iab Institute of the Arts Barcelona

# DIGITAL (EMERGENCY AND HUMANITIES)

## Artistic Practices in COVID-19 Time

iab **Institute of the Arts**
Barcelona

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# Essays

# Eve White, Eve Black and Jane:
# Using Multimedia to Tell One Woman's Story.

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**Abstract:** This research paper will introduce you briefly to the story of the woman who is famously known as "Eve White, Eve Black and Jane". She was born as Christine Sizemore. Mrs Sizemore suffered from Multiple Personality Disorder, now known as Dissociative Identity Disorder. In 1953 her case study was televised, throwing her and MPD (DID) into the public spotlight, spurring a popular demand of portraying MPD (DID) in entertainment. Utilising the story of Christine Sizemore you will be guided through how portraying such a topic as MPD (DID) in multi-media formats. These formats include: Documentary Theatre, Film and Art Installation. This fuels the understanding on how each form of media portrays her story in different dramaturgically ways. By placing a true story into multiple medias, this gives the opportunity for the story to be obtainable and understood by a larger variety of audiences, in turn, expanding its viewing base.

**Keywords:** Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), Eve White, Eve Black, Jane, Christine Sizemore, Case Study, Multimedia, Theatre, Film, Installation, Entertainment, Interviews, Psychology, Stage, Project, Therapy, Splitting, Identity.

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## 1. Introduction: Finding Eve

Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), known since 1994 as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), has had ongoing multiple discussions and curiosity surrounding it since its first recorded scientific report, in 1791 by Eberhart Gmelin. This publication of Gmelin involved a young German woman who suddenly took on the personality and language of a French Woman (Rolls 2020: 21). Following this report MPD/DID has been swirling in and out of controversy and belief throughout the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries and has been discussed and described by renowned theorists, including Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Alfred Binet, William James and Benjamin Rush. (Brand and Sar 2016: 3)

The project *Eve* revolves around a more recent and known case of DID from the 1950's. This project stems from a youtube video of the case study called "Eve Black, Eve White and Jane" which became the base of the project. In this specific case study the woman known as Eve White, Eve Black and Jane was being interviewed by her therapist Dr. Corbett Thigpen. This recorded case study inspired the book *The Three Faces of Eve* by Dr. Thigpen and his partner Dr. Cleckley which in turn was the inspiration for the feature film by the same name *The Three Faces of Eve* directed by Nunnally Johnson, in 1957. It was this film that began bringing DID into the wider public attention (Rolls 2020: 19). It was not until 1977 that the woman known as "Eve" came forward into the public eye and her real name was learned to be Christine Costner Sizemore.

This essay will give a brief introduction to both MPD/DID and Christine Sizemore as well as information gathered from an interview with Therapist Carolyn Halliday, from Minnesota, U.S.A., throughout the entirety of the essay. It will explain how the format for the writing of a documentary play was chosen and, due to the surrounding current events, how they implemented and forced adaptation to *Eve* turning it into a multi-media project.

This leads to the discussion of multi-media and how each adaptation into a new form of viewing changes the story of *Eve* dramaturgically. This enables it to be able to be read correctly in each form. How something read on a stage by a theatre audience will not read on screen in the same way and vice versa. It will show how an art installation becomes more abstract while at the same time allowing the audience to feel immersed and educated. By putting a true story into multiple medias, this allows the story being told to be obtainable and understood by a larger variety of audiences, expanding its viewing base.

The conclusion of this essay will help bring to light a new conversation around DID in various forms of media and entertainment, using the story of a woman who lived it, during a time when the understanding of the disorder was just being grasped and not fully a subject of belief.

## 2. The Pre-story

*Eve White, Eve Black and Jane*: The name of the original case study held in 1954 with who we now know as Christine Costner Sizemore and her psychiatrist Dr. Thigpen (Rolls 2020: 19). With this

used as the base for the project *Eve*, it put three things into perspective for the project. Firstly, it provided the project *Eve* with a prime focus on the therapy sessions between Mrs. Sizemore's personalities and Dr. Thigpen. Secondly, it narrowed down the material which would be used and which part of Christine Sizemore's timeline that would need to be accessed. Thirdly, the time period of 1950's and the history of MPD leading up to this moment. This included, looking back on the case of Eve White, Eve Black and Jane to understand how the treatment being used on patients suffering from DID has evolved and changed today. To achieve this, there needed to be an extension to the research into both a medical side and an artistic side revolving around MPD/DID.

The two interviews which were transcribed for the base of the project *Eve* included: *Multiple Personality Disorder Real Psychiatric Interview with Eve White Eve Black and Jane* (case study, 1953) and the *Psychiatrist Introduction Multiple Personality Disorder Eve White, Eve Black and Jane*" (case study, 1953).

To expand the research process so as to better understand the growth and differences in how DID was looked upon and treated from the 1950's until today, Doctor Carolyn Halliday was interviewed. Dr. Halliday is a therapist and psychologist based in Minnesota, U.S.A. A questionnaire was sent to Dr. Halliday alongside a Skype interview. Parts of these interviews can be seen below and throughout the essay:

> Q. From a professional's point of view, when you look at this specific case how did it change the idea of DID and MPD today?
> A. "In my lifetime, the MPD case that was hugely popularised was in the book and film, 'Sybil', which I think has come to be considered fraudulent" …. "I never saw the movie "The Three Faces of Eve" but I remember cultural references to it. I remember asking my father, who was a physician, if MPD existed and he said no, that people were faking. Fairly early in my career in Minnesota, after I became licensed as a master's level psychologist, I came to realise that one of my very chronically mentally ill clients, was MPD. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia, but as I came to know her well, it became apparent to me that she was also MPD. Very few people were working clinically with this diagnosis locally because it was just gradually becoming to be known." … "I think what happened is that within the circle of therapists who were working in that field, we began to see MPD emerging" …
> Q. Regarding the time period of *Eve White, Eve Black and Jane* (1953) and the use of hypnosis, how do you think this helped her case specifically if at all?
> A. "I am not familiar with it but what I can tell, is that the patient/therapist relationship was highly exploited in a way that would result in being barred from the profession and a civil suit for malpractice. Hypnosis can be very useful for behaviour change, and in some ways is an extension of guided imagery. However, with DID, the goal is to have the individual be present and connected, not dissociated. Encouraging a trance like state may fuel the individual's tendency to dissociate."

The information gathered above from Dr. Halliday gave insight into approaching the project *Eve* from a scientific, medical and directorial point of view. This mainly can be seen when creative writing came into play to create the multi media scripts for *Eve*.

### 3. Multiple Personality Disorder/Dissociative Identity Disorder

Multiple Personality Disorder is, as of 1994, now known as Dissociative Identity Disorder. DID is defined as a dissociative disorder in which two or more distinct personalities coexist within one and the same individual. It is an example of a neurotic disorder (Roberts 2014 48). The essential feature of the dissociative disorders is a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity and perception (Ringrose 2012: 3). A patient with DID has two or more distinct identities. Each of these identities have a distinct and individual way of perceiving and thinking about the environment and one's self. At least two of these personalities recurrently take control of the patient's behaviour. It is necessary to remember with a DID patient that the multiple identities do all exist as manifestations of one person. These means that two or more personalities coexist but only one is 'in control' at a given time. During this 'in control' period of one identity the alternative identities may or may not be aware of one anothers existence and experiences (Roberts 2014: 48).

There are many varied speculations on MPD/DID and the reasons supporting it and how it evolves in someone. It is stated that dissociation reveals itself in childhood which makes the patients discontinuities of time not unusual to them. The main agreed reason among psychiatric professionals is trauma including sexual, alcoholic, drug or physical abuse among other forms of abuse. Only in the last thirty years have analysts begun to confront and integrate the psychopathology and the psychodynamics of severe trauma (Waugaman 2019: 268). According to Dr. Halliday:

> Q. From your experience is trauma the main, if not only, reason for DID?
> A. "Yes. But the trauma can be something that some people don't think of as trauma, such as early life invasive medical procedures."
> Q. With MPD (DID) cases the different personalities that come out, are they always in competition with each other or do some feel comfortable with the others? Are there survival instincts in personalities to become the 'strongest'? How does the therapist find the 'True' personality?
> A. "In my experience I have no greater sense of competition among the different personalities of self than exists with any given individual who may, for instance, hate the part of themselves that cries, or the part of themselves that gets scared, or the part of themselves that is shy.

When working with clients who are not at all dissociative, I have heard them say things like "I hate my little girl. She's such a wimp." I think the therapist has to increase self compassion and self empathy for themselves, so they can accept and understand that they have normal feelings. When working with any client, I believe it is the purpose of the therapist to wholly understand the individual in order to help them move towards a life that feels more functional than their current life, and to help them find strategies to do so. A full range of feelings is normal and human, and therapy can help us to better understand and manage our behaviours when we experience them. In my understanding with DID, there usually is a part of self that knows all of the parts of self and often is more visible than other parts. One of the remarkable experiences is how, in therapy, a person can learn to connect with a part of themselves that they had wanted to bury."

Q. What is the difference, if any, between split personal and Multiple Personality?

A. "I have heard the term 'split personality' mostly in popular culture. People sometimes use spilt personality when referring to someone with schizophrenia. I think people think of the old novella *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* which was a tale of a protagonist who was one person with such diametrically opposed personalities that they appeared in the story as separate individuals. When a person presents with a very strong personality character on one day, and on another day, seems to be the opposite, people will sometimes describe them as having a split personality. Clinically I haven't really heard the term used. People have sometimes used the term in reference to someone who has had a psychotic break, which is not a dissociative disorder. Psychosis is generally associated with a chemical misbalance in the brain whereas DID, is thought to be developed as a pattern to defend against unbearable experiences."

There are multiple myths and many misunderstandings revolving around DID. One of the most common is that a patient with DID has a *split personality*: "The 'split' relates to a divide from perceived reality rather than what is commonly interpreted to mean a split in actual personality. This is rooted in the literal interpretation of the word multiple personality disorder— devised before a clear understanding or differentiation of the term psychosis was determined" (Hayes 2014: 5).

Diagnosing DID is a complicated process and the failure to diagnose it correctly can result in the patients unravelling and even death. The need for disassociation to become generally recognised is key for correct diagnosis (O'Neil 2009: 27): "MPD is best conceptualised as both a complex, chronic dissociative disorder characterised by disturbance of identity and memory and as a post-traumatic condition initiating from abuse or traumatic childhood experiences" (McDavid 1994: 2). The difficult part of diagnosing DID is that the symptoms in each individual are diverse and varied and there is not one "typical" case to base it off of. The similarities are that there is a core personality which is usually unaware of the personalities or if they are aware, it is in an indirect way (Rolls 2020: 20). This was the case with *Eve White, Eve Black and Jane*.

Therapy and the act of converging personalities, alongside diagnosing, remains complicated and varied depending on the case and has changed drastically throughout the years. In *Eve White, Eve Black and Jane*'s case hypnosis was used as well as electroencephalogram tests (a

test that detects abnormalities in your brain waves, or in the electrical activity of your brain). According to Dr. Halliday:

> Q. The integration of personalities is a difficult topic in this to understand. Do you believe this is something the patient becomes capable of doing because of the help of therapy?
> A. "Yes, integration is often the therapeutic goal for someone with DID but not all clients want to be integrated. I think the idea of DID is easy to understand if one considers the concept that humans all develop a variety of skills and roles for coping… In a way, DID is really just an exaggerated way of coping and protecting oneself from the unbearable."
> Q. What are the techniques used now to converge personalities. Are you actually killing or repressing?
> A. "Neither is true. It's all about understanding, validating, and teaching strategies to cope… With DID it is common to think of the self as a committee with all of the different parts, and to meet and talk in a board room type situation. The idea is to give all aspects of oneself, or all parts of oneself. DID or not, the chance to be heard and understood."

Correct diagnosis and therapy are key for a person struggling with DID and is a gradual process. In the next chapter the case of Christine Sizemore will bring to light her specific journey on overcoming DID.

## 4. Christine Costner Sizemore

Christine Sizemore (1927-2016) who went by *Eve White or Eve Black or Jane* was a 25-year-old married housewife with a 4-year-old daughter when she began her therapy with Dr. Corbett H. Thigpen and Dr. Hervey Cleckley in Georgia, USA. She was suffering from "severe and blinding headaches" and "blackouts" following the headaches. She proved to be a matter-of-fact person and sober and serious with her, at the time, unexplained "troubles": "To the therapist, Eve White — as we shall call her — was an ordinary case with commonplace symptoms and a relatively complex but familiar constellation of marital conflicts and personal frustrations. We were puzzled during therapy about a recent trip for which she had no memory" (Thigpen and Cleckley 1954: 136).

After a session with Mrs White a letter arrived at the office of Dr. Thigpen and Dr. Cleckley. This letter was written partially by what was Eve Whites penmanship and at the bottom finished in a childlike handwriting. Eve White was questioned and responded saying that she thought she had destroyed the letter and had not sent it. This was troubling to the Doctors until during a session Mrs. White she mentioned hearing another voice which was addressing her and made her questioned her sanity to Dr. Thigpen. As Dr. Thigpen thought of a response to Eve

White on her sanity, her expression changed and seized by pain she put her head to her hands. It was immediately following this moment that a bright sparkling voice said "Hi there, Doc!". Her physicality, vocals and expressions changed and this was the first appearance, to Dr. Thigpen, of Eve Black (Thigpen and Cleckley 1954: 137). Eve Black showed opposite characteristics then Eve White. Mischievous, childishly daredevil and seemingly free of any habitual signs of care, distress or seriousness.

Over a period of fourteen months, a series of interviews totalling approximately one hundred hours and much extensive material was obtained about the behaviour and inner life of Eve White and of Eve Black by Dr. Thigpen and Dr. Cleckley. It soon became clear that Eve White was in distress about her failing marriage where Eve Black was not. Eve White loved her little girl while Eve Black did not care for her and so on. Although Eve Black shared Eve Whites memories (not the other way around) she viewed them as an outsider and not as herself. It became clear through sessions that Eve Black had been coming "in and out" since their childhood and was skilled in making the people in her life not truly suspect her as someone else entirely, but of having "fits of temper" (Thigpen and Cleckley 1954: 138). As Eve White's marriage crumbled Dr. Thigpen concluded it was mainly due to Eve Black's coming out and her behaviour. Eve White spoke of many real and serious incompatibilities with her husband and it was noted that "adverse acts and influence by an insider have been peculiarly damaging and pernicious. Though Eve Black does not apparently follow a consistent purpose to disrupt the union, or regularly go out of her way to make trouble for the couple, her typical behaviour often compounds their difficulties." (Thigpen and Cleckley 1954: 141) Eve Black was able to "come out" and "go in" when she pleased. This means that she could cause mischief and then during the rebuke or effect of that mischief which she caused, it would be Eve White who was forced to deal with it. At one point in therapy, Eve White seemed to be getting worse with more frequent headaches.

During a session with Dr. Thigpen:

> Her head dropped back on the chair. After remaining in this sleep or trance perhaps two minutes her eyes opened. Blankly she stared about the room, looking at the furniture and the pictures as if trying to orient herself. Continuing their apparently bewildered survey, her eyes finally met those of the therapist, and stopped. Slowly, with an unknown husky voice and with immeasurable poise, she spoke: "Who are you?" From the first moment it was vividly apparent that this was neither Eve White nor Eve Black. (Thigpen and Cleckley 1954: 144)

Jane had emerged. Jane was described as a compromise of the two Eve's assets combined. It was after Jane's emergence that electroencephalographic studies (a test that detects abnormalities in your brain waves, or in the electrical activity of your brain) was conducted. It was soon learned that Jane and Eve Black could not access each other but they had to 'go through' Eve White, the middle personality. The combining, "extinction" or "killing" (the last two terms which are not used today) of these personalities was worked throughout multiple sessions with Dr. Thigpen and Dr. Cleckley over the following years throughout the 1950's.

Eve's dissociative identities were a result of her witnessing two deaths, a horrifying accident involving amputation within a three-month time period as a child and parental rejection. Although according to Mrs. Sizemore at a later point in her life these incidents only triggered the "outing" of selves which were already present in her. It was during her time with Dr. Thigpen and Dr. Cleckley in 1956 that Christine Sizemore signed away her life's rights to her story which had been published in the book *The Three Faces of Eve* by Dr. Thigpen and Dr. Cleckley, to 20th Century Fox. It was later declared and believed that she had signed away her life rights to her story using the names of her personalities and that there was no legal representative present (Easton 1998: 1).

In 1970 Christine Sizemore began seeing Dr. Tony Tsitos. It was under his care that it became present that she experienced not only three "selves" but in total more than twenty different personalities which were eventually unified. Her "selves" were presented in groups of three. Mrs. Sizemore went on to write three novels based on her experiences and accepted an out of court settlement, regaining her life rights back in 1988. Christine Costner Sizemore died on 24 July 2016 (Weber 2016: 1).

### 5. Portraying MPD/DID and Splitting in Entertainment

The idea of "splitting" has been portrayed both on screen and on stage. "Splitting" is typically seen in the genre of horror, suspense dramas and psychological-based genres. Movies and play's such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) by Rouben Mamoulian, *Psycho* (1960)by Alfred Hitchcock, *Sybil* (1976) by Daniel Petrie, *Black Swan* (2010) by Darren Aronofsky, and *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957)by Nunnally Johnson.

Johnson's *The Three Faces of Eve* was used as a primary source for this project. In most of these representations you have the "good" character/personality and the "bad" one. You typically

do not see an in-between. Psychoanalysis seems to fit well with film as deals with the unknowable mind. It allows for understanding in spectatorship, identity, desire and fantasy and this all binds with the pleasure of specifically film and the moving image (Ruddell 2013: 18).

If we look at the example of Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the most famous adaptation of Stevenson's masterpiece, there is the classic case of the "good" character, Dr. Jekyll, and the "evil" character, Mr. Hyde. There have been multiple remakes and versions of Stevenson's story, one of them being *Dr. Jekyll & Sister Hyde* (1971) by Roy Ward Baker. In this version the transformation into the "other" identity take place in front of a mirror, playing with the ego from Lacan (Ruddell 2013: 57). The use of a mirror to symbolise "splitting" is common in horror genres as it is a captivating notion for the audience and can also be seen in more modern pieces such as *Black Swan* by Darren Aronofsky: *Black Swan* is notably a film which also raises the question of where the monster ends and the human begins and if there is even a line at all (Rudell 2013: 62).

When speaking with Dr. Halliday two questions arose regarding DID in entertainment:

> Q. When it comes to watching dissociation or multiplicity on screen or in theatre what is something that you find problematic? Is there a piece of work you feel is correctly portraying this?
> A. "I think the portrayal can be subtle such as the actor wondering why they chose to wear red when they hate red. Or not remembering having gone to the grocery store. What I think is poorly done is if they portray the person like a transformer, suddenly growing into the opposite of what they were."
> Q. Should it become entertainment?
> A. "The intent is not to exploit… [The] intent to highlight the experience of the disease and the process of living with it. Start[ing] discussions, open[ing] the dialogue. In my life experience mental health is not referenced, 'oh my sister is DID' or referenced outside of clinical setting. You still don't hear anything in common culture normalising the existence of the disorder. Trauma is so common which people openly speak about only now."

The usage of more "realistic" portrayals of "splitting" can be found in works such as the mentioned *Sybil* and *The Three Faces of Eve* a main tool for the project *Eve*. Using these examples there is a more relatable connection for the audience with the characters portrayed in these films as both were based off of true stories. When it comes to film in an industrial context, characters which are split "provide a dramatic device that gives narrative structure as well as stylistic content and an opportunity for fanciful visual special effects" (Ruddell 2013: 124). Using a split character in entertainment is a snare for audiences, capturing interest and intrigue. The "split" character

often allows the viewer to see what it is to be human by shedding light on true evil, seduction, expression and more in a very characterised manner.

For a writer and director working with a true story which leans on topics such as MPD/DID, finding the line between thrill and "truth", and working with terms such as "split", "other" and "identity", is important. This is necessary in understanding how to guide the actors in the said roles and creating a piece of work which does not take advantage of these topics but shines a light and educational understanding while at the same time taking a form of entertainment.

For *Eve* the physicality of each of the personalities identities plays a large part. This comes into play in each visual format and/or type of media it is put into. For example, Eve White's body language is tired, defeated, demure and fragile. The way the shoulders and spine are used will indicate that, as well as, a feeling of heaviness and exhaustion in the walk and stance. In Eve Black's case she is carefree, a daredevil and mischievous and the posture shows that with a looser and freer frame as well as a lighter and relaxed step. Jane's physicality is that of a poised, upright woman who is polite and well spoken. To portray that, the spine is consciously upright and the hands and legs are put where they need to be, nothing is there for 'no reason'. Each of these personalities has a completely different physicality which will be read immediately by the audience even prior to them speaking. With such a strong use of physicality in each personality shown, the vocal changes will be determined by the physicality.

As gathered, more often than not, DID is shown as in genres of horror and psycho-drama allowing the myth that people suffering from DID are violent towards others. This is not the case, typically they are more violent and harmful to themselves. The project 'Eve' aims to present that.

When it falls onto documentary entertainment, director William Wyler was quoted: "Entertaining of course is the main purpose of it, but if film can contribute something to the social conscience of your time, then it becomes a source of great satisfaction." (Five Come Back 2017)

## 6. Documentary Theatre

From the beginning it was clear *Eve* would be a documentary play. Documentary Theatre is a considered a vehicle for learning and documentary playwrights are tellers of "truths". They tell

stories and experiences from different perspectives by revisiting history with the intention of educating (Morris 2014: 15). While dealing with documentary theatre you enter the notion of what is sometimes considered "unrepresentable". This places performances of documentary theatre on a spectrum between fiction and reality and brings to light the ethical restrictions which may effect the production and how it is received (Little 2011: 3). This happens through the playwrights own filter. It was also learned during the making of *Eve* how, depending on the form of media being worked with, the filter would change. There is personal interpretation which also applies to the term "docudrama". This describes dramas which are "based primarily on reality, not necessarily on fact. According to William Scott there are two types of documentaries; one that *gives information to the intellect* and one that *informs the emotions*" (Morris 2014: 24).

The process of creating *Eve* took on the format of collage. With the main resources used for the base of the play including the two transcribed interviews. This gave a clear storyline to collage around, extending the given timeline and creating dramaturgical structure for the play. The pieces of text, used to collage in to the main interviews, came from *The Three Faces of Eve* script and pieces of creative writing. The most effective way to do this was to begin with the collected text printed out with each piece of text given its own colour. It was then cut and collaged together. This was done numerous times to create the outcome of *Eve*. See example below:

THERAPIST: Where were you, then, when your daughter was born?

EVE WHITE: It looks like to me that's your problem, Doctor, not mine.

Don't you have any fans in this office? It's hot in here.

THERAPIST: Can I speak with ~~Eve~~ Mrs. White again?

EVE BLACK: Sure

NARRATOR: There are considerable elements that Eve Black has existed co-consciously and as an alternate personality since Eve White's childhood. Relatives relate many incidences in Eve Whites career which were totally out of character and which often puzzled and astounded them. For months valuable therapeutic time was consumed in helping Eve White out of Eve Blacks difficulties which included a divorce among others and bargaining with Eve Black to get her to remain calmer and more respectful of Eve White while we tried to bring order into the chaos. We are now back with Eve White.

By working in this way in the telling of a small part of Christine Sizemore's life story, filtered it and placed it in a structure that would allow the audience an understandable dramaturgy. It will offer a glimpse of an obscured piece of history. "Particular types of dramatised documentary material can help to revive neglected (or suppressed) historical events. If the role of documentary is to assert things about the world we inhabit (and this includes the world of the historical past)" then they "have a vitally important part to play, in the ways that they draw out and amplify some of the underlying tensions and sensibilities of the times they depict" (Morris 2014: 26).

## 7. Adapting a Documentary Play into Multi Media: Screenplay and Art Installation

<u>Screenplay</u>

The adaptation of this project began as the current events progressed and the decision to adapt the documentary play into a multi media project ensued. This was begun with the adaption of *Eve* into a screenplay for a short film. This adaptation meant understanding the differences of dramatic structure between stage and screen and how the adaptation process would need to be approached. Firstly, for *Eve*, the formatting needed to be addressed:

```
INT. THERAPIST OFFICE. AFTERNOON. EVE BLACK

We see CLOSE UP Eve White bow her head as a headache
overtakes her, pain envelopes her. It slowly passes and she
looks up. EVE BLACK has now emerged. She is the opposite of
Eve White, confident, sassy, loud, her physicality is loose
and almost too relaxed, she has near to no filter and does
and says as she pleases Eve black smiles, bites bottom lip

                    THERAPIST
          Mrs. White are you feeling okay?

                    EVE BLACK
          Hi there doc!

                    THERAPIST
          Mrs White? Sounds like your feeling
          better now?

                    EVE BLACK
          I feel fine.

                    THERAPIST
          What about the headaches?
```

As pictured, the scene is formatted as a normal script for cinema. As the main base of the screenplay the original documentary play was used. As "Eve" was adapted into a short film, not a full length, that automatically determined that the screenplay could not be longer than twenty five to thirty pages. This meant the story itself was drastically shortened as it was coming out of a play that estimated around one hour. The challenges arising are how to tell the story in a dramatised structure which is readable on screen. From the beginning it was clear *Eve* would be a documentary play. Documentary Theatre is a considered a vehicle for learniwithout losing the main focus of the story. For the adaptation for this project, the use of the collage format came back into play.

A story being told on screen to a film audience is drastically different than a story being told on stage to a theatre audience. This comes with the dramaturgy and how the characters, issues and time is being depicted. For the screenplay of *Eve* the decision was made to use the research on DID to re-write the end and what the reason for her disorder was. The decision to do this was made so that the dramatic structure read correctly on screen and it reached a level of drama that would keep an audience engaged: "Just as Freud turned to myth, narrative and storytelling to explain his theorisation of human nature, so we can turn to Freud, and subsequently Lacan, to understand the representation of identity on screen; the fictional world and the psychoanalytic enquiry into human nature are intrinsically linked" (Ruddell 2013: 29).

Putting *Eve* into the media of a screenplay used more of the research done on the era and history of DID to be able to write additional happenings into it, changing the story just enough to be engaging for the film audience for the length of the film, while staying based to the original story. As the events of *Eve White, Eve Black and Jane*'s life were changed for dramatic effect this places the screenplay into a film which is "based off of true events".

### Art Installation

Creating an art installation for *Eve* is in a similar creation process to the screenplay adaptation. The entirety of the installation will be in projected video format. To begin, the screenplay footage of Eve White, Eve Black and Jane will be used in its entirety alongside a new script written to introduce each personality separately. There are now four different pieces of footage of Eve White, Eve Black and Jane. The Therapist which has been a voice over in the last two formats (play and screenplay) is now seen for the first time in a two separate pieces of footage. The first

piece being a new introduction to his character and the second being the screenplay with him as the visual. There are now six pieces of video material.

The journey the viewers will take, will firstly introduce them to Eve White. They will see, hear and begin to connect and sympathise with her. They will then meet Eve Black and again see, hear and connect with her. Thirdly they will meet Jane and once again will see, hear and connect with her. At this point the viewers have seen three different women who looked entirely the same. Lastly, they will meet the Therapist who will introduce himself and explain the meaning for meeting these three different women. At this point in the viewers journey they have met each identity separately and in ways that feel personal and connectable. They will then view the short film of Eve White, Eve Black and Jane and the Therapist. The footage of each character will be projected on opposite ends of the room with the sound coming from all around. The Eve White, Eve Black and Jane footage will be projected on wall number one and the footage of the Therapist will be projected on the opposite wall, wall number two.

The idea of the installation gives the viewers at the beginning of there a journey, through the work, personal time with Eve White, Eve Black, Jane and the Therapist. This allows them to find a deeper connection with each one, bringing to light an understanding that each of the personalities is a human being with different thoughts, interests and physicality. At the end they are able to see the conversation being held "together" of the Therapist and Eve White, Eve Black and Jane from projections on opposite ends of the room while putting the viewer in the centre with the audio surrounding them in an immersive viewing experience. This installation puts the viewer into a position of connecting more deeply with each personality from beginning to end and to walk away with a fuller understanding of identity, personality and most importantly DID. With *Eve* in the format of an installation brings forward the fine lines between art, reality and fiction and opening up dialogue surrounding them.

## 8. Conclusion

Using different artistic formats to tell a story, allows that story to be told from multiple angles and highlighted from different points. As stated before, it also allows a larger variety of audience and discussion. Mental health is not a comfortable subject in society. Having ways to access information through entertainment and art today, allows a more comfortable introduction for education in the said genre. The project *Eve*, through multi media use in entertainment, was made

with the hopes of bringing to light and to urge discussion about a disorder which is still considered controversial today.

Christine Sizemore struggled with a plethora of personalities and, although they were all separated by her disorder, she was able to bring them together to form one unified person throughout her life. As Dr. Carolyn Halliday said: "DID [is] a way of coping, surviving the unbearable".

This should be clearly remembered while working with such delicate issues and true stories. There is no one way to present DID as each case is uniquely different and personal. Working with Documentary is a way of allowing these stories to stay surfaced and discussed today. Using different formats of multi media alongside documentary work allows these stories to be seen, heard and experienced by a much wider demographic opening up discussion and understanding to subjects which may be difficult to approach. This is what the project 'Eve' aims to do.

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# Conversations with a Stranger:
# The Role of the Artist in a Global Pandemic

*Lea Marks*

**Abstract:** This essay explores and questions both the role of the artist in a global pandemic and the role of suffering in the creative process. In order to do this, the myth of the suffering artist is deconstructed and reimagined. *WHAT NOW WELL* is a multimedia performance, in the form of a video project, that tells the story of 18 artists on lockdown in 18 different countries. At the centre of the project lies the footage from the conversations that were recorded with these artists via Zoom. Using this digital performance as a case study, the essay analyses the digitisation of art during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the aesthetics of empathy and the role of multicultural communication through a period of closed borders.

**Keywords:** Multimedia, Digitisation, Intercultural, Performance, Storytelling, Pandemic, Global Art.

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## 1. Introduction

> Everything humans do is the product of struggle. We invented clothes because we were cold. We built houses because we were getting rained on. We created laws because we were killing each other. You might ask why art should be any different. (Zara 2012: 7)

In December 2019, a new novel coronavirus was identified in Wuhan, China. By May 2020, there were more than four million confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide leading to a total of over 300,000 deaths. Most countries in the world experiences some form of lockdown, limiting the movement of citizens. Many industries, including the performances industries were put on ice. This essay aims to explore the way in which artists were affected by the pandemic and vice versa. At the centre of this exploration, will be the case study of *WHAT NOW WELL*, a multimedia performance project. The main points addressed are:

- The deconstruction of the suffering artist and identifying the origin and the evolution of the link between creativity and madness.

- The digitisation of *WHAT NOW WELL* and the effect of the medium on the content.

- The aesthetics of empathy and the role of multicultural communication to overcome closed borders.

- The result of the project: attempting to connect the stories of 18 artists without jeopardising their individuality and using the new medium as the message itself.

In order to discuss the role of the artist in any context, it is necessary to clarify the definition of an artist first. In the context of this essay, the term "artist" will refer to any person who produces work through any artistic medium, e.g painters, sculptors, writers, actors, dancers, performers, musicians, film-makers, etc.

## 2.  Deconstructing the myth of the suffering artist

> Deviant behaviour, whether in the form of eccentricity or worse, is not only associated with persons of genius or high-level creativity, but it is frequently expected of them. (Rothenberg 1990: 149)

The notion of the tortured artist has been around since the time of Greek philosophers. In Plato's 'Phaedro', Socrates described poets as possessing a "divine madness". Since then, the link between creativity and madness/suffering has been widely studied, distorted and, at times, even romanticised. It is undeniable that some of the world's most memorable performances/art works were made by artists who encountered a great deal of hardship. Take Antonin Artaud's radio plays or Sylvia Plath's later poems, for instance. These pieces were arguably the result of their author's suffering. Nonetheless, an artist does not keep creating art because he has suffered, he keeps creating art because he is an artist. In some cases, as with Plath, the suffering that once inspired some of their greatest work, eventually cost them their life and put an end to their creations. It is thus justified to say that, although suffering can be a source of art, it is not a sustainable one. Still, there is a social construct surrounding the need for pain and suffering in the artist's life that can be adequately summed up in the poet John Berryman's words:

I do strongly feel that among the greatest pieces of luck for high achievement is ordeal. Certain great artists can make without it..., but mostly you need ordeal...My idea is this: The artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him. At that point, he's in business. Beethoven's deafness, Goya's deafness, Milton's blindness, that kind of thing. And I think that what happens in my poetic work in the future will probably largely depend not on my sitting calmly on my ass as I think, 'Hmm, hmm, a long poem again? Hmm.', but on kinds of other things short on senile dementia. At that point, I'm out, but short of that, I don't know, I hope to be nearly crucified. (Cited in Plimpton 1976: 322)

The first draft of this project aimed to deconstruct the myth of the suffering artist by instigating a conversation surrounding the most sustainable ways of working as a performer.

The idea of the suffering artist is closely linked to the artists' position in society. In the 19th century, artists started rejecting traditional conceptions of art and, by doing so, set themselves apart from society. This separation from society could take place in one of two ways. Either the artist lingers on the edge of society which, according to Peter Nicholls could drive him to "perversety, self-destruction and failure" or he manages to "retreat... into pastoral fantasy, withdrawing into the safer, more remote worlds of Arthurian legend or Trecento Italy" (Nicholls 1995: 17). The former rejection of society established the place for many art movements to come: the edge. From the "avant-garde" movement to today's "fringe" theatre, the terminology suggests that the development of new art is still thought to take place on the borders of society. However, anyone who has walked down the Royal Mile in Edinburgh during the month of August knows that the city's Fringe Festival takes place very much at the centre of society.

Nonetheless, the suffering, self-exiled artist became a universal archetype for non-conformist painters, poets and performers. Part of the aesthetic value attributed nowadays to this archetype derives from a kind of cultural nostalgia for artists such as the ones from the Beat generation: the outsiders, rebels and revolutionaries. The new generation of discontent artists look for guidance in the previous ones and revel in the fact that they are not the first ones to feel a certain way.

On the other hand, many studies have attempted to prove the link between creativity and emotional/mental illness, with limited success. Beyond the vulnerability that most artists share, there is little evidence to prove that any form of psychological imbalance increases creativity or vice versa. For instance, Albert Rothenberg conducted more than 2000 hours of interviews with highly recognised artists and scientists as part of his research into the link between creativity and psychosis and in his findings he states:

First, contrary to popular as well as professional belief, there is no specific personality type associated with outstanding creativity. Creative people are not necessarily childish and erratic in human relationships, as is often thought, nor are they necessarily extraordinarily egoistic or rebellious or eccentric. (Rothenberg 1990: 27)

Assumptions are often made that the real connection between creativity and madness lies in the unconventional thinking patterns that both groups supposedly share. However, Rothenberg challenges this view by separating unconventional thinking from pathological motivations:

Involved, however, are unusual types of conceptualising, and I think it is precise to say that the processes transcend the usual modes of ordinary logical thought. Therefore, I refer to them as translogical types of thinking. As a corollary to the firm connection of these processes with both logic and consciousness, there is an important conclusion: nothing is pathological about them, nor do they arise from pathological motivations; on the contrary, their roots are instead highly adaptive and healthy in their psychological nature and function." (Rothenberg 1990: 36)

The presence of the myth of the suffering artist in today's society can therefore be attributed to two factors:

- The fact that the idea of the suffering artist is frequently nurtured by the artists themselves, rather than by any external sociological forces.
- The common tendency to attribute the achievements of creative geniuses to some sort of psychological disorder, even when there is more evidence to indicate that the deciding factor, they all had in common was their work ethic and their dedication to creating art.

3. **Performances during COVID-19: the silver (on)lining**

As mentioned previously, the first draft of this project aimed to promote a conversation between artists. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of all theatre venues, the medium through which the project would take place had to be reconsidered. The result was a digitisation of the aforementioned conversation and the start of *WHAT NOW WELL*.

*WHAT NOW WELL* is a multimedia performance, in the form of a video project, that tells the story of 18 artists on lockdown in 18 different countries. At the centre of the project lies the footage from the conversations that were recorded with these artists via Zoom. In a world in which the digital medium is the only viable medium for any kind of performance, we are

encouraged to reconsider our prejudices against the conditions of space and presence that such a medium constructs. On one hand, the project gained a wider group of participants by taking place online. On the other hand, a certain juxtaposition of presence and detachment appeared. Beyond the fact that the artists could not share the same physical space during these conversations, technical issues often occurred, such as a poor internet connection or a damaged laptop camera. Cynthia A. Freeland describes this juxtaposition as follows: "The Web's 'global village' effects seem ambiguous, too. It draws people together and cameras enhance the sense of contact across cyberspace. Yet users remain isolated before their screens" (Freeland 2002: 204)

However, *WHAT NOW WELL* was created during a time in which any connection with another person is immensely valuable, whether the sound failed or the image froze, the "sense of contact across cyberspace" overpowered any downfalls that the medium might have presented.

An important aspect of digital performances that is often overlooked is where the performance actually takes place. If we are watching a filmed version of a play, the answer seems obvious. We are watching something that took place in a theatre at some point in time. There is an added distance in terms of time and space. Although the play itself might be enjoyable and the filmed flawlessly, we still feel that we are clearly not in the space that the audience and the actors shared on that night.

In *WHAT NOW WELL* the performance takes place in two parts. The first part, takes place in the live conversation between the artists, only excerpts of which are later seen in the video. This aspect of the performance is reminiscent of one-on-one theatre. In terms of space, this takes place in three places simultaneously, the two artists' houses and the space that is created online when both of them are present in the conversation. This third space can be harder to grasp sometimes, because it is ephemeral and cannot be recreated on any given night. In a way, this third space is comparable to the conditions that are created when the audience and the performer are in the same room. The conditions of that interaction cannot be repeated. Therefore, even if these one-on-one performances took place in 18 different countries, the participants shared a unique virtual space in which the conditions are similar to those in shared physical space. The second part of the performance is the final video presentation. Trying to define where the performance takes place here would be like trying to define where the performance in a movie takes place. Depending on the movie, it takes place in several locations and none of them are shared with the audience. This is the case in *WHAT NOW WELL* too. The audience gets a glimpse of the spaces in which the 18 artists are living, but never enters

them. In this case, the viewer does not share the virtual space with the artists, since what he is watching is pre-recorded.

Another aspect that should be considered in the presentation of *WHAT NOW WELL* is the position of the audience. Again here, there is a different audience on each level of the performance. On the first, conversational level of the project, the division between performer and audience is blurred, as is often the case with one-on-one performances. Although the 18 artists are all talking to the same person, that person is not necessarily the performer in this scenario. In each conversation, both participants are both audience and performer at once. Then, on the second level of the project, the participants of the conversation stop being the audience and become the performace/performers. The audience is now the person watching the video. The element that is present during all of this is the camera. The camera connects the audience and the performer and allows the roles to change from one level of the performance to the next. Freeland describes web-based art as being "multimedia, hypertextual and interactive" (Freeland 2001: 201). *WHAT NOW WELL* aims to be all three, at different stages of the project. It is interactive in the first stage, from the moment the participants get in contact, through to the moment they decide to enter the Zoom call, creating an environment in which they become both audience and performer and are able to create a space that is unique to each conversation. It is multimedia in the second stage, combining footage from the first stage as well as other visuals, audio and text on the screen. All the different elements are connected through the audio, which is manipulated in different ways to create an overlying story arch connecting the different people and their stories. Finally, it is hyper-textual in both stages of the process. During the one-on-one conversations, there are moments of silence created either by a delay in the audio or a loss of connection, that form part of the conversation as much as the verbal part does. In fact, the footage that is later used in the video is often the moments in between, where there is no text but where the communication is still active. Often during the video, the images are juxtaposing the text, thus giving the text a different meaning than it would have on its own.

In essence, the web-based performance medium was forced upon all artists when the pandemic began. The choice to create anything at all is still in the hand of the confined artists, but if the need to produce work is there, the only viable way is digital. In the case of *WHAT NOW WELL* the digital medium became a tool to explore the links between the execution, the format and the content of the project.

## 4. **The aesthetics of empathy**

Cynthia Freeland wrote in 2002:

> In an era of political turmoil and complex negotiations of personal identity, even artists from within a nation, people, or culture may face difficulties in assessing meaning and value in art. A key point is that many people still see art as crucial for addressing basic questions we face—as citizens and individuals—within an ever-new and often precarious situation. (Freeland 2002: 87)

Now, 19 years later, this statement is more relevant than ever. The initial stimulus for *WHAT NOW WELL* was this need for addressing the basic questions that we face, in this case, as artists and individuals. The call-out for *WHAT NOW WELL* was posted on the Facebook group 'International Open Call for Artists' on the 11th of April and read as follows:

> CALL OUT FOR PERFORMERS: *WHAT NOW WELL*
> Hello fellow artists! I am looking for 20 performers, ideally from 20 different countries and all different ages to take part in a project. All you'd have to do is have a cup of coffee or a glass of wine with me over Skype and answer a few questions. These conversations will be recorded and edited together into a video. If you're interested, please message me where you're from and your age and I'll send you some more details. If you know me, you can't take part unfortunately... Hope you're all doing well during these uncertain times!"
> Within 12 hours the post received over 140 responses from all over the world. A message was then sent to a pre-selection of 70 artists, who were asked to send some more information about themselves in order to select the final 20. In the end, 18 interviews were conducted.
> The aim of the conversations was not necessarily to answer the questions, but to create an intercultural sense of empathy. Fostering empathy is one of the principal roles of an artist during a crisis and, in the the case of the COVID-19 health crisis, it is a fairly achievable one. Before the conversations that formed *WHAT NOW WELL* even began, there was an underlying empathy established by the fact that no matter what country the artists were in, they were all feeling the threat and repercussions of the virus.
> In order to capture this intercultural empathy, the video relied on recreating the aesthetic effect of empathy rather than attempting to force a feeling onto the viewers that was created during that conversation that they weren't a part of. The first noticeable effect is that when we hear the voice of each artist, we don't see their face. Instead, we see the same person for all of the answers, voicing everyone's thoughts. During these snippets of footage, the person in lying on different surfaces and remaining quite static.

The idea behind this was to highlight something all artists, as well as anyone else really, have in common during this time: we are all waiting. What each artist is doing while they wait is sometimes revealed in the answers included in the video. For instance, the video begins with one artist saying that they've been making home-made pasta and another reveals they've been doing a poetry reading every night. This sets up a false sense of security and hyper-positivity which the music compliments. Then, as the video goes on, there is less footage of the artists laughing and their answers start revealing a certain vulnerability. At the epicentre of this vulnerability lies the sentence "I don't have space at home to do anything".

There is common misconception in the art world regarding an artist's response to a crisis. There is no standardised impulse to create that takes over the art world in a situation like the one we are living in. This misconception leads back to the myth of the suffering artist. Not every artist is driven to create during a challenging time. Although what we see on the surface level of the web-based art scene right now is a huge increase in creativity and inspiration, this is simply because all other mediums have been put on ice. In this project, every artist was in a unique situation in one way or another. The aim was to highlight these differences in the video by placing them right next to each other. For instance, Nomatlou Mahlangu, a South African artist who participated in *WHAT NOW WELL* said that "home is where we are supposed to be more comfortable". In the video, this line is followed by Rym Hayouni, an artist from Tunisia's, response: "It is quite difficult to be here". A similar effect can be found between "I think it's going to be okay" and "I think it's gonna be difficult to be honest". These two answers were not placed immediately next to each other but rather allowed a certain progression to appear as the video went on, facilitating the creation of a collective story arch.

Another way in which the video highlighted the cultural diversity that this project brought together was through the different languages. During the conversations, the artists were asked to speak in their own languages for a short section. The cue they were given was to speak either about something frustrating or something uplifting that had come up for them during the conversation and that they would feel most comfortable expressing in their own language. The audio from these answers was then layered and used for the end of the video. Depending on who is watching the video, what their nationality is or what languages they speak they will hear something different in this section.

By combining these three aesthetic choices (one face lip syncing to everyone's voices, the juxtaposition of some of the answers and the layering of different languages) *WHAT NOW*

*WELL* aims to create an atmosphere to capture the fast-paced minds of artists in a world that has come to a standstill.

5. ***WHAT NOW WELL*: Repositioning the artist**

> The telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectivity itself. (Jameson 1986:.85)

*WHAT NOW WELL* tells the collective story of 18 individuals. Their identities and personal stories remained for the most part in the conversational phase of the project. In order to give an insight into those conversations, without jeopardising the intimacy of the content discussed in them, here are the profiles of the artists who participated in the exchange:[1]

- Two visual artists living in Berlin. Their work includes photography, sculptures and multimedia videos. From France/Switzerland.
- A juggler and works in dance shows with acrobatics. He designed his own juggling balls with motion sensors that interpret the movement into sound. From Switzerland.
- An actress and a theatre maker, usually based in London. She focuses on collaborative physical theatre addressing feminist subjects. From Taiwan.
- A movement artist in his final year of studying contemporary dance in Hamburg, Germany. From India.
- A director and a performance maker living in Glasgow, Scotland. Her work revolves around rituals, ethics of care and one-on-one performances. From Croatia.
- A performer, journalist and an art therapist. From Romania.
- A performer and the founder of a young dynamic project with a passionate vision to make performing arts more accessible to audiences in South Africa, based in the semi-rural area of Winterveld. From South Africa.
- An actress and a performance artist. She is currently finishing her Master's degree of research in film sciences at the Higher Institute of Cinema in Tunis. From Tunisia.
- An architect, aerialist and stage maker for the circus. From Greece.

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[1] The profiles of the artists are listed anonymously in accordance to GPR.

- A theatre director living in Germany, founder of her experimental theatre company. From Finland.

- A choreographer and a dancer. He often works with video and sound installations as well as illustration. From Portugal.

- A urban performance artist. He is part of a collective that work with human rights activists, disadvantaged youth and environmental activists. From Colombia.

- A circus performer and a dancer, working with an Estonian circus company. From Finland.

- A theatre and screen performer and a scriptwriter. From Cyprus.

- A saxophonist, a vocalist and a multi-disciplinary artist. She mostly works in theatre and experimental music. From Canada.

- A French/English dancer and performer. Currently she is working as a dance therapist. From France.

- An actor and social-impact performance maker. She is also a strong women's rights advocate. From the United Kingdom.

- A performance artist and a contemporary art student. This year she was studying in New York, as part of a scholarship programme. She is interested in studying Japanese Butoh theatre. From Russia.

The identity of each one of these artists affects their personal role as an artist. Their position in society also varies depending on the country they are working in. Nonetheless, their position now is closer to each other than ever before. In this way, their individual experiences of this crisis are able to create one story arch in *WHAT NOW WELL*, as long as the audience keeps in mind that they are watching a collage.

The title of the project, was initially a part of a dialogue that was written for the video, but later replaced by the overlapping languages. The dialogue was the following:

A: What now?
B: Well...
A: We could...
B: Oh.

A: We could do...

B: Well?

A: What?

B: What could we do?

A: Well...

B: We could.

A: Do what?

B: Well...

A: Now?

B: Well...

A: What now?

B: We should.

A: Should what?

B: Well?

A: No.

B: No. Well...

A: How?

B: What?

A: Now?

B: What now? Well.


In the end, the overlapping languages became the more effective way of portraying a fast-paced thought process. *WHAT NOW WELL* follows Marshall Mcluhan's belief that "the medium is the message" (Mcluhan 1964: 17). The project utilises this duality of connection and isolation in a way in which the medium becomes the content. In this case, the medium is digital and non-linear, making it part of the message that we never see the full story. It connects the stories and circumstances of artists from different countries, creating unity amongst them, while simultaneously emphasising the loneliness that many people are facing. In this way, the project repositioned the artists in two ways: 1. through the change in medium the artist's stories became more accessible and 2. by creating a space in which 18 artists could coexist despite being physically distant from each other.

6. **Conclusion**

The role of the artist in society, changes and adapts to the needs of said society over time. At times, artists have had to separate themselves from society in order to establish their work independently in order to later rejoin with stronger standpoints. Some artists, who endured tremendous hardship, became the faces for the myth/archetype of the suffering artist. This archetype enforces the idea that the artist must suffer in order to create meaningful content and there is a connection between emotional instability and creativity. The real deciding factor that these artists had in common however, was their commitment to their work through challenging times, not the suffering itself.

When the world was taken over by the COVID-19 pandemic, the performance industries, as well as many other industries, were forced to reconsider their way of existence. *WHAT NOW WELL* explores this change of position and pace of the artist in the pandemic and attempts to express this through every aspect of the performance: The medium, the aesthetics and the content. Each of these aspects of the multi-media performance are linked to each other in one way or another and establish the overall image of the artist in lockdown.

To identify a role for all artists during this crisis would be to homogenise their personal identities. I therefore conclude by stating that there is no "role of the artist in a global pandemic". Instead, there is the commitment of the artist in a global pandemic. Some commit to making art, others commit to making pasta, others simply commit to temporary stillness. Whatever their commitment ends up being, their identity as artists remains intact. As Sophie Scheifele says in *WHAT NOW WELL*: "We are the artists of today. We don't can change that"

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# New-Age Theatre
## An Empirical Investigation into the Effectiveness of Theatrical Reproduction via Digital and Extended Reality Technology[*]

*Kim Shannon Francey*

**Abstract:** Reproduction of live theatre has led to the development of numerous performance based artforms which replicate the traditional theatre experience through use of modern technology with varied levels of effectiveness. The most prevalent reproduction of this kind is digital theatre. Previous research suggests that mainstream digital theatre is insufficient in securing audience investment and cannot replicate defining characteristics of the live performance experience such as shared time and space. Numerous theatrical experiences utilize extended reality technology, but no relevant academic literature could be sourced providing an evaluation of these theatrical reproductions. Comparison between these two methods of reproduction could not be drawn because of this academic gap. Research was conducted in an interview series to establish which method of reproduction provided the most realistic theatre experience for audiences and performers and which method best resembled the live performance genre. Extended reality technology was identified as the superior format to reproduce the live performance experience according to the criteria set out in this research.

**Keywords:** Theatrical Reproduction, Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, Mixed Reality, Extended Reality, Digital Theatre, Performer Experience, Audience Experience, Theatrical Integrity, New-Age.

*****

1. **Introduction**

The desire to imagine and create alternate worlds is innate within humanity (Ellis 1991). Theatre and live performance represent one branch of this expression. As technology advances, new avenues of experiencing live performance have become available. Extended reality (XR) theatre and mainstream digital theatre (MDT) are examples of this. XR includes virtual reality (VR),

augmented reality (AR) and mixed reality (MR). MDT is defined by scholars as simplistic live streams or recordings of theatrical performance (Mueser 2018). Research into the use of XR theatre and MDT was conducted with emphasis on maintaining the integrity of the live performance experience. Primary research topics were preserving and/or improving audience experience, performer experience and implications on the integrity of the genre. It should be stated that no live theatrical performance can be identically reproduced through technological means (Crethis 2020). This research hopes to illustrate which medium best mimics the live performance experience when comparing works of screen and XR and/or identify an appropriate alternative method of reproduction.

2. **Contextual review**

Theatrical reproduction

Fascination with imagined or virtual realities could be traced back as far as the earliest human cave art (Ellis 1991). This has been prevalent throughout history as every society and culture creates virtual realities through a plethora of different artistic and technological mediums. Reproduction of live performances through technological means, such as digital and XR theatre, capture and record theatrical realities.

Film was the first incarnation of digital theatre – where digital theatre is defined by scholars as any theatrical endeavour that communicates through digital technology. It evolved from simplistic replications of theatre on screen (single stationary viewpoint and exaggerated physicality) to a diverse and complex artform (Sontag 1966); developments in the artistry and technique of filmmaking led to drastic changes in the way filmmakers utilised the camera (Sontag, 1966). All works of screen can be categorised by whether the camera is a medium for communicating reality or a subjective viewpoint through which one can manipulate the audience's perception of the filmed reality - the latter, lends itself to engaging and dynamic storytelling but removes the work further from its theatrical origins (Sontag 1966).

Despite numerous practical applications of XR technology, interest in using it specifically for entertainment purposes was popularised via mainstream science fiction media (Ellis 1991); it could be argued that XR entertainment experiences were derived from works of film. Recently, Sky commissioned English National Ballet's Tamara Rojo to perform an excerpt of Akram Khan's *Giselle* in Virtual Reality (VR) for the launch of a new VR application (English National

Ballet 2016). Alongside an abundance of VR content including sports, film, animation and documentaries consideration was given to include theatrical performance in the form of dance (Sky 2016). This suggests that the desire to reproduce theatrical performance remains consistent as new technological mediums emerge.

### Digital and XR Theatre

The innate desire to reproduce theatre has been addressed, however, which medium best captures the essence of live performance? Research has been conducted regarding the MDT experience. It is important to recognise that analysis of MDT does not give consideration to the contemporary genres of film or dance film - the merging of dance and artistic cinematography to portray a narrative (Choreoscope 2019). It exclusively refers to simplistic recordings/streamings of performances. Literature suggests that MDT is an entirely separate experience rather than an alternative to traditional theatre (Mueser 2018). It is reminiscent of early film serving as documentary content rather than its own intrinsic form of artistic expression (Melzer 1995) and therefore does not engage the viewer sufficiently to provide an immersive experience. Furthermore, MDT lacks the unique element of shared time and space which is a defining characteristic of live theatrical performance (Benjamin 1936). Audiences and performers sharing the same time and space during a performance experience creates a unique sense of immediacy and risk which encourages and consolidates audience investment – this is lost in MDT (Mueser 2018).

XR technology has the potential to mitigate these flaws and provide a more accurate live performance experience. VR events such as *The Under Presents* by Tender Claws Studio clearly demonstrates this. The immersive theatre experience for VR headset users creates a virtual world where participants are led through the interactive experience by avatars of actors performing in real time (Tendar Claws n.d.). This example is more relevant when comparing XR theatre performances to immersive theatre rather than traditional staged theatre as it explores many elements of interaction. Unfortunately, due to the synonymity of interactivity and XR technology there is limited research into this technology being used to replicate live stage performance where audience interaction is traditionally more restricted. *The Under Presents* also provides a virtual chat space that reflects the social interaction audiences get from attending live performances (Tendar Claws n.d.). Effective social engagement is critical to the success of digital theatre (Walmsley 2016).

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Research criteria

When comparing methods of theatrical reproduction, several different avenues of inquiry could reveal valuable insight. Audience experience, performer experience and the impact the reproduction method has on the integrity of the performance have been identified as relevant criteria to consider within this research.

Study into audience experience in both MDT and XR theatre exists, however, it is in rudimentary stages of development that mirrors the state of the respective technologies. A somewhat established area of research within digital theatre addresses the challenge of maintaining audience engagement and the importance of social interaction in this endeavour (Mueser 2018; Walmsley 2016). This challenge of controlling audience focus is applicable to both digital and XR theatre. After significant research no relevant academic literature could be sourced regarding; quality of performer experience within digital or XR theatre, what impact reproductions of live performances have on the integrity of said performance or any direct comparison between MDT and XR theatre. Research and conclusions drawn from specific investigative focus on these topics should be able to directly inform development of theatre reproduction within these fields. This may also form the basis of an understanding which could then be further investigated to approach the academic gap identified.

Relevant external factors

The Covid-19 pandemic is an ongoing external factor throughout this research and has encouraged a vast shift toward streaming and digital services (The Social Media Monthly 2020). This research is critically significant as the creative industries seek alternative solutions to crowded venues and workplaces while trying to address drastic changes in consumer behaviour that may have a lasting impact on the arts (The Social Media Monthly 2020).

3. **Investigative practice**

Aims

The aim of this research was to investigate and compare the effectiveness of theatrical reproduction through MDT and XR theatre. To do this, the following research questions were considered:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Which method provides audiences with a more realistic live performance experience?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Which method provides performers with a more realistic live performance experience?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): Which method more closely resembles and respects the live performance genre?

Research system and parameters

Practical research was undertaken in the form of an interview series. Interviews provide qualitative data and permit greater depth of understanding into opinions and greater potential to form hypotheses (Alshenqeeti 2014). This method was ideal because it allowed insight into personal experience and provided a solution to the limited data pool caused by the infancy of the subject matter.

The following important parameters were considered when constructing the interview series: who to interview; the interview timeframe; the interview environment; and the framework of interview questions.

The following criteria were used to select appropriate interviewees to provide insightful and relevant comment in response to RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3 respectively.

| Research Question | Selection Criteria |
|---|---|
| **RQ1** | - Participants with experience seeing live performance, watching MDT and/or using XR technology for entertainment and leisure. |
| **RQ2** | - Performers with experience being filmed and/or working with various technologies/ recording equipment.<br>- Professionals working in the context of performance presence and/or engagement. |
| **RQ3** | - Industry professionals with experience developing and spectating a variety of digital theatre.<br>- Industry professionals with experience working with XR technology in varied applications and contexts. |

Some interviewees met numerous selection criteria which was ideal for gathering diverse and informed data from individuals with robust opinion grounded in varied experience. Interviewees who met criteria for multiple research questions were interviewed regarding each research question relevant to them. Eight interviews were conducted: eight interviewees were asked questions regarding RQ1; five were asked questions regarding RQ2; and four were asked questions regarding RQ3. A breakdown of interviewees 1-8 and their relevance to the research questions can be seen in *Appendix 1*.

Due to the unpredictable nature of the interview method a time allotment of 30-90 minutes was permitted for each interview. The flexible timeframe contributed to a relaxed atmosphere which permitted natural flow of discussion in an ideal interview environment (Alshenqeeti 2014).

Interviews were held over videoconferencing software because of mass health and safety regulations in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewees chose the most convenient location for them which contributed to a sense of security and led to open, quality interview feedback (Alshenqeeti 2014).

A framework of interview questions was prepared prior to the interview series which was adjusted for each interview based on the appropriateness of the questions for each interviewee - an example framework can be seen in

*Appendix* 2. This framework was used as an aid to help stimulate relevant discussion regarding the research questions rather than a 'question and answer' format. Therefore, not every prepared question was asked, and many relevant topics out with the interview framework were discussed. This malleable framework helped stimulate both reflexive and considered responses and provided the opportunity for unexpected revelations and emotive discussion from the participants. Thus, utilising the interview data collection method to its full potential (Alshenqeeti 2014).

## 4. **Results and analysis**

Notable results of the interview series were categorised by research question into the following topics then presented and analysed.

| Research Question | Results Topics |
|---|---|
| **RQ1** | - Engagement/Immersivity<br>- Viewpoint<br>- Physical Environment<br>- Event Ritual<br>- Social Engagement<br>- Shared Time and Space<br>- Future Digital and XR Theatre |
| **RQ2** | - External Factors<br>- Preparations<br>- Shared Time and Space<br>- Training Methods |
| **RQ3** | - Reproduction of the Live Performance Genre<br>- Theatre for Specific Formats |

The number of relevant results topics presented within each research question reflects the quantity of interviewees and raw data analysed.

RQ1

**Engagement/ Immersivity** – The most prevalent finding from this research was that 7/8 interviewees (87.5%) said that MDT does not accurately recreate the live performance experience from an audience perspective. The majority responded, "it's better than nothing". One interviewee (interviewee 7), with extensive experience in screendance and dance film [*Appendix 1*] argued this point because they felt a clear definition of MDT was lacking - they questioned the number of camera angles and filmmaking techniques required before MDT becomes a work of film.

This suggests that audiences view MDT as a last resort to connect with the performing arts due to its ineffectual attempt at reproducing stimulating live theatre. The definitions of MDT and film may need further examination to enable authentic comment for future investigations involving MDT.

By comparison, the five interviewees with experience using XR technology for recreation purposes [*Appendix* 1] indicated that XR technology (specifically VR) adequately replicates the immersivity of a live performance in terms of their engagement with the experience. They agreed that further development of this genre would likely lead to an improved live theatre reproduction experience compared to MDT. However, one interviewee (interviewee 8) [*Appendix 1*] commented that a common issue in the development of VR experiences is the necessity for identifiable user controls within the reality to "ground" the experience.

This suggests that further investment into theatrical reproduction through VR technology could be promising in terms of improving audience engagement however, additional investigation may be necessary to establish whether including identifiable user controls would compromise the effect of a fully virtual reality. In theory, the visual presence of these controls would corrupt the 'realness' of the experience because there are no visible controls in a real theatre setting. This invites the question of whether the distraction of user controls in a virtual reality is more or less distracting than the environmental distractions associated with watching MDT.

**Viewpoint** – The seven interviewees (87.5%) who did not find MDT engaging mentioned that having no control of their viewpoint was a source of frustration. They thought it limited opportunity to develop attachments to specific performers or take in minor details unless they wanted to view the piece in the exact same way the director did. The lack of choice negatively

impacted the way the material was absorbed. Interviewees said that these elements often help "make" a performance and without them they felt isolated and detached from the experience.

This is completely unlike live shows where every action and design feature are curated to draw the audience in and feel as though they too are part of the story. This suggests that any mode of theatrical reproduction must permit a free viewpoint for audiences to allow them to connect with the performance as individuals and form their own opinions based on unique perspectives. The genres of MDT and live staged performance are fundamentally opposed because MDT cannot provide this vital element of freedom that fuels audience connection to a performance.

From interview with the five interviewees with experience using XR technology for recreation purposes [*Appendix 1*], it was determined that the first-person viewpoint and potential for 360-degree recreation of a live performance would give audiences of XR performances a much greater sense of satisfaction because they could choose how to view a performance.

Autonomy over the viewpoint will lead to increased sense of independent and individual connection with the subject matter resulting in a more realistic reproduction of a live performance experience. This mode of theatrical reproduction could provide audiences even more flexibility and freedom with their viewpoint because they would not necessarily have to watch the entire performance from one perspective, for example from a seat in an auditorium. XR theatre has the potential to give audiences a deeper sense of individual connection to performances through this flexible viewpoint.

**Physical Environment** – The physical environment of an audience engaging with MDT was identified as a notable point of consideration. The seven interviewees (87.5%) who did not find MDT engaging acknowledged that viewing a live stream or recording of performances out with a theatre setting (ie. at home) encouraged them to get distracted. Distractions included consumption of other media, eating, drinking, talking to companions, doing chores and moving around during the performance.

In a traditional theatre setting outside stimuli are intentionally limited (dimmed lighting, no external sound, talking, moving around or use of handheld devices). The alternative environment presents distractions as acceptable activities to partake in during a performance because there is no social obligation to refrain from these pastimes. This significantly limits the

potential for immersion because even if audiences were entirely focused on the screen, they would still have to overcome frustrations regarding the restricted viewpoint.

An interviewee with experience developing XR projects (interviewee 8) [*Appendix 1*] mentioned that, while XR technology may be a more immersive mode of theatrical reproduction there is potential for audiences to become more interested in the details (or environment) of an extended reality than the primary objective (or storyline) of the experience.

Therefore, guiding user engagement is an important factor considered in the development of any XR experience but unlike MDT potential environmental distractions within the reality can be addressed with clever design. Additionally, significant consideration must be paid to the audiences' physical environment. Due to the immersive nature of the technology, it is essential that audiences are in a secure and safe space. For example, AR displays at museums work well because the user is in a controlled environment and not likely to face any immediate danger. The act of controlling external factors to facilitate viewing is essential for immersive XR experiences and is comparable to that of a live performance experience. VR experiences where users wear headsets, headphones and gloves in a controlled environment are likely to mitigate external distractions even more than a traditional theatre setting. This technology may not only reproduce but improve the live performance experience for audiences.

**Event Ritual –** Sometimes with MDT there is the option of going to a cinema or live streaming event to watch a performance. The two interviewees who have been to this type of event said that while this successfully mimicked the ritual of preparing for and attending a live performance it still did not fully capture the excitement of the experience.

These events reproduce the ritual of going to a performance better than watching the same show at home because of the live community coming together and lack of external distractions as well as the physical preparations the audience must make for the evening (making plans, getting ready etc). In this category MDT resembles the live theatre experience well.

This type of event is possible for some XR performance experiences (AR and MR). Live XR performance events would in theory be a better solution to replicate the event ritual of going to a live performance because audiences could enjoy a free viewpoint of a three dimensional or 360-degree XR performance in addition to the event ritual. VR specifically, is more suited to individuals being physically isolated (in a safe space) and connecting within the virtual reality itself which does not replicate the event ritual of going to the theatre.

**Social Engagement** – The two interviewees who have watched MDT at cinemas or been to streaming events said they adequately recreate the social platforms one can expect to encounter at a live performance however MDT in other locations did not. In instances of watching MDT at home with others, 6/8 interviewees (75%) admitted the distractions of the environment combined with an intimate viewing community led to more engagement with each other rather than the performance. In instances of watching MDT alone 7/8 interviewees (87.5%) described the performance as unengaging and isolating. Watching MDT alone while engaging in real time with others on social platforms presented 6/8 interviewees (75%) with a slightly more engaging and effective reproduction of live theatre but this was on an external platform and not part of the MDT performance itself.

These results demonstrate that providing stimulating social engagement and the appropriate environment is a delicate balance and key to the success of MDT.

Interviewees only had experience communicating with others via digital platforms and/or headsets when watching MDT or using XR technology. Typed communication was described as an effective method of communication but did not suitably replicate the social stimulation available at a live performance.

This is because typed communication lacks the reflexivity and spontaneity of live conversation. Headsets could address this problem (interviewees responded positively to their experience with headsets), but they are not suitable for a mass event with larger audience numbers. Avatars within XR theatre could be used to split larger audiences in a selection of virtual chat spaces. This structure along with use of headsets would provide a much more accurate replication of the social environment at a live performance especially if users were able to enter and exit chatrooms of their own accord.

**Shared Time and Space** – The seven interviewees who did not find MDT engaging all recognised that the lack of shared time and space between performers and audience in MDT was a significant barrier to a stimulating experience.

Although some examples of MDT are livestreamed this does not address the lack of shared space. These two elements create a sense of risk and immediacy within a performance as well as an intangible raw human vibration. For these reasons, MDT is a poor reproduction of the live performance experience. XR theatre offers a potential solution to this as performers and audiences can share time in a communal virtual reality. A shared virtual reality where audience

and performer experience the same physical boundaries and limitations would provide the sense of immediacy missing from MDT. In MDT, audiences are aware of their own three-dimensional reality and view the performers in a separate reality on a two-dimensional screen. A live performance in a shared reality would mimic the elements of shared time and space.

**Future Digital and XR Theatre** – One interviewee with extensive experience developing digital theatre (interviewee 6) [*Appendix 1*] suggested that alternative forms of digital theatre could solve many issues identified with MDT without resorting to solutions within XR technology.

This emphasized the importance of questioning whether MDT should be produced or if performing arts companies should invest their time in creating digital theatre specifically designed for this format. Perhaps MDT is a transitional genre that was useful to encourage initial interest in digital performance content and now will be phased out as the genre evolves into more engaging and immersive forms.

All interviewees (100%) mentioned a desire to include interactivity within any XR theatre experience.

This would be a direct contrast to live performance where there is limited interactivity. Interactivity could be included before and after a performance within extended reality spaces. For example, instead of a paper programme there could be a three-dimensional program in the form of a virtual museum that audiences could interact with before and after a performance. Additionally, audiences could interact with an extended reality by having more flexibility and control over their viewpoint. They could reorient themselves throughout a performance and have even more freedom over their viewpoint than when seated in a traditional theatre setting. This would provide interactivity and perhaps an improved audience experience without disrupting the performance.

RQ2

**External Factors** – The four performers interviewed felt that they were expected to adapt to different environments and external factors while maintaining a consistent level of performance. Interviewees all felt differently about filming: some felt the knowledge of being filmed negatively impacted performance while others felt it presented an exciting challenge and increased their engagement; some said they were only affected when recording was physically invasive to the performance space and would remain unaffected if it remained out of sight, others said the

knowledge of being recorded was enough to affect them; some found the additional presence of an audience completely distracted from being recorded and others did not. Most interviewees felt their performance and/or performance preparations were impacted in some way by the physical act (or the knowledge) of being recorded.

This suggests that performers experiences will vary in different environments and cannot be controlled, making it impossible to determine which method (MDT or XR theatre) provides a more realistic live performance experience.

When asked, three of the four performers (75%) agreed that one of the reasons MDT is an ineffectual method of transposing a live performance experience is because the performance is not being viewed in the way the creative team originally intended and the cameras are an external factor imposed onto an existing piece of work.

Performers have a unique insight into how their work is affected by external stimuli. They embody a performance and are charged with the responsibility of sharing it with audiences. Performers are measured by how effectively they share these stories and therefore are highly aware of what factors may prevent them from doing this effectively.

**Preparations** – The performers all agreed that creating and performing a show that had been explicitly designed for digital theatre or XR theatre (and not originally for stage) might not present the same challenges as filming MDT because the equipment could be integrated into the design and choreography of the show and they could appropriately prepare for the performance from the beginning of the project.

For the performer, this approach would more similarly represent the process of designing a live performance for a specific venue because the creative process is geared toward one predetermined format.

**Shared Time and Space** – The immediacy and risk of a live performance is as important to performers as it is to audiences according to all interviewed performers. One interviewee with experience in different forms of digital theatre (interviewee 6) [*Appendix 1*] discussed the benefits of live digital theatre performances where audience feedback is integrated within the performance platform.

This would allow performers to perform live and connect to audiences in real time which more accurately represents a traditional live performance experience. However, MDT is defined

as simplistic live streams or recordings of theatrical performance (Mueser 2018). This definition suggests these alternative forms of live digital theatre should be excluded from analysis of MDT. XR theatre offers another potential solution where performers and audiences can share time in a communal virtual reality.

**Training Methods** – One interviewee with extensive experience investigating performance presence (interviewee 5) [*Appendix 1*] suggested that it can be effectively trained to the point it does not rely on any external factor.

This would mean that no matter the format, performers would be able to enter the same level of performance presence and therefore have the same performance experience in any environment. When asked, all interviewed performers agreed that some form of performance training could be beneficial for performing consistently in different environments, but some were doubtful that it could be trained to this level. Interviewee 5 [*Appendix 1*] has completed extensive research on how to train performance presence and is considered a pioneer in this research. It is a relatively new concept within the performing arts and therefore understandable why other interviewees would be doubtful about the effectiveness of this training.

RQ3

**Reproduction of the Live Performance Genre** – When asked which reproduction method (MDT or XR theatre) more closely resembles the live performance genre (given the definitions used in this research), three of the four RQ3 interviewees (75%) voted for XR theatre experiences. However, these interviewees also stated that if given the chance to compare two specific performances this opinion may change in favour for MDT depending on the quality and content of the respective performances.

**Theatre for Specific Formats** – All four of the RQ3 interviewees (100%) agreed that works designed specifically for digital or XR theatre should not necessarily prohibit them from being included in the live theatrical performance genre. They felt that this was an umbrella term that all forms of live theatre could fall into and that the distinction was clearer between works of theatre where performers and audience share time and (a form of) space and theatrical works where performers and audience do not share the same time and space.

5. **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the reproduction method that provides audiences with a more realistic live performance experience is: engaging; allows freedom of viewpoint; is watched in a controlled environment; mimics the event ritual of going out to the theatre; provides integrated social stimulation; and occurs in real time where audience and performers share the same space. Based on the evidence collected, XR theatre experiences have the capacity to meet these specifications in some way while MDT does not. However, it is acknowledged that other forms digital theatre could provide alternative solutions.

The method that provides performers with a more realistic live performance experience depends partly on the strength of their performance presence. If the performer has strong (whether natural or trained) performance presence, they will likely experience each run of a performance in exactly the same way regardless of filming for MDT. However, other performers are likely to have a more fulfilling performance experience if the production is geared toward one specific performance format. The best replication method must also afford shared time and space between audience and performer. Since MDT is unable to provide this and varied performance presence presents scattered results XR theatre experiences are more likely to provide a realistic live performance experience for performers.

Interviewees instinctively felt that XR theatre performances held more potential for accurate recreations of live performance, but this was based on subjective opinion. A quantifiable way to conclude which method more closely resembles the live performance genre is to determine which method provides the electrifying elements of shared time and space between performers and audience. Given the results collected, the best format to reproduce live performance is XR theatre.

Recommendations for future research topics include: defining the differences between MDT and film; the purpose of producing MDT and whether the genre fulfils this purpose; how other forms of digital theatre can improve the MDT experience; and whether performance presence can be trained to the point where external factors no longer influence the performer.

Clearly defining the differences between MDT and film is vital to allow researchers to determine what the purpose of MDT is and evaluate whether the genre fulfils its purpose. This in turn will inform research surrounding contemporary digital theatre and if/how this genre can become a fulfilling experience. These areas of research will be able to further inform the

development of theatre production within these fields and strengthen the academic understanding of digital theatre.

The question of how to maximize performance presence is extremely beneficial for performers because if it can be trained in this way, it could revolutionize the way performers approach their work entirely. If it can be done, "how to train performance presence" will become a pillar within performing arts education and allow professional performers to find the same sense of satisfaction with every performance because they will be able to disassociate from all external factors.

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## Appendices

Appendix 1: Breakdown of Interviewees and Relevant Research Questions

| Interviewee (Initials) | Qualifications | Relevant Research Question(s) |
|---|---|---|
| 1 (S.F.) | - Experience seeing live performances<br>- Experience watching MDT<br>- Experience using XR technology (including AR and VR headsets) for business and recreation purposes | **RQ1** |
| 2 (M.R.) | - Experience seeing live performances<br>- Experience watching MDT<br>- Experience using XR technology (including AR and VR headsets) for business and recreation purposes | **RQ1** |
| 3 (L.M.) | - Experience seeing live performances<br>- Experience watching MDT<br>- Experience performing live in a staged production<br>- Experience being filmed during a staged production<br>- Performing works developed for film/screendance | **RQ1**<br>**RQ2** |
| 4 (S.R.) | - Experience seeing live performances<br>- Experience watching MDT<br>- Experience performing live in a staged production<br>- Experience being filmed during a staged production<br>- Performing works developed for film/screendance | **RQ1**<br>**RQ2** |
| 5 (J.C.) | - Experience seeing live performances<br>- Experience watching MDT<br>- Experience using XR technology for recreation purposes<br>- Experience performing in a live staged production<br>- Experience being filmed while performing<br>- PhD specializing in generating performance | **RQ1**<br>**RQ2**<br>**RQ3** |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | - presence<br>- Founder and director of Toward Vivencia (an online performance presence training programme for dancers)<br>- Experience choreographing a performance with XR technology<br>- Experience developing interactive digital dance performances | |
| 6 (T.J.) | - Experience seeing live performances<br>- Experience watching MDT<br>- PhD student focusing on audience and performer engagement within digital platforms<br>- Research & Development for E̅lektron (digital performance space) | **RQ1**<br>**RQ2**<br>**RQ3** |
| 7 (L.J.) | - Experience seeing live performances<br>- Experience watching MDT<br>- Experience using XR technology for recreation purposes<br>- Experience performing in a live staged production<br>- Experience being filmed while performing<br>- Dance Film Director<br>- Artistic Director of Choreoscope (dance film festival) | **RQ1**<br>**RQ2**<br>**RQ3** |
| 8 (F.P.) | - Experience seeing live performances<br>- Experience watching MDT<br>- Experience using XR technology for recreation purposes<br>- Experience designing XR experiences in varied applications and contexts | **RQ1**<br>**RQ3** |

Appendix 2: Interview Framework Sample

➢ What is your experience interacting with XR technology?
➢ What is your experience wearing an AR/VR headset?
➢ Do you know what kind of headset/technology you were using? (brand/ model)
➢ For what purpose(s) did you use it? (work, training, recreation etc)
➢ Roughly how long did you wear the headset / How long do you wear it for different purposes?
➢ How did/does the headset feel after this time? (Were you aware of it? If so, was it unpleasant?)
➢ Were you in a stationary position for the duration of the programme?

- o How did you move physically in the real world and how did this effect the alternate reality?
➢ Could you manipulate the projected reality?
    - o Yes/No
    - o If Yes, explain how.
➢ Have you ever considered/ heard about ways this technology may be used for (other) entertainment purposes?
➢ Is there a possible application of this technology for entertainment that comes to mind?
➢ Have you ever been to a live performance? (play, musical, dance show, music gig etc)
    - o Yes/No
    - o Which?
➢ Have you watched digitised versions of live performances at home, at the cinema or at a streaming event? (Mainstream Digital Theatre)
    - o Yes/No
    - o Which?
➢ How do these compare?
➢ Do you think there is a way to use alternate reality technology to improve the digital performance experience?
    - o Yes/No
    - o If yes, how? If no, why?
➢ Do you feel interactivity in alternate reality performances would be vital to the experience or success of the performance?
    - o Yes/No
    - o Why?
    - o If yes, what kind of interactivity would you be interested in? Could you give examples?
➢ Would you be more interested in seeing performances in a complete virtual reality OR seeing performances augmented onto a real-life environment of your choosing? (in your home/on location) OR would you prefer a different application of XR technology in performance?
    - o Could you explain your choice/give examples?
➢ If you were watching a performance in complete virtual reality how would you feel about the level of detail given to the recreation of the venue and other audience members?
    - o Would you want to see shapeless strangers?
    - o Do you think the surrounding details in general help *make* the performance experience?
➢ If it were possible to watch a performance using an alternate reality headset and link in with other real people as avatars, how would this impact your experience?
    - o Would you prefer it to just be you and the performers?
    - o Would you like to interact with the strangers/friends?
    - o Would this add to the overall experience? Being able to share it?
➢ Do you think attending a digital performance using alternate reality technology in real time (where the performers are putting on the show at the same time you're watching it) would differ from watching it pre-recorded in terms of your audience experience and investment?
    - o How so?
➢ Finally, where do you see/ what would you like to see from the future of alternate reality technology in performance? What's next?

# Approaching the Creative Process through COVID and Beyond

## Shakespeare Frankfurt Monographic Section
### Proceedings – 27th March 2021



**World Theatre Day**
Approaching the Creative Process
through Covid and Beyond

Fundraiser & Online Symposium
hosted by
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# Approaching the Creative Process
# through Covid and Beyond:
# Section Introduction

*PJ Escobio*
*Artistic Director, Shakespeare Frankfurt (Germany)*

I believe the past contains a great deal of the secrets to the future; when we study what has been, we begin to understand how to approach what will be. This applies to Theatre as much as, say, geopolitics. We don't often look to Ibsen, Goldoni, Chekov, Shakespeare or the Ancient Greeks to mold our views on the future, but we do tell their stories to discover our commonality and with that commonality how we can grow and evolve to be better citizens of the world. We look to the past to tell stories that reflect our very small and intimate community of over 8 billion inhabitants.

Shakespeare Frankfurt was born in 2017 to provide the city of Frankfurt am Main access to classical theatre from an ensemble that represented the city's own international diversity. As like most other producing entities, our season was altered, cancelled, postponed or put online. We made a movie, *Spiritus Vitae – The Breath of Life*, we tried online performances, we even did *The Plague Project*, a compilation of individual monologues from Shakespeare. This kept our ensemble creative but there was a sense of needing something more, a connection with our audiences and the world outside our own four walls. As the year of lockdowns unfolded, we saw a unique opportunity to gather artists to whom our ensemble and audiences would normally not have access.

On March 27th 2021, in celebration of World Theatre Day, Shakespeare Frankfurt held our inaugural Online Symposium and fundraiser. Its purpose was to explore how we can, and indeed must, approach our craft once the dust of this global event has settled. The subjects and expertise of the panelist were wide and varied from playwrights and actors, to critics and intimacy/violence directors. The theme was: "Approaching the Creative Process through Covid and Beyond". As theatre makers we are all at a crossroads; our industry has been profoundly affected by the events of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have all had to adapt and overcome. A

pause button has been needed for most projects and plenty of producing entities have had to close their doors or transfer to an online presence, a presence which is incapable of replicating the essential component of Theatre, an environment of the here and now, a live experience with no other filters than one's imagination. It is however a rare opportunity to change how our industry works. From actionable points on diversity and inclusion to taking an already existing global phenomenon and breathing life into it in front of live audiences, we explored what is reasonably possible for a more robust Theatre.

The following papers by John Freedman, Kristy Thomas and Brooke Haney are a reflection of that event and a deeper analysis of the topics by some of the artists who presented. My hope is that we are able to continue this kind of global online event so as to encourage the necessary dialogue that will bring sustainable change to the world of Theatre.

# Presenting Andrei Kureichik's *Insulted. Belarus*
# to a World in Lockdown

*John Freedman*

**Abstract:** Andrei Kureichik wrote a play, *Insulted. Belarus*, about the revolution in Belarus as the violent events took place around him in August 2020. He asked the author of this essay to organize "a few readings in the West" to bring international attention to the plight of the Belarusian people. Three weeks later, 20 staged readings had been streamed on social media apps in three countries. Five months after that, by April 2021, the Worldwide Readings Project of Andrei Kureichik's *Insulted. Belarus* counted over 120 readings in 30 countries and 20 languages. This success was explained in part by the sympathy the revolution evoked in people around the world, but other forces were at work, too. The COVID-19 epidemic meant that thousands of actors and directors were "locked down", unable to work. Thanks to the emerging technology of video streams offered by Zoom, YouTube and Facebook, these artists could mount readings of *Insulted. Belarus* easily, and in high quality. The combination of divergent theatrical and cinematic traditions, plus the nature and capabilities of streaming apps, led in numerous occasions to significant innovation. The influence of the Worldwide Readings Project was such that a spin-off project, *Insulted. World*, presenting theater works from various countries scarred by civil and political unrest, is now in its formative stages.

**Keywords:** Andrei Kureichik, Insulted Belarus, COVID epidemic, Belarus revolution, Worldwide Readings Project, streamed theater, video apps, digital applications.

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### 1. Introduction

If ever an endeavour were launched fortuitously, the Worldwide Readings Project would have to be considered among the most fortunate of them all. But even in saying the project was "launched", I must admit to resorting to gross exaggeration. In actual fact, the program that

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brought Andrei Kureichik's play, *Insulted. Belarus*,[1] to the world was an example of a perfect storm of events working on everyone from numerous different angles. Riding the choppy waves of a pandemic, employing the latest in technological advances, relying on some good old-fashioned word-of-mouth, and plugging in to the passions, fury, despair and hope that accompanied a dramatic national uprising in the country of Belarus, Andrei and I found ourselves swept up in an international movement within hours of the moment that we now can posit as the beginning point.

## 2. The Pre-story

In early August 2020, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko harbored no doubts that his latest reelection campaign would end as had every other since he first won the country's presidency in 1994 – with easy victory. As usual over the lead-up to voting day, he had jailed or exiled his main rivals, and had granted significant TV airtime only to himself. All mechanisms to falsify the vote count were in place – hundreds of election commissioners were prepared to report numbers dictated by Lukashenko, ignoring any such annoying anomalies as the actual expressed will of the populace. But one small mistake blindsided the usually vigilant, and highly vindictive, leader. Lukashenko and his cronies in the election committee merely smiled condescendingly when on July 14 Svetlana Tikhanovskaya registered as a presidential candidate in place of her husband Sergei Tikhanovsky, who was imprisoned May 29. What could Lukashenko possibly fear from her?

In fact, Tikhanovskaya presented an enormous danger to Lukashenko. Shrewdly, she joined forces with Veronika Tsepkalo, wife of would-be presidential candidate Valery Tsepkalo, who had to leave the country to avoid arrest, and Maria Kalesnikava, an advisor to jailed presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka. The three women, speaking the truth about a nation trapped in authoritarian stagnation, and offering hope of genuine change and modernisation, began drawing huge crowds of committed supporters.

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[1] The title in the original Russian is Обиженные. Беларусь(сия), which a) references both the current name of the country, Belarus, and its former, Soviet-era name, Belorussia, and b) suggests an alternative message of approximately "The Insulted Ones. This Belarus." A compromise translation would be "Insulted. Belarus(sia)," but I felt that this was not only confusing for an English-language audience, it also loses the second alternative meaning, while putting more emphasis on the old name of Belorussia, when clearly the newer name is more important. Thus my simplified translation of "Insulted. Belarus."

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By the time of the August 9 election, Tikhanovskaya had made a deep impression on Belarusians, although Lukashenko had taken all the usual and necessary precautions. Officially, the sitting president claimed to have received 80% of the vote, compared to Tikhanovskaya's 10%. The general populace knew this to be a lie, however, as was borne out in a poll by Chatham House, indicating that Lukashenko probably received around 20% of the vote, while Tikhanovskaya most likely received 52% (Astapenia 2020). Signs of protest and civil disobedience began popping up immediately. Within days a massive, national movement was drawing hundreds of thousands of protesters onto the street every day. Strikes began. Lukashenko jammed the internet, while mobilizing the military and riot police. Commerce, government affairs, and daily life came to a standstill.

At approximately this time Andrei Kureichik, a popular playwright, screenwriter, director and producer based in Minsk, began writing a play in order to tell the story of what he saw happening around him. Its characters included a president (Oldster) and his teenage son (Youth) continuing to live in arrogant isolation; an enthusiastic young woman (Cheerful) inspired by the hope for change; a school teacher (Mentor) who cynically and loyally serves her president by chairing corrupt election commissions for every presidential election; a 26 year-old sports fanatic (Corpse) who is eager to take to the streets to defend his freedom, but who will die for his actions; a darkly repressed riot policeman (Raptor) whose understanding of personal worth and state legitimacy is bound up in twisted thoughts of sex and violence; and the candidate Tikhanovskaya (Novice), who finds herself at the center of a political and social maelstrom.

The play, especially early on, consists largely of monologues that tend to violate rules of time and place. The architecture of the work – the way in which the characters are related or intertwined with each other – emerges slowly as tidbits of information are introduced, helping an audience discover the full picture of all seven characters over time. Kureichik used the monological genre to gradually, but fully reveal each character's personality and situation over the course of the play's duration. As we will see later, this monological basis turned out to be fortuitous for another reason entirely – it lent itself to video streams of actors working together online as each sat at home before his or her personal recording device. We will return to this topic shortly.

Kureichik, who was – and still is – a member of the opposition's Coordinating Council, wrote the play more or less on the run as he hid in the countryside from possible arrest. He finished it on September 9, emailing me a copy with the request to help 'organize a few readings'

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in the West to bring the story of Belarus to those who knew nothing about it. A few days later, his lawyer instructed him to leave the country immediately, or face certain arrest. Within hours he boarded a flight to neighboring Ukraine under the official explanation that he was attending the premiere of his new play. On the evening of September 12, Kureichik, bleary from 24 hours of travel, pulled into the city of Kherson just in time to attend the first public reading of *Insulted. Belarus*. We did not know it at the time, but the Worldwide Readings Project had begun.

### 3. Taking *Insulted. Belarus* to the World

I responded immediately when Kureichik reached out to me with his new play. I sent letters to six colleagues in the U.S. and the U.K., asking if they would be interested in mounting readings of a new play about the revolution in Belarus. Within ten minutes I received positive responses from all six. Feeling a sense of urgency, I sat down to create a hurried first draft translation that I could offer to interested theaters as soon as possible, and that I would edit heavily and improve over the next four months. By the time I sent out my decidedly rough first draft three days later – even as the first reading in Russian was taking place in Ukraine – I was sending it to 20 theaters. Moreover, I was beginning to receive information about other theaters, universities and reading groups in other countries that were interested in taking part in the project – I do not know who first used the word "project", I or one of my correspondents.

The first reading in the U.S., performed in Russian, was done by Arlekin Players Theater in Boston on September 17. The world premiere reading of the English translation, streamed on YouTube, was produced by Rogue Machine Theater in Los Angeles on September 18. The U.K. premiere was mounted by ARTEL and Maketank in Exeter on September 19. By October 8, just one month after Kureichik sent me his new play, we were celebrating the 30th and 31st readings – both in the Czech Republic – the first outside the early core countries of the U.S., U.K. and Ukraine.

This introduced a new period in the project, where several Eastern European countries joined us with their own translations and streamed readings – including the Czech Republic, Poland, Lithuania, and Romania. Before long Kureichik's play spread east and west simultaneously – to Hong Kong, where Blank Space Studio mounted readings in English, Cantonese and Mandarin, and to Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands, where multiple online readings encouraged still more participants.

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The first reading in Belgium, at De leesclub (Reading Club) in Antwerp on October 25, was of especial importance. Unlike a traditional theatrical reading, where specific actors are cast in specific roles, this was a group of various literary, theatrical and educational professionals who meet regularly online to share works that they consider new and important. At any one online meeting there may be 30, 40 or more participants, some passively listening, but many actively sharing by reading selected parts of the work as it progresses. The democratic, online nature of this more-or-less regularly scheduled event also means that on any given night there are probably people taking part from various far-flung locales. The readings of De leesclub conclude with discussions in which everyone still online at that time may take part. *Insulted. Belarus* was an uncommon success during this first reading in Belgium, and shortly thereafter many more readings popped up in the Netherlands, Sweden, Nigeria and the U.K. This was truly a superspreader event for the Worldwide Readings Project.

Suffice it to say that by April 2021, the project had logged over 120 readings in 30 countries and 20 translations. But even that does not provide a full picture of the project's reach and influence. By the turn to 2021 we were seeing an increase in other kinds of events – ranging from radio broadcasts to storefront or outdoor installations, and on to films, academic symposiums, forums, webinars, conferences and mini-courses. These and other such non-reading responses to the play numbered nearly 50 by April.

As organizers, Andrei Kureichik and I never distinguished between professional or amateur readings, or, even, between well-publicized events and those that were virtually private. We found that, no matter what the number of individuals that an event involved and/or reached, it was still an important form of outreach, of sharing the word about the dire situation in Belarus. This was precisely why Kureichik had written the play, it was why he had reached out to me, and it was why I had approached my colleagues around the world – to shed light on the dramatic, often tragic situation of a deeply corrupt and fervently unloved president who was making an entire nation miserable by clinging to power. The goal was simple, yet crucial: To bring awareness of injustice, cruelty, violence and corruption to people who otherwise would have known nothing about it. As such, essentially private readings like those at Strange Town Theater Company in Edinburgh Scotland, or St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN, were still of utmost value to our goals. Feedback from the organizers in virtually every case like this indicated that everyone involved expressed gratitude for having had the opportunity to learn about, and lend aid to, a nation in need.

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Many events reached large numbers of people in short periods of time. Dozens of streams were watched by over 1,000 people around the world. The first reading ever, at the Kulish Academic Musical and Drama Theater. Kherson, Ukraine, on September 12, 2020, had been viewed by over 24,000 people as of April 2021. A February 2021 marathon of 16 Romanian readings in 16 theaters in 16 days reached over 30,000 viewers in that three-week period. The English-language premiere by Rogue Machine Theater in Los Angeles grabbed a respectable 800 to 1,000 views on YouTube before it somehow reached a Belarusian and Russian audience in April 2021 and, in the course of three weeks, the views went through the roof to over 29,000. A Russian-language film of the play by Oksana Mysina was viewed by over 55,000 people in 15 days on the Belarusian Belsat TV YouTube channel in April 2021. Taken altogether, the readings and other events of the Worldwide Readings Project reached approximately 500,000 people in its first six months of existence.

## 4. COVID-19 + Digital Applications = Innovation

The roles played in the project by COVID-19 and emerging video technology were enormous. Copies of *Insulted. Belarus* began to appear in people's electronic mailboxes after most of the international community had spent the better part of four to six months in various states of lockdown and quarantine. Theaters were closed, as were cinemas. Actors and directors could not personally talk to their parents, grandparents or children, let alone their colleagues at their places of employment. They missed their work and their colleagues, and were in the process of finding that various kinds of social media could provide an outlet for their creative impulses. The Zoom video chat app, especially, found its place in the Zeitgeist during the coronavirus pandemic, and became a major avenue not only for online conferences, but for online theater work. Also useful and popular in the Worldwide Readings Project were Facebook Live and YouTube, both in terms of its live platform and its traditional role as a host of pre-recorded videos. It is worth noting that Facebook Live, because of Facebook's algorithms and notification systems, tended to draw significantly more viewers during live streams and in the immediate aftermath.

The reality of COVID-19 combined with the possibilities of the available technologies not only encouraged artists to work, they began to influence the work itself, the way it was made, and the form it assumed in the end. Russian actor and director Oksana Mysina embraced the

limitations placed on performers by the pandemic in a way that allowed her, in the course of a few days, to make a film of the play without endangering anyone by violating social distancing norms. (Disclaimer: Oksana Mysina is my wife, and I am one of four producers of the film she made.) Mysina, who lives in Greece, engaged a cast of seven actors, most of whom were in urban or suburban Moscow, but one of whom was in Spain. They rehearsed and discussed their individual collaborations on various audio and visual apps before each performer recorded his or her parts on telephones or tablets, either on their own or with the aid of a household member. They emailed their video files to Mysina, who edited the actors' footage into a final product, interweaving it with additional footage shot in Greece, and actual documentary footage of events in Belarus, filmed and provided by the Russian TV Rain channel (Dozhd'). This method allowed Mysina to film and edit a full 90-minute film whose genre she designated as a 'cinematic reading' in a remarkably short period of time. The film premiered on TV Rain November 15, 2020, and its innovative qualities were recognized at the Art Film Awards festival in Skopje, North Macedonia, where it was named Best Experimental Film in March 2021.

All of the video apps – Zoom, Facebook Live and YouTube – naturally approximated the sensation of cinema even when the readings were conducted in entirely traditional ways. Early on, the most common form of online reading was one in which actors sat at home before their electronic devices and delivered their text. This was only natural since most of the early readings were done in the U.S. and U.K., both of which are writer- and actor-centric theater cultures. These readings tended to show the actors and present the text front and center, something that was also natural due to the monological nature of the play. Some groups always showed just one actor at a time on a single screen, others showed the entire group in a gallery-style screen, while still others combined the possibilities of these two basic approaches. For example, a particularly emotional or heated exchange between two characters might cause a director to place those two actors on screen side-by-side during the stream. More subtle choices were to show a silent actor reacting to words being spoken about him or her by another performer when neither of the two were interacting at all as per the play.

As time went on, and as the more director-centric East-European countries began joining the project, approaches tended to employ increased innovative measures. In some cases this was enhanced by the fact that, as the dangers of the pandemic occasionally ebbed, social distancing regulations were sometimes loosened, allowing for companies of actors to join each other on

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stage even in the presence of a limited live audience. This brought about a myriad of different styles of performance and presentation.

Gabriele Tumanaite's Maly (Small) Theatre of Lithuania came out on October 15 with one of the most radical visual readings to that date. Actors, all in full costume, were seated closely together at two separate tables on stage. The storm trooper, known as Raptor in the play, looked rather like a marauding Terracotta Warrior. Before long, the tables could not hold the characters who increasingly engaged one another or the space around them. They were in each others' faces, often in full motion. The camera followed the action and the characters breathlessly. Not surprisingly, Tumanaite offered this version as a film via Lithuanian channel LRT for a limited time in late March 2021.

A beautiful – one might even say classically rendered – reading at the Royal Dramatic Theater in Stockholm on October 27, 2020, had the actors fanned out in chairs in a long, loose arc across the stage. As directed by Dmitri Plax, they largely remained seated, although they might squirm when agitated or even stand briefly in rare emotional or physical moments. Two static cameras created a sense of movement and action by interchanging long and medium shots with close-ups.

Tuminaite's dynamic reading notwithstanding, the stakes in the emerging theater-reading-as-film were raised several notches by Jerzy Jan Połoński at the Municipal Theater in Gliwice, Poland, on December 10. There was no social distancing here, and, in the finest of Slavic traditions, Kureichik's play was used as a launching pad for the director's and actors' imagination, rather than as an end-product to be presented faithfully. Połoński doubled and tripled up on actors playing characters, also inserting characters that Kureichik mentions but does not bring on stage. He crammed large numbers of actors into tiny, claustrophobic spaces – a woman's bathroom, an office, a weight room, an empty bedroom, and more – and kept the work charging forward at a breakneck pace with a constantly-moving camera, while none of the spaces were intended to look realistic. Most were built inside cubicles in the theater, presumably on stage, with walls or ceilings missing, thus allowing the camera to rove almost instantly from one "location" to another.

Four days later, on December 14, the renowned director Javor Gardev added another twist to the possibilities of cinematic Zoom theater at the Ivan Radoev Drama and Puppet Theater in the city of Pleven, Bulgaria. Gardev set the action in an other-wordly space that was achieved by shooting the majority of scenes against an off-white background resembling

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crumpled cloth or paper. Gardev and his actors achieved the illusion of being in constant motion even though the two cameras were invariably static. One camera was set up to cling closely to the actors' faces so that any eye or lip movement was perceived as a major action event. Turns of the head registered almost as seismic events. It was enough for one of the cameras to film the actors on rare occasion at unusual angles – from "too high" above, or "too low" below – to add even more to the illusion of movement. Also noteworthy was the fact that Gardev and his actors faithfully observed social distancing regulations, although the tightly-cropped close-ups and bold editing were more than enough to make a spectator forget that mundane fact.

Gardev's work, like that of Poloński and Mysina, straddles the boundaries between cinema and theater in ways that had not existed quite so prominently before the art of theater ran up against the COVID pandemic in 2020. Although they all make heavy use of theatrical devices, and bare them quite honestly, they all probably can only work as cinema, that is, via the medium of the screen. It would be difficult to imagine a spectator sitting in a theater and receiving the full impact of these works were they to be performed as-is on a stage before a live audience.

In that sense, Tuminaite's production in Vilnius, Lithuania, was more of a hybrid. It was, in fact, acted on stage before a live audience, even as it heavily employed cinematic technique to tell its story. The fact that the piece worked successfully both in a theater and on television speaks volumes about the manner in which Tuminaite walked a fine line between the two mediums.

Everyone participating in The Worldwide Readings Project of Andrei Kureichik's *Insulted. Belarus* was confronted to one degree or another by the need to engage the laws of theater and film simultaneously in ways that they probably had rarely done before. This was not just a matter of placing a screen or monitor on a theater stage to demonstrate background, supplementary, contradictory or "internal, psychological" images. It was not a case of getting live actors to interact with cinematic images. The cinematic medium of Zoom/Facebook/YouTube was, indeed, the medium of every one of the streamed readings. Even when the performances remained fully theatrical, the medium of an online stream (which could be left online to be watched as a video recording) deeply influenced every choice an actor or director made.

Zoom allowed Arlekin Players to do what normally would have been impossible. For their Russian-language reading of October 18, they engaged Ales Molchanov, an actor based in Minsk, to perform the role of Corpse 'alongside' the other actors based in Boston. This, of course, lent a tangible authenticity to the story of violence and protests in Belarus. Molchanov, standing before his window in a high-rise apartment building, set up his Zoom camera so that one half of

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the screen showed the now-famous white-red-white revolutionary flag hanging at full length, while the other half showed the actual flickering city lights of Minsk over his shoulder. (For the record, Molchanov was arrested in December for participating in protests, and spent the New Year in prison. He was eventually released but has not been able to return to his profession to make a living.)

I point to a student reading as one of the cleverest and most attractive of all the renditions of *Insulted. Belarus*. Maketank in Exeter, U.K. mounted a second rendition of the play on November 3 with students Poppy Franziska and Sophia Trewick directing. They cast young women in all of the roles. Each performer had a bench in front of them on which stood a camera. The benches were arranged in a circle, and, in the center, a technician operated the digital stream. The camera set-up enabled the performers to be seen in isolation, and to adjust their camera angle to show isolated body parts – faces, bodies, or just hands. We would not have known that they were actually all together in the same space were it not for an eighth camera stationed at a distance, which, in an additional video box, showed the entire set-up of everyone sitting in a circle. The reading began as we saw legs and feet pass by the cameras until someone took a seat in each place. Now, however, we saw just hands against the background of all-white costumes – hands clasped, open palms, fists, arms crossed, or fingers intertwining nervously. This reading was not intended to imitate a film – the script was delivered more or less traditionally – but it made excellent use of the opportunities offered up by the nature of a camera and its limited, though enhanced, field of vision.

## 5. The Future and an Afterlife (in place of a conclusion)

At the time of this writing the Worldwide Readings Project of *Insulted. Belarus* had been in action for approximately six months. Early on we harbored vague, but high, hopes that it would provide us with several weeks of readings in a few countries here and there. Once translations other than English began to appear, we increased our optimistic projections to a project lifetime of a few months. When we hit a relative lull in new readings around the New Year, we were surprised to find that new kinds of events began to fill our schedule – symposiums, seminars, conferences, and in-class studies at universities that took Kureichik's play, and the project that grew out of it, as topics for serious scholarly and journalistic discussion. When the Romanian marathon of 16 readings in 16 days was organized in February 2021, we were reminded that the potential for

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readings was far from exhausted. We now have Spanish, French, Portuguese and Hungarian translations in the works, with more languages being discussed. These translations will open us up to new audiences that we have not yet had access to. I have every expectation that we will greet the project's one-year anniversary still in full forward motion, although the actual details of our activities may well be quite different from what we imagine today.

I had a revelatory moment about the murky future when discussing possible collaboration with a colleague from Chile. He had been interested at first, but, after a period of silence, admitted he would not be able to mount a reading. A year of violent clashes between protesters and the Chilean government eventually forced him to flee to Mexico to avoid arrest. There he had been trapped by COVID lockdowns and had even come down with a mild case of the virus. Joining our project was simply not something he could do at the time, but, as he wrote, "this story of the Belarusian revolution is very familiar to me".

My interest was piqued because these were words, I had been hearing for months from people all over the globe – from the U.S. with its Trumpism, racism and nativism; from the U.K. with Brexit and Boris Johnson; from Hong Kong where protesters clashed violently with the police force of the Communist China government. Jerry Adesewo, the Artistic Director of the Arojah Royal Theatre in Nigeria, wrote about *Insulted. Belarus*: "remove the setting and substitute the characters, [and] that play is 100% talking to Nigeria as well". The difference in all these cases was that people facing bad and dangerous government were coming to the Belarusian revolution from a point of ignorance. They knew nothing of Belarus, but were drawn in by parallels with their own experience, and ended up becoming extremely involved with the story Kureichik told.

But the case of my friend from Chile offered a different dynamic. This time I was coming to him with my tale of Belarus only to learn of serious social and political unrest that I knew absolutely nothing about. It was a lightbulb moment. I immediately recalled the comments by colleagues in the States and the U.K., that "this is about us". I recalled Jerry Adesewo. I recalled William Wong (actual Cantonese name: Wong Ka Kui) of Hong Kong telling me how deeply he and his actors responded to *Insulted. Belarus* because they were living the same thing.

It was gratifying and inspiring to hear that Andrei Kureichik's play spoke so clearly and profoundly to individuals of different cultures and experiences. But I also began to see new prospects for our project. Wouldn't it be an honor for *Insulted. Belarus* to spawn a whole new project consisting of new works created on the theme of "insulted" populations? Wouldn't that

be a splendid way to pay back all the artists who had taken Andrei's work to heart – by turning around now and shining a spotlight on trials they had endured?

I floated the idea during several online discussions – with members of De leesclub in Belgium, with members of The Fence reading club in the U.K., with professor Valleri Robinson at the University of Illinois, who had become a frequent contributor to, and participant in, the Worldwide Readings Project. I discussed it with PJ Escobio of Shakespeare Frankfurt, with whom I participated in a webinar about the Worldwide Readings Project, as well as with Jean Johnstone and Michael O'Hare, who were teaching a special in-course section on *Insulted. Belarus* for a cultural policy class at UC Berkeley. I discussed it with Andrei Kureichik. I asked, would they be interested in becoming involved in a project tentatively called *Insulted. World*? Such a project would encourage the writing of new plays, or the creation of new, less traditional theatrical works of art (why be limited to just 'literature'?), all loosely based on the notion of people 'insulted and injured' by unfair interaction with heavy-handed police forces. Imagine it: *Insulted. Chile. Insulted. Hong Kong. Insulted. Nigeria.* The possibilities seemed endless, and the potential seemed great. Indeed, everyone declared they would be eager to join such a project. I continued thinking loosely about what *Insulted. World* might look like, even jotting down a cursory outline of future actions. But the time to declare a start to this new endeavor had not arrived.

It was then that I received an unexpected email, not entirely unlike the day Kureichik sent me a copy of his new play. I was in correspondence with William Wong in regards to a possible reading of *Insulted. Belarus* in Taiwan, a country we had not yet reached. We exchanged a few brief notes before this sentence arrived in my inbox: "Inspired by your *Insulted. Belarus* project, I have gathered 10 playwrights in Hong Kong to each write a short 15-30 minutes script about what happened and is happening in Hong Kong".

There it was! My project. And it was already underway. I replied to William immediately and admitted that he had taken the top of my head off. I had been nurturing this idea slowly and mostly privately for months. Now one of the most active members of the Worldwide Readings Project had already begun doing precisely what I thought I might possibly do at some nebulous point in the future. All that was left me now was to offer my services, and promise I would do my best to help these plays reach the world.

Extraordinarily, lightning had struck twice. Andrei Kureichik's unexpected email caught me off-guard in September 2020 and sent me figuratively on a journey around the planet. Now a surprise note from William Wong in April 2021 promised to do the same thing, albeit, surely, in a

different trajectory. I am still in the middle of all this, and I have no idea where it will take us. One thing I do know: A time of plague with a bit of Zoom thrown in created more possibilities for Andrei Kureichik's *Insulted. Belarus* than anyone could possibly have dreamed of.

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John Freedman

Presenting Andrei Kureichik's *Insulted. Belarus* to a World in Lockdown

# Presenting Andrei Kureichik's *Insulted. Belarus* to a World in Lockdown

## *PHOTOGRAPHIC APPENDIX*



A scene from the reading at the Maly Theater, Vilnius, Lithuania. Photo by Laura Vanseviciene.

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**Alexei Nesterov as Corpse in Oksana Mysina's film. Image taken by John Freedman.**



**Rachel Brunner as Cheerful in a reading by Rogue Machine Theater, Los Angeles, directed by Guillermo Cienfuegos. Image taken by John Freedman.**

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**Łukasz Kucharzewski (upper left) was the primary of four actors playing Raptor
in a reading by Teatr Miejski, Gliwice, Poland, directed by Jerzy Jan Połoński.
Image taken by John Freedman.**



**Lena Endre as Oldster at the Royal Dramatic Theater, Stockholm, Sweden,
directed by Dmitri Plax.
Image taken by John Freedman.**

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**Valentina Zaharia as Mentor, at Untheater, Bucharest, Romania,
directed by Catinca Drăgănescu.
Image taken by John Freedman.**



**Florian Gerteis as Youth, Thomas Prazak as Oldster, and Jenny Langner as Novice
at Staatstheater Augsburg, Germany, directed by Andreas Merz-Raykov.
Image taken by John Freedman.**

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Krasimira Kuzmanova-Cochran as Mentor at Ivan Radoev Drama and Puppet Theater, Pleven, Bulgaria, directed by Javor Gardev. Image taken by John Freedman.

# An Unexpected Pair:
## Can Consent Practices Make Your Rehearsal Rooms More Inclusive to Underrepresented Groups?

*Kristy Thomas and Brooke M. Haney*

**Abstract:** In March 2021 at the World Theatre Day Symposium for Shakespeare Frankfurt, DEI Consultant Specialist Kristy Thomas and Intimacy Choreographer Brooke M. Haney met and began a conversation about how their fields intersect and can support each other. This paper will incorporate reflection on those discussions, changes in the theatre (as individuals and as an institution) drew to a halt during the COVID-19 pandemic, and address the following: as theaters look to reopen, what lessons can be taken from both of these areas that will lead to more inclusive, consent-forward rehearsal and performance spaces? Can consent practices support anti-racism work in a meaningful way?

**Keywords:** Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Anti-Racism, Theatre, Intimacy, Staged Sex, Nudity, Consent, COVID-19.

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## 1. Introduction

In March 2021, we met at the Shakespeare Frankfurt World Theatre Day Symposium and hit it off. We are two distinct voices – Kristy, a queer, African American writer and DEI consultant, and Brooke a white, queer, gender queer actor, professor and intimacy choreographer – excited about how our fields intersect, speaking about ideas that overlap each other. Sometimes we write together, sometimes separately. When we write from personal experience, we will let you know with the notes "Kristy" or "Brooke".

## 2. How did we get to the conversation of racial divide?

**Kristy** – As we now live and breathe in the midst of and looking back on the COVID-19 pandemic, we are able to see things clearer than we did before. Before, we had so much time to give. More often than not it takes coming to a complete standstill to be able to look back and see with unfiltered or unobstructed eyes, true reality. This has been, for those who took the time, a great opportunity to have an in-depth experience of reflection. One thing this situation has given me is a whole lot of unassigned time. I spent that time distancing myself from my elderly parents that I share a home with. Wanting so desperately to hug them, kiss them and reassure them as they had done for me all my life that everything would in fact be okay. I missed their touch and warmth. We were just steps away and yet in a different theatre, experiencing a different play. It was the first time in all my life that I couldn't use my physical body to express to them my unwavering love and cast a safety net. Neither thing was at this moment in time, "safe."

My soul was desperate to stop looking at the wind blow and start feeling it but the anxiety of the unknown kept my front door locked and me, in so many ways hidden, frozen in time. There was also another aspect of time that came to the forefront, in the pure realization that I had an abundance of it. What would I do as I watch the minutes pass every day? This was time that I never thought I would have nor did I ever think I would be spending sitting in an office, in front of a computer, trying to figure out what is actually happening? Most of those concerns were wrapped up in the pandemic but as an educator, artist, actress, playwright, and an African American queer woman I knew that there was much more going on in America than we were openly talking about. How has life in 2020 put a tattoo on the world that reads, "Black Lives Matter," for some people with a question mark and for others with an exclamation point?

**Brooke –** This time of reflections, as Kristy calls it, involved me, an extreme lack of touch. For the first six months of the pandemic, I worked from home where I, for all intents and purposes, lived alone. The amount of skin thirst I felt was painfully devastating. The only touch I experienced for many months was the occasional jostle of the crowd at a protest over the murder of Black people in the United States, and as someone who spends their career choreographing hieghted touch, the lack of actual touch was notable and jarring. I began to wonder if there are ways in which the work that I do, creating consent forward rehearsal rooms, could support the anti-racism work theaters were striving towards. Were there parallels?

While the fight for racial justice and the work of intimacy choreographers didn't start during the COVID-19 pandemic, the visibility of both increased. COVID-19 created a pause in the country and world, and by extension the theater industry, which allowed time for personal and institutional reflection. Consequently, this paper will address the following: As theaters look to reopen, what lessons can be taken from both the field of diversity, equity and inclusion, and the field of staged intimacy that will lead to more anti-racist, consent-forward rehearsal and performance spaces?

### 3. Why does diversity on our stages matter?

**Kristy –** When diving into the idea of diversity, equity and inclusion on our stages one must first ask, why representation matters? Why is it even important or worth having the conversation in an attempt to gain understanding into this topic? My immediate first thought is, "Why wouldn't representation matter?" While I hate to answer a question with a question, the reality is that representation matters because the moment we recognize that we are a diverse population of artists, comes the responsibility to represent said artists for the sake of building and maintaining our group. There are artists all over this world from different nationalities, backgrounds, perspectives, identities and all are of course carrying different life experiences. If we believe as artists that all of those stories need to be told, why wouldn't we also innately believe that all of the people whose stories are being told are an important presence to bring to the table? The goal of any and all of our performance spaces should be that our doors are truly open and any and everyone can walk in, be respected and equally represented.

When I think of the arts, I think of a place that always had a knack of finding a home for every person who wanted to be a part of creating something special. The theatre, for me, was and will always be my first true place of belonging. This is the same mindset that needs to be attributed to our world spaces. There should never be a moment or a place where someone doesn't feel like they belong, like a puzzle we all have a place. Because isolation is an emotional state of being that is not fun, nor is it a safe place to live. Being the only and being the first are positions that historically people are praised for, but usually many years later.

Education is the key to representation. I consider myself to be a lifelong educator and in that I believe that it is by far the most important tool that we sometimes forget to pack in our

bags. I can educate people on any and everything that I have experienced in my life. What that means, however, is that there are millions of things that are not being represented by me, because they can't be. This is a fact; I am an African American queer woman. Which means that I am not the representation of the African American male, those are shoes that can't be filled by me. I can speak to my experiences that connect with the African American man because we do share the same race. Can I tell you their story, absolutely not. As human beings we need to realize that there is a difference between being able to understand and being able to relate.

Representation is something that is important across-the-board in all of our spaces: our workspace, our safe space, our stage space, and in our lives. There were occupations that I knew as a child I could do because there was representation there. There were also plenty of occupations that never crossed my mind because in my life I had never seen someone who looked like me doing that occupation. We have to remember that the idea of representation starts when we are children before we have the conscious ability to put into words the idea that representation is important. I work to express the importance of having Black, Brown and Marginalized People teaching our children because, when they are children is when they are learning these things. I posed the question and I ask it to all of the readers, "In the occupation that you hold right now, who was the first person of representation that you remember looking up to?" I will never forget mine, as an actor beginning from the age of three, I remember we had a huge cable television in the basement. My brothers, who knew that I loved acting, told me that there was this Black woman with dreadlocks telling jokes. I wasn't old enough to watch the cable special that the phenomenal Whoopi Goldberg was doing but I remember sneaking downstairs after my parents had gone to bed and turning the television on. I laid on the floor, so close I couldn't even see the screen, but that didn't matter because all I needed to do was just listen. This was the moment that made me realize that I could be an actress. In that one hour special I knew I could stand in front of a, then mostly white audience, and they would laugh at me. In fact, it made me feel like they would love me.

I live my life daily recognizing that on my shoulders comes the fact that I am their representation of an educator, actress, business owner, playwright, and out there somewhere is a little Black boy, a little Black girl, or an LGBTQIA+ youth looking at me and thinking, "If she did it, I can do that too." That's representation at its best. This is a topic that has the ability to shape how Marginalized People view themselves in our art, and our craft. Representation is wrapped up in the creation of inclusion and it requires us to be diverse in the stories that we tell

and in the telling of those stories, and then this mathematical equation if we can get all of the pieces right, we should be able to create some fantastic equitable theatre spaces. I always give this piece of advice and I feel it is a game changer in the way we view this conversation. Marginalized Groups don't want more, we don't want to be treated better than, we just want to be equal. We want equal opportunities to work in whatever area we work in, matched with equal pay. We want to be able to tell our stories and have them told. We want these things on a scale that creates a level of balance and equity that has never been seen before. And in that creation, we want to actively work to make sure that those scales are never tipped out of our favor again. We need it on our stages, backstage, in the box office, in our college theatre training departments, as directors, producers and technicians and quite honestly, we should not have to continue fighting or begging for it.

Diversity often gets thrown around and tied up in a bow with inclusion. To be clear, diversity and inclusion are two different concepts. They are not a cloth twisted and tied around each other. I say that to express that you can have a diverse cast but not be an inclusive cast, just as you can have an inclusive and safe environment within the theatre and not be diverse. The importance of addressing diversity, equity and inclusion on our theater stages at this moment in time is quite simple, at its most basic level we should have already addressed this. Historically for decades there have been pushes to enhance the presence of people of color on stage and in doing that we tend to leave off other Marginalized Groups such as women, senior citizens, military veterans, physically challenged persons, and all members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Diversity is more than one group. Creating inclusive environments involves more than one group. And creating equity must absolutely involve everyone. The time is now. Everyone has a voice, and everyone has the ability to assist their theater communities in being successful in this positive move forward. If the world begins to open and all of the sudden 2020 didn't happen, the conversations weren't continued, and we are back to staying silent because hopefully it will go away, we will have lost our perspective on what is important. The worst mistake that we can make is to realize that there is an injustice in something that we are an active participant in like our theater community and not do anything and everything we can do to fix the problem. It is our job, and when I say "our" it is for all of us. We all have a level of responsibility. Often, we don't realize we have a problem until someone tells us and that should force us to reflect as we spoke about earlier. To put it in theatrical terms we can do better and be stronger as an ensemble. A group of diverse minds working together to make something amazing happen and continue to

happen. That is what we have always done, and this moment in history allows us to do that on a much grander scale.

During this time of reflection into our lives as artists in whatever place you find yourself within this community, we want to take specific notice of our two major concepts; that of the diversity in our world adequately being reflected on our stages and the importance of consent as an active participant in these same safe spaces. How much have these two topics been a part of these brave conversations that we are having? Listening for understanding is an important step but if we come to the conversation above it, beyond it, or believing that we should be the people in charge, we will leave the table wondering why everyone else is full of knowledge and we are starving. We want you to be fed so that you can share what you've learned, that is key. As we look back, let us take a journey as we explore the ways in which life in the theater as well as how an exploration of intimacy within that space has changed in the past year of COVID-19.

## 4. Let's start with some history

**Kristy** – On top of the pandemic, we were faced with injustices towards people of color, specifically African American people who looked exactly like me. These injustices aren't things that hadn't happened before. Often people speak of the situations that end up being historical like Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor as if they are the first of their kind, but they were not. Historically African American people have been enslaved and fighting for very basic and simple human rights for centuries. What happened in 2020 was that people found themselves watching more news and glued to their televisions like they had never been before. It made the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor front page news, because the question of, "Do Black lives really matter? Had Black lives not mattered before?" was once again, a headline. This is not just a conversation for America, this is a conversation for the world. These deaths were the gasoline that rekindled the fire about the treatment of Black, Brown and all bodies of people of color. That conversation finally began to happen in a big way that made my parents, products of the Civil Rights Movement, believe that we might finally get it right. This little bitty word of Equality. People from all walks of life and from all reaches of this earth were having protests, holding up signs and wearing masks that read, "BLM." Making a clear statement to not be confused with Black Lives Matter (Black Lives Matter 2021). In the midst of a

pandemic, it was such an important issue that people were not going to allow it to be forgotten or dismissed as not a movement for right now, maybe we'll come back to it later. No, we want change, recognition and we want it now, recognizing that the conversation while difficult is one that needs to be had.

## 5. An Intimate History of the Theater

**Brooke –** There are others who are called to be intimacy historians, I am not one of them. That said, here are some observations. Prior to the #metoo movement, people were creating the practices of intimacy choreography, but the market for those skills did not yet exist. For the years before, when I would get asked to help with a project, rather than being called an intimacy choreographer, I would get special thanks in the program.

There are so many fantastic people that I have either been influenced by or had the joy with which to work. A non-exhaustive list includes: Cha Ramos, Laura Rikard and Chelsea Pace of Theatrical Intimacy Education, Ann James of Intimacy Coordinators of Color, Adam Noble, and the many contributors to Intimacy Directors and Coordinators. When possible, I will credit them individually. That said, as our practices grow and morph together, it is possible I have forgotten where I learned something or who influenced me. Please consider all of these fine folks as part of my ongoing learning process and deserving of credit.

It should be noted that before the intimacy industry existed, folks were certainly doing this work. It often fell to the wardrobe or stage management teams or the fight directors. Plenty of directors were quite skilled in working with moments of intimacy as well. However, the theater as an industry still had a great need for qualified, specialized professionals.

Virginia Commonwealth University published Tonia Sina's graduate thesis, *Intimate Encounters; Staging Intimacy and Sensuality* in 2006. Sina is considered by many to be the mother of this industry. To my knowledge, this is the first piece of writing published on the topic.

My own academic research, theatrically, in the field of intimacy can be clocked when I workshopped *The Actor's Warm Down* with students and alumni at Marymount Manhattan College, which we presented at the Crossing Borders conference at Bedford Correctional Institute in 2016. Though I can chart connections to intimacy in my work as far back as 2002, this warm down was one of my first official forays into the field of intimacy direction and has become the foundation of my closure practices.

October of 2017: Harvey Weinstein was exposed in a NY Times article (BBC News 2021). In this moment, despite it being christened years before by Tarana Burke (Brockes 2018), the metoo hashtag (#metoo) went viral. While no one knew it at the time, this was a loud, marketable call for intimacy choreographers. In 2018, Alicia Rodis became the first intimacy coordinator on TV, when she was hired by HBO to work on the second season of *The Deuce*. Recently, SAG/AFTRA, the union for film and television actors, has recommended protocols for working with intimacy coordinators (SAG-AFTRA 2021). Clare Warden became Broadway's first intimacy director in 2019. These two intimacy professionals made the news and an industry was born. In 2020, Chelsea Pace published the book Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy, with contributions from Laura Rikard, as the first prescriptive text on the practices of intimacy choreographers. Currently, several companies train intimacy choreographers here in the states as well as across the globe.

If you look at the last four paragraphs and the intimacy professionals I've mentioned, you might notice a common theme. Many of the folks who have done an incredible job bringing visibility to this field are white and female presenting. This is evidence of the colonization of the theatre. There could be a whole other paper on why these folks have the access, and why whiteness has the assumed credibility in the press. That said, it is important to mention that there are many qualified, intimacy choreographers of color and while I do not by any means know all of them, a few to look out for are: Oliva Troy, an intimacy coordinator who notably improved the second season of Bonding; Cha Ramos, who besides being an incredible intimacy designer working in Spanish and English, has created a class for actors to explore their boundaries outside of a show or classroom; Teniece Divya Johnson, an intimacy coordinator and director who worked with Clare Warden on Slave Play on Broadway; Rachel Finley, an advisor for Intimacy Coordinators of Color (founded by Ann James), who teaches a class on voicing intimate sounds; and many more.

The background and lived experience of an intimacy choreographer is important, along with training, because the work of intimacy professionals doesn't only involve working with touch. It can involve moments of heightened storytelling around identity. Raja Benz recently put

together a directory of Queer and Trans Intimacy Professionals that is accessible to anyone looking for an intimacy professional with an LGBTQIA+ specialty.[1]

Intimacy choreography is a concept that may be difficult to wrap our minds around, but gaining an understanding on why it is important is the first step in further fostering our theatres into safer physical spaces.

## 6. How do we talk about our differences in a way that fosters a safe learning environment?

**Kristy** – When we discuss things that matter in our lives most of the time there are givens, my mother matters, as does my father, brothers, nieces and nephews, and because they matter their lives also matter. Not a sentence that I ever thought I would need to share or explain to anyone. But in the midst of worldwide uproar for the deaths of Breanna Taylor and George Floyd, two African American people at the hands of the police, we had to not only tell people that Black Lives Matter, but we had to, in some instances, explain why. That is our world. It is our world and these protests, arguments and explanations are going to continue, because they have to. We started asking the important questions like, why did this happen? Why does this continue to happen? Why historically has America treated Black bodies as items to bring financial gain but not as human beings to be cared for and honored? Why does it seem to be that this has become a permanent stamp on the history of America going back hundreds of years, the inequities and the mistreatment of Black bodies?

The hope is always that we, as Americans, will learn from our mistakes. That in regard to negative experiences, history does not continue to repeat itself. Every country has instances of elements in history that could have been handled in a stronger way for the sake of its people. However, when we look at American history, we see that history absolutely continues to repeat itself. "Same stuff, different day," is an all too familiar term when looking at our history. That Black and Brown bodies live in a reality where they are constantly asking to be treated as equals. Seemingly begging to not be feared for the color of our skin. Holding on our backs the constant feeling of nervousness to leave the house, to do, well anything. To that end there is also the conversation of institutional reflections. When the protests began a lot of organizations: school

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[1] Directory of Queer & Trans People Working in Professional Intimacy, please see the following Google document: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1aIQ_4T5u_1xtw9slE-u1fT1SMcXG4WbBNTigpWb_cPk/edit#gid=0

districts, sports franchises, businesses big and small, as well as our live theaters began to post on their websites and through their social media accounts their support of Black bodies in their spaces. For them it was important that the consumer be able to recognize that their organizations valued Black lives.

The most important piece of reflection or sitting with a group of parents, mothers, fathers or artists to have a conversation like this is the idea of allowing yourself to open your mind to a situation and a conversation that you may not know, you may not understand, and you may absolutely not be able to relate to. It may make you want to disappear in your seat, or cry, or run out of the door and to all of that I say, do it! It is difficult as an adult to accept that there are things you don't know and that the way that you have always thought could be wrong, but it's possible. You may not know what it feels like to be a Black or Brown body in any given situation. Open your ears to the very real reality that what you were taught and what you have heard are actually not the healthiest ways of interacting and supporting situations when dealing with people of color and Marginalized Groups.

Having these conversations first begins with accepting that we are all different. And with those differences come privileges that came with something we had no control over, the color of our skin. This is not a reality that any of us created. This is a concept that was born and bred hundreds of years ago when it was decided that people who don't look like us are not equal to us and we will treat them as such. Whether it is stealing them from their country and forcing them into slavery or stealing their land and calling it our own, both are historical pieces that have to be seen as the start of what has trickled down for generations. That mentality has since been passed down generation to generation. I often lead discussions about the idea of Unconscious Biases. Unconscious bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. (Navarro 2021). A solid first step is to accept that we all have biases, then work to recognize when they come into play in decisions that we make in our lives. That is how we fight against biases. We have to make a conscious decision to address an unconscious mindset.

The best way to walk away with a positive experience from a conversation like this is to take note that we are all different. We are different people coming from different places, having different experiences and that is what makes us individuals, but it is also what innately makes us all very special. Never discount the importance of another person's presence in any given room or situation. Remember that we all deserve a seat at the table. No one wants to serve the meal,

everyone wants to be able to sit, converse, and eat, like they are accepted and equal. It is also important to remember that people of color have not always been able to sit or even be invited to the table. The idea of "the table" can be further and more specifically explored in our more intimate world of theatre and the stage.

### 7. Why do consent forward rehearsal rooms matter?

**Brooke** – Coercion is based in white supremacy, and let's be clear, if your rehearsal room isn't consent based, it is coercive. When an actor has to deal with intellectual and emotional labor around not having their boundaries respected or not knowing if they will be respected, that is wasted energy that could have been directed to the work of creating brave, risky characters. If an actor feels personally unsafe, they aren't as able to live in the discomfort of the character, because they are instinctively protecting themselves. That said, please note: boundaries aren't just physical; they can be emotional, intellectual and around the stories we're willing to tell.

When someone's boundaries are violated, they can go into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. We've seen each of these as examples in the theatre, and if that actor is a Person of Color or from another Marginalized Group, the very thing that they are doing to survive can be used against them as a stereotype or worse. An established Black actress's hair is touched by her assistant director and she snaps at him, "don't touch my hair" (fight), and she is labeled as "the angry Black woman" who is difficult to work with. An older actress is triggered by a touch she hasn't consented to, bursts into tears and runs to the bathroom (flight), and we call her hysterical and difficult to work with. We're staging a simulated sex scene between two young men and as one of them initiates touch, the other is tongue tied (freeze), and we call him inexperienced and difficult to work with. An Latinx assistant director, has been dreaming of working under a particular white director, then that director makes a careless joke - the assistant director feels uncomfortable but laughs (fawn), because they know if they don't, they will be labeled as a snowflake and difficult to work with. While these particular examples are hypothetical, they are based on real, anecdotal experiences.

Curating consent forward rehearsal rooms takes the anxiety out of the space. In its place is room to create. All the energy that would have been used in self protection and self preservation can be harnessed and directed into the art. It saves time, creates better, more compelling stories, and offers the opportunity for a career of longevity. In an attempt to educate

and leave readers with a stronger vocabulary we will now present some important terms as well as books and articles to continue the conversation.

## 8. Do you mean what you say? Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Basic Terms

Words and how we use them matters. Language is constantly changing, which is thrilling and dangerous. During the pandemic, people misused words around their safety precautions. Folks would say things like, "I am quarantining with the neighbors across the street, because our kids are the same age." That's not a quarantine; that's creating a pod. An instagram message would read "grateful to have a social distanced hang with my bffs!" The photo would be of five unmasked friends crowded onto a bench, arms around each other. If you aren't six feet apart, the hang was not socially distanced. Say what you actually mean. It's important, especially when communicating about boundaries and consent. To that end, we've compiled a list of definitions from our two fields:

- Black Lives Matter: #BlackLivesMatter was founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer. Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. is a global organization in the US, UK, and Canada, whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives. (Black Lives Matter 2021).

- Discrimination: The unequal treatment of members of various groups, based on conscious or unconscious prejudice, which favors one group over others on differences of race, gender, economic class, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, language, age, national identity, religion and other categories.

- Diversity: the state of being diverse; variety. (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Glossary 2021).

- Equity: the quality of being fair and impartial. (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Glossary 2021).

- Inclusion: the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure. (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Glossary 2021).

- Institutional Racism: Institutional racism refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies and practices create different outcomes and opportunities for different groups based on racial discrimination.

- Microaggression: The verbal, nonverbal and environmental slights, snubs, insults or actions, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages to target persons based solely upon discriminatory belief systems.

- Multicultural Competency: A process of embracing diversity and learning about people from other cultural backgrounds. The key element to becoming more culturally competent is respect for the ways that others live in and organize the world and an openness to learn from them.

- Social Justice: Social justice constitutes a form of activism, based on principles of equity and inclusion that encompasses a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others.

- Unconscious biases are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness.

## 9. Intimacy Terms

This is a new field, so the language is developing, even the titles folks go by; this list isn't exhaustive. Some common titles people use in this growing industry: Intimacy Choreographer, Intimacy Director (theater), Intimacy Coordinator (on-camera), and Intimacy Consultant.

- Intimacy: while this work is most frequently thought of as choreographing simulated sex and working with moments of partial or full nudity, intimacy can be many other things. Besides nudity, it is any time there is touch combined with intensified emotions. This can be familial touch, medical scenes, a scene of childbirth, some physical comedy and more.

- Nudity: anytime an actor is wearing less clothing than they would to rehearsal, or anytime they undress on stage.

The work of staged intimacy involves: a boundary setting practice, intimacy choreography and closure practices:

- Boundary Setting Practice: there are several valid boundary setting practices developed by a variety of intimacy professionals. At their heart, they give the performer the opportunity to communicate their boundaries on a given day and clarify any questions around those boundaries.

- Intimacy Choreography: intimacy choreography is repeatable, recordable movement, communicated to the actors through desexualized language and aimed at compelling storytelling.

- Closure Practice: Closure practices can take anywhere from 5 seconds to 20 minutes. They allow the actor to let go of their character and return to their own authentic self. Some examples are: Clap in/Out (Intimacy Directors International), De-Roling (Theatrical Intimacy Education), and The Actor's Warm-Down, my own 20-minute curated closure practice, involving mediations, visualization, yoga and vocal/physical release.

## 10. So, what now?

When theatres, particularly historically white institutions, first begin to make progress on racial justice, they often focus on diversity. They start to understand the importance of representation and immediately make an effort to create space in their seasons for more "diverse" plays. This often looks like an August Wilson play in the February slot, or *maybe* a queer show in June. However well meaning, this is performative and not simply in the theatrical sense. The very best case scenario is that representation really does help. Some young theatre goer sees themselves on stage and feels less alone.

Often however, the well meaning theater hasn't actually done enough work to be an inclusive space and the artists - that they are already paying peanuts, because the theater doesn't

pay it's artist enough (an issue for another paper) - are retraumatized in rehearsal, marketing, talkbacks, etc by microaggressions or worse. The audience doesn't actually see themselves due to inaccurate storytelling where perhaps the cast is representative of the storytelling, but the artistic team is representative of the oppressor and as such the story is told through a straight, white, patriarchal lens.

As we continue to diversify the theatre, both on our stages, backstage, on our artistic teams, in the leadership at our theaters, and on our boards, we must look deeply at our practices to see if they are actually fostering inclusion. Are we creating brave spaces where our artists don't merely survive, they thrive? And as a result, our audiences do too – which leads to word of mouth, etc. It's good business.

## 11. Some Best Practices

Perfection is steeped in white supremacy, so we do not attempt perfection here, merely a start to conversation. We value action, taking a step towards a better theatre community. As we have been talking and looking to merge our expertise, some best practices come to mind. Here is a non-exhaustive list.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Best Practices

**Kristy –**

- Be intentional. If your theatre wants to make a change in the way of diversifying their casts for the next season, don't keep it a secret. Publicize it. Make it a part of your website.
- Set clear and attainable goals. Goals can only be measured if they come with a specific expectation with a specific date to meet said goal. Example of a good goal: The theatre wants to hire 25% more women in directing positions by the beginning of the 2023 season. The goal is clearly stated, followed by the specific date to reach the goal. This is how we measure success.
- Educate. This is something for everyone from the executives and board members to the actors, front of house staff and everyone in between. Have training that addresses what

has been determined to be the biggest issue for the theatre. Educate the entire body of the theatre and be proud of the work you are doing to make your theatre a more inclusive place.

- Offer a survey to your employees and people that have recently worked at your theatre. These surveys need to be offered as anonymous submissions. Some people will feel comfortable sharing honest information and will give their names so that the theatre can ask questions of them. However, not everyone feels comfortable especially if this is the first time something like this has been presented to them. The theatre has to be open and prepared to actually receive the survey. Count on it being a difficult experience, but you can't get better if you don't know what you need to work on.

- Share your goals with your season ticket holders and have it on our social media accounts. The entrepreneur wants to know what kind of theatre they are supporting and giving their money to. Make sure your representation is honest and that they can see what you've done and know what you are doing.

- Figure out how to get more Marginalized People into your theatre productions. Create different outreach methods that bring them in and makes them feel included in the process which should be represented in the casting.

- Remember that "diversity" is a goal throughout, not just with the actors. We want diversity in theatres on and off stage, on boards, executive offices, etc.

- Look at how institutions moving forward can better address the presence of Black and Brown bodies as theatergoers, actors, directors, playwrights, as well as all of the technical positions backstage. If we have learned nothing else it should be that representation absolutely matters, and that these conversations cannot be a secret that we only tell people who are on the inside. Because how small is that circle in comparison to how big the circle is of the people that are being affected by the decisions secretly talked about and quietly made behind closed theatre doors.

- Recognize and celebrate every success, even the little ones. Remember a small success is still a success. Never forget the positive in all situations. The negativity can speak very loud sometimes, find the balance of the good, the joy, the love that fuels us to keep doing what we love for the theatre.

<u>Consent best practices</u>

**Brooke** –

- Budget properly for your shows and season. Before committing to produce a show, look at the needs of the play and make sure you have the budget to produce it ethically. If a show involves intimacy, ask yourself if you have the budget to hire a qualified intimacy choreographer. If you don't, produce a different show and save that one for when your budget allows for it.

- Create consent forward rehearsal rooms for all your productions. The outdated idea of theatre being a place where "Yes and..." is glorified must become obsolete. This concept plays into feelings of scarcity and ends in coercion. Instead, embrace a "No, but…" policy. Celebrate when someone gives you a no, and encourage them to suggest what they are ready to enthusiastically consent to do. Moments of incredible creativity and artistry can be found just beyond "no". This applies to intimacy choreography as well as all other areas of your theatre. The more you make space for people to be able to say no, the more you empower your artistic team to create from their best place.

- Learn and lead a boundary setting practice. Even when you don't have an intimacy professional in the space, a boundary setting practice can be a wonderful way to show folks the culture of your company.

- Plan extra time. In the theatre, it often seems like we never have enough time. As we return to in-person rehearsal, there will be an adjustment period and it will be different for each person, because we each experienced COVID-19 differently. Damian Barr has a poignant quote: "We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar." (Barr 2021). Folks had very different experiences of COVID-19. Some of your artists will have been holed up with their families the entire time. Some will have taken other survival jobs as essential workers, putting them on the front lines. Some will have spent the entire time alone in a tiny apartment. Coming back into a rehearsal room may be exhausting for some. Consider shorter rehearsals at first, more frequent breaks, and check in with folks often. Some will be doing double duty in their brains, mulling over the artistic challenges of the piece while

doing mental gymnastics around their physical safety. A little extra time and grace will go a long way.

● Identify a vocabulary for your company where someone can ask for a pause. A pause can be requested when someone observes a microaggression, when someone is asked to try something and they need a moment to check in with their own boundaries, or for any other reason. A pause is fantastic, because it doesn't grind the production to a halt, it merely pauses it. When a pause is called, it may require a quick naming of the microaggression and work to heal it (see below). It may need 30 seconds for reflection, before making a choice. Or it may need a five- or ten-minute break. Regardless of the need, having a culture that embraces the concept of calling for a pause gives folks permission to ask for exactly what they need.

● When mistakes are made, and they will happen, use restorative justice practices to create space for healing. Restorative justice practices include recognizing that: 1) Harm has occurred and a focus on repairing that harm. 2) Those affected by the harm should have agency in its resolution. 3) The organization is responsible to aid in creating space to resolve the harm.

## 12. Looking beyond COVID-19

Just like you can't hire an intimacy choreographer and expect that person to eliminate the possibility of sexual harassment, you can't hire a DEI professional and expect to end racism at your institution. These issues are systemic. As COVID-19 comes to an end, now is the time to take action. Recognizing that your work won't be perfect, start with the things you know you can do. Then, try new things, one at a time. Make time for reflection after each new attempt and ask yourself what worked and didn't work. It's okay if it's messy; that is part of the process. When you get stuck, hire a professional to help you. Positive change will only occur when we take steps towards it.[2]

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[2] Here some good reads on diversity, equity and inclusion: BANAJI Mahzarin R., GREENWALD, Anthony G. (2013), *Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People*, New York: Delacorte Press; JANA, Tiffany, FREEMAN, Matthew (2016)*, Overcoming Bias: Building Authentic Relationships Across Differences*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers; KENDI, Ibram X. (2017), *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, New York: Bold Type Books; DIANGELO, Robin (2018), *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, Boston: Beacon Press; OLUO, Ijeoma (2018), *So You Want to Talk About Race*, New York: Seal Press. On Intimacy please see: BUCHER, John (2018), *A Best Practice Guide to Sex and Storytelling: Filming Scenes with Sex and Nudity*, London-New York:

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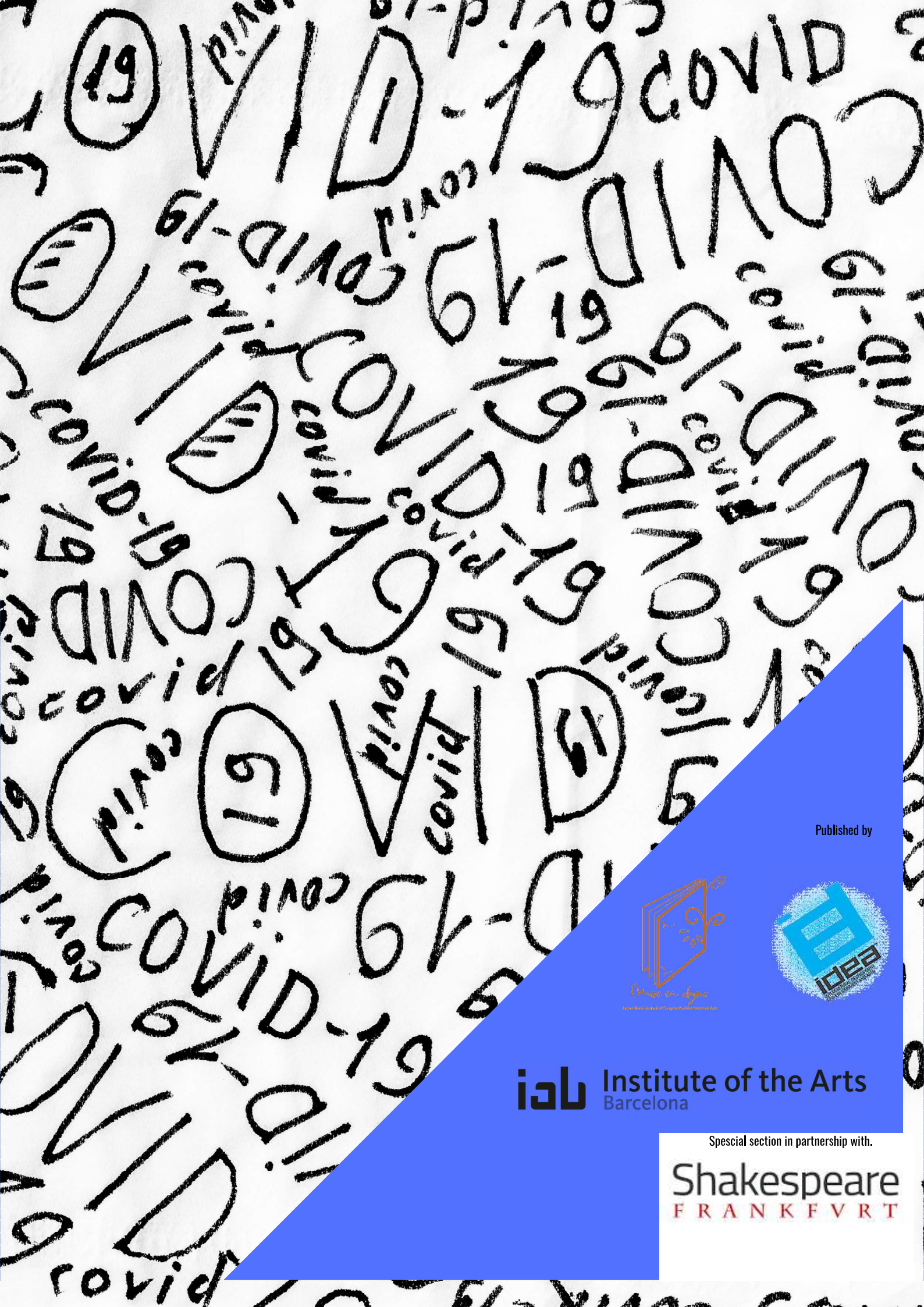
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