The Digital, Postdramatic Moment in Theatre: A Genealogical Study

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Abstract

Literature has seen its fabric alter in every age, making the aligning genres go through the necessary mutations. Drama or theatre, one of the primary genres of literature, has seen a similar trajectory down the ages, and in the twenty-first century, it has revolutionised itself. With the advent of technology and the latest developments in the field, theatre has reconceptualised itself and made an entry into the digital sphere. This paper attempts to draw a schematic history of the emergence and subsequent development of digital theatre, looking at the 2020-21 pandemic as a necessary signpost that helped digital theatre reach its pinnacle, worldwide. The paper presents a concise history of the form in broad strokes as well as composes a repository of the works under digital theatre with the aim of providing a starting point to any potential research in the field, a form that has burgeoning capabilities.

Keywords: Digital theatre, postdramatic theatre, digital literature, cyberformance, pandemic, digital humanities

Introduction

Theatre, as a performing art, has existed since time immemorial. Before it was written, literature was performed, and as a corollary, theatre dates back to the inception of storytelling and rituals. Theatrical and dramatic elements are present in various forms of rituals, ceremonies, and events; however there is a distinction to be made between theatre as a form of entertainment and arts, and the presence of a scattered sense of performative/theatrical elements in other art forms (Brockett & Hildy, 2014). This distinction advances the notion of 'theatre' as an art form,

which Schechner (1988) distinguishes through the term performance, when he states "a performance is called theater or ritual because of where it is performed, by whom, and under what circumstances" (p. 120). The origin of theatre has remained a debatable topic among scholars, and Brockett and Hildy, in their extensive work titled *History of Theatre*, aver:

> The oldest existing dramas of India, for example, date to the second century CE; a few scholars, however, argue that Indian theatre actually started before Greek theatre, although most now seem to agree on a date closer to the end of the Vedic period, c. 200 BCE. The oldest surviving dramas in China date to the Sông Dynasty (960–1279 CE), but some scholars argue that Chinese theatre predates the theatre of both India and Greece. (2014, p. 83)

Theatre has lent itself to a series of evolutions with the progression of time, and in the Indian context, it has traversed not only large swarthes of time but also space: "Performed in urban, glitzy movie houses and on rural, well-worn grounds, theatre in India is expansive and experimental" (Karnad, 1989, p. 331).

A few elements that have remained as a core part of theatre as a form are the script, actors, dialogues, props (objects), stage (open-air/make-shift/proscenium), sound/music, lighting in the modern setting, and the audience. These components are not fixed, and theatre can exist even in the absence of one or more of these components, which are themselves flexible and have evolved with time.

With Epic Theatre, which tried to break the fourth wall, to elicit the audience's response, and make them active agents as opposed to passive receptors of an enactment, theatre has long established itself as a medium that is vociferous of the times. World over, theatre has always been a potential political tool, and a cursory glance at the history of its evolution down the ages shows how this 'art form' has armed playwrights with a power unfathomable hitherto to writers.

Theatre reshaped itself specifically in the twentieth century (Lehmann, 2006) to adhere to political, social, as well as technological shifts. For example, radio drama is a technological shift, and street theatre (absence of proscenium stage) is one of the political shifts that the times have witnessed. Similar examples are avant-garde theatre and televised drama, and through these, essentially, theatre undergoes "self-reflection, decomposition and separation of the elements of dramatic theatre" (p.

48). Such decompositions usher theatre into the postdramatic stage. An art form that took thousands of years to define and essentialize, advanced into the stage of decomposing and redefining, specifically due to the rapid technological advancements in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As George writes, "Theatre, as a performing art, traditionally unfolds within the confines of a closed space, where a live audience witnesses the enactment of a performance" (2025, p. 130). However, with digital theatre, even the essential node of audience and performer sharing the same space has been delinked and allows for a remote sensing of theatre. Out of all the components that have been removed, the delinking of the audience is one of the pronounced, unimaginable, tragic, and catastrophic alienations. Radio drama is essentially a format that is audio and not visual. Similarly, televised drama is either a television show or a recording of a play. These particulars are not based on an expectation of an audience reaction or even its presence and can be consumed passively. However, digital theatre is one of the few formats that keeps the audience at bay, yet at times, expects audience reaction as well; a similarity that can be drawn from immersive theatre, a type that breaks the fourth wall by blurring the boundaries between the performers and the viewers. This form bends the genre by making it participatory, site-specific, multi-sensory, non-linear, improvisational, and technological-driven. Digital theatre and immersive theatre overlap in terms of methods, orientations, and form.

Digital Theatre: Etymology

With the inception of technology, as other art forms have splintered into alter digital forms, theatre has seen a newer dimension which has expanded it and at certain levels made it more robust. Digital theatre, which has taken the theatrical world by storm, has opened an alternative portal for this performative art. In terms of etymology, the usual words used for theatrical forms signify either the medium or the location or the type of the performance. Street play renders a play being performed in the street, stage play assumes the play to be performed on a proscenium stage, and radio drama specifies that the medium is a technological object. The term 'digital theatre' that this paper studies indicates three specific aspects; first, it is a performance online that is cast through internet bandwidth; second, the audience and the performers meet in the online space; and third, it has one of the inalienable aspects of theatre, which is,

that it is live. Digital theatre, in general, is rather an umbrella term that refers to digitally distributed theatre (broadcast to a remote audience, live or recorded), digitally mediated theatre (use of digital technologies within the scenography), and digitally located theatre (performed in a digital location, such as Zoom or an entirely digital platform) (European Theatre Convention, para 3).

The idea of digital theatre came up with the inception of interactive art, which in turn was a result of the advancements in the field of technology and digital media. And to this effect, digital theatre has been aided and abetted by the technological developments in the 1980s wherein several theatrical groups like George Coates Performance Works and Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre shook hands with software and hardware companies to create media rich performances as well as to create a repository/archive (Saltz, 2019). The idea of digital theatre, that conflated to its maximum during the 2020s, has its roots in the early conception of the form that is often called cyberformance and cyberstage. Other terms used in this context are intermedial performance, virtual theatre, cyberdrama, telematic performance, cybertheatre, hyperformance, cyberformance, digital performance, online theatre and networked performance (Papagiannouli, 2011). The key idea here is to connect the audience and the performers through internet technologies. With a foot necessarily in the digital world, digital theatre straddles a plane wherein performances depend on digital platforms for their orchestration, but at the same time, they retain the primary characteristic of a theatrical performance wherein the audience experiences the performance in real time. It makes a necessary departure from the recorded video of a theatrical performance and allows the audience to experience it in a way that calls for active engagement, which is live. As a corollary, it distinguishes itself from cinema, which allows it to retain its gist.

Digital theatre, therefore, as it has emerged in recent times takes the idea of theatre towards the postdramatic moment wherein performances engage with every audience member exclusively making them witness something entertaining and interactive at the same time, without necessarily being in the same material/physical space together. The usage of multimedia in theatre is not new, and with the advancements in the field of technology, theatre practitioners have taken greater interest in them and have regularly incorporated these techniques in their artworks (Jordan, 2002). According to Gough (1999), "Several terms

are currently used for the application of technology in performance; these include multi-media, poly-media, hybrid art, multi-arts, mixed-media, screen-media, new media and work with new technology" (p. 23). The term 'digital' then, is more of a contemporary take on the idea of multimedia, but the theoretical implications of the concept withhold. Jordan avers that the use of multimedia in theatre antedates World War 1, adding that the term 'multimedia' has evolved through time and 'new' multi-media trends in theatre are some 75 years 'new'. As he traces the influence of early artists who used multi-media in their theatrical practice and documents their work, one cannot help but notice a sense of inevitability that surrounded theatre vis-à-vis technology even at that stage. He looks at the very political theatre work of director Erwin Piscator, the concurrent theatre of Russian director, Vsevold Meyerhold and the work of Czechoslovakian set designer, Joseph Svoboda, who, as he writes, "laid the groundwork that has since become part of a modern tradition of theatre" (Jordan, p. 81). These three artists, responding to the technological advancements of their times, incorporated these advancements into their works. Multi-media or the digital took baby steps as it entered the theatre, and the early examples show how the aim was to enrich the experience and also to embody theatre with the necessary tools to adapt itself to the changes in milieu so as not to become an obsolete form, and it learnt from cinema to improve its power of vocation. "The employment of technology is not a means in itself but a further resource available to an artist in their desire to communicate a story, message or theme" (Jordan, 2002, p. 81). Digital also refers to digital music as opposed to live instrumental music, or a digital background instead of a live backdrop and these can be referred to as digital mediated theatre. However, the digital live-streaming of the play with the audience's live consumption is where lies the crux of digital theatre, that challenged the craft and significantly changed the 'location' of the play.

The Pandemic: A New Momentum in Digital Theatre

Lehmann notes, "the theatre with the advent of new technologies is a medium where the mode of perception is shifting: a simultaneous and multi-perspectival form of perceiving is replacing the linear successive" (2006, p. 16). And this becomes a point of departure as recent innovations and developments in the world of digital theatre have multiplicity and

plurality as their ideology. The advent of Covid-19 can be seen as a signpost that added momentum to digital theatre in the larger field of digital art, digital theatre, digital medium, and digital expansion. With the onset of the pandemic, there was a colossal shift in the existing worldview of people, which made them rethink and reconsider the 'everyday' and the 'normal'. Simultaneously, a parallel, new world emerged which was digital in its conception and effect. As the pandemic upturned the social fabric and affected every walk of life, theatre also found itself at the crossroads.

It is during the 2020s, thus, that one witnesses a new buzz in artistic circles as they take up the challenges imposed by the lockdown and imagine the theatre anew. As theatre shakes hands with technology while trying to maintain its exclusive identity vis-à-vis cinema, theatre encounters multiple possibilities and avenues. The digital theatre that developed in India saw the mediation of theatre performances happen on online platforms like live-websites and Zoom. The mode of rehearsals also changed as these were often held on online meeting platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and Skype. The idea of performance itself was reconceptualised which led to much anxiety and nervousness. Despite the challenges, some groups and individuals successfully managed to deliver compelling performances, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of theatre.

This section attempts to discuss the different types of projects that emerged out of the digital theatre spectrum and also looks at the academic advancements in the field. One such was the course offered by the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Delhi, on digital theatre where the students developed digital theatre performances as part of the course, which were live-streamed through Zoom (Sivaraman & Pillai, n.d.). Some of the performances that emerged out of this wave were 'The Lonely Hearts Club' by Anuja Ghoshalkar, a digital play that had interactivity as its central feature; 'Allegedly' by Mallika Taneja, which was performed online through the Zoom platform in front of a digitally live audience and had actors who were also performing live from their own individual spaces; 'No Country for Women' by Sunita Singh and Steven S. George performed on Zoom, but in sharp contrast to the previous examples, the two performers in this play were present at a single location, much like the performers in an on-site play. A theatrical performance, as it breaks for 'Acts' and 'Scenes' in the traditional setup up allows the audience

to mull over the previous sequences. In the digital space, in order to make sure that the audience does not lose interest or divert its attention, many digital performances invested in the idea of interactivity through questions and polls at regular intervals, which allows the audience to engage with the performance with focused interest and attention.

'The Last Poet' by Amitesh Grover is characteristically different as it takes the audience to a website wherein they enter different scenes of the narrative (play) by entering different rooms. The play gives the impression of an art exhibition where the audience enters or leaves a room as they desire, without necessarily adhering to a sequence, which is a quintessential feature of any theatrical performance. Every room, as it connotes a narrative, works in a standalone manner, even as it complements the narrative as a whole. "This particular play takes the "digital" and "theatre" to a level where both intersect to create an identity of its own that is immersive, innovative and inquisitive" (George, 2025, p. 134). Another play, 'Abhi.Neta Aayenge' (2020), by Padmini Ray Murray was developed on a grant by the Goethe-Institute. Based on Ionesco's play *The Leader* (1953) it was an online live performance, which was presented as a transmedia adaptation where "the performance is not only located in the bodies of the actors, but also in the performance of technology itself: social media and news websites and other platforms 'perform' in response to both algorithmic diktats as well as to user interaction" (Refunction, 2022). 'Thespo Tapri: Cheeni Kam, Stories Zyaada!' (2020), curated by Thespo, featured 12 performers performing from their own spaces and narrating their stories dramatically to a live audience (Thespo, 2020). 'Nihayati Niji Baatein' by Jyoti Dogra was another digitally mediated performance, created and disseminated in the form of a video call, wherein the viewer engaged with the piece in isolation and emerged from it as if ending a video call (Kaur, 2025). And Maya Krishna Rao's 'Paru' (2020), a 22-episode-long series which was eventually animated by Mansi Thapliyal and released as 'Lockdown Stories' on YouTube "must be categorised under the genre of digital theatre" (Kaur, 2025, p. 125). Stills from theatre are used as background and the actor appears to be performing against the backdrop of a stage, so that she is characteristically distinct from a cinema actor, and thus the performance comes within the broad ambit of digit theatre, which is an ever-widening idea extending and lending itself to many mediatised performances (Kaur, 2025).

Digital theatre saw a similar trend in other countries as well, where it was necessitated more than consciously channelled. A quantitative, data-driven study carried out by Richard Misek as part of the AHRC project, along with other similar projects, highlights key factors that led to the rise of digital theatrical works during the pandemic and their eventual 'snap-back.' As Misek writes:

> Understanding online distribution as an accessibility feature opens the door to a more inclusive approach to accessibility that also addresses previously invisible barriers to engagement with arts and culture. For many who are d/Deaf and disabled, older, vulnerable, low income, overworked, geographically remote, chronically ill, dependent on local transport, time-poor or carers, this can form such a hard barrier to participation that no on-site accessibility features can make the trip to a physical venue feasible. In our post-interview survey, 100% of organisations that responded noted 'widened geographic reach' as a benefit of online arts and culture. (2024, p. 29)

Digital theatre provided newer avenues to theatre practitioners to broaden their horizon, but the 'snap-back' was equally quick and contemplative. The idea of digital accessibility became a point of departure as this was attributed sometimes to a "lack of funding, lack of expertise, lack of technical infrastructure, or lack of interest" (Misek, p. 27). Misek also explores how digital access comes with its own challenges, where the manoeuvring of the website becomes a task for the audience, and which needs to be simplified and well-managed in order to keep them coming back. However, in the case of a country like India or the Global South, the digital divide becomes a problematic as neither networks nor devices are readily available across the demographic. This digital divide that spans geographies brings out the inherent barriers that such endeavours face in the long term. The complexity of the digital space is ubiquitous, which becomes one more reason for the eventual exhaustion that it leads to in both practitioners and the audience. As compared to the live performance, which allows for a direct engagement, digital comes with its own aporias, and again, in the Global South, with a literacy rate much lower than the Global North, the digital turn becomes all the more challenging and restrictive.

Conclusion

The real question, therefore, is about the future of digital theatre. After 2020 and 2021, the digital theatre scene in India saw a sense of stagnation.

As long as the pandemic situation and the unavailability of physical theatrical spaces remained, these plays kept emerging, displaying a sense of necessity but post the pandemic, the change or return to the physical mode has been imminent. Digital theatre faces many questions for the future, especially with the rapid advancements in artificial intelligence. The first play created (written) by AI was 'Schwandia', staged by the Prague Theatre, (Grynyshyna et al., 2002), and the possibility of robots as actors has been the buzzword on the theatre scene since the early 2000s (Ficarra & Kiefer, 2022). The future of digital theatre remains essentially a directorial choice, where theatre-makers need to think through how significant and important the digital 'location' to their craft is. There is more accessibility and far more reach in terms of the audience, but is there anything more important to theatre than the 'live' aspect that has been its core? Is the proximity to the audience, a shared space where you smell, hear, and see everything all at once, a core component that is inalienable? As far as the data goes, digital theatre at the moment exists as experimentation which is in its initial phase. The digital architecture is an inviting and expanding space, but it also makes the play more dependent on the technological aspects of the digital, the internet, and the medium, a move that could compromise the significance of the actor, and ultimately the theatre, which is a craft of the actors, where they exercise their sense of autonomy. The shrinking of the actor (literally, via the screen) in terms of time and space poses a strong sense of fear and intimidation for the actors. An event like the pandemic creates a momentum for digital theatre that is born out of necessity, but a stand-alone digital theatre might not be the preferred choice of the director. No director mentioned above has so far created another play for the digital space. The challenge remains for both, digital theatre and on-site theatre; proscenium/make-shift architecture and digital infrastructure; and at the same time for actors and audiences to self-contemplate, critically engage and re-negotiate the space for theatre. And in this context, Misek makes a brilliant point when he says that "...there is no 'either/or' in digital access, just 'both/and'" (p. 37). This transition was driven by necessity during the pandemic years, but it can now be seen as an alternative that can exist alongside traditional theatre and augment it in the future.

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