africa where oral history and group storytelling are significant facets of culture. The ability of digital theater to broaden access, such as through mobile performances in Kenya or the Virtual Ubuntu Project in South Africa, illustrates the need for inclusivity. Nevertheless, it can be very dangerous that teachers adopt technological determinism without critical reflection on culture. Digital theatre is not the innovation that comes at a high cost of artistic value, but it is a required change of direction in the struggle to preserve theater in African education. To enable the institutions of learning to use the innovative talent of students, and at the same time encourage and maintain the spirit of their

culture is to ensure that students become the guardians of culture, and the drivers of culture on the digital frontier. These may be realised by:

- i. Curriculum Integration: create courses such as Digital Dramaturgy in African Contexts, which are a combination of coding, acting, and critical theory. Co-design modules on AR/VR storytelling with tech hubs (e.g. Andela in Nigeria, iHub in Kenya).
- ii. Policy Advocacy: Governments need to make an investment in digital arts infrastructures to overcome electricity and internet shortages. Create national digital theatre awards, based on South Africa National Arts Council Innovation Fund.
- iii. Collaborative Projects: To establish student internships with Nollywood/Bollywood studios. Establish cross-institutional forums such as the Pan-African Digital Theatre Network to distribute resources and case studies.
- iv. Ethical Principles: Reuse decolonial models, such as the one in Senegal, the École des Arts, to examine the cultural meaning of technology.

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