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POST-PANDEMIC THEATRE: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE LITERARY
FORM THROUGH THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

by

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE LITERARY FORM THROUGH THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

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The digital landscape has had a significant impact on literature and the way in which it is consumed, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift towards digital operations has enabled the rise of digital literary forms, such as audiobooks and electronic literature, which have opened up new possibilities for interpretation and pedagogy. At the same time, this literary transition to technology has enabled the revival of oral traditions in literature, bringing a new level of immersion and engagement to the reading experience. This thesis explores the impact of the digitized productions on the performance of various Western writers, such as Shakespeare, Euripides, and Strindberg as well as the production considerations of Houston's own Alley Theatre. Through the use of digital media and multimodal compositions, the digital landscape has enabled the creation of new and innovative aural and visual modes of experiencing Shakespeare's works and has forever altered the production considerations of the local theatre and other similar institutions. As we move further into the digital age, it is important to consider the ways in which these changes are shaping our experiences and interactions with literature, theatre, and the world around us.

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CHAPTER I: THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

On March 11, 2020, the way in which people operated in the world changed forever. Throughout the world, countries, companies, schools, and livelihoods shut down in a state of emergency as the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic that forced drastic societal changes. Practically overnight, governments and organizations issued orders that limited large gatherings of people and confined many to their homes until further notice. In response, people began to move their interactions for work, family, and entertainment to digital channels. At the beginning of this shift, I, like many others, experienced a grieving period not only for the lives being lost but for the loss of the way of life to which I had grown so accustomed. Aching for connection and expression, I turned to digital spaces wherein I could congregate and collaborate with like-minded individuals remotely. Here, I found a wealth of resources: book clubs, museums, art exhibitions, and theatre. I rehearse this story to state simply that the shift towards digital operations has brought to light the reasons for believing in the empowering nature that digital spaces can offer including, but certainly not limited to, “access; value for money; portability and ease; ...potential for social education...; the bringing together of a multifaceted audience; its sweep and intimacy; its ability to simulate reality and its unparalleled capacity to prompt our brains” (McMurtry 5).

The digital landscape, and its effects on literature, have been a progressively hot topic of discussion since the 1960s. As computers were becoming increasingly more affordable, academics became intrigued by the changes they would incite. In 1962, communication theorist Marshall McLuhan became internationally famous for his studies on the effect of mass media on behavior and thought, stating that “all media are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his

environment” (McLuhan 131). Due to this fundamental change in the way we intake information, media directly affects how we learn. Though it has been an important concept for decades, with the onset of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the movement into isolation, digital media has become an increasingly integral part of our lives. Digital literary forms such as audiobooks, electronic literature and theatre, and videogames have given rise to new and innovative theoretical, interpretive, creative, and pedagogical possibilities. Every new medium and tool has changed the art of writing and the text itself (Micunovic 1). The digitalization of literature, and more specifically theatre, creates a new sociocultural perspective and challenges the means, practices, and effects the new media will have on how works are consumed and interacted with by their audiences. Because of these changes, the exploration of digital literary forms has never been as paramount as it is today, calling for research and observations that bring digital and traditional literary scholarship into conversation with one another to progress the field in a way that meets the needs and mindsets of our rapidly changing world.

Prior to the pandemic, one such digital transition that has made a profound change in the literary world is the onset of broadcast, streamed, or recorded theatre. Theatre has always been a unique form because it is both literary and performance based; currently, in the new digital-era, the most prominent is the streamed video, such as the National Theatre at Home who provides recordings of their productions which can be accessed through a variety of applications such as Amazon or Roku TV, or recorded audio drama, which present fully audio renditions of theatrical productions and operate in a similar way to many audiobooks but instead utilize a variety of actors and sound effects to produce a more theatrical effect. These pre-pandemic explorations, which used digital means to both disseminate and begin rethinking a play’s construction, set the stage for digitally constructed productions as companies were forced to rethink the practice

through a completely virtual lens. Both the pre-pandemic audio dramas and recorded productions as well as the digitally born works that arose as a result serve as primary examples of the tensions between the “virtual” and the “real” and its inevitable digital future. Just as the internet serves as a tool to provide a collaborative and connecting space, theatre transports the audience into a new and imagined world wherein they are able to experience ephemeral tragedy and comedy exposing them to a diverse range of truths and voices. Because of these inherent similarities in form, digital theatre is a prime and relevant example of the advantages and weaknesses of the new landscape. The technology used in this medium is rapidly creating new norms for interacting with the world, raising the question: what will it bring to the concept of what theatre is and how performance can be experienced?

The digital landscape is moving at an almost incomprehensibly fast speed causing much of the current research on the transposition of theatre to the virtual arena to be “both fragmented and sparse” (McMurtry 4). Many critics often pose the elitist concept that theatre loses its spirit—that essence and feeling of “live-ness” and human connection that separate its performances from other forms of storytelling—when it moves away from a localized stage, stating that “theatre’s great threat [can be] presumed to be digital culture” because “the virtual and the real [are in] opposition... [and are] ...an inadequate substitution for ‘in-person’ assembly” (Walsh 6, 7-12). Because of this, many critics assert that theatre without in-person interaction creates a wall that “destroys the [organic] dialogue between the stage and the audience” (Nemchenko 472). It is possible that the experiential and organic interaction crucial to the authenticity of traditional theatre could be lost not only due to the transposition and adaptation processes it must undergo, but also because of the physical separation of the performance from the audience, the actors from one another, or the actors from the stage. Despite these fears, critics such as

William Irwin, Chiel Kattenbelt, Leslie McMurtry, and Adam Hammond, among others, recognize both the creative possibilities of virtual formats as well as the growing bond between theatre and the digital world demonstrates the positive impact technological developments can have on the “perception of audiences to the works of...contemporary theatre and performance-makers” (Kattenbelt 19).

When examining the implementation of digital forms of theatre, it is important to consider transmediality, or the “change (transposition, transition, etc.) from one medium to another” (Kattenbelt 23). The very real fear that “specific features of the source medium [may] become lost in the process” is a pertinent one when considering what is lost and what if anything takes the place of what is lost. Transposing the traditional physical notion of theatre into a new medium risks recontextualizing or losing the original content completely (Kattenbelt 24-5). Recorded theatre already exists; how could the live component then change the form of the production when operating in a solely virtual environment? One answer is that the new medium for theatre can take a tribute-focused approach to show respect to the physical stage and imitate its unique qualities through virtual means, conserving its values by maintaining a sense of representation, liveness, and interaction within its simulated spaces.

Notwithstanding the vastly differing opinions regarding the potential effects of digitization, critics do agree that, for better or for worse, a great deal of art and media consumption is now taking place on personal technology and “it is...critical that we pay attention to the past and present [of digital productions] in order to divine its future” (McMurtry 4). Early attempts of digital transposition prior to the pandemic are “not as neutral as might first be assumed, and [are], instead, a form of adaptation [and within this process theatre itself] becomes a new medium, one with its own ontology and, resultantly, its own unique mode of audience perception” (Hitchman 183). Many of the

critics reluctant to accept a new form of theatre have “argued that you could never capture the heartbeat of a live production;” however, the success of theatre on the digital platform “shows that critics’ fear of massification and mechanical reproduction...proved to be unfounded” (Nemchenko 469). In fact, the digital realm grants affordances that distinguish it from its analogous predecessors (Hammond 11). It offers a “liberating form of dramatic expression” which creates the potential for digital productions to be “the most democratic, of media” (McMurtry 5). The theatre industry needs to look at the demand for digitization. This thesis argues that moving theatrical productions, at least in some capacity, to a digital space provides access and exposure to the enriching worlds they make and maintains the feeling of liveness and interplay that the theatre creates, and the digital simulates.

The shift to digital consumption has allowed for directors to start disseminating digital performances *en masse*. A lot of these productions, such as the L.A. Theatre Works (LATW) audio dramas at first mimicked any other form of recorded theatrical work but the company’s play with the media demonstrated the potential impact of early attempts at the digitized theatre form (as explored in Chapter Two). However, once the pandemic hit, people with their newfound digital literacy, were forced to go virtual. This caused a self-conscious turn within theatrical companies who, in this crisis, still needed to focus on their businesses. The pandemic took theatre companies' previous way of work from them calling for a redefinition and reconstruction of the stage within the digital space. Discussed in Chapter Two and Three respectively, theatre companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and Alley Theatre produced works that signal a significant shift in what theatre is, fundamentally changing its effect and trajectory. Theatre is a simulation of a perceived “real” and within the digital space that perception can stretch into untraversed creative territory. In this thesis, the positive effects of

theatre's digitalization will far outweigh the negative. I argue that its transposition into this new medium will lead to increased innovation and ingenuity creating an alternate, but equally powerful, relationship between the audience and theatre's new form; one that eliminates the physical stage and causes a cohabitation between the players and the observers in the live virtual space.

To best transpose the medium, theatre companies and actors alike must familiarize themselves with the new digital stage. The intersection of theatre and the digital space, or intermediality, "assumes an in-between space...from which the mutual affects take place," in this case, an intersection of the virtual nature of the digital and the physical aspects of traditional notions of theatre (Kattenbelt 26). The digital space grants theatre new ways by which to immerse spectators into an illusory, representative world to create a complete and unique experience. When theatre companies put on virtual productions that are self-aware and self-consciously interacting with the medium, they are forced to reinterpret the concept of the stage, simulating its qualities and function in inventive ways. Essentially, the new medium offers new ways to engage and interact with storytelling, opening the door for a variety of new performative and even pedagogical techniques.

This thesis places its research in relation to the modern concept of electracy, a term devised by Gregory Ulmer to "distinguish the emerging apparatus [digital media] from the established one" by describing the skills necessary to exploit its unique communicative properties (Ulmer 28). Electracy denotes that digital media can be used as a tool to reach the full expressive potential "beyond [the] organic capacity" of a purely physical or material production (Ulmer *Electracy and Pedagogy*). Within this framework, I thus pose the question: What dimensions could digital theatre, and the varying ways that dramatic texts can be translated to digital media, bring to improving the literary form, or

even to forms of audience literacy? Will this shift cause a fundamental change in the types of rhetoric that are used in our society? Will the ability to create more sensorial experiences, and play with perspective, improve the reader's identification with and connection to the story and characters? These are all questions that are on the horizon for the industry as it reluctantly relinquishes its tight hold on the preservation of its conservative past and catapults itself into the inevitable technological and interactive future.

This first chapter has served to introduce digital theatre: what it is, its possible place in the world as technology becomes increasingly intertwined in our lives, and the benefits of creating multimodal digital performances for people to consume and enjoy. By discussing the changing landscape that began with the progression and accessibility of technology and has accelerated and intensified since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have explored some of the current research and proposed applications for digital theatre as it begins to incorporate audio, video, and interactivity into its new hybridized and multimodal formats. The provided critical context creates a lens through which digital theatre and its modern applications can now be analyzed.

Chapter Two – “To Look or To Listen, That Is the Question: Shakespeare and Modality” - expands on this foundation by examining the tools and applications that theatre companies have engaged with to create the feeling of live-ness and community within the digital landscape. It surveys how the mode of delivery is affected by the transition to digital formats and what that looks like in both pre- and post-pandemic conditions. I focus on two prominent theatres that have incorporated a variety of digitally infused and distributed dramas before and since the COVID-era programming: L.A. Theatre Works (LATW) in Los Angeles and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in Stratford-upon-Avon. In Chapter Two, I compare and contrast a tragedy recorded prior to

the pandemic with a comedy produced under the COVID-19 restrictions, elucidating their formal effects on the online experience. For the pre-pandemic control, I analyze the effect of transposed and recorded sound in LATW's 2011 audio drama of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, directed by Martin Jarvis. For the exploratory counterpart, I examine the RSC's 2021 live-streamed, motion-captured production of *Dream*, directed by Pippa Hill and Robin McNicholas, to consider the impact of the virtually constructed visual effects.

Chapter Three – “All the Internet's A Stage: The Alley Theatre's Pandemic Response” – investigates how the producers and performers of Houston's own Alley Theatre have pivoted to digital theatre. As one of America's leading non-profit theaters that focuses on both quality performances and educational programs—which include talks, events, and workshops that aim to generate interest and promote knowledge of their art form—the Alley Theatre Company is the ideal case study for examining the effects of the theatre's technological transformation. I examine their digital offerings to see how the digital space has prompted a rethinking of theatrical productions including from George Orwell's *1984*, Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, Euripides' *Medea*, Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, to multiple works by August Strindberg. Interviews with different positions reveal the advantages and disadvantages of the theatre's transition.

In the Conclusion, titled “The Way Forward,” I highlight several topics within the thesis that I, or other interested parties, could expand and focus on in future research. Technology has become such an integral part of much of the population's lives. Investigating the actor/ audience interaction and the purpose of the stage as theatre moves into a digital space offers a wealth of information regarding approaches to transposing work into this new landscape.

Dramatic texts are being brought into the digital realm. Exploring the impact that this will have on the future of readers is paramount to understanding the future of literary

texts and their readership. Theatre allows people to step into another's shoes and witness a new point of view allowing for reflection, introspection, and cultivation of empathy and cultural understanding. Digital theatre is an intersection of "live" actors and audiences that creates a hybridized form and revitalizes theatre. This new space both allows for flexibility and retains the essential qualities of theatre, human connection and imagination. Allowing traditional forms and digital theatre to converge and coalesce extends the reach of the performance, expands the audiences' concept of place, and creates a new framework for global, democratic, and art-centric communities.

CHAPTER II:
TO LOOK OR TO LISTEN, THAT IS THE QUESTION:
SHAKESPEARE AND MODALITY

Theatre's mediatization in recent years has "resulted in new forms of representation, ... strategies, ... [and as a result] new modes of perception" (Kattenbelt 21). Though the advancement of technology has played a major role in the progression of theatre over the course of the twentieth century, its current innovations and integrations are "playing a [much more] prominent part in the development of arts and media" (Kattenbelt 21). We should therefore consider the different sensory appeals and applications when working with the diverse digital form. In this chapter, I examine both pre-pandemic isolated mediatization attempts as well as the more experimental work during its restrictions to reveal the implications of transitioning theatre to the digital space.

The examples explored in this chapter focus solely on Shakespeare productions to provide an opportunity to analyze the mode of delivery's effects on an author that has maintained relevance to modern culture for centuries. Shakespeare creates a "human dimension [that] involves an intimate connection [between] *us*, who study him... [and the characters] who elicit *empathy*" (P. Cohen 3) Because of this quality, Shakespeare's plays have a unique openness to them, an organic nature that inspires thought and invites reinvention. Shakespeare was himself a master of adaptation, so it is not only apt but appropriate that his plays have been reworked endlessly and will now serve as familiar ground to better understand the shift in theatre's form.

While each modality brings a unique layer, I will take a deep dive into two primary modes of experiencing theatre—the aural and the visual—examining how they echo and enhance performances when transposed. Audio lays the foundation for emotion

and experience and as such will serve as an excellent control, demonstrating the early attempts and subsequent acclimation to the virtual stage. Before diving into the play, it is important to understand what an audio drama is and what it can offer theatrical performance.

Aurality in Martin Jarvis's *Macbeth*

Audio drama is a purely acoustic performance that makes use of dialogue, music, and sound effects to assist the listener in imagining the elements of the story; it presents “not *a* theater of the mind, but *the* theater of the mind” (Verma 1). This bonds the listener to the story in ways visual forms cannot because “the more we work on making our own images, the more powerfully attached we become to them” (Douglas 27). While listening to an audio drama, “the mind [not only] devises [images that increase our attachment, but also] outcomes based on [the] sound combinations,” resulting in a “centripetal” effect that “pulls you in” (McMurtry 36-37). Audio dramas can impact their audience in ways that lend themselves to a mode that is more experiential demonstrating the first attempts at creating a simulated, rather than physical, space for performance.

Macbeth utilizes sound in a multifaceted approach to construct an aural stage. It is a tale “full of sound and fury” (5.5.26), a play full of the clamor of war, the haunting calls of nature, orchestral flourishes, and a diversity of voices. In the play, the soundscape—a term coined by R. Murray Schafer describing the connection between the acoustic environment and the perceiver of that environment—provides an essential component to understanding Macbeth’s descent into nihilistic rage and our emotional responses to it. This, paired with Ulmer’s concept of electracy mentioned in Chapter One, demonstrates the opportunity for digitally rendered sounds to be used to enhance the desired “mood atmosphere” (*Electracy and Pedagogy*). While the mind may be consumed with the imaginative terror of a narrative, the feelings of uneasiness, anxiety,

and fear caused by the implementation of sound set the tone and exponentially elevate the performance. Martin Jarvis's pre-pandemic 2011 audio drama for L.A. Theatre Works (LATW) demonstrates how early attempts at theatre's digitization enhance the experience of the play.

In creating the soundscape for *Macbeth*, Shakespeare, and his playing company, would utilize a variety of sounds to construct acoustics that would align with and build upon the framework that the text prescribed. Most off-stage and acoustic direction that was given was prompted through dialogue or noted in the stage directions, such as "I hear horses" (3.3.11) or "*Thunder and lightning*" (1.1.s.d.), indicating the importance of a specific sound's placement and timing within a production. While practical effects were used in early modern productions of the play, the digital arena offers an abundance of different sound effects that can be used to create a new virtual stage and amplify this previously ambient effect. Jarvis's *Macbeth* uses sound strategically to reflect themes, create tension, and maintain the illusion of setting throughout the performance. This demonstrates that digital transposition can honor its ancestral roots and acclimate audiences to the new virtual arena.

As Bruce Smith notes in *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England*, "plays tend to begin with a high-intensity sound" (244), creating an acoustic space that sets the tone for the subject matter and sonically signifies the start of the performance. Shakespeare, and subsequently Jarvis, begins the play with the first textually structuring sound, "*Thunder and lightning*," followed by the entrance of the three witches (1.1.s.d.). This stage direction is commonly used to signify "more than just weather... 'thunder' alone, is associated with supernatural events, to figures of devils, spirits, witches, magicians and gods" (Dessen and Thomson 230-231). This sound is all the direction given regarding the location of the opening scene; however, the acoustic prompt signals

the need for a supernatural space. Each subsequent entrance of the witches is pronounced by the device: “Thunder. Enter the three Witches” (1.1.s.d.); “Thunder. Enter the three Witches, meeting Hecate” (3.5.s.d.); “Thunder. Enter the three Witches” (4.1.s.d.). Through the direct tie between the acoustic, the witches, and their ominous plot that will usher Macbeth to his demise, Shakespeare “constructs a soundscape that exploits existing cultural associations of thunder and the supernatural, tightening the link with every appearance of the witches” (Tribble 78). Jarvis’s production uses a more sustained opening sound to illustrate the imaginative stage and set the tone. The very first sound the audience member hears is a growing ambient amalgamation of noise akin to a sustained ghostly breath layered with light crackles. This indicates both a haunting quality and intentional distortion that irks the listener. As the sounds slowly grow in intensity, they create a simulation that the audience is entering the scene—much like a panning or zooming feature would work in the film to establish their presence as a witness to the plot. Here, the sound is interspersed with a whooshing of the wind, ambient nighttime noise, hoots of a nearby owl, and light maniacal laughter that turns into malicious cackles, create the setting and foreshadow plot points that are marshaled by the witches. Jarvis’s translation of Shakespeare’s line “Thunder and lightning” (1.1.s.d.) weaves a telling fabric from the onset of the production. The production creates an impactful soundscape that takes time to set the scene and modernizes establishing sounds to transform the visual interpretations.

The second structuring sound is the alarum, which Dessen and Thomson’s *A Dictionary of Stage Dictions* describes as a “call to arms in the form of sound produced offstage before and during a battle helping to create an atmosphere of conflict and confusion” (3). This may recall battle drums or even announcing trumpets. It is a common device used throughout diverse cultures that immediately signifies battle.

Shakespeare notes the sound in the second scene of the play: “Alarum within. Enter King [Duncan], Malcolm, Donalbain, Lennox, with attendants, meeting a bleeding Captain” (1.2.s.d.). The sound not only places the audience in the setting but signifies the change of scene and tonal shift of the play. Jarvis interprets Act One Scene Two that begins “what bloody man is that?” (1.2.1), as one of a military gathering using a composite of muted male conversation, clinking of swords, and battle cries. Illustrating the same tone as the note “alarum” in the scene, this replacement sound marks the entrance of the military and indicates the intensity of battle. Jarvis uses the alarum throughout the play in times of military involvement, and notably utilizes an amplified version in the final scenes of the play “which register the rapid changes in fortune characteristic of Shakespearean battle scenes” that are “invariably marked by the martial sounds” of war (Tribble 78).

The final structuring sound is the flourish produced by the hautboy. A flourish serves as an accent to mark a “regal, ceremonial space” such as the entrance of nobility (Tribble 78). Because the sound is specifically used for this purpose, it signals “shifts in power” that occur within the plot (Tribble 78). While flourishes are typically produced by trumpets, fiddles, and flutes, they can also be produced by the instrument known as the hautboy. A hautboy is an archaic form of the modern-day oboe, but with a wider, less refined range. Because the hautboy produced sounds in “treble, alto, and bass” the sound of the instrument could convey a wide variety of “moods and meanings” (Tribble 78). Wes Folkerth, in his work *The Sounds of Shakespeare*, calls attention to the hautboy’s “dramatic possibilities” claiming that while other critics have associated the “oboes [hautboys] and the ominous” the effect is far more supernatural and sinister (Folkerth 41-42). He claims that hautboys “would have been heard in the dead of night and early morning hours” and thereby would have “accompanied people’s sleep to waking” making

it a “signature sound of this liminal state of consciousness” (Folkerth 42). The audience first hears the sound as Duncan arrives at the castle in Act One Scene Six. Foreshadowing Macbeth’s permanent residency in this liminal space between wakefulness and sleep as a man who will “sleep no more” (2.2.39). The hautboy adds a haunting meaning but does not aid interpretations because modern audiences have no context for the instrument. Therefore, Jarvis replaces the hautboy with other sounds of nobility that his audience can recognize—such as more formal intonation in the actor’s voice or the sound of incoming horses. To mark the feelings of liminality, the sound is at times re-envisioned as a low-frequency tone—a note echoing a deep whisper in the wind that is most noticeable in the breaks between lines—that can sustain within the background of speech while infecting the audience’s mind with feelings of uneasiness. Our brains have evolved to detect abnormalities in sounds to assess our environments. When such sounds are used, listeners become acutely attuned to the fact that something is wrong or that danger is nearby.

The structuring sounds construct a mental stage that frames *Macbeth*, forming baselines throughout the play that establish a tonal norm and contextualize the audio drama. This marks the first movements of theatre’s transition into the digital world. By allowing audience members to have a direct connection with the actors they are placed in the middle of the performance, processing the dialogue and sound of each actor or effect in turn. Because the digital auditory space creates a new venue, Jarvis also uses aural effects throughout the play to place the audience in the appropriate headspace, guiding their mind’s eye in manners similar to visual cues on a physical stage.

On the sonically simulated stage, the soundscape creates three notable sounds—the bell, the knocking, and the cry of women—that provide insight into Macbeth’s mental state through the observance of his reactions to them. The sound of the bell marks the beginning of Macbeth’s sonic journey, wherein the noise of the play echoes his

psychological state. In Act Two Scene One, Macbeth “bids [Lady Macbeth] ...strike upon the bell” (2.1.31-32) to signal that it is time to kill King Duncan. This sound marks his first step down his tragic path. Here, Shakespeare is using a symbolically significant sound, “a bell rings” (2.1.s.d.), to immediately mark the solemn importance of the event and conjure the collective knowledge of the church knell which serves to announce a person’s death. This sound “gains its extraordinary power through contrast with silence...exploit[ing] the association of sound and fear, the capacity of sound to startle” (Tribble 79). To create this effect, Jarvis uses a high-pitched chime in E flat minor. This note makes the bell sound “‘muted,’ ‘deadened’ and ‘sorrowful’” (McClelland 26) resonating with the soliloquy’s tone. The bell/ bellman is one of the “crucial sounds to which Macbeth’s bodily response is noted” as he, and consequently we, are “invisibly led by the sound” (Tribble 80); “the bell invites me” (2.1.63). In the audio drama, Macbeth’s Act Two Scene Three soliloquy is accompanied by a faint yet noticeable background noise of that same ghostly breath. The actor, James Marsters, seems at first nonchalant in his intonation when he notices the dagger before him. However, as he reaches for the dagger— “Come, let me clutch thee” (2.1.34)—he audibly gasps when he realizes that it is not tangible: “I have thee not” (2.1.35). He becomes, both in his tone and language, more inquisitive, curious about the apparition. However, when he draws his own dagger and the apparition guides him, his voice, and the ambient sound that accompanies, change. He again gasps, “Thou marshall’st me the way that I was going” (2.1.42) and the ghostly breath sharpens into a higher pitched series of distant chimes that allude both to the signal of the bell and, due to their pitch which provides an ethereal quality, the trance that he is now under. As Macbeth acknowledges that “There’s no such thing” and that “It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes” (2.1.47-49), signaling some sense within him, the chimes cease, and the ghostly breath returns accompanied by

crickets, a common sound that signals the time. However, when the bell tolls, Macbeth gains a sense of resignation in his voice, accepting the foul deed he is about to commit: “I go, and it is done” (2.1.63). Within the scene, the audience is brought into not only the mood of the play but the inner thoughts of Macbeth as he is about to commit murder. The audience begins to form a sympathetic bond with him as he is marshaled forward by the apparition which is accompanied by the sounds of the witches which indicate a loss of power. Despite his recognition of its intangibility and the sinister forces at work, the audience follows him as he continues without resistance.

The second notable sound that signals the listener occurs in Act Two Scene Two with the “Knock within” (2.2.s.d.). When horrific deeds are performed, “the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced” (De Quincey), creating a pocket of time suspended from reality. Both the characters and audience become caught in this break, raising their awareness and tensions. However, “when the deed is done” the space “passes away like a pageantry in the clouds” (De Quincey). As Macbeth reenters, he exclaims “Who’s there? What ho?... Didst thou hear a noise?” (2.2.8-14). These “short lines convey the hyper-alertness generated by the dead night and the knowledge of the deed,” and illustrate his sensitivity to his environment (Tribble 81). As he attempts to settle back into his new sense of maddened normalcy, “the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced” (De Quincey). This signals that the “human has made its reflux upon the fiendish” and has returned to the ordinary “goings-on of the world” which make the person “profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them” (De Quincey). In this state, unable to fully distinguish the actions of the king’s men from his imaginings of their words, a “knock within” (2.2.s.d.) is heard; Macbeth responds “Whence is that knocking? / How is’t with

me when every noise appalls me?" (2.2.55-56). The knock increases in frequency through Scene Two and into Scene Three, heard ten times in the audio drama.

In Jarvis's fidelitous production, the Macbeths in the scene are noticeably on edge; their speech is more rapid, and jumpy—abruptly stopping and continuing at irregular intervals. Macbeth, who was merely reflective in the scene prior, has now lost his composure. His voice shakes as he looks at the remnants of his crime exclaiming to his wife, "My hands, this is a sorry sight" — interpreted from the stage direction—"looking at his hands" (2.2.s.d.). He takes shallow breaths between each line thereafter, indicating his state of shock. When the knocking interrupts their exchange, it startles the actors and the audience, who, aurally amidst the scene, have been a vicarious witness to both the premeditation and aftermath of the crime. To illustrate, Jarvis creates a distinct sound—a steady and forceful series of bangs on a dense wooden surface—evoking feelings of urgency. The small but notable distinction can be heard in the tones produced by the knock. While the gate noted in the text would have a higher, metallic sound, the wooden door produces a deeper thump which is more recognizable to the contemporary listener who can more easily associate the pounding at a door with the jarring onset of a sudden and rising sense of anxiety. Though this change may appear minor, the collective response to a familiar sound increases the intensity of its effect. The audio drama heightens this experience further through its contrast between silence and sound exhibiting its ability to startle. Jarvis's decision to modernize the sounds intimately impacts the listener who can compare their reaction more easily to Macbeth's, strengthening the bond between them.

Macbeth's appalled reaction to the knocking is understandable; however, his response to the equally jarring and viscerally affecting sound "Cry within of women" in Act Five Scene Five is indicative of his declined mental state. The scene begins with the

familiar framing sound of drums signaling the impending battle between Macbeth and Macduff. The cry pierces Macbeth's preparations; he asks, "What is that noise?" to which Seyton answers "It is the cry of women" (5.5.7-8). Here, in contrast to the knocking, "Macbeth muses precisely on his lack of somatic response to the sound" (Tribble 82). He states:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.
The time has been my senses would have cooled
To hear a night-shriek, and the fell of my hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in't. I have supped full with horrors.
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me (5.5.9-14).

The "cry of women" that Macbeth adeptly referred to as the "night-shriek" dissociates the audience from Macbeth. He comments that he no longer retains the "taste of fears", and that time has made "direness" too familiar to incite any "start" in him. The "very absence of the [expected] physical reaction to sound measures the effect of successive murders on Macbeth" and unlike the knocking "it cannot penetrate [and] lacks the power to startle" (Tribble 82-83). Jarvis plays with insouciance to set the aural tone for the scene. To do this, he foregoes the drums. Marsters begins by angrily yelling, "Hang out our banner on the outward walls" (5.5.1) illustrating his increased dread of the witches' prophecy as it nears. This is immediately followed by a series of distant high-pitched screams. The actor responds with irritation in his voice stating, "What is that noise?" (5.5.7), emphasizing the word "noise" to indicate a separation between himself and the piercing fear in their voices. Jarvis makes the screams soft and fleeting to contrast Macbeth's clear indifference. The audience, having traveled alongside Macbeth's tragic journey, now

witness his despondency and can now fully comprehend the near completion of his descent; Macbeth has lost a key component of what it means to be human: empathy.

The effect and affect of Jarvis's soundscape grants insight into Macbeth's deeds that pierced and then muted his senses. The audience is able "to hear what Macbeth hears," and is thusly "led into his inner passage of passion that displays the drama of fear and grief" (Lin 132). With each sound, the audience is transported into the scene; with each noise, the audience gains further knowledge of the characters through their relative reactions to them. Macbeth's later relationship to sound ultimately distances the listener from him and his growing nihilism. Macbeth's musings are eventually reduced to senseless noise, as he later states: "It is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/ Signifying nothing" (5.5.25-27). The intimate experience underscores the importance of aural mode as both a medium and a primer for audiences to experience theatre in future digital performances.

Within the new platform, the influence of sound on space becomes more evident, just as the space in which the sound is perceived impacts its delivery. Its soundscape creates an intermedial space that echoes the text, allowing for, as mentioned in Chapter One, "increased creativity and innovation" (Micunovic 2). Jarvis's *Macbeth* illustrates the first steps toward this change as audiences learn how to shift to and interpret the digital sphere to partake in performance. The nature of the audio drama form serves as a precursor for what is to come and prepares audiences for future digital work created, performed, and experienced virtually.

Visuality in the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Dream*

The visual aspect of a production adds another digitally communicative layer. The "presence of [the live] performer...exposed to [the audience's gaze] is...considered to be a fundamental characteristic of the theatre event, and crucial to the strong effects it can

produce” (Bleeker 14). Because of the mutual understanding that forms between the audience and the performers, theatre “presents the object *par excellence* for an analysis of visuality” (Bleeker 2). Dennis Kennedy, in his investigation of performance highlights the importance of giving “freedom [to the creators] to redraw Shakespeare according to the demands of the modern world” (Kennedy xxii, 165). Since the digital revolution, the potential of theatrical visuality has increased exponentially. Due to their hyper-realistic properties, digital images have stronger transportive and striking effects that serve to stimulate the audiences’ senses and create new simulated relationships between the actors, stage, and active spectators.

Royal Shakespeare Company’s (RSC) 2021 production of *Dream* is both inspired by Shakespeare’s play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and developed deliberately in response to the pandemic, playing innovatively with the concepts of setting, narrative, and remote audience interactivity. Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* “opens the possibility of examining afresh what playgoers see when watching the play” (Farabee 15), so it is apt that *Dream* illustrates the potential of digitally rendered visual perceptions. The RSC states on their website, “*Dream* isn't a full performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but it is a magical, live, online performance set in the world of the play” (RSC “First Look at the Unreal Forest”); “it is ‘created from the DNA of the play’” (Lamb “Theatre Review”). The 50-minute streamed production “fus[es] live theatre with motion-capture technology, 3D graphics, and interactive gaming techniques” that let the audience remotely guide Puck through a virtual forest amidst a tumultuous storm to create a new form of live theatre that is “sprinkled with some seriously high-tech fairy dust” (Williams “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”). *Dream* effectively removes the conventional notion of the stage, challenging the traditional oppositional relationship created by it. In one way, the audience is merely consuming, but

at the same time, they are also immersed in this new construct with the actors cohabitating on a virtual stage. The RSC's *Dream* illustrates how transposition to a digital platform revolutionizes the effects of perception and develops a new virtual stage, redefining what theatre is and how it can be experienced.

Dream plays with visually immersive digital effects to transport people from their everyday world into the depths of the imaginative forest. The audience is guided from the “real,” wherein they see the actress EM Williams suited up in their motion-capture gear, into the virtual “dream,” where they, preparing for the transition, state “as soon as we get in *there*, you will see me become Puck” (McNicholas, *Dream*). Williams’s language underscores a transition of perception and emphasizes that the images may be disorienting, causing the audience to distrust their senses and give in to the chaos of the forest. As Ralph Berry states in his *Shakespeare’s Settings and a Sense of Place*, “locations and setting structure...sometimes define the drama [and operate as] a telling dimension of [a] work” (Berry xvi). Williams’s transition into the virtual world parallels the desire of four Athenians from the text who flee into the forest seeking to find a suitable future for themselves; however, in the RSC’s *Dream*, it is not the Athenians, but the audience that “Steal forth...in[to] the wood” to be charmed by what the enchanted space has to offer (1.1.164-165) —a respite wherein they can “quickly dream away the time” (1.1.8). Placing the audience into a digitally-rendered space echoes the early-modern theatregoer’s relationship with vision—just as the Neoplatonist concept in which eyebeams penetrate and infect the body through *spiritus*, the virtual immersion into a world of light reimagines and reverses this notion as the digital images, brought to life, bore into the eyes and minds of the modern viewer. The translation of the play transforms the content into something to be experienced primarily through one’s vision; the production’s construction indicates a knowledge of the potency of the visual mode while

simultaneously remaining true to the theme of sight within the text. By modernizing the transportive properties to reflect the contemporary audience member's relationship with visuality, *Dream* re-establishes the organic nature of the theatre and illustrates its ability to grow with society's ever-increasing advancements.

The RSC's 2021 production forgoes the city and takes place entirely within the dream-like world of the forest. This allows the audience to exit the constraints of the "civilized" world—the "reality" of the pandemic-induced regulations—and enter a virtual dream world where a magical sense of community is possible. When EM Williams puts on their VR headset, the screen shifts from displaying the motion-captured (mo-cap) covered actors to the virtual forest. The audience find themselves enveloped by a "canopy of the trees [and] roots" that are "under the shadow of gathering clouds at dusk, lit by the glimmer of fireflies" ("Dream" Audience of the Future Live). The space is filled with an impressive number of rich colorations of a variety of greens, blues, violets, and sparkles of gold that dance around the scene. As the camera appears to descend through an opening, the spots of these colors that make up the individual leaves frame the screen. This perspective places the audience in the middle of the forest with no sense of direction other than their avatar guide, Puck. The lighting in the forest appears muted in its colorations, each leaf and stone containing touches of blue evening pigments echoing the repeated mention of the "moon" and "moonlight" from the text (2.1.7, 61, 104, 143, 160, 166, 3.1.43, 45, 46, 49, 4.1.98, 5.1.141-142). Approximately five minutes into the production, Puck and the audience begin to feel acclimated to their new environment and lay eyes on the first narrative plot point, a storm rolling across the enlarged and pressing moon. The entrance of the audience, alongside Puck, into the new digitally created environment signals a fundamental change in theatre—now the audience is not only witness to the story, but amidst it.

The storm parallels the conflict in Shakespeare’s play and the pandemic. It reaches its climax turning into a dangerous tempest—leaves whipping around like sharp daggers and strong winds knocking over trees that trap Puck and shatter Peaseblossom resulting in a crescendo that brings the screen to black. When the image returns, the unsteady Puck reaches out to the foggy ether and, paraphrasing Shakespeare, exclaims, “help me, for I am weary.” The audience uses their device to partially control the number and direction of the falling sparkles that pool around Puck, helping them regain their strength. In this moment of recovery, Puck paraphrases a line originally spoken by Bottom (as Pyramus) in Act Five Scene One in the text, “sweet friends, I thank thee for thy sunny beings. For thy gracious golden glittering gleams. It is near the break of day. I am ready.” The screen again cuts to black. When it reappears, the world is in a new coloration, one of dawn. The sun emerges along the horizon and Puck commands the earth to “grow;” the forest regrows into a beautiful summer palette of reds, bright greens, and baby blues, but costs the spirit of Puck who collapses into a pile of unanimated rocks just before the credits appear. While there has been sacrifice both on the part of Puck and the audience, the vibrance of the world communicates that there will be renewal, that the earth will once again thrive. The RSC’s transposition of the Shakespearean wood creates a uniquely digital experience that transports the observer into this magical and metaphorical setting. Though virtual productions are still in research and development, *Dream* demonstrates that the absence of a physical stage can have a strong impact on the theatrical experience. To do this, however, the RSC had to not only re-envision the story but also the way the audience is led through the performance.

Dream uses the digitally composed avatar’s movements to help guide the audience through the world. The art of visual expression originates from “the body, which must become sensitized to the movements it can make” because it presents the

“common language of movement which is at the center of communication on the stage” (Petit 6-7); through this, observers vicariously experience portrayed emotions through powerful imitation. The way the actors’ bodies and movements portray thought and feeling within a theatrical production “reveal a complex relationship between the textual and the choreographic, a relationship that is almost always perceived by critics and scholars as a ‘problem’ to be solved” (Klett 1). The RSC uses motion capture avatars to guide the audience’s focus and convey emotions through specific character gesticulations, redefining the role of movement. To further evaluate, it is important to revisit the start of the play and observe how this strategy is implemented consistently throughout.

When the play first begins, the audience is greeted by a cheery Puck who first appears on a physical stage and takes the audience into the virtual world of *Dream*. The audience is immersed in the world and sees through Puck’s eyes as they examine their new stone body; however, the perspective quickly shifts back to an observer’s view providing a full-body view of Puck. Though avatars can take the shape of many forms, *Dream* presents the “fairies...conjured from leaves...twigs” and stone (Clapp “Dream Review”) to add to the organic nature of the world. Puck takes a few staggering steps back to acclimate, but quickly regains interaction with the audience, leaning in and reminding them to “stay close” as they begin guiding the observers into the woods. Puck utilizes movements that range from a graceful dance to those of a fumbling toddler—wobbling and making exaggerated movements that are indicative of the unfamiliarity with their body. Puck’s behavior serves not only as a guide but a mirror of audience perception as they adapt to their new environment.

Next, the audience meets the forest sprites Moth, Peaseblossom, Cobweb, and Mustardseed, who visually and physically represent their names. Moth, a swarm of small

moths forming a larger one, flies around Puck gesticulating concern about the incoming storm by pausing as though attentive and then quivering with fear. True to the nature of fairies, they quickly brush it off to focus on their merriment and decide to go and bring other spirits into their “mischief.” Moth tells us Peaseblossom resides in the place where “the wild thyme blows, where oxlips and the nodding violet grows, quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine, with sweet musk-roses and with eglantine” (2.1.249-53). The comment not only serves to echo the text but re-centers the audience in the forest environment. Peaseblossom, embodying the description, is made of “luscious woodbine” with “oxlips” and “violets” that cover their humanoid form. Unlike the other forest spirits, Peaseblossom has a stiff posture and calculated movements which establishes them as an authoritative figure. With this commanding air, Peaseblossom directs Puck to their next destination: “Seek out Cobweb [who] will creep into an acorn cup and dream away the time.”

With the audience in tow, Puck flies the audience to the visually striking spirit Cobweb. Cobweb similarly embodies their name: a single eye with spiderweb lashes that reach and grasp every corner of their tree-hole bed. As Puck navigates the room, Cobweb’s eye opens but shuts abruptly when Puck makes eyes contact, creating a ripple in their lash-like webs like waves on an ocean surface. In their short-lived scene, Cobweb’s movements convey weariness of conflict, while still embodying a forest spirit’s mischievous nature by gesturing annoyance and a desire for rest. Cobweb echoes Hermia’s plea in the source text, stating that they were “Never so weary, never so in woe, bedabbled with dew, and torn with briers, I can no further crawl, no further go” (3.3.30-32). Cobweb’s movement and line not only engage with the text, but also represent the audience’s desire to curl up in an “acorn cup” and be carried through the trials until dawn. This parallel is communicated through virtually constructed gesticulation. Though

Cobweb's body is a spider-like eye and lacks the ambulatory nature of a full human form, the timing and speed of their movements effectively convey a clear message to the audience that echoes both their demeanor and the familiar sentiment of fatigue.

With Cobweb by their side, Puck encounters the final spirit Mustardseed, whose face is shaped by vines from the wood and appears with a furrowed brow and grim expression. With a stern look and warning to "Follow me...to plainer ground" (3.2.403-404), they direct Puck and the audience out of their dwelling and the camera pans to the storm's climax and ensuing damage. *Dream* encompasses themes of order and disorder, reality and appearance, all of which are conveyed through the gestures and movement of the sprites and the forest as a character throughout the production, offering a technology-driven interpretation that brings "characters and themes into motion" in an innovative way (Klett 11).

Blending Shakespeare's texts with modern technology keeps the productions relevant to the increasingly technology-focused times and creates a new format for "liveness". However, with change comes criticism; because of the experimental nature of the production, *Dream* has had quite a bit of pushback from its participants. Audience members and critics have expressed their frustration with its restricted nature. When "entering a virtual world... [people] want to be transported...to do things [they otherwise] can't" (Crompton "Review: Dream") Unfortunately, the actors are confined to the studio and the avatars are limited to what the actor can physically simulate. Additionally, *Dream* is live-streamed theatre, requiring performers to interact organically with a live audience, underscoring the second criticism—interactivity. With the premium "Audience Plus" ticket the audience member could "take on the role of a firefly, exploring, [lighting the path for Puck within] the forest, and influencing what is happening in the world of the performance through their [device]" (RSC, "First Look at the Unreal Forest"). However,

the movements were limited, and the audience expressed their disappointment as it “no discernible effect on the action” (Clapp “Dream Review”). The lack of interactivity presents an area for growth in future productions using this technology. The RSC recognizes *Dream* as a prototype production that is not “a homogenized situation,” but “is part of where theatre is headed in the future” (RSC “Dream Q&A”). *Dream* offers a glimpse at the future of theatre, using technology to bring people together during a time of isolation. It also serves as an excellent metaphor for the pandemic, taking audiences on a “journey into the eye of a cataclysmic storm” (“Dream” Audience of the Future Live).

With digital technology, we are able to reexplore modes of delivery employed in the creation of theatre as it evolves. The use of the digital landscape in audio drama indicates the beginning effects of digitization of theatre, producing individuated experiences even when the physical stage is absent. The new space, created by and for the digital, allows for flexibility in adaptation while retaining the essential qualities of imagination and human connection that are central to theatre. Martin Jarvis’s audio drama *Macbeth* and the RSC’s digitally rendered visual production *Dream* demonstrate the possibilities of redefining theatre for the digital age.

CHAPTER III:
ALL THE INTERNET'S A STAGE: THE ALLEY THEATRE'S PANDEMIC
RESPONSE

Performances generate a necessary revenue for theatre companies and therefore they could not be paused during the pandemic. While larger companies like L.A. Theatre Works and the Royal Shakespeare Company had resources to explore digital productions, local theatres worldwide had to make the same shift without the requisite tools, greatly impacting their considerations. In this chapter, I use performances, interviews, and anecdotal evidence to demonstrate how Houston's Alley Theatre embraces virtual platforms to create a new and more egalitarian form of operation. It is important to note that though I had full access to their shorter productions, I could only view limited clips and stills of their digital multi-act performances —*1984*, *Medea*, and *An Enemy of the People*—which restricted my analysis. As a fully comprehensive local theatre, the Alley serves as the ideal case study to examine the advantages and limitations of technology in theatre.

Alley Theatre Makes Initial Pivot with George Orwell's *1984*

In March of 2020, while theatres around the world went dark, the Alley kept the arts in the spotlight with its recorded production of George Orwell's dystopian fiction *1984*. *1984* was open for a single day before the Alley had to shut down; however, the artistry and awareness of the influence that the spatial construction had on audience immersion were evident. As the audience arrived at the theatre, they faced Ulrich Franzen's brutalist concrete façade. Although not intentionally designed for this effect by the Alley staff, the architecture of the theatre served as a cold and soulless fortress, echoing the themes of urban decay and totalitarianism of the play. Inside the building, guests were surrounded by Oceania propaganda posters and flyers, including those advertising "HATE WEEK." A CCTV placed in the mid-level foyer allowed guests to act

as Big Brother and spy on those near the ticket counter below. This physical space was engaging in a form of method acting, transporting the audience into the world of the play, which unfortunately may not feel far removed from their lives.

On the second day of the scheduled performance, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner and Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo's recommendation to avoid gatherings of over 250 people led to the Alley Theatre's production of *1984* being moved to a digital platform. Unsure of the impact of the health crisis, the Alley began planning for an online production that would simulate the same tones and themes of the stage performance, to be released within only two weeks. The shift was suitable as technology plays a big role in the world of *1984*; the prophetic "George Orwell knew that new tech meant new ways to influence and control people...[its] pervasive [reach is now] affect[ing] everything from phones to Facebook" (Playbill 9). Despite the fear induced by *1984*'s surveillance culture, technology acted as a rebellious freedom for the theatre; the Associate Producer and Casting Director Brandon Weinbrenner stated to Houston's ABC 13, "We are going to film the production of '*1984*' and make it available through a link to ticket buyers, subscribers, patrons, and anyone that wants to support us and see this production" ("The Alley Theatre Takes '*1984*' Online"). By going online, the Alley not only granted greater access and exposure but also facilitated a democratic transposition that brought "together multifaceted audience[s]" which has allowed for increased social education without reinforcing audience homogeneity (McMurtry 5).

Unfortunately, in their rush to record the production, the Alley missed the communicated utilitarianism of the physical theatre. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the location and setting structure, whether that be within the virtual or the real often defines the dramatic work and adds a telling dimension that generates further meaning (Berry xvi). By examining platform similarities and differences, valuable insights can be gained

regarding how transposition affects perception and reception. In the virtual rendition, the audience still experienced the practiced production; the décor maintained its economy-style circular platform, concrete-like framing, with metallic lights in the floor envisioned by the Alley's artistic director; the talented resident company still performed Michael Gene Sullivan's transposed lines from Orwell's classic; the costumes still created their impression of monochromatic hopelessness. The recording strategy implemented attempts to mimic the live audience view using two cameras—one static, and one mobile—to simulate stationary position of an audience member while also moving the audience's eye with their one mobile camera to focus the gaze on the changing scenes. Despite their attempts, recorded theatre lacks live, sustained actor interaction of the continuous, chronological performance. As a result, the Alley's filmed production of *1984* acted as more of a stopgap for the stage production.

There is little discourse regarding the recorded performance due to union regulations prohibiting critiques; however, there is one review that provides a perspective on its reception and demonstrates the success of the Alley's quick but effective transposition to the webcast format. Terry Teachout's review in the *Wall Street Journal* commends Sullivan's "no-frills...version [of Orwell's classic], intended for...a near-bare stage" as well as the Alley's "crisp, unflashily photographed and...hard-hitting [rendition that] comes across with bright clarity on the small screen...work[ing] at least as well when viewed at home as it would have been case had the show gone on" (Teachout). While Teachout's positive review of the production is noteworthy, the limited availability of critical perspectives and my lack of access to the production make it difficult to assess the specific advantages and limitations of the digital production in practice. However, Teachout's review does speak to the transition's possibilities for theatrical performances

in the digital world. The Alley's quick yet efficient move to an online show laid the groundwork for what would become known as Alley@Home.

The Alley's Digital Season: Alley@Home

In the spring of 2021, the Alley produced a free season of classic plays adapted solely for the digital space, aptly named Alley@Home. Despite being one of America's larger regional theatres, the Alley cannot typically dedicate time or space to one-act plays without mainstream appeal as they do not generate enough revenue to sustain the theatre's more widely recognized performances; however, the experimental nature of this project allowed the Alley's artistic director Rob Melrose the freedom to turn his focus toward lesser-known literary works. Throughout the season, the Alley embraced virtual theatre as an opportunity, using green-screen technology and original footage shot by actors at home to create innovative productions, prioritizing audience imagination over the use of special effects. This experiment sheds light on the potential advantages and limitations of this methodology, which could find a new home in future mainstream theatre productions.

The Alley, like many theatres, initially pivoted to Zoom for dramatic readings. However, since many people were using the platform for work, it presented a challenge—“What play is theatrical enough and emotional enough to cut through the digital experience and grab an audience so that it feels like live theatre even though it is coming through a screen?” (Melrose). Contemporary plays lacked enough contrast from daily reality, so the Alley turned to the classics, whose language diverges enough from modern language to provide the much-needed sense of escapism or, sometimes, alienation. Among the first of their productions was a reading—spoken and performed by the resident acting company—of Lewis Carroll's poem *Jabberwocky*, a “nonsense” epic structure that features a protagonist that is warned against and then triumphs over the

monstrous Jabberwock. *Jabberwocky* was shot in two different formats using Zoom to convey the poem's anxiety-inducing and ominous tone; they were released simultaneously with a prompt to vote, or "like," for their preferred version as a means of exploring the new mode of transmission and determining audience preference to it; these releases marked the beginning efforts in this new medium.

The first rendition utilizes a green screen that depicts surrealistic forest backdrop scattered with bones and skulls. To cohesively blend together the performance on the Zoom platform, each actor wore a black shirt to create continuity while the camera cut between each of them reading their lines in turn, unifying their performances despite being physically separated. The performance begins with Todd Waite facing the camera, as if addressing the viewer directly. He speaks urgently, bringing a foreboding tone to the production from the start. His gestures match his fearful demeanor as he crouches, turns his head, and looks around the room for the monstrous Jabberwock. The tone and expression change from actor to actor as each performs two lines before the camera cuts the next. Shawn Hamilton speaks slowly and deliberately as he reaches forward with a grabbing motion, resembling a storyteller trying to frighten his listener. Elizabeth Bunch and Jay Sullivan, echoing Waite's approach, follow with similarly anxious expressions, further demonstrating nervousness through their speed, intonation, and consistent eye and body movements. David Rainey and Melissa Pritchett, more in tune with Hamilton, maintain a slow, deliberate form of speech. The final actor to make his appearance, Dylan Goodwin, blends these approaches, with steady intonation and wide-eyed unease, balancing the performance at a crucial point. The description and warning of the Jabberwock culminate into a sketch that appears on the screen— a skeletal centaur-like body with lanky arms, claws, and a head resembling a diseased serpent tipped with the face of a human skull. After the Jabberwock is slain, the actors shift to a tone of happy

relaxation—shoulders down, smiles that begin to touch their expression, and calm voices. In contrast to the opening, the production ends with the first actor encountered, Todd Waite, who now is further from the camera, with open arms and a slow ease to his recitation of the final lines. Using Zoom’s versatile software allows for a new level of organization and control. The director and videographer can work collaboratively to organize and control the performance through the capabilities and functions given to the host and co-host of the production resulting in an improved audio-visual performance. Though this first attempt to align the performances with the backdrop and cohesive costuming did not match the alternating styles of the actors throughout the piece, this production is a fun retelling of the poem, showcasing each actor’s unique reactions and approaches while accurately conveying the message of good triumphing over evil.

The second version of the reading brings a menacing tone to the poem and further demonstrates the creative play of the company. Each actor employs varied lighting, backdrops, and close-up shots that emphasize their panicked faces that feed into the war-like tone that echoes the theme of man versus nature. Though the rotation of the acting company here is the same as the previous rendition, the approach and execution of the poem differs drastically. Waite opens the piece lying on the ground in a crawl space, wearing all black and surrounded by gravel and stone; his voice and gestures maintain an anxious tone, pace, and movement. Hamilton who follows, however, produces a soldierly quality, with a spiked weapon in hand, ready to defend himself as he tells of the fearsome Jabberwock. The subsequent actors’—Bunch, Sullivan, Rainey, and Pritchett—intonations and gestures match the previous production, but the close-up camera shots and innovative use of environment exhibited by the actors change the mood of the piece. For instance, Godwin uses the bars of a toilet paper rack to create the imagery of imprisonment, echoing the poem’s theme of entrapment. The actors also use tight,

claustrophobic areas like attics, sheds, fireplaces, and closets to induce feelings of uneasiness and a desire to escape. After slaying the Jabberwock, Hamilton and Chris Hutchinson exhibit a maniacal happiness like that of a soldier prepared for a battle that will no longer come, showing happiness in their voice but holding the preparation in their body. Waite ends the production exhausted, slumping down with closed eyes. The production's intensity and unease resonate with the audience's experience during the pandemic, making it a fitting start to the season. Additionally, this rendition of the poem conveys fear and anxiety while showcasing the building creativity and cohesion of the resident actors in the virtual space. Similarly, the capabilities of the Zoom platform establish this form of performance as a new and unique mode of transmitting theatre. These productions represent a first attempt to acclimate both actors and audience to a new medium, allowing them to gauge and adapt to it. The experimentation in the Alley's renditions of *Jabberwocky*—coordinating actors in different locations operating their own equipment—marked the beginning of the digital Alley@Home season.

Melrose used the digital season as a platform to offer the classic one-act works of profound playwrights that are not typically part of the Alley's seasons such as August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen, and Euripides. The season kicked off with August Strindberg's one-act play *The Stronger* (1889), translated by Melrose himself. Strindberg's play depicts two female rivals, Ms. X and Ms. Y, each with a checkered past, who meet at a café on Christmas Eve and engage in a psychological game of chess, exposing the complex and twisted nature of desire and adversarial contention. Ms. X exemplifies a propensity for machinations when people are allowed to spiral out of control psychologically. Her character hauntingly reflects the experiences of many who, isolated in their echo chambers, lack the balance that interaction provides and are susceptible to gravitating toward extremist ideologies. In contrast, Ms. Y's complete comfort in her

own skin serves as a silent but powerful sounding board, provoking the insecurities of those like Ms. X and exacerbating their traits. Its production demonstrates the first of the Alley's attempts at building a digital platform for theatre.

For this play, the Alley constructs a virtual stage where the actors could occupy the same simulated setting while physically separated, presenting the characters' cohesive surroundings through a blurred restaurant backdrop and accompanying sounds of a muffled piano and clanking silverware. To further illustrate, a vase of flowers in the center of the table is presented at different angles to give the impression that they sit at opposite ends of the same table. Therefore, despite their physical separation, each actress appears to be looking across the table at the other through the Zoom video boxes, creating an interaction between them. By strategically placing the audience perspective at the center of the space, observers are essentially at the table with the characters, thrust into the women's interaction, intimately privy to their expression and reactions, creating an inclusive rather than oppositional actor/audience relationship. Rather than a removed party glancing in at the drama, this positioning allows the audience to act as a fulcrum, balancing the behavior and story of each woman on either side of them and enhancing one of the play's central questions: Which of the two women is the stronger? Is it the married Ms. X (Melissa Pritchett) with a voice, accoutrements of a happy and fulfilled life, and the aggression to maintain what she believes is rightfully hers? Or is it the silent and taciturn Ms. Y (Elizabeth Bunch) who endures the onslaught of verbal attacks and, like a cat, simply outwaits her prey? Like many great works, *The Stronger* is built on these ambiguities that haunt the observer beyond the conclusion of the performance. The Alley's production of this play emphasizes the character development of both Ms. X and Ms. Y. The audience is able to empathize with Ms. X as she spirals out of control while fighting for what she believes is rightfully hers. At the same time, the audience can

respect Ms. Y for her detached demeanor, which indicates a strategic approach to her opponent as well as a closed-off approach to the world. Each woman in the production offers a piece of a whole, allowing the viewer to construct their own interpretation and allegiance with little or no push from the actors to sway opinion, an excellent choice to debut the ambiguous new digital platform.

This digital play was immediately followed by Melrose's translation of Strindberg's short story *A Half-Sheet of Paper* (1903), which portrays the protagonist's discovery of the creative potential of linguistic signs that represent significant memories. Melrose's inclusion of the story is topical because Strindberg's expressionistic and symbolist plays emphasize the need for reflection, commenting on the need for reflection during the pandemic and in this new medium. Similar to Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, Melrose released two versions of the production to experiment with the medium and observe reception on the Alley's newly constructed virtual stage. The first version opens in black and white with an overlay of a scratched film texture. The protagonist's (Chris Hutchison) movements appear sharp as the recording intentionally skip frames to create a dated atmosphere and tone in the piece. Finally, to emphasize its short story form rather than adapting it into a play, the visuals accompany the narrator (also played by Hutchison), who reads the text in voice-over style. During his narration, the audience watches the protagonist navigate the home and interact with the objects which spark his memories. This serves to place the audience in the protagonist's home as a bystander, observing the action from a third-party point of view. The Alley's second rendition of the performance has no actors, only voice-over narration. Instead, the visuals consist of drawings of the protagonist's words written on paper that float across the screen, reflecting his recollection of pleasant memories of a past life existing only in the mind. The camera pans slowly over the words and pictures, expanding the text's symbolism

into the visuals and allowing the audience to participate as first-person observers as they witness this “...piece of human life on a half-sheet of paper.” This new vantage point is unique to the digital format and allows the audience to experience a story through the eyes of the actor rather than observing from a distance, exemplifying the possible advantages of the new form. With a better understanding of digitization, these productions demonstrate the Alley’s experimentation with perspective—another creative attribute of working in the virtual world.

Later in the season, Melrose produced longer productions that were presented like live performances and were only available to stream for a limited time; one of these productions was *Medea*. To move beyond the one-act play format, Melrose tackled Euripides’ 2,500-year-old Greek tragedy *Medea*, showcasing female power and revenge. *Medea* features a powerful woman who seeks the ultimate vengeance on her unfaithful husband by killing their children, denying him of closure, and leaving him in grief. It is a psychological tragedy that confronts the rage and disorder that comes with attempting to take back control of one’s life at any cost. *Medea* is a disturbingly cathartic force for her own life as she reacts violently to the humiliation and heartbreak of having her world stripped away. This production showcased the actors’ interaction via Zoom despite physical separation. *Medea* maintained a cohesive space by using a similar background style to *The Stronger*, with grey-scale brutalist stonework that echoed the Alley’s architecture, virtually constructing a singular stage regardless of the disconnected physical environments. To unify the spaces, music, props, costumes, and lighting were used in the cohesive production. The actors wore modern attire that blended with the brutalist backdrop and were offset by warm lights, drawing the audience’s eyes to the character-driven performance. In this space, the actors simulate in-person communication through body positioning and gaze coordination, with each performer turning their body

and head at a three-quarter angle when addressing another singular performer, imitating the live connection the dialogue requires between the compartmentalized boxes on the screen. This technique is especially effective in Medea's (Bunch) final confrontation with Jason (Hutchinson), as it creates a torturous connection between ex-lovers through simulated eye contact and address. The connection is palpable and the separation between the actors dissipates with the emotion and intensity of the scene. Despite the knowledge that everyone is isolated, the virtual stage not only simulates but creates a real relationship between the characters and audience as they all simultaneously exist within the same live platform. The Alley's director, actors, designers, composers, and videographers effectively circumvented the limitations of the Zoom platform, demonstrating the company's capability to deliver quality online performance. The 87-minute production shows that full-length digital performances can be created in shared virtual spaces, both in a live and recorded format, that are distinct from the physical stage.

Using these cooperative techniques, the Alley company embraced the virtual arena and tackled their biggest digital production, Henrik Ibsen's five-act thriller *An Enemy of the People*. The production was released as a mini-series with each act as its own "episode," which Melrose called a "nod to...the cliffhanger, plot-driven shows we see on Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu today" (Melrose), indicating the Alley's push to bring a relevant and intense thriller drama to audiences who are used to the constant stream of new releases on various platforms. Translated from Norwegian by Paul Walsh and directed by Melrose, this play confronts themes of tyranny and manipulation of the majority that resonate with modern audiences. In the Alley Theatre's Stage Notes, Melrose remarks, "it...feels like Henrik Ibsen literally wrote the play from the headlines of today" (Melrose). The play tackles a contemporary issue: "the balance between public

health vs. the economy... [a hard truth] we have all been struggling with” to which Melrose asks “Is there an all-or-nothing solution or is there a middle ground? Do we shut down completely or are there ways to keep people healthy and keep the economy going?” (Melrose). These questions get to the heart of what many people worldwide have been grappling with in recent years, highlighting the Alley’s effective digital performances that reflect the audience’s lives and offer a haunting portrayal of the perception and state of our world today. Through I was not granted full access to this production, its theatrical realism was striking. Melrose use of background moves beyond mere cohesion and functions as a new element; it uses a solid black backdrop which serves to eliminate the environment and draw the focus entirely onto the actors, their expressions, and their movement, subtleties suited better for the close-up shots on the screen than the distance of the physical stage. This technique particularly centers the audience’s attention onto the deadened eyes of the characters, emphasizing their growing understanding that monetary concerns govern society when democracy and truth die. This eerily familiar sentiment underscores the Alley’s thoughtful selection and growing comfortability with virtually-constructed productions.

Recalling previous work, Melrose concluded the season with Strindberg's 1890 play *Pariah* in the one-act play model. This was a fitting pairing with Ibsen, as both playwrights were pioneers of naturalism in theatre and rivals during their lifetime, each with their own unique approach. While Ibsen's plays have a plot-driven structure, Strindberg was known for his intellectual and experimental approach. Strindberg's play *Pariah* draws strong influence from Edgar Allan Poe's stories, *The Cask of Amontillado* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*. The play comes full circle as two men, Mr. X and Mr. Y, engage in a struggle for survival; they must confront their troubled pasts and engage in a Darwinian battle of wits. The performance opens with Waite as Mr. Y, dressed in a worn

dress shirt and suspenders, stands against a rough wooden wall backdrop with a Victorian-style shelf to the side. The shelf contains jars of rock samples, a blurry framed photo of a bar, a skull, and leatherbound books, all alluding to the dark themes of the play. Hamilton soon arrives as Mr. X, voice before image, loudly exhaling and expressing his exasperation from the “sweltering heat” of the hot summer day. He is similarly dressed, donning a long-sleeve button-down shirt and vest, and stands in front of a similar wooden backdrop with framed images of bats and bugs emphasizing the man versus nature theme. Using their learned technique from earlier in the season, the backdrop and costuming once again provide unity to the performance. While Mr. X visibly sits at the table and flaunts his newfound riches, the backdrop blurs to bring focus to this point of contention. As tensions escalate and Mr. X taunts Mr. Y’s insecurities, the camera zooms in on his face, emphasizing his antagonistic behavior. Using digitally rendered special effects and camera work, the intensifying storm mirrors the growing tension between the two men, with sudden sparks of lightening, thunder and reddened clouds that spread across the walls and characters’ faces. The contention climaxes and the backdrop fades to black. The symbolic storm continues even after the physical storm passes, with props from the beginning—such as a skull, handwritten script, and a pumping heart—emphasizing the diminishing outside world; the psychological battle between these two men is all that remains. After the argument reaches a crescendo and Mr. X accuses Mr. Y, both return to reality in the wooden house. Mr. Y, unable to beat his opponent in the mental battle, threatens Mr. X’s marriage and life but fails. In this final production of the Alley@Home season, *Pariah* stands as an allegorical mirror to the divided world in which we all now stand; many fighting for the chance to prove the other wrong without first taking a hard look at our own moral dilemmas. The production represents the culmination of everything the Alley learned throughout their digital season,

including functioning backgrounds, adjusting audience perspective, simulating interaction between characters, and incorporating special effects to enhance the symbolic nature of the play. Alley@Home's *Pariah* serves as an excellent example of the work that can be created on the virtual stage and demonstrates the power of digitally produced art as a medium for commenting on human nature.

Theatre's transition to digital media is hindered by their lack of familiarity with the medium and its platforms. Theatres are facing a balancing act as they try to showcase their unique offerings wherein they must navigate between remedial and hypermedial approaches. In 2022, *The International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* discussed the "Viral Theatres' Pandemic Playbook" which identified five primary shifts theatres have made to reconceptualize the industry in response to the COVID-19 crisis: incorporating cameras in live streams, adapting collaborative practices, staging audience participation, engaging digital audiences, and experimenting with VR (Mosse 108-121).

Alley@Home had to create their own "pandemic playbook," reassessing their goals and mission to make conceptual and infrastructural changes. The virtual stage was created using superimposed backdrops and a static camera to set the scene and create a sense of continuity between physically disparate locations. During these productions, each actor addressed and controlled the camera, which resulted in a fragmented stage; this created a unique visual experience that, when reconstructed, formed a new digital theatrical space. Within this setup, the camera gains a new status; no longer "an alienation effect allowing us to reflect on the status of live theatrical performance...much rather, [it] was the medium through which liveness now had to be rendered" (Mosse 110-111). On the virtual stage, the camera represents the audience member, acting as both observer and receiver of content. This reassignment of roles and reconstruction of theatre

is built around the quality which separates the industry from its cinematic counterparts: liveness.

The Alley, new to digital performance, aimed to replicate the sense of “liveness” in the virtual space. To address each other, they would glance off-screen in the direction that their Zoom box would be oriented. Depending on perspective, it uniquely positioned the audience within the scene, between the characters and amidst the action. Additionally, when the actors looked directly at the camera, they created a sense of inclusiveness for the audience, essentially pulling them into the production. These techniques hint at the creative possibilities that can be utilized as the industry rethinks its defining qualities and moves online. As they do, they will want to incorporate an interactive theatrical experience; performances without this quality can result in productions that miss the mark. Unfortunately, the Alley@Home productions did not incorporate this, leaving the performances feeling incomplete. The Alley@Home aimed to bridge the gap between physical and virtual spaces by creating productions that resembled live performance. However, without audience participation and simultaneity, the plays felt more like recordings than theatre. The Alley used platforms as a stopgap but missed the opportunity to “provide a more immersive, fully embodied approach...beyond the head and shoulders compartmentalizing” (Sermon 64). Their efforts to create a cohesive digital stage, engage the cast, and simulate audience inclusion were innovative but fell short of achieving the level of immersion that can rival in-person theatrical performances.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION: A WAY FORWARD

As an admirer of theatre, and throughout this study of its possible future, several questions recur for me: In this age of technology, what is the place of theatrical productions? Will it survive in an age where attention is fought for and colonized by the vast array of digital platforms? Can the theatre industry go somewhere new and worthwhile? In an era of technological distrust, I believe theatre's fictional productions can uniquely touch hearts and minds by revealing truths. Although many claim theatre is dying, it has proven resilient against competing forms like cinema, TV, and streaming services (Gontarski 191). To survive, theatre must expand into the digital arena and offer a new "liberating form of dramatic expression" (McMurtry 5).

As with digital adaptations mentioned in this research, the advantages of the digital realm compared to in-person theatre are evident. Digital renditions such as Martin Jarvis's *Macbeth*, the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Dream*, or the many experimental offerings of Houston's Alley Theatre's Alley@Home provide valuable advantages for the growth and future of theatre, including value for money, portability, ease, potential for social education, the ability to bring together a multifaceted audience, and capacity for both sweep and intimacy (McMurtry 5). From the "earliest days of radio, drama was characterized by a different kind of unprecedented access...it opened doors for not only producers" who would have a new avenue by which to creatively compose works on the air, but also for "listeners, especially those in rural areas" (McMurtry 6). With the spread of technology, many more people now own devices capable of streaming productions and can be exposed "to the kind of theatre these listeners would not [have been] able to access in their remote locations" (McMurtry 6). The access that digital drama provides highlights the excellence of this medium and the need for exploration and research into

the vast array of possibilities for paving a new future of theatre within the multimodal digital world.

In the new virtual space, creators can enhance their productions using the technology's multimodal options to reinvent classics to keep universal themes relevant and engage audiences with fresh, imaginative takes that reinvigorate dramatic impact. As discussed in Chapter Two, the audio drama illustrates early efforts at digitization. Jarvis's use of unsettling sounds and frequencies that extend beyond the typical range to parallel Macbeth's descent into madness and create a personal bond between the listener and the production. The VR experience that primarily uses the visual mode adds another layer of possibilities. Visuals can directly impact the perception of a play. Digital platforms, such as the RSC's production *Dream*, revolutionize the transposition of the visual mode and offer opportunities for alternative interpretations, performances, and creative expression through new design tools. As demonstrated in Chapter Three's discussion of the *Alley@Home* series, the digital space offers flexibility while preserving theatre's essential qualities of connection, imagination and exploration. The *Alley* utilized both aural and visuality in their productions to build a new virtual stage on which performance can be experienced, transforming the overall theatre experience. These changes can better reflect the life of the audience members and provide the experimental spirit combined with the organic nature of performance that keeps the theatre alive and breathing. As technology use rapidly changes the world, theatrical practices must catch up. As Warman argues in "Theatre Not Dead,"

[Theatre] needs to reinvent the hope of being awakened. It needs to dance for its life, as though something actually depended on it. Dance like a bullfighter. It needs to be a thuggish philosopher/poet, not afraid but even

eager to make a fool of itself; to offer itself as the bank where all the debts of history can be cashiered. It needs to launch out of [its own history and create a new path of exploration] (10).

This reinvention has begun. The theatre industry, known for resisting change, had to re-evaluate its relevance and contribution to its audience and fight for a new place in the modern, technology-driven world. Technology's increasing role in contemporary culture makes the industry's virtual venture crucial for its future existence and development.

Digital Theatre Creates Educational Spaces

Digital theatre productions may cause a shift in theatrical structures so that they could also be considered forms of educational outreach; the Alley's digital season exemplifies this change. Alley@Home facilitated creative and experimental play not only in their performances but also in their educational outreach. The Alley's administrative director of Education and Community Engagement (ECE), Cathy Bencivenga, described in our interview how the theatre experienced significant "confusion" when first considering digital offerings, and how they used it as a "playground for trial and error...seeing what would work and what would not." The Alley's ECE department took this as an opportunity to help young people struggling with the grief of isolation by creating both asynchronous, synchronous, and hybrid videos to interact with a wide range of audiences in their pursuit for continued education. To engage students and lifetime learners in literature and theatre during a time when it was easy to fall prey to the often mindless streaming content, the Alley collaborated with the Houston Public Library to create videos of summer readings as asynchronous productions. This consisted of the Alley's actors emotively performing dramatic readings from a variety of texts for children and young adults to watch and listen or read along.

To keep teachers inspired, the Alley's ECE also developed a program called "Imagination Journeys," which served as a "guided meditation to learn new concepts that focused on the improvement of educational literacy for students in K-12, providing offerings both in English and in Spanish" (Bencivenga). "Imagination Journeys" is a series of "10-minute...experiences" within eight professional development videos. Each video is "designed to teach an invaluable teaching tool...with plenty of examples, ideas...how-tos [and even a bit of] theory," targeted at boosting student literacy and achievement designed to keep teachers inventive during these difficult times ("Imagination Journeys PD #1). Each professional development video in this series was delivered by the Alley Theatre's teaching artist Scott Gibbs who enthusiastically emotes each strategy he presents while superimposed words and images on current topic appear on the screen, acting similarly to a whiteboard or projector in a classroom. Additionally, when he prompts the viewer to participate in activities, these effects are imitated on the screen; for instance, in the first "Imagination Journey" video, Gibbs covers the concept of affective images. When he prompts the viewer to "close [their] eyes" and recall a series of images from their lives, the screen uses an eye blink effect to fade to black, giving a first-person perspective by mimicking the requested audience action as though they were students following the teacher's direction. Accompanied by the backdrop of a classic chalkboard, this strategy sets the tone for the instructionally oriented content of each video in the series. These asynchronous works were sold as a literacy package to the nearby school districts such as Spring ISD and Cline ISD to inspire methods to keep children learning in a fun and engaging way. Bencivenga explained that synchronous curricula were also created such as "Time Machine Interview," which unfortunately was not recorded, but which served as a live reflection for students to "digest and process" the COVID-19 crisis and its effect on their lives (Bencivenga). These synchronous digital

spaces, however, did offer a platform for a live and more accommodated curriculum, as the instructor could respond in the moment to students and adjust coursework to fit the interests and needs of each session.

Combining both asynchronous and synchronous formats, the Alley experimented with slam poetry sessions. Slam poetry is a relatively new form of poetry that involves self-expression through performance art. Due to its unique accessibility and properties, slam poetry can easily adapt to new modes of delivery and comment on prominent societal structures from various perspectives. It encourages people “to write about their feelings and experiences in the form of a poem, acknowledges that they have something to say and that it is important while showing that poetry does not belong to an elite, inaccessible world” (Fiore 822). The hybrid slam poetry sessions—held live via Zoom and recorded for viewing and discussion—were formed in response to the pandemic and served as an outlet for processing confusing emotions and trauma. Though this was not as elaborate or decorative as other Alley@Home productions, it did serve as a safe space for expression and reflection. For many students who were accustomed to the rote work of the eight-hour school day, this platform offered a new form of learning. In a time disrupted, separated from the routines and procedures of daily life, the Alley’s slam poetry sessions created a space where the spoken word and performance was in a “unique position of facilitating unprecedented social change by providing students with a platform from which to question and negotiate the conditions of their lives...building literate identities” in a world forever changed (Fiore 814, 822).

The Alley used Zoom as a stage to incorporate digital applications in their efforts to promote art and learning. This allowed the theatre to venture into the future and, perhaps inadvertently, bridge cultural and educational binaries that have long plagued the American education system. Additionally, virtual environments present the theatre

industry with a range of “methodological considerations, both new and old...[as] the advent of embodied online worlds, experiences with distributed presence, anonymity and multiple modes of engagement” (Taylor 236). These environments afford participants “new opportunities to reassemble the world,” (Zoetewey 135). The palpable divide between scholarly and creative—the classical and contemporary—can now be traversed because the digital arena grants the ability to engage with the content of various forms of texts. Because the virtual medium allows for more cost-effective production, theatres can use this as an opportunity, at least in small doses, to free themselves from the financial constraints of what is “known” or “popular”—note the classics from the Alley@Home season. On Zoom, the performances served as a new creative challenge for actors and directors who needed to create a sense of cohesion despite being physically separated. However, they were able to take bold, experimental, and participatory intermedial forms of expression and move them into a wide-reaching democratic virtual space that granted freedom of expression for the actors, participants, and audiences, aligning with the new progressively online world.

Theatre performances, live-streamed or recorded, were used mostly as a supplementary strategy to maintain audience bases and assist in the promotion of the “soon to be back” performances. Though online productions did serve to satiate the need for entertainment, many critics, like Fintan Walsh and Lilia Nemchenko, consider it nothing more than a suitable stopgap, arguing that theatre audiences thrive on live productions, delighting in the excitement that is offered by the proximity, interaction, and shared experience. Back catalog streaming, such as that offered by the National Theatre at Home subscription service, as well as newer pre-recorded productions have found it difficult to compete with the sheer number of entertainment options available on major platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, HBO Max, and more. This places an inordinate amount

of pressure on theatres attempting to enter the digital arena. To do this, virtual productions need to create a sense of liveness by “[a]ttending carefully to dramaturgies of space alongside those of psychology and emotion is perhaps the most powerful way in which a broadcast can produce a visual sense of ‘being there’ akin to that experienced in the theater” (Sullivan 661). As theatre is typically marked by this sense of “liveness”, the question arises: How can theatres compete with the vast amount of entertainment options available to the public, provided both through cinema and nationally funded theatre companies, that have both larger budgets available and an established and vested audience base? To survive, the answer is that they must be truly innovative in trying to tackle the lack of intimacy and dynamism of online theatre: a problem that they would have to take on without the aid of audience or box-office funding.

Considering these findings, how do digital theatre and the translation of dramatic text to digital media inform the improvement of literacy? Regarding education, I believe digital theatre’s multi-sensory experience can help diverse learners analyze plots, themes, settings, characters and other literary elements. The Alley Theatre’s Education and Community Engagement department utilized collaboration platforms like Zoom to attract and capture audience attention, create moments and address learning loss during COVID-19 isolation. Additionally, during their digital season, the Alley demonstrated that learners can experience different modalities and strengthen their empathetic bond with the text by interacting with theatre through virtual content. This allows for new means of experiencing dramatic work, promoting understanding and engagement. Furthermore, the digital content allows students of theatre to “read, learn, and share [it] in dynamic ways [using the full array of human senses]” (Rowe) that grant “access and opportunities for mining the texts in creative, illuminating ways [as the] reader’s pleasure and profit come to the fore as multimodality, or synesthesia, [that can] ‘open’ up...difficult texts for a

range of readers” and improve both their literacy and overall enjoyment of drama (Desmet 218).

Similarly, on the front of critical literacy, digitized content affords audiences diverse avenues for questioning and exploring secondary meanings of dramatic texts. Virtual theatre presents new creative approaches that audiences can interpret, aiding in the development of higher-order comprehension strategies and deeper exploration of inferences and connections to the work. Critical literacy “transcends conventional notions of reading and writing to incorporate critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one’s world” by encouraging readers to “uncover implicit messages” in digitally produced content and environments further promotes their recognition and understanding (McDaniel 474-475).

Because digitized theatre allows for critical analysis of portrayed works and their construction, it opens doors to new ideologies and worldviews in cultural literacy. Recalling Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it is crucial to liberate students from rote memorization and foster holistic understanding that allows for identification and reclamation of individuality and agency in evaluating presented information through social hierarchies. Critical literacy “has foundations in the sociocultural theory of language, challenging readers to think about the relationship between language and power” (McDaniel 475). The examination of the cultural arts through a new virtual lens can build understanding and empathy toward differences, promoting inclusion and tolerance of customs, values, and perceptions. This exposure affords audiences the opportunity to examine “the ways in which our ideologies influence our own readings...of texts” (McDaniel 475) and reflect on preconceptions that could be implicitly present in way we view the world.

The shift to the digital realm fundamentally alters how our highly mediated modern society processes and expresses information, affecting the rhetoric used for communication. Digital content enables more conscious recognition of visual and aural cues, in addition to linguistic communication. Examining the isolated effects of each modality, as demonstrated in Chapter Two with Jarvis's *Macbeth* and RSC's *Dream*, highlights the unique power and rhetorical features of each form. Analyzing a puzzle piece by piece is similar to the process of understanding complex concepts. By examining the individual function and contribution of each piece, a deeper understanding of the whole can be achieved when it is reassembled. Digital theatre enables new analyses in the virtual space as messages are transmitted and received by different means, potentially creating new meanings. The digital arena's creative possibilities can also redefine the audience's connection to characters, themes, and narratives.

Considering Legalities of the Digital Transition

To adapt, the theatre houses needed to navigate the long-standing legal jurisdictions of performance and media. The Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and Actors' Equity Association (AEA), which are two of the largest American unions representing performing artists, provide ongoing support to working actors by “negotiating wages, improving working conditions, and... a wide range of benefits, including health and pension plans” (Actors' Equity). Each of these unions has been, for the most part, separated by the type of work an actor engages in and performs. SAG-AFTRA focuses on recorded works for radio and screen, while Equity has jurisdiction over live stage productions. Each contract has distinct pay scale variances due to the income differences between the stage and the screen. Since the pandemic forced theatrical productions to move to digital platforms, it reopened negotiations regarding the unions' long-understood division and territory. Approximately

six months into the pandemic, on October 17, 2020, SAG-AFTRA’s Chief Operating Officer and General Counsel Duncan Crabtree-Ireland filed a formal complaint with the Associated Actors and Artistes of America charging Equity with an “infringement of its rightful and traditional jurisdiction” and seeking “protection from any further encroachment” (SAG-AFTRA 1). They alleged that Equity had rejected provisions designed to assure a waiver was a substitute for live theatre and purposefully crossed over into SAG-AFTRA’s traditional jurisdiction. However, Equity claimed SAG-AFTRA encroached on their jurisdiction, making it harder for members to find work during the pandemic, as they would have to join SAG to qualify for online productions (Sakoui). On November 19, 2020, a month after the original complaint, the unions reached a temporary agreement regarding the jurisdiction of streamed theatrical performances during the COVID crisis; Equity would be able to represent “work that is recorded and/or produced to be exhibited on a digital platform, either as a replacement for a live theater production that cannot take place because of the pandemic or for a partially virtual/digital audience that supplements a live audience during the pandemic period” that was set to end December 31, 2021 but has since been extended (Meyer). In the unions’ attempt to keep a defined line between their territories, stipulations were created to establish digital boundaries between the different types of productions; “recorded performances under Equity’s representation must be similar to a live performance that the theatre company normally presents” (Meyer). This regulation immediately limits access to productions in the digital sphere as companies are only able to sell as many tickets as “200 percent of the venue’s capacity...or 300 percent for houses with less than 350 seats,” are only able to keep performances on a digital platform for either “three months or the length of the run, which is lesser,” and are unable to edit their recordings in a “manner similar to TV/film” (Meyer). In SAG-AFTRA’s demand to maintain its jurisdiction over filmed or

recorded media, the union has severely limited the potential for theatre to evolve into a more accessible and democratic medium, acquiescing only the promotional and archival rights of these productions to Equity.

During my research, I spoke with the Alley's general manager Brandon Kahn, who expressed that one of the primary constraints on American theatres is not the legal agreement per se, but the cost of recording productions. The Actors' Equity agreement for the Alley currently restricts the sale of digital tickets to the number of empty seats, or unsold physical tickets, within the theatre. However, despite this seemingly constraining regulation, Kahn explained that "every regional theatre in the country, including the Alley, does not have a problem with availability." To my surprise, he confidently claimed that the ongoing battle for jurisdiction has not been harming theatres or actors in any way and, in fact, "it is groundbreaking for theatres as it grants an entry point for content to be digitally viewed and distributed" and before the current agreement, "would have cost a fortune." Furthermore, when I spoke with him about the Alley's affiliations, Kahn stated that the Alley "do[es] have the ability to work with SAG-AFTRA and [they] always had...but it just did not make financial sense for [them] to do so." Despite the temporary nature of the unions' agreement, it has made the possibility of digital content feel more approachable for theatres like the Alley which experimented with digitization during the pandemic to keep members engaged. Theatre managers, like Kahn, find the cost of producing digital content to be a deterrent. When asked about the issue, Kahn commented, "It has always been high." This cost is approximately double that of the Equity stage-only productions, which is a significant amount for smaller theatre houses. Therefore, the Alley is committing to only one Alley@Home project per year which will serve, as Kahn stated, as "an added element... [operating as more of an] outreach and

marketing activity that will align with their live shows and hopefully get people back into the [physical] theatre.”

Kahn also cautions that licensing rights make it difficult to adapt theatre to digital distribution. In his discussion with associate editor of *American Theatre* Jerald Pierce, Kahn posed the question: “How would any potential broadcast deal pay playwrights, whose intellectual property could be at multiple theaters across the country during any given season?” (Pierce). He did confirm in my interview with him that “they would of course be paid royalties, but many authors are still reluctant to sign these types of contracts and feel that their work is meant only for the [physical] stage.” If any significant move is going to happen for theatres moving into a world of broadcasting, “all relevant unions will need to find common ground to make sure everyone is protected and getting paid fairly for their labor and the distribution of their intellectual property...a uniquely theatrical concern” as it currently “has no central governing body to determine who is protected and how” (Pierce). In the meantime, however, theatres are faced with the concern that if they offer secondary digital products, they will simultaneously be discouraging people from attending the live performances; how then can “theatres craft a narrative that encourages people to still come to in-person productions?” (Pierce).

It is not likely to be in the best interest of every theatre company to try to also become a broadcasting company [yet he does hope] that there are tech companies out there who can step in to help, companies willing to focus on and support a specific vision of theatre’s place within the world of screens... [but also acknowledges that as an industry] ...we have taken some amazing steps in this last year to get the conversation [of virtual theatre] started (Pierce).

If theatres continue to operate independently and do not reach conclusive agreements, regulations, and decisions for the future direction of the industry, problems will continue to arise.

Theatre's shift towards digital platforms necessitates ongoing discussions between the theatre companies and their governing unions about the future of the industry in the digital sphere. As the pandemic recedes and live events return to semi-normalcy, the future of the theatre industry remains uncertain. Over the past three years, stages have gone dark, and companies have taken risks to keep audiences engaged. Temporary measures were implemented to allow regional theatres like the Alley to continue producing and distributing art; however, new decisions and agreements must be made to ensure a stronger future for the industry. Considering the current conditions, there are two primary positions: either the industry rejects the changes and devolves into a pre-pandemic state, relying on the traditional theatre's allure and nostalgia, or it will pivot into a new direction, embracing virtual media and risking losing live theatre as we know it. The industry is unlikely to choose either extreme approach and will likely settle somewhere in the middle; therefore, theatres, both individually and collectively, need to proactively define their vision for the future before external forces shape it for them. While many pandemic-era changes will be left behind, innovations in content and streaming options have the potential to greatly impact the industry. The question remains: what steps are needed to achieve this goal?

A Direction to Take

While my research focused on digitally born modalities and the Alley Theatre's virtual productions, it is important to acknowledge the limitations. This work focuses on a limited number of performances within the classical-European-style tradition. I chose these specific examples, such as Shakespeare's fundamental works and the Alley

Theatre's in-house productions, as they offer a commonly accepted foundation for analysis. Additionally, my analyses of these performances are based primarily on observational studies, which may introduce biases in assessing the viability of and reception of digital content on a larger scale. For future research, an executable and data-driven project could help determine pedagogical techniques to address the learning gaps that schools have experienced during the pandemic. Such research would provide an in-depth analysis of the psychological benefits of providing diverse learners with repeatable digital productions that cater to different leaning styles through various modes of virtual delivery. As technology increasingly pervades people's lives, considering different approaches that creators can take would provide valuable insights into the evolving relationship between technology and storytelling.

At its core, this research argues that digitally born theatrical productions are not only deserving of study but integral to the future of the industry. The critical view that claims the sense of "liveness" or community is lost in a digital space does not account for the creative progress that has occurred over the past few years nor the democratic affordances that these productions can offer. People's lives and how they navigate the world around them have fundamentally changed since the COVID-19 pandemic. The continual exploration, research, and development of digital literary forms like theatre need to progress to match the needs of our changing world.

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