

## Theatre Dispositif and the Challenge of Covid-19: Mediatisation, Liveness and Audiences<sup>1\*</sup>

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The COVID-19 emergency has had a profound impact on the artistic and cultural sectors, and on performing arts in particular. The lockdown required the suspension of all live performances and rehearsals, including the cancellation of seasons and festivals. Because physical proximity is an essential component of live shows, this sector will be on pause longer than the others. Since the early stages of the lockdown, Italian theatre has developed several online initiatives to counterbalance the suspension of its activities. These efforts have aimed at maintaining contact with the remote theatre audiences, by extending the presence of artists, theatres and performances in the online context. However, they have also provided an opportunity to reflect at large on the digital transformations of performing arts. The following contribution reflects on how we are researching the online response of the theatrical sector from the perspective of sociology and media studies. The paper aims to contextualise the phenomenon within the processes of theatre mediatisation and digital transformation of liveness, and to present what we think are the most urgent research questions in this direction. The first part of the article introduces the theoretical premises of the investigation. We present the frame of theatre mediatisation by analysing three interrelated processes: the mediatisation of dramaturgy through the concept of transmedia; the mediatisation of theatrical presence, with the debate on digital liveness, and the mediatisation of the theatrical relationship through social media. The second part will analyse some of the main online initiatives of the theatre sector, observing how they fit into the previously introduced mediatisation processes. The third part will observe how users have responded to the initiatives presented on social media by some of the main Italian theatres. In the conclusions, we will discuss which research questions we consider crucial to connect the analysis of this critical moment to the main themes of sociological and media studies research on performing arts.

**Keywords:** Theatre mediatisation; Digital liveness; Italian theatre; COVID-19.

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Technologies have never usurped the role of artists; rather, they have suggested new spheres of action. Anyone at all sensitive to their own age is attuned to the technologies of the time.

Giacomo Verde

## Introduction

The Covid-19 emergency has had a massive impact on the artistic and cultural sectors in terms of production, distribution, and audience. One of the areas to be hit hardest has been the performing arts. We have witnessed work halted, programmes and projects suddenly put on hold and seasons and festivals cancelled. Unlike other sectors of the economy, the layoff is destined to last longer because live performance entails physical proximity.

In an attempt to offset this situation, right from the earliest stages of lockdown various online ventures started to emerge, nationally and internationally, with a view to guaranteeing performance content and maintaining contact with audiences at a distance. In the wake of these initiatives, funding is now being made available for digital projects.

From a media studies standpoint, the disruption to the performing arts has made it clear that live performance is facing an unprecedented crisis. Although the occupation of digital environments by theatre companies and organizations, as well as online theatre schemes in general, belong to the realm of possibilities explored by some twentieth century artistic experimentation, the current situation seems very different. It is a question of understanding how the need to radically rethink the performing arts scenario is not merely proof of mediatisation of society (Krotz 2007; Hjarvard 2008; Boccia Artieri 2015; Hepp, Couldry 2017) but a vantage point from which to observe the transformation of live entertainment and the dynamics associated with *digital liveness* (Auslander 1999, 2012; Gemini 2016a).

Based on these assumptions, the present contribution aims to decide the research questions which are likely to determine the study of audiences in the near future. As regards the theoretical premises of the study, the relation between theatre and mediatisation will be contextualized by taking into account the processes 1) of dramaturgical mediatisation, in terms of the transmediality of theatrical narration, 2) of the mediatisation of theatrical presence, observing the transformations of liveness, 3) of the mediatisation of our relationship with the theatre, starting with the role played by the social media. This last aspect is seen as especially crucial for research because it enables us to observe the forms of remote spectatorship and digital liveness which – without denying the importance and desirability of a physical return to the theatre – are able to reconfirm the centrality of the mediated experience as part of the processes determining the distribution and enjoyment of theatrical content. On this basis, as a future research hypothesis, liveness (no longer thought of as a characteristic in itself of a certain artistic object or as just one of its effects) can be observed as a form based on the acceptance of a new pact with the audience which re-articulates the *hic et nunc* in the continuity between offline and

online. The mapping of some of the initiatives launched since the start of quarantine aims to highlight the extent to which they exhibit this process of mediatisation. An exploratory analysis of trends detectable in the social media pages of some of the major Italian theatres will attempt to gauge how the audiences are responding to these transformations.

## **Theatre and Mediatisation: the theoretical background to the research**

The relationship between media and theatre is one of the most fruitful areas of theatre-performance studies (Birringer 1998; Chapple, Kattenbelt 2006; Dixon 2007; Salter 2010). If, on the one hand, this relationship has underpinned research into the specificity of theatre, on the other, the twentieth century theatrical scene favoured the development of multimedia arts and brought about the progressive assimilation of media formats and languages (Balzola, Monteverdi 2004; Gemini 2003). More recent perspectives have shown that the ability to relate to other media is not just typical of a stage in the history of theatre development but an integral part of theatre as a “hypermedium”. (Chapple, Kattenbelt 2006).

The close bond between theatre and the media is manifest in the ability of the theatre to preserve its autonomy while incorporating other technologies, but also in the way it continues to provide frames and formats for other media practices (Gemini 2003; 2018). We need only think, for example, of how the development of the digital “participatory condition” is indebted to the numerous artistic experiences which theorized participation well before the digital revolution (Barney et al. 2016). Furthermore, as Giorgi points out (2014), theatre has a specific “media mobility”, in the sense that it is the only medium capable of including the others in a physical environment while maintaining their materiality.

It is precisely this ability to combine various media in the same physical-experiential space that has enabled the theatre performance itself to be used as a vantage point from which to observe and reflect upon the workings of the media and the linking of media and society. As Gieseckam (2006) argues, the inclusion of screens and screen-based practices in the theatrical world has gone from being a way of *reflecting* the dynamism of the modern world to offering an opportunity to *reflect upon* the proliferation of screens in contemporary culture.

In keeping with this, the use of the term “mediatisation” in theatre performance studies tends to be restricted to the way the theatre uses other media and recording technologies, thereby often running the risk of claiming 1) that extra-theatrical media logics are homogeneous, 2) that there is an inherent distance between these and theatrical performance, 3) that a “hybridizing” function is exercised by media technologies, often viewed primarily as agents which blur the boundaries between performers and public, machines and actors, live and recorded, and between authors and spectators.

These limits can be overcome through recourse to the concept of mediatisation developed in recent sociology and media studies literature (Krotz 2007; Hjarvard 2008; Boccia Artieri 2015; Hepp, Couldry 2017). Here mediatisation is understood as a meta-

process which observes the dynamics of the social construction of reality as increasingly influenced by the media, viewed both as technologies and as sense-making processes which concern individual agency (Boccia Artieri 2015).

In this sense, adopting the mediatisation framework for the analysis entails at least four correctives to the most common ways of conceptualizing the role of media in theatrical performances.

1. First, mediatisation stresses that the influence of the media is not restricted to their material use but extends to the use of formats, practices and protocols developed in other media fields.

2. Second, it means getting away from the idea that we can talk about a single “media logic” (Altheide, Snow 1979) - understood as the way artists make themselves visible for the media (Esner, Kistners 2018) – and observing instead a plurality of media logics, not necessarily linked to the acquisition of a potential circulation in the media.

3. Third, it involves observing media logics, not just in the theatrical staging, but starting from the artists’ production, distribution, archival and promotional routines which tend to be increasingly interconnected without necessarily intermingling.

4. Fourth, it means abandoning a perspective which favours the logic of hybridization and the disappearance of boundaries and seeing the media as components for building new category distinctions (Boccia Artieri, Gemini 2019), e.g. in managing new *relational boundaries* (Baym 2018).

Hence the decision to look at three spheres of action of mediatisation in theatre which will allow us to contextualize the sector’s response to the pandemic in the context of broader, ongoing processes.

### ***Theatre and Transmediality: the mediatisation of the theatre narrative***

The communicative and artistic processes which take place in a mediatised environment are to be understood beginning with the increasing interrelatedness of media. Transmediality is thus a guiding concept for observing the fopen nature of the relations between different forms of media (Jansson 2013). The term “transmedia”, which found favour with Jenkins’ (2007) notion of “transmedia storytelling”, refers to the circulation of a media narrative among several media and platforms. In transmediality, each medium is associated with a section of the overall narrative which can only be seen in its entirety when reassembled by the audience.

Although transmedial narratives now occupy a position of importance in the spectrum of contemporary media industries, to some extent transmediality is still a concept foreign to theatre practices and studies (Hadley 2017). This seems all the more surprising when we remember the avant-garde role that theatre has always had in assessing and resorting to media (Gemini 2003, Gieseckam 2007). Recently the debate on the possibility of a transmedia theatre has been liveliest among Spanish-speaking scholars who have emphasized how theatre is still some way from a transmedia design, (Scolari 2014),

although there have been some interesting exceptions. Possible examples include those analyzed by Grande Rosales and Sánchez Montes (2016), such as *Afrodita o el juicio de Paris* (La Fura dels Baus 2013) or *Hopscotch Highway* (Pervasive Theatre 2013), *Situation Rooms* by Rimini Protokoll (Nawrot 2019) or, in Italy, the *AldoMorto54* project by the Compagnia Frosini/Timpano (Gemini, Brilli 2020). Though very different one from another, they are all experiments which point towards a complexification of the dramaturgical structure. It is a process which draws on innovations from transmedia storytelling, without necessarily building fictional narrative worlds, but assimilating logics such as serialization, collaborative entertainment, a multiplicity of entry points into the story and a profound synergy between texts and paratexts.

### ***Theatre and Digital Liveness: the mediatisation of theatrical presence***

The concept of liveness is one the main areas of experimentation where theatre mediatisation is concerned (Auslander 1999, 2012; Reason 2004; Gemini 2016a). Although media studies' analyses of the cultural significance of "live" predate Philip Auslander's well-known work (Scannell 1989; Thompson 1995), the emphasis placed by the latter on liveness as a phenomenological condition rather than an inherent characteristic of the medium has opened up a branch of studies which, for over twenty years now, has been enquiring into the conditions which enable this peculiar experience to come about.

This more complex and "mobile" definition of liveness furnishes an opportunity to examine how the sense of simultaneous presence is reconfigured according to historical, cultural, media and experiential contexts. In online environments, for example, according to Auslander (2012) we need to refer to a particular quality of liveness as "digital liveness"; this is not generated only by the characteristics of the digital environment or the mere construction of the audience, but has to do with a «[...] specific relation between self and other, a particular way of "being involved with something". The experience of liveness results from our conscious act of grasping virtual entities as live in response to the claims they make on us» (Auslander 2012, p. 10).

This phenomenological framework has been expanded by a series of interesting subsequent analyses. Writing from an audience studies perspective, Barker (2013) identifies liveness as a composite experience made up of at least seven components: 1) the physical co-presence of performer and audience, 2) simultaneousness, 3) the sense of unmediated engagement, 4) the sense of the locality with the experience, 5) the sense of interaction with the performer, 6) the sense of interaction with other members of the audience, 7) the awareness of taking part in a unique event. It is not only in what we understand ontologically as live communication that these conditions come about (Gemini 2016a); hence the possibility of understanding liveness as a dispositif which produces a subject position, which depends on discourses and institutional frames, and which is brought into being through relations with other members of the audience and with other contexts and technologies.

Nell'ottica della mediatizzazione del teatro diviene quindi interessante capire quali dispositivi di liveness siano attivi nell'uso quotidiano dei social media, e, secondo, che tipo di congiunzioni possano instaurarsi con il dispositivo della liveness teatrale. Tale riflessione diviene di ulteriore interesse nel momento in cui assistiamo a quello che alcuni hanno definito come un "ephemeral turn" nei media digitali (Haber 2019): il passaggio dalla permanenza dei contenuti come condizione predefinita (boyd 2010) alle molteplici temporalità di *story* e *live stream*, apre nuove possibilità performative ai social media che necessitano di essere esplorate. L'accelerazione che si è verificata con il lockdown, dovuta alla necessità per gli artisti e le organizzazioni teatrali di arginare, almeno in parte, la chiusura dei teatri e delle manifestazioni dal vivo, segna un passo avanti importante nella ricerca sull'uso dei media sociali da parte della comunicazione teatrale e sulla ridefinizione della relazione con i pubblici di riferimento.

From the viewpoint of theatrical mediatization it is therefore of interest to understand, firstly, which liveness devices are in daily use in the social media, and secondly, what type of relationship is there between digital and theatrical liveness. This line of enquiry becomes the more interesting given that we are witnessing what some have described as an "ephemeral turn" in digital media (Haber 2019): the transition from the permanence of the content as an a priori condition (boyd 2010) to the multiple temporalities of *story* and *live stream* opens up new performing possibilities for the social media which need to be explored. The acceleration which took place during lockdown - owing to the need felt by artists and organizations to respond with damage limitation exercises in the face of theatre closures and the ban on live performance – marks an important step forward in terms of research into both the use of social media in theatrical communication and the redefining of the relationship with the target audience.

### ***Theatre and Social Media: the mediatization of the theatre relationship***

For about a decade now, the use of social media in the theatre world has fuelled a debate as to the possibility of redefining the relationship between performer and audience. According to Hadley (2017) there are currently at least six areas in which we can observe the impact of social media in the field of theatre: 1) in the use of social media for intermedial performances, 2) in the distribution of the performance, 3) in audience development, 4) in criticism, 5) in opportunities for documenting and archiving, and 6) in the performativity involved in the daily use of the social media themselves.

One of the main topics which have shaped the debate on theatre and the social media is the emphasis on the democratizing potential of social media (Sant 2014) in reaching audiences otherwise excluded from the theatre orbit and in reconnecting the theatre discourses to the public sphere (Balme 2014). Research analyzing this social media potential in the theatre field has so far come up with conflicting findings as regards their effective

capacity to make an impact beyond the western canon (O'Neill 2014) and the consolidated networks of enthusiasts (Walmsley 2019).

One of the topics as yet little explored in the literature, but central to the present analysis, concerns the daily online presence – for broadly promotional purposes – of artists and companies. In fact, the development of the social media entails, first and foremost, a thrust towards a type of performativity which features in the narration of personal stories (Page 2012; Lavender 2016), as it does in the management of visibility and celebrity (Marwick 2013). But these aspects need to be supplemented by research showing how theatre artists define their role within a mediatised environment, how they respond to the intense *relational labour* (Baym 2018) involved in finding the most appropriate means of controlling interaction with their audiences.

We can therefore conclude that the mediatisation of theatrical communicative relations, observable through the social media, raises not only the question of opening up to new audiences, but also the question of the labour involved in defining the relationship with the public, a task which artists now find themselves having to face as an integral part of their routine.

## **The Resilience of the Theatre Sector from the Viewpoint of Mediatisation**

The theoretical framework presented here allows us to consider the theatrical activities launched during quarantine in the context of the ongoing mediatisation of society and the performing arts. Artists and those working in the theatre have come up with a vast range of responses: from circulating unpublished archive material to creating ad hoc domestic performances, and from involving enthusiasts in collecting memorials of previous seasons to experimenting with shows requiring videoconferencing services. These attempts to ensure that theatre kept going during lockdown have triggered a general rethink about theatre's relationship with digital technologies and cultures.

However, such reflection has not always been an untroubled process, just as the ventures themselves were launched with absolutely no guarantee of success. There undoubtedly exists a repertoire of research and good practices concerning the use of digital in communicating and distributing theatrical contents, but this is based on the certainty of live performance.

In the present instance, though, an entire sector has found itself in the position of having to produce solutions while operating in a state of total uncertainty due to the absence of its core business. But this is precisely why we think it important for research to focus on this predicament, especially where it reveals an unusual conjunction of formal experimentation and the strategies which the theatre uses to prove relevant and necessary at this particular time.

We shall therefore look at some of these ventures and notice how they are placed with regard to the dynamics governing the mediatisation of the narrative, of the theatrical presence and of the theatre relationship.

Many of the attempts to disseminate online theatrical content, which we have witnessed in recent months, start by challenging the traditional conception of “a work for the theatre” which has hitherto hampered any real theatrical experimentation in a transmedia sense.

The mediatization of theatrical narrative has emerged mainly through the use of *serialization* (Gemini 2016b; Del Gaudio 2017). Serialization seems to have been one of the most frequent ways of thinking of theatre for the web and keeping in touch with audiences. Serial logic has involved not just the periodic publication of contents, but the “mimetic” acquisition of neighbouring formats. This is true of *Decreto Quotidiano*<sup>i</sup>, performed online by the actor and director, Michele Sinisi, who turns to the political format most in vogue in a time of pandemic. Every day around lunchtime, live Facebook coverage from the Sinisi family kitchen updates spectators on life in quarantine, thus applying the theatrical narrative function to the live stream format. Serialization has also played a part in determining the selection and publication of archive material. The Belgian theatre-dance company, Peeping Tom, for example, has shared its show, *A Louer* (2011)<sup>ii</sup>, on YouTube, breaking down the complete work into episodes of a few minutes. Similarly, the Ravenna dance company, Gruppo Nanou, has opted to make the episodic project *Motel (personal affairs)* (2008-2011)<sup>iii</sup>, publicly available on Vimeo.

Mediatized Dramaturgical experimentation has also taken the form of adapting the text to the platform. An example is the Bologna company Teatrino Giullare<sup>iv</sup> with its puppet theatre transposed to slow-motion animation. The Company has embarked on a series of video micro-narratives on Instagram in which the two lead characters of Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days* are physically stranded in an eternal present which echoes and accompanies the current standstill. The Company Fortebraccio Teatro has translated its show, *Cantico dei Cantici*<sup>v</sup>, into a Spotify playlist, rivetting the attention of the listener to Roberto Latini’s vocal and Gianluca Misiti’s musical experimentation, thereby giving the performance an additional dimension.

Finally, there are the forms of *participatory dramaturgy* typical of both transmedia logic and relational art. One example is the public call by the choreographer, Paola Bianchi, for *ELParchivio*<sup>vi</sup>, in which, even during lockdown, the artist kept up the collective exchange of actions and postures with the project participants through the use of messaging apps.

The mediatization of theatrical presence can be observed through experimentation on the different gradations of digital liveness. Redefining a sense of the *hic et nunc* has taken numerous forms which are not limited to the simple acknowledgement of the cultural centrality of live streaming in recent months.

In this direction, one endeavour has been to *construct a sense of the event*, concerning the way in which previously inaccessible archive material has been made temporarily available. In other words, we have witnessed numerous ventures involving artists and theatres sharing materials, choosing however to make them impermanent. This artificial scarcity of availability has served to create a new present for digital performance content, retrieving it from its persistent default state (boyd 2010). Furthermore, we note how the construction of the event has often been accompanied by a scheduling logic, as in the case of the shows programmed by ERT on the channel Regione Emilia-Romagna Lepida

Tv<sup>vii</sup>, or Elvira Frosini e Daniele Timpano's *#Indifferita*, composed through videos of shows available on YouTube for one evening only.

On a different front, the digital pursuit of liveness has combined *interactivity* and *recomposition of a sense of place* through those performances which have made use of web conferencing platforms like Zoom. One example of this is *The Kreisky Test* by the Austrian company Nesterval<sup>viii</sup> which for years has been creating immersive dispositifs which draw heavily on the gaming culture; this project tries out a possible new level of gaming in virtual and synchronic co-presence.

Finally, we find that the mediatisation of the theatre relationship is abundantly apparent whenever artists, theatres and festivals have extended the range of their social media uses. What we have observed at this time is a transition from profiles as a channel of communication to profiles as a forum for experimenting relationally. Think, for example, of DREAM SUQ, an open group created by the Santarcangelo festival on Facebook<sup>ix</sup>. DREAM SUQ is a place where different levels of presence and relationship are produced by sharing how the participants envisage their future world. These spaces for exchanging views are accumulating on the web, calling for the participation of one's own target community, made up not only of spectators and performers but all the other workers who experience this artistic scene at first hand.

What has been outlined here is an attempt to provide at least a partial idea of the mapping which will continue to engage us in the months ahead. The aim will be, not to present a faithful picture of "theatre in the time of Covid-19", but, rather, to identify which of the signs and practices developed in this period will be a staple of the theatre (and digital media) of the near future.

## **Audience Response: theatre spectators online / spectator of online theatre**

The attempt to understand how Italian theatre field (Serino 2018) has reacted to lockdown necessarily entails an inquiry into the response of the audiences. When live performance is concentrated online, what type of audience follows this move? From the spectator's viewpoint, what experiences and conditions correspond to it? What are the relations which theatrical bodies entertain with their audiences when what they normally produce is no longer available? And finally, can the theatre's digital presence prove a means of involving a potential audience? In this case, too, we find ourselves facing issues which did not arise as a result of the current emergency but which have now become more pressing and, at the same time, more readily investigated.

The data so far collected cannot provide an exhaustive answer to these queries since they are questions which can only be observed in a diachronic dimension. That said, a preliminary glance at trends detectable in the social media pages of some major Italian

theatres suggests a number of factors relevant to the discussion. While fully aware that they do not constitute a representative sample of the overall complexity of theatre in Italy, but simply offer a glimpse of that section of Italian theatre which is most in view, we are analyzing profiles on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter e YouTube of the National Theatres, of the Theatres of Major Cultural Interest, and of the Theatre Production Centres, the beneficiaries of the Fondo Unico dello Spettacolo (FUS)<sup>x</sup>, the Italian fund for entertainment.

Of the 33 entities, nearly all of them have at least one Facebook profile (32/33); the next most widely used are Twitter (28/33, though over 16 of these are no longer active), YouTube (27/33 have a channel) and then Instagram (22/33 profiles). Besides being the most used of the social media, Facebook also turned out to be the one with the highest average number of followers (an average of 21.325 fans per page as against Instagram's average of 4528 followers per page) and the most stable and frequent daily activity (a daily average of 0.98 Facebook posts against 0.54 daily tweets. 81.8% of the organizations instituted some specific kind of online activity in response to the shutdown. However, only in some cases do we find an increase in user involvement and number of followers vis-à-vis the average increase in page activity.

Concentrating on Facebook, we find that in March only 45.2% of profiles registered a posting frequency above the annual average, which means that over half the cultural entities recorded a lower rate of online activity during quarantine than during ordinary programming. However, the profiles which opted to increase their rhythm of publication did so very markedly: these profiles recorded an average increase in the number of posts of 138.1%, which indicates a decided change of pace where digital strategy is concerned. We also find that three quarters of the profiles increased their number of video posts.

Activity from fans of the pages increased more markedly as regards the average of likes per post (which increased in 20 of the 32 profiles), comments per post (21 out of 33), and above all shares per post (24 out of 32). If likes per post increased on average by 43.2%, shares went up by 114.0%. Further analysis of the type of content shared will be needed in order to understand if this result indicates the more central role of the audience in disseminating the performance contents of the pages or whether it points to an increase in participation restricted to circulating calls-to-action.

The increase in the number of followers was less sustained than the annual rate. Only six profiles recorded an above average increase in fans and even then, gains were modest. However, it is interesting to note that four of the six profiles which showed an increase belonged to theatres which operate in "children's theatre" or whose published contents during lockdown centred on that area<sup>xi</sup>. In this case, too, we are dealing with a trend which requires further data, but which nonetheless suggests that theatre children's entertainment produces content well able to circulate online and beyond the networks of theatre buffs.

Although we are still at a preliminary stage of analysis, these partial data already enable us to do some initial stocktaking and to justify some future questions. What needs to be

understood first of all are: how these dynamics will evolve over the months to come, and among the various platforms; what type of audience accessed the contents and what type merely showed support at a time of crisis; whether the increased participation should be imputed to a general increase in the use of the social media or whether the theatres really did succeed, albeit marginally, in extending their online production. Then it is important to understand the discrepancies between successful and unsuccessful ventures, and whether success depends on the production conditions at the outset. Finally – and a good rule in any audience study – the quantification of the response must be accompanied by an analysis of the experiences, the motives, the pleasures and the means of access adopted by the spectators at *this* theatre. These questions ought to lead not only to a grasp of the theatre’s response to lockdown, but to a deeper understanding of the offline-online mobility of the theatre audience.

### **Conclusions: research routes on theatre beyond theatres**

In this contribution we have outlined the premises for the research that we are conducting – or that we feel it is necessary to conduct – into theatre during the pandemic. We have concentrated our attention on how to examine the response of Italian theatre, starting with theories of the mediatization of theatre, with initiatives mapping and with an exploratory analysis of trends detectable on the social media pages of the major Italian theatres.

As scholars interested both in relations between the media and performing arts and in the meaning-making processes of live performance audiences, we are convinced of the methodological – and not just episodic need – to discover research routes which connect the study of mediatized theatrical forms to a sociological inquiry into the theatre world. With theatre now off limits as a physical venue, research is urged to pay two-fold attention to theatre as *langue* and *parole*, focusing both on the variations to abstract artistic conventions and on transformations in the lives of those who create and those who resort to theatre.

At this point we should like to suggest three research routes which lead in this direction and which, we believe, are able to generate further questions.

The first is about how the examples of online theatre observed during lockdown relate to ongoing mediatization processes. As mentioned in our short analysis, it is important to free ourselves from a perspective which sees these initiatives simply as solutions in time of emergency and to consider them instead in terms of their continuity with the repertoires which preceded them and their potential to survive into the future as assimilated practices. So, what are the artistic and media genealogies which they draw upon? What gradation of “liveness” do they present? What kind of liveness to they engage with? How will the forms which have been tried out at this time survive the selective pressure of future scenarios?

The second research route examines the position of theatre in the current artistic, communicative and social environment. As soon as theatre vacates its ordained place and moves into the digital environment, it finds itself competing directly with all the other contents. The success of the children’s theatre ventures suggests that there were users

outside the theatre orbit who nonetheless resorted to that source of entertainment. Can theatrical entities therefore have a role in the absence of the theatre? In a digital context, what can theatre express which is specific to it? How have artists and operators redefined their work and their social role during the closure? Can theatre regain its voice in the public sphere as Christopher Balme wished (2014)?

The third route focuses on the audience. It is crucial to understand *what the theatre audience did online* – how it continued to indulge its enthusiasm and support theatre – but also to identify the *audience which followed online theatre*. In both cases there needs to be close cooperation between quantitative and qualitative methods: if, on the one hand, it is a question of determining when and to what extent the initiatives have worked, on the other, it is important to probe the experiences of the audience in that situation. How important was theatrical content in the spectators' choices? How did the absence of a physical context like the traditional theatre affect the spectators' experiences? In what ways might attention have had to adjust to the new conditions?

It is clear that such a multitude of queries exceeds our current research capabilities, though we should like to feel that these lines of inquiry will fit in with the work of other research teams. Basically, our hope is that “theatre challenged by Covid-19” will swiftly move from being a framework for discussion dictated by the circumstances to being one among several case studies when investigating the digital transformation of the performing arts.

## Biographical Notes

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## Note

<sup>i</sup> Michele Sinisi, *Decreto Quotidiano* (2020):

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpJX4GrgtF7X7J23eFZFjLw>

<sup>ii</sup> Peeping Tom, *A Louer* (2011). Su YouTube dal 22 aprile è rimasto solo il video integrale dello spettacolo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLD7XKcaRi0>

<sup>iii</sup> Gruppo Nanou, *Motel (personal affairs)* (2008-2011): <https://vimeo.com/channels/motelproject>

<sup>iv</sup> Teatrino Giullare, *Diario dei nostri giorni felici* (2020): <https://www.instagram.com/teatrinogiullare/?hl=it>

<sup>v</sup> Fortebraccio Teatro, *Cantico dei cantici* (2017):

<https://open.spotify.com/album/0lppJiMgHKcoqwXaiXAbgh?si=v6b-enulS0Sr3z3kDy49pw>

<sup>vi</sup> Paola Bianchi, *ELP Archivio* (2020): <https://www.facebook.com/ELPproject/>

<sup>vii</sup> Regione Emilia Romagna, ERT, Lepida Tv: <http://www.lepida.tv>

<sup>viii</sup> Nesterval, The Kreisky-Test (2020): <https://brut-wien.at/en/Programme/Calendar/Programm-2020/April-2020/Nesterval-Der-Kreisky-Test>

<sup>ix</sup> Festival di Santarcangelo, DREAM SUQ: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1086680995021510/>

<sup>x</sup> For this preliminary analysis, we made use of the online tool, *Fanpage Karma* (<https://www.fanpagekarma.com/>) which allowed us to compare the principal metrics among pages on different social media. In order to investigate trends in online audience responses to the initiatives put forward by Italian theatre, we started with the large "hubs" - trying to look at those theatrical institutions with a broad and consolidated following, expecting that these would be the ones with the greater ability (and need) to produce digital content in the wake of the lockdown. One criterion for inclusion in the sample - which seemed to take into account size, diversity and geographical distribution - was that the theatres should have been beneficiaries of the Fondo Unico dello Spettacolo (FUS), the fund for entertainment. For this exploratory analysis, it was decided to use the beneficiaries of the three-year period 2015-2017, rather than 2018-2020, since the latter are more heterogeneous and would have made the comparison less indicative. The period selected for data collection was from 1 January 2019 to 31 March 2020.

<sup>xi</sup> These four are La Fondazione Teatro Ragazzi e Giovani di Torino, il Teatro del Buratto di Milano, Teatro Testoni Ragazzi di Bologna e La Piccionaia di Vicenza.