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Reflections on Place in Telematic Performances

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Abstract

This article is based on two telematic theatre productions to better understand the possibilities of the digital medium as well as the artistic challenges it brings. When producing the performances, the technology was very much in focus: how to act in front of the camera, how to relate to each other remotely and how the audience would watch the finished result became artistic problems that needed to be solved during the process. In this article, I outline some of the learning outcomes on acting, storytelling and production design when working with digital theatre in these two productions, with a particular focus on the notion of place in digital performance.

Keywords: Telematic, digital theatre, place, communality, Zoom theatre



Marketing material for the telematic performance *I ett fält av guld*. Photo: Mats Bäcker

In her book *Digital Theatre* (2020), Nadja Masura states: “there is no one ideal example of Digital Theatre, instead the sum total of these works demonstrates the reach and potential value of this rising art form” (18). Digital theatre is an elusive concept. It is sometimes a term addressing how to use digital tools to reinforce and mediate reality in live performances and, other times, used to describe live performances distributed through the internet or to

describe how technological inventions, such as artificial intelligence, extended reality (a combination of virtual and augmented reality) and robotics, could be used as tools of representation in the performing arts. Even the term “telematic,” which was coined already in the 1970s to describe art and artists who used the internet and video conference systems to communicate and create art, is not clearly defined either.

This article is based on two telematic theatre productions to better understand the possibilities of the digital medium as well as the artistic challenges it brings. These productions were rehearsed, performed and recorded live with the *Zoom* video conference software and the artistic output were adapted to be presented on a screen.

The first production, *Trädgårdsgatan*, premiered in February 2021 at Helsingborg stadsteater, featured text by myself and was directed by the Swedish theatre director Linda Ritzén. The performance addressed narratives of socio-economic division in Sweden. The play took place in Helsingborg, one of the ten largest cities in Sweden and situated by the Öresund strait in the south of Sweden. Trädgårdsgatan is the street that runs through the city and divides it into a rich north and a poor south. The play takes place between 1965 and 2020 and portrays three generations of women living in Helsingborg: a grandmother, a mother and a daughter. The performance was initially supposed to be staged in a black box, but, due to the pandemic situation in Sweden, the authorities introduced a more extensive shutdown that recommended everyone work from home and prohibited theatres from inviting audiences to the performances. The choice the production team faced was to either close the show entirely or transform the concept that was imagined for the stage into a digital format. The decision was not difficult because all the rehearsals had basically taken place using the *Zoom* software already. After short consideration, it was decided that the production should be presented as a digital theatre performance on the theatre’s homepage play channel.

The second production, *I ett fält av guld*, premiered a month later in March 2021, on Örebro Teater’s homepage play channel. I wrote and directed the production. The performance was divided into eight different episodes, each between twenty and thirty minutes, and portrayed eleven individuals who were isolated at home because of social distancing and home quarantine in different ways. Through these stories, a narrative emerged of how the pandemic had affected the way people were relating to each other during the lockdown in Sweden. The ambition with these two productions was to explore how to work with the digital medium but also to try to imagine a novel format for theatre that differed from the distribution of traditional remediated theatre productions.

In her book, Masura states that: “Digital Theatre both *does* and *does not* deviate or step outside of the tradition of familiar theatre practices. Theatre has a long history of employing new technologies . . . at the same time, there is a significant difference in the nature and effect of these new theatrical tools” (18). When producing the performances, these

differences were very much in focus: how to act in front of the camera, how to relate to each other remotely and how the audience would watch the finished result became artistic problems that needed to be solved during the process.

In this article, I will discuss some of the learning outcomes that came out of the making of two digital theatre performances—how the actors made themselves at home before the video conference software, but also how the spectators were encountering the performances through the screen—and how the notion of place thus affected the acting, storytelling and production design in the productions.



Still from *Trädgårdsgatan*. Photo: Jörgen Dahlqvist

The Sense of Place in Video Conference Software

In their article “Immersive Telepresence in Theatre: Performing Arts Education in Digital Spaces” (2020), Tom Gorman, Mikko Kanninen and Tiina Syrjä describe how the notion of space made them rethink how actors interact in the digital realm during a project where students from Finland and the U.K. met to learn how to speak and act Shakespearean English:

We adopted the term “virtual stage” to describe our system until a colleague pointed out that there was, in fact, nothing “virtual” about the space. Both sets of participants were physically present in their own campuses—they were not occupying a ‘third space’ even in a theoretical sense

In their research, they used the term immersive telepresence to label their project. Instead of using the concept of stage, they choose the notions of immersion and (tele)presence to describe the spatiality of the technology. They conclude that “*liveness* is key to telematic communication and, as a result, live-streams do *not* constitute telepresence collaborations, nor do recorded performances—synchronous interaction is key to the experience” (25).

This mirrors my experience in the two productions discussed in this article. In rehearsals, the digital meeting room “disappeared” and instead the social relations between the actors and the director came in focus. In *Trädgårdsgatan*, three generations of women meet over *Zoom* to react to life events, such as the death of the mother or the daughter’s graduation from school. Their dialogues are intimate and intertwined as if they have had the software running for a long time to just record what happens in their lives. In a conversation with director Linda Ritzén, she explained that her focus when directing is always conveying what the audience can believe in: the actors must accept the conditions and logic of the world of the performance as true. This always starts with how the actors understand the dramatic situation. For her, it is obvious that the actual space affords the ways the actors will be able to portray the characters in the play. The actors are calibrating their bodily expressions to connect and communicate to the audience.

This calibration also happens when acting in a different medium. In his article “Zoom; or, Obsolescence” (2021), W. B. Worthen writes:

While actors today may well move from the stage to a television studio to a film location to a laptop in their bedrooms, what they do in each of these sites, as a practice, engages with and represents that medium on its own terms.

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According to Worthen, acting is inseparable from both the social world that it represents and the theatrical space where it takes place.

During the pandemic, it has become obvious that people have become used to interacting with people in their different homes as they have been throughout much of their social life online. However, when Ritzén suggested that all the actors should be placed and filmed in their own homes, many in the artistic team protested as they believed it would be confusing for the audience to understand how the stories connected and how to signal to the audience where the play took place. In the physical theatre space, there would be light and sound, which would help indicate the different spatial and temporal locations in the text. They instead suggested that a neutral space would make it easier for the audience to believe that the characters were in the same world. Even if the actors physically were placed in different places, their acting was connected through the digital interface.

The performance took place in an actual *Zoom* meeting room and in these meetings the homes have become present and non-present at the same time: we have been so accustomed to seeing other people's homes that we often do not even notice them anymore. Instead, the digital meeting room has become a "place" with its own conventions of what the participants can and cannot do. Users choose how to view themselves and others, how they position and size the windows, who is to be viewed in full-screen and who is not. The software would connect the different characters' different worlds rather than how their homes were presented in each window. Because the screen had become a specific place, in the same way as a theatre stage does, it was possible to understand how the actors related to each other, even if they were in different rooms. It is the same as how actors give meaning to a theatre space. The narrative and the dramatic situation in the performance transforms the space into a place, or a world, with its own inner logic.



Interactions with the camera in the performance *Trädgårdsgatan*. Photo: Sasha Becker

Relating to the Camera

The decision to make a digital performance also affected the way Ritzén rehearsed with the actors. It became evident that the format needed its own aesthetic approach in performing before the camera. During the first three weeks, while preparing for the actual work in the

theatre venue, they used *Zoom* to do an in-depth table read, analyse the text, sort out the dramaturgy and the individual storylines and discuss relations between the characters in each scene. At that point, something else was needed. Ritzén explains:

When we just did the table read, the actors acted differently than during the actual rehearsals. I had to ask them to tone everything down and go back to how they acted during the reading sessions to get the right expression. Actors are so used to adapting to the theatrical space, so this transition came without thinking, and now we needed to find a new approach to this format.

The actors describe it as being hard at first. Frustrating later. They felt confined in the small space in front of the camera. It took some time to get used to these conditions. However, this changed after a while, when they felt that they began to understand how the technology worked. In a conversation with the actors after the production, one states:

In the beginning, I tried to look upon our work as a traditional rehearsal situation. I tried to overcompensate . . . in the beginning of the process I was totally exhausted at the end of the day . . . I was searching for the old ways of expressing myself in the rehearsal space or on stage. This was a new situation that demanded another focus.

Becker et al.

One of the actors took a lot of photos during the rehearsal process, and when she looked back at them, she found they revealed how her interaction with the technology changed during the rehearsals. In the beginning, it was important to have the screen with the other actors up close, but, in the end, the screen was hardly visible. The camera became her co-actor instead. For her, this shift came when she really started to understand how to work with the technology in this new format. She concludes that, in the end, she did not even think it was a loss; instead, it brought an intimacy to the acting.

W. B. Worthen describes the concept of *Zoom* theatre as something other than performance taking place in a theatre, drawing links to the notion of *liveness*, which aligns with the U.K./Finnish Shakespeare project mentioned earlier. Even if the productions are transmitted live, they are recorded for later broadcast, and:

The distinctive format of most productions (actors working directly into their cameras, notionally speaking to one another in character while facing out to the equally virtualized audience) lends even the recorded performances the feeling of intimacy, the immediacy of, say, a recorded monologue. This mediatized immediacy stands apart, then, from broadcast films . . . and also from prepandemic live broadcasts

Worthen 185

Telematic productions are not really theatre, but also not film; instead, a hybrid between the two. Like film, the physical place the actors are in differs from the digital representation the audience is experiencing on screen, but as in traditional theatre the actors are aware of the audience while performing. This demands something other from the actors and the director of a performance. In her 2014 article “Impossible Triangles: Flat Acton in Telematic Theatre,” Yoni Prior writes that:

Working with live streaming requires performance-makers to think simultaneously in theatrical and televisual space —that is, the space defined by the human eye, and by the eye of the camera.

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Once the actors in *Trädgårdsgatan* realised they had power to control what the camera could frame, they also had the opportunity to explore it as an acting tool, with greater control over close-ups, angles and the spatiality of the image. The camera helped the actors direct what the audience could see and experience, as there was no editing in post-production.



The set-up for the recording of *Trädgårdsgatan*. Photo: Birgitta Rydberg

How the Technology Transforms the Home into a Theatre Space

For the actors, the technology offered great resistance from the start: plugging in network cables, setting white balance and sharpness on the camera, connecting to the internet, starting the various computer programs and remembering to start the audio recording was not something that any one of them was used to before. In addition, the digital repetitions made everyone painfully aware of how the speed of the internet connection affected the rehearsals. The screen could freeze in the middle of a sentence while rehearsing and this often led to great merriment, as it was impossible to know if it was because the actor took a long pause reading the line or if the technology went awry.

It is always hard with the things that you don't understand. When you must learn new things. Then you feel insecure. But eventually it was like going on tour with a monologue. You must build everything yourself. . . . It became part of the preparation and it also helped me to take control over the space.

Becker et al.

The technical limitations also affected the final concept. In *Trädgårdsgatan*, there was an early idea to stream the performances live, but the bandwidth and stability of the software made the theatre reject that idea. The internet connection was too unstable, even if we were using ethernet connections to guarantee the connection. There was too much uncertainty around whether the actors could hear and see each other without glitches or images that at any moment could freeze.

There are also limitations in how the sound is captured in the software. *Zoom* uses noise reduction to get rid of background noise, and this made it hard to capture sound that was not immediately directed to the microphone. Even if this could be adjusted, it was still of too low quality to really work for the performance. Additionally, the software muted the participants that were not talking. This affected the style of acting; it became important to leave room between each line. It also became important to speak loudly and articulate well for the software to recognize that someone is speaking if they have been silent for a while. The solution was to record the sound in another software and to install programs so the technicians could control the computers remotely. The technical set up very quickly became complex, and postproduction was needed to enhance the quality of the recordings.

Although the technical difficulties and limitations were never completely resolved during the process, the work of setting up cameras and computers eventually became part of the preparations. It served to leave the home environment and "go to work." When the actors had accepted the digital means of working, they could concentrate on their artistic exploration instead. After breakfast, the actors go to their workstations and they are not at home anymore. Instead, they are immersed in the work of solving the dramatic situations implicit in the text, which is a process that is familiar to them.



Staging the home. Photo. Evamaria Björk

Inviting the Audience to Your Private Home

In her article, “Creating New Spaces: Dancing in a Telematic World” (2010), Pauline Brooks explains how a dance performance she was involved in could be understood as an example of how a sense of shared space can be created even if the performers are separated geographically. According to Brooks, the performance created “a space that [did] not exist in the live world, but [could] be inferred only through the ‘magic’ of the Internet” (57). The world in the performance was created by the choreographers and inhabited by the performers with the aid of technology and could also be perceived by the spectators. In the article, Brooks refers to the “the cone of capture,” “the live zone” and “the zone of virtual interplay” (58), which she has coined to map out the different spaces in the performances. The cone could be understood as the space captured by the video camera to be streamed via the internet to the audience.

In the two telematic performances discussed in this article, these zones were present but used somewhat differently, as the performances Brooks discusses combine live audiences with those who are only present digitally.

For the actors in *I ett fält av guld*, the physical space they were using as stage was only relevant in relation to the camera; all movements and actions were made in relation to the lens. For the audience, this added depth to the two-dimensionality of the screen. For the actors, it was important to know what the camera and audience, could perceive of their homes, but this knowledge also created other problems. When talking to the actors afterwards, one explained that set designers often directed her as much as directors do when making theatre.

The room directs my possibilities to express myself in my acting. This format has very much decided the acting: how our relation is and what our intentions are. My expression is framed by the room. No matter how it looks. I am framed by it.

Berg et al.

However, in *I ett fält av guld* there was no scenographer. The idea was to use their real homes as the place where the characters lived. This was not always appreciated. The actors discussed the notion of privacy when inviting audiences into their homes.

When scouting for a specific location in the apartment that would look good when framed by the camera, I complimented one actor by saying that her home appeared out of an article in a fashionable interior design magazine. Later it turned out that these comments really had affected her:

When you commented on how it looked, I started to value my own home. What should I remove and what should I keep? Which things could relate to the character I was going to perform? If I used a specific corner in the flat it was easier for me, then I could remove things that I didn't want people to see.

Berg et al.

This started a process of getting over an anxiety of showing private life. As the camera just captured one section of the room, props from the theatre helped to change the private home into scenography. A fictitious photo of the actors as the two characters together on a vacation did much for the transformation. Later, traditional theatre technology also contributed: "It helped when the lighting technician from the theatre came here and installed theatre lights" (Berg et al.).

It was important to separate the home of the actor from the fictional place where the characters were situated, even though this separation was merely imaginary. Using objects connected to the narrative and technology related to theatre helped the actor with this.



The actor impersonates an influencer guiding her viewers in Örebro on her *YouTube* channel. In the background, to the right, is the Örebro Castle. Still from the performance *I ett fält av guld*. Photo: Katarina Krogh

The Screen as Place

When working with these two telematic productions, the artistic team realised through hands-on experience that a screen is not a fixed entity: using a smartphone, a tablet, a computer screen or a TV will affect how the audience encounters the artistic result. What they encounter on the screen differs and these aesthetic experiences are closely associated with technology, distribution and format.

In *Computers as Theatre* (2014), Brenda Laurel, a video game designer and researcher, suggests that the interface is represented through a perceived “common ground” of interaction between the computer and the user. She discusses what we today refer to as the desktop (or the finder, as it is also called) on the computer. This common ground model “supports the idea that an interface is not simply the means by which a person and a computer represent themselves to another; rather, it forms a shared context for action in which both are agents” (5). The user learns what a program can and cannot do.

I would suggest that the same can be said of software programs. Even if video conferencing programs such as *Zoom*, *TEAMS* or *FaceTime* have become software that many people encounter every day, even if they have some quirks in common—for example, people are getting accustomed to wait in silence before a meeting starts, it is hard to make eye contact because the camera is not located at the same place as the other people on screen, and everyone seems to become self-conscious when having to watch themselves on screen—it

has also become clear that they differ in both appearance and how the user relates to these programs. This means that film, television, a video game and now also digitally distributed theatre have their own aesthetics, although they all have the screen as their viewing medium.

In *I ett fält av guld*, different software was used to present the manifold stories. In one of the storylines, the audience followed a couple who were socialising through *Zoom* while in separate geographical locations. In another storyline, the spectators were invited to eavesdrop on a woman's *FaceTime* call with a co-worker she was flirting with. In yet another, a young influencer is streaming content to her *YouTube* account while strolling around in Örebro.

In the performance, these different communication tools are used and presented as part of a greater narrative and then presented and distributed to the audience digitally. In *Storyworlds across Media* (2014), Marie-Laure Ryan uses the concept "storyworld" to explain how narrative space in stories is completed through the imagination of the reader or, in this case, spectator. This connects well to the discussion above on how social and relational interaction changes the virtual stage to a sense of place. The narrative and the storyworld dictate the logic of how to behave in different media and thus create a common ground for the audience to make meaning of the performance.

Co-presence and Communitality

We have become accustomed to watching theatre via the screen as a complement to live events. This also affects the space through how and where the audience watches the telematic performances: it creates an individual spectatorship. In her thesis, *Encountering Shakespeare Elsewhere* (2020), Rachael Nicholas explores how audiences have accessed and perceived digital productions of Shakespeare.

The popularity of physically mobile devices as a way of watching broadcasts suggests that whilst online reception can resemble older modes of domestic media consumption such as television, the mobility of both audiences and screens through space is a significant feature of theatrical reception online.

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This means that the actual physical place where the audience is watching from must be renegotiated to create a focused space when taking part of the performance.

Nicholas points to the fact that even though the viewing experience is individual, research shows that it is more complex. The audience is still unsure about how to understand the social and communal aspect of the experience, but they still feel they are part of something. Nicholas adds that "being physically separate from each other can, paradoxically, promote engagement and communication between audience members in online experiences" (267).

She argues that this is done through communication in different social media where they share experiences and comments. The notion of presence could thus be understood as part of an on-going negotiation:

The fact that some audience members did feel connected despite not being physically co-present reflects how what 'being together' means might be shifting as a result of digital communication technologies. The way that space, distance, and presence are experienced has been altered and expanded by new communication technologies such as instant messaging and social media. Shared physical space, therefore, is no longer a pre-requisite for experiencing co-presence in day-to-day life.

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Another aspect of this is the extension of perception to a production. Masura emphasises the social construction of these meetings taking place online: "community is the place where people, and their ideas, meet" (236). She suggests that place is a stable concept—it is where we experience the world—while the concept of community deals with the interaction between social actors: "community is formed in a third intersecting space where interest and location meet, when the ability to meet in a shared space composed of multiple places is itself the shared interest of the members of the group" (236).

I would suggest that this could be achieved in more ways than just through social media. In the two productions discussed in this article, the audience was not provided any opportunity to comment or interact with each other through any of the theatre's digital channels. Instead, the performances aimed for this third space in other ways. In the performance *I ett fält av guld*, the different storylines were anchored in the small communities throughout the Örebro region. And *Trädgårdsgatan* used a similar strategy but also added the narrative of Helsingborg as an unequal city to this. The latter gave relevance to the performance and also to the social sphere.

Märta Stenevi, the former Minister of Equality in the Swedish Government, was asked by a Helsingborgs Dagblad to reflect on the performance *Trädgårdsgatan*. In her article, she addresses injustice driven by the socio-economic division between the city and the country (Stenevi). Stenevi also used the narrative of the performance as a point of departure to project herself as the protagonist in a political drama to achieve what she believes to be a more just society (Dahlqvist). Through the co-presence of telematic performances, and by the accessibility of digital distribution, it is possible to create an arena where ideas on society can be discussed—both *in* time and *over* time.

Conclusion

Masura writes that telematic technologies change our understanding of space: "when real places share one space (via cyberspace) we have an ontological conundrum, something which is both" (57). This enigma is also what I found when working on these two telematic

performances. Different notions of “place” intersect: The actors’ own homes, the same home now transformed into a theatre, the software where the artists meet when rehearsing, the digital interface where the audience becomes immersed in the narratives.

In realising that there were different overlapping places, connected and distributed through a one angle camera set up, it made it easier to adjust our artistic methods to use this media to present our stories. The challenge was to understand how to work with the technology as a representation tool, as well as how to understand the inner and outer logic of the worlds that needed to be created. All these different places must be present simultaneously and thus need to be taken into consideration when rehearsing and performing. Together, all this creates a world with its own rules and logic of how to act, especially when using different software and media.

In his article, W. B. Worthen states:

Zoom theatre, like any new technological application, alters the relations between all technologies, in this case troubling the identities of film and television, and especially the interaction between film, television, theatre, social media, internet video, and the public private bodies they articulate.

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Exactly this altering of technologies is what is fascinating with this new medium to me. In the case of *Trädgårdsgatan*, which was reconceptualised in mid-process due to pandemic lockdown, no adjustment was needed, even though the text was written to be performed on a stage; the text was easily translatable between the live and the telematic performance.

In the other production, *I ett fält av guld*, the format differed from live theatre, but this was part of the concept already from the start. This performance was divided into eight episodes, and each episode contained two or three shorter monologues. In between, there was music and a distinct graphic design dividing each of the stories. The length of each episode, moreover, was adapted to what is more common on the internet; that is, twenty to thirty minutes each. Both productions had a “realistic” look with regards to acting and set design, mostly because they used private homes as settings.

It would be interesting to further explore how fictitious spaces, created by new digital software, could afford the artistic outcome of productions like these. For now, it is still more a substitute for live theatre, but the technology promises new modes of engaging with the audience, as well as other ways of telling stories.

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