

## Hacked Narratives: Technological Interventions in Contemporary Dramaturgy

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### **Abstract**

Dramaturgy, customarily concerned with narrative structure and theatrical coherence, now operates in a hybrid space where technology is central to scripting, performing, and designing performances. The emergence of virtual reality (VR), artificial intelligence (AI), and also digital performances has expanded the role of the dramaturg into interactivity, media management, and coding beyond the text, altering customary modes for the telling of stories and the making of performances in interesting ways. Technology no longer exists as a supplementary tool but is an active agent within theatrical creation. Using media theory as well as postdramatic frameworks, this paper studies cases such as 'The Encounter' by Complicité, The Wooster Group's 'Hamlet', and the AI-written play 'When a Robot Writes a Play' to explore transformations in spectatorship, scenography, and archival practices. Questions concerning access or authorship along with the political implications regarding technology for theatre are raised as well.

**Keywords:** Digital age, dramaturgy, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, hybrid space

### **Introduction**

As the digital age emerged, dramaturgy transformed from a script-centred approach to an interdisciplinary, dynamic process. Historically, dramaturgy has been understood as the architecture of storytelling in theatre. It is concerned with thematic coherence, character development, and narrative structure (Turner & Behrndt, 2008). Customarily, the dramaturg functioned as an intermediary between the playwright,

the director, and the audience. However, the integration of digital technology has transformed these dynamics. From AI-generated scripts to engaging sound designs and live-streamed performances, theatre has embraced new forms of technological experimentation. This digital shift was further accelerated by the global pandemic, as many productions moved to virtual platforms. Consequently, audience interaction was also redefined. The dramaturg's role has expanded to that of a curator of digital tools, a mediator of virtual environments, and a co-creator with technological systems (Bay-Cheng, 2010). Drama continues to adjust to this shifting landscape. Drawing upon the work of theorists such as Lehmann (2006) and Auslander (2008), this paper aims to investigate how technology has transformed the dramaturgical process and the challenges it poses to distinctions between live and mediated performances. Focusing on Indian theatre's dramaturgical relationship with technology it also highlights how practitioners navigate the digital turn and engage with indigenous aesthetics and narratives. Theatre Without Theatre, the Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust, The Company Theatre, and Sandbox Collective are examined to argue that we must reconceptualise dramaturgy to recognise technology as a collaborator in storytelling and performance.

### **Literature Review and Research Methodology**

Since performance practices shifted to digital media, there has been a significant increase in the number of explorations on the relationship between dramaturgy and technology during recent decades. Lehmann (2006) as well as other scholars have examined some of the implications of postdramatic theatre, where technology turns into a major tool for dramaturgy and is not simply a supplement. In this context, digital performance requires reimagining the spatial dynamics of performance, audience interaction, and narrative structures. It moves beyond simply adding projections or soundscapes. Dixon (2007) discusses VR, projection mapping, and motion capture technologies. These technologies transform both the visual and spatial elements of theatre and then enable performances to immerse audiences in alternative realities. Auslander (2008) stresses that this blurs the lines between live and mediated performance, suggesting that technological interventions increasingly question the customary idea of "liveness".

Lužný and Tichý (2021) investigated the impact of artificial intelligence

as it starts to write, direct, and perform plays, challenging customary concepts of authorship as well as creativity because technology is now in the position of co-creator within the theatrical process. Furthermore, Bay-Cheng (2010) highlights how spectatorship evolves within the digital age, where interactive technologies enable audiences to actively create performance, thus reshaping how spectators transform from being passive observers to active participants.

This paper researches through a combination of qualitative methods and analysis of case studies, to trace technology's influence on dramaturgy in contemporary theatre. It will examine specific productions that incorporate digital technologies such as the Wooster Group's use of video and projections, Complicité's use of engaging soundscapes, and National Theatre's live-streaming of performances during the Covid-19 pandemic to assess audience interaction as well as narrative structures along with the role of technology within the theatrical experience.

This paper will also look into practice-as-research which involves the exploration of virtual theatre platforms, AI assisted dramaturgy, or one digital scenography designs within personal or collaborative creative practices, for a deeper comprehension of how these technologies function within live performances. Approaches that are customary for dramaturgical uses will also be contrasted against contemporary methods that are technology-driven. The paper will explore the aesthetic and practical implications from these shifts and critically evaluate how digital technology can act as a dramaturgical agent in itself because it alters the creative process and audience perception.

### **Digital Performance and the Virtual Stage**

Digital performances are theatrical events that incorporate digital tools like live streaming, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), projection mapping, and telepresence during performance. While early experiments in media-integrated performance date back to decades before, the Covid-19 pandemic greatly accelerated this shift by compelling theatre-makers to adapt to digital platforms like Zoom and YouTube, together with custom-built virtual spaces (Auslander, 2008). These adaptations allowed performance to take place when lockdowns occurred and gatherings were severely restricted. They also reconfigured theatre's spatial and temporal coordinates, decentring actor and audience co-presence which had been taken for granted earlier.

'National Theatre at Home' live streams provided viewers access to quality recorded performances. Wolf 359's 'Temping' used emails plus spreadsheets remotely to tell a story like experimental works, reshaping intimacy and interactivity (Bay-Cheng, 2010). Rimini Protokoll's *Remote X* used GPS technology plus pre-recorded audio to transform city streets into performative landscapes and showed how dramaturgy can integrate digital navigation with represented experience (Dixon, 2007). These examples suggest that digital performance is indeed a distinct form with its own dramaturgical logic and aesthetics, not a degraded substitute for live theatre.

Digital performances challenge binary distinctions since they connect live with mediated performances and introduce hybrid modes in which interactivity, platform design, and networked presence become central dramaturgical elements. Bay-Cheng (2010) notes that a reconceptualization of presence and of liveness together with authenticity is required within theatrical discourse in service of these performances. They demand new competencies from both artists as well as audiences. Platform literacy, along with remote engagement, can be examples of some of these competencies. Digital performance ultimately expands theatre's possibilities because it offers new modes for storytelling, access, and experimentation. The digital platform allows for innovation in structure plus audience participation which makes play creation better without lessening theatricality.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has increasingly emerged as a transformative agent within dramaturgy because it introduces new models of authorship, creativity, and collaboration. GPT-2 as well as GPT-3 are AI-driven language models for reconfiguring plot structures while also inspiring character dialogues. They are now employed even for generating theatrical scripts. A prominent example is 'AI: When a Robot Writes a Play', which was developed and produced by Prague's Švanda Theatre. In this revolutionary performance human performers interpreted the entirely GPT-2 generated script. The playwriting that followed was surreal and fragmented, which had an estrangement effect highlighting the tension between machine logic and human expressivity (Lužný & Tichý, 2021). This, of course, raises questions regarding the usual concept of the playwright as the sole authorial voice.

As AI begins to influence dramaturgy and co-creative processes and interaction between human and non-human intelligences is fostered,

some theorists argue that such systems experiment with novel pathways in a theatrical way. Hayles' (1999) posthumanist framework recognises agency within technological systems shaping human culture and aesthetics. AI has now become an active participant within algorithmic dramaturgy, contributing thereby to the play's content as well as form and temporal structure. It has become a "performative machine" (Bay-Cheng, 2016). However, since AI output can be unpredictable, dramaturgs are then required to engage in new forms of interpretation and adaptation that can blur the boundaries between script and improvisation, intention and even accident. AI systems reproduce ideas that have been trained on data so that ethical concerns about authorship and ownership remain as do biases which need to be addressed. In practice, these tools expand the dramaturg's role beyond being the sole creator to becoming a facilitator of human-machine collaboration. Theatre intersects more and more alongside code and computation and algorithmic dramaturgy sees performance as a place for shared hybridised intelligence.

### **Technological Scenography and Interactive Environments**

Scenography that is based on technology has radically altered the aesthetics of theatre, making it far more engaging to the senses. Scenography was customarily viewed as narrative enhancement. However, integrating scenography with augmented reality, motion sensors, and projection mapping has elevated it to becoming a key dramaturgical element. Within this kind of revolutionary framework, technology can actively shape the perceptual and emotional experience available in a theatre, instead of simply representing space. One landmark production, The Wooster Group's 'Hamlet' (2007), best exemplifies this transformation. Video projections of a 1964 Broadway version of *Hamlet* interacted with a live performance to create a constant interplay between recorded and live moments. This blurred the boundaries between time, memory, and authenticity, and then offered a complex commentary on the nature of the performance itself (Dixon, 2007).

Likewise, Complicité used binaural sound design in 'The Encounter' (2015), and audiences wore headphones which allowed them to manipulate the audio spatially to immerse themselves in a rainforest soundscape. This sensory manipulation heightened the emotional environment, in which technology served not just as an enhancer but as a narrative device (Bay-Cheng, 2010). Technology constructs not just

visual images but also emotional experiences in these works, as part of a more broad trend towards affective dramaturgy. Interactive design tools such as motion sensors or live-controlled videos permit performers to trigger audiovisual elements in real time introducing responsive non-linear storytelling.

In keeping with the concept of the postdramatic theatre of Lehmann (2006), scenography shifts so that the performance becomes a sensory event instead of merely representing the narrative. In this context, the digital scenographer is still a vital dramaturgical collaborator since the scenographer manipulates time, space, as well as perception, to offer a more engaging and often destabilising experience to the audience. When technology intervenes, it creates an environment in which the line between the performer and the spectator, reality and simulation, becomes more and more fluid.

### **Spectatorship and the Digital Audience**

Digital dramaturgy has deeply redefined the audience's role since the audience shifts from being passive spectators to becoming active participants, co-creators, or even performers within the theatrical experience. Performances that are online and attempt to actively engage the audience, in particular, show this transformation. As audiences engage they integrate that engagement into the dramaturgical structure. Mozilla Hubs and VRChat, both of which are virtual reality (VR) platforms, offer interactive experiences since spectators explore virtual spaces as avatars plus interact with the environment in real time (Jenkins, 2006). These digital platforms blur the boundary between gaming and theatre; they require audience members to make decisions that directly influence the narrative; and this alters the customary dynamics of performance.

To understand this shift is also key to understanding Jenkins' (2006) concept of "participatory culture". As audiences actively contribute to a performance's unfolding, user input shapes the story's direction. This can lead to unexpected endings because of the audience's choices. However, such participatory engagement by spectators also raises question about agency, consent, and control. Audience actions as well as personal data may alter performance particularly in online productions (Lehmann, 2006).

The participatory turn provides exciting and brand new opportunities for audience involvement. In addition, it highlights issues of

accessibility, inclusivity and diversity. However, since not all audience members have equal access to digital technologies, this can lead to concerns about the digital divide as well as unequal participation (Bay-Cheng, 2010). Additionally, the move to online venues changes theatre's social contract since it reshapes typically accepted customs for assemblage, attention, and response. Within the digital era, the audience is dispersed and each individual experiences the performance individually even while contributing to its collective dramaturgy.

## **Case Studies: Indian Theatre and the Digital Turn**

### **1. Theatre Without Theatre (India): Pandemic-Era Innovations**

The lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic evoked a revolutionising shift in Indian theatre, with practitioners in Mumbai, Delhi, and Bengaluru adopting digital platforms. Initiatives like 'Theatre Without Theatre' testify to this change, with performances being created on Instagram Live, Zoom, and YouTube (Kaul, 2021). A good case in point is 'Lines of Blood' by The Dark Room Project, where physically separated actors were acting at the same time, interrupted by video projections and pre-recorded recordings. Such dramaturgical fragmentation is typical of Lehmann's (2006) 'Postdramatic Theatre', where montage and simultaneity replace the coherence of linear narrative. In 'Lines of Blood', most importantly, watching was remapped digitally. Audiences voted for storyline decisions, participated in comment threads, and thus blurred the performer–audience dichotomy. Theatre's "liveness" then became a co-constructed virtual spectacle shared by both, presaging more extreme challenges for theatre's ontology in a virtual environment.

### **2. Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust: Hybrid Visual Storytellings**

If the pandemic imposed a forced digital turn, Roy's Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust showed how technology has become a dramaturgical ally over the long term. Productions such as 'About Ram' integrate live puppetry, digital projection, animation, and sound mapping (Roy, 2020). In these productions technology is not merely an "enhancement" but an engaged dramaturgical force: puppeteers and media create together in the moment to produce hybrid visual worlds. What is distinctive about Katkatha is that it reimagines native forms—such as Kathputli (string puppetry)—without stripping them of their cultural particularity. This shows the way traditional theatre can be remade digitally and still have

roots, addressing younger viewers in their techno-cultural language. It is both restoration and preservation, placing Indian puppetry on the world agenda of 'technological dramaturgy'.

### **3. The Company Theatre (Mumbai): Digital Scenography and Experimental Space**

Kumar's Company Theatre used digital scenography and sensorial dramaturgy in productions such as 'Khwaab-Sa', a reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Sundar, 2018). Light mapping, sensor-activated sets, and surround sound design created a nightmarish environment that referenced digital fantasy aesthetics. Storytelling ranked second to urgency here, secondary to rhythm, mood, and spatial change. This interesting creation placed Indian theatre on the same plane as international trends in immersive and non-narrative performance, yet kept local cultural subtlety intact through Hindustani dialogue and classical music. The play demonstrated how Indian dramaturgy walked the tightrope of international experimentation and local specificity.

### **4. Sandbox Collective (Bengaluru): Interactive Online Theatre**

Lastly, Bengaluru's Sandbox Collective pushed the dramaturgical imagination through transmedia storytelling. Its play 'Ahalya@Nandi.com' was staged over email conversations, WhatsApp chats, and video calls (Vasudevan, 2022). Each medium refashioned the story in its own way: the chat platforms' informality produced intimacy, and video calls emphasised distance and fragmentation. This resonated with Jenkins's (2006) transmedia storytelling but refashioned the ancient stage-screen dichotomy. Sandbox turned mundane communication technology into theatre technology, thus claiming that theatre need not be geographically located—it may be spread out, conversational, and platform-based.

### **Preservation, Archives, and the Digital Dramaturg**

The digital age has fundamentally transformed the ways in which performances are documented, archived and analysed, providing new opportunities for dramaturgs to engage in digital curation. Recorded shows, interviews, and process perceptions are available through tools like Digital Theatre+, YouTube, and HowlRound TV. Through each of these resources, dramaturgs are able to study the subtleties in temporal dynamics, including actor choices, and audience reactions. These digital

archives can serve as valuable resources for dramaturgical analysis, because they allow deeper comprehension of live performances, beyond the fleeting moment of performance (Turner & Behrndt, 2008).

Scalar and Twine, platforms of annotation, have opened further the opportunities for the creation of “living” documents that are dramaturgical, incorporating multimedia elements and non-linear storytelling. Scalar is a scholarly publishing platform designed for annotating and linking multimedia materials, while Twine is an open-source tool for creating interactive, non-linear narratives. These platforms enable dramaturgs to construct multiple layers of interpretation since they offer a more dynamic and interactive form of dramaturgy that reflects on the continuing nature of performance. This shift has led to the emergence of the “digital dramaturg”—a practitioner who analyses data, as well as curates multimedia, which engages online.

However, digital documentation poses philosophical questions regarding memory and ephemerality, questions that are of great concern in performance studies. While Phelan (1993) argues that live performances cannot be reproduced for their essence is lost in digitisation, digital archivists challenge this by saying that digitisation allows people to replay, revisit, and reinterpret performances. Critically examining digital archives shaped through editorial choices and technological constraints shows that memory reconfiguration is not neutral. Archiving becomes an integral part of what is the dramaturgical process and it influences the way future audiences and scholars will understand the meaning of performance.

### **Challenges and Critiques**

Innovations within digital dramaturgy exist. It nevertheless faces critiques along with challenges. Erosion of “liveness” is a primary worry. For years, this concept has defined the theatrical experience. Phelan (1993) suggests that the true heart of theatre is found in its quick nature plus the joint presence of actors and audience, which is hard to reproduce in a digital space. This immediacy is often compromised by digital performance because spontaneous interaction is lacking between the spectators and the performers.

Overreliance on technology can also result in a theatrical experience prioritising visual spectacle rather than emotional resonance or narrative depth. Dixon (2007) warns that undue focus on technological innovation

can distract from the heart of dramatic storytelling, turning theatre into mere visual tricks or technical displays without an emotionally moving core. This worry suggests technological determinism, where technology is commended for its newness and not for its enhancement of the dramatic production.

Digital dramaturgy is also likely to exacerbate existing inequalities in access according to another critique. Since audiences need to participate in digital performances, they need reliable internet access, plus technological devices, as well as digital literacy, and this does create barriers for marginalised or underserved audiences (Bay-Cheng, 2010) impacting equal accessibility and diversity. The dramaturgical landscape also gets complicated on account of ethical concerns with respect to data privacy, surveillance, and also AI-generated content. Audience data use by digital platforms heightens issues of privacy and consent.

The environmental impact of digital production further sparks enquiries regarding sustainability in the digital field, particularly about energy consumption of server infrastructures. Therefore, dramaturgs as well as theatre-makers must use technology critically plus ensure that innovation serves the performance instead of overshadowing it. In contemporary theatre-making, a reflexive and balanced approach towards digital dramaturgy is necessary for maintaining inclusivity and integrity despite the challenges.

## **Conclusion**

As a dynamic as well as evolving practice, dramaturgy in the digital age challenges the customary boundaries that exist between live and mediated performance, performer and audience, script and stage. It also reimagines the making, experiencing, and comprehension of theatre. Technology can act as both a dramaturgical agent, a collaborator and a medium, as this paper has indeed shown. It reshapes the aesthetics, politics, and pedagogies within performance. As these things develop and offer exciting opportunities for innovation, they also demand critical engagement and ethical consideration. That the digital dramaturgy is not limited to the urban, Western, or high-tech contexts is demonstrated in and by the Indian cases studied in this paper. Because they do draw from indigenous traditions as well as multilingual narratives, including local performance logics, Indian theatres makers are experimenting in compelling ways with low-tech innovation plus

digital scenography, platform dramaturgy, also AI-augmented design. This hybrid dramaturgy is responsive to global digital culture rather than attempting to erase it. Remaining attentive to human dimensions of performance, future research should explore the interdisciplinary intersections of theatre, digital humanities, as well as media studies.

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