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Virtual Theatre: Its Prospects in Post-Covid World

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to study the rise of Virtual theatre globally during the post-Covid era with special emphasis on the reasons behind such emergence, various ways in which Virtual theatres are operating both globally and nationally, and variety of responses such a surfacing has generated, thereby trying to figure out whether such a form of theatre can actually someday act as a proper replacement of the more popular form of live theatre.

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While for centuries, theatre professionals have marvelled at this medium “being real” compared to television and cinema, they have now begun to acknowledge that the digital space and the traditional stage must coexist.
(Shastri)

The discovery of the Novel Corona virus (or Covid-19) in China’s Wuhan can be deemed as the most influential event that mankind has experienced in over a period of two centuries. The virus for which a full-proof vaccine is yet to be found (not until the writing of this paper) has globally affected billions of lives and killed people in a number that would



appear dreadful even to Satan. Apart from the global medical emergency that it has ushered in, the need to check the virus by breaking human contact has also fostered sea changes in the way 21st. century human were accustomed to live their lives. In place of the more coveted practice of human intimacy the replaced normal is 'physical distancing' which urges people to keep distance and avoid crowd. Thus, most offices have closed their buildings and encouraged employees to work from home. Schools, colleges and other educational institutions have also shut their gates for students and teachers – enabling virtual learning as an alternate mode of education. In this scenario, as it may be commented, connecting people virtually has become one of the more popular and in-demand alternative. All over the world the tendency is to exploit this virtual world to stay connected and thrive.

In this era of the unprecedented and rapid growth of the virtual mode, it is needless to say that all sectors which have a considerable number of people associated with them for their daily bread are trying to cope with the novel changes by using the virtual mode as their means of survival. Theatre industry being largely dependent on its connection with the audience is no exception. The closure of theatres across the globe from March, 2020 (in some cases they were closed in some later period, depending on the intensity of the spread of the virus) meant that theatre companies would go out of work. And it was going to have two major adverse impacts upon the production houses. First, because theatre does not only mean art but it also means business and it offers means of sustenance to people associated with it, the closure of theatres would mean people running out of work and money. Secondly, the long-term success of a production house depends a lot on the kind of impact it can have on public memory. A long gap from public memory would mean that the very existence of the



house would be at stake. Hence, need- based changes made in the theatrical realm have been the call of the day.

The rapid rise and growth of virtual theatre in the post-Covid world is, therefore, neither surprising nor unthinkable. If we take a look at the global theatrical scenario we can easily find out how, apart from the amateur theatre houses which have been using social media platforms for showcasing their productions to a larger number of audience much before the pandemic has seen light of the day, now even larger production houses are also shifting to the virtual mode for being in the business.

An analysis of the collated data from various sources shows that there are roughly three major ways in which virtual platforms are being used by the theatre production houses:

- i. Streaming archived recordings of previously performed plays.
- ii. Recording live proscenium performances and streaming them.
- iii. Streaming informal performances created through virtual interactive platforms.

Virtual Theatre: The Global Scenario Now

Broadcasting pre-recorded popular performances has become one of the major ways in which production houses are trying to keep themselves in the business. The modus operandi for this kind of a project is pretty simple. Most modern production houses or other archiving agencies have been recording performances of popular plays from much before the pandemic. In the present scenario they are utilizing these resources not only to entertain the bulk of audience now confined at home, but also to keep the business alive. Most of the times



they are getting streamed through the production houses' own websites. For example according to the report by *Belfast Telegraph* (online edition) dated 1st. June, 2021 even the British Broadcasting Corporation or BBC in its initiative called "Culture in Quarantine" will feature a combination of premieres and older plays recorded for the first time" (Green).

As published in a report in the website *Londontheatre1.com*, Jonty Claypole, the Director of BBC Arts has emphasized on this new method of reaching out to theatre audience in unambiguous terms:

This has been the hardest year in living memory for the performing arts – and the crisis is far from over. It is only right that the BBC – which has worked arm-in-arm with writers, performers and off-stage talent day-in day-out over the last 100 years – should support and celebrate our performing arts at this time. This is why BBC Culture in Quarantine is launching Lights Up: a major season devoted to theatre, celebrating the UK's stages, its artists, the shows that we cannot see, for millions at home around the country. The shows come from every corner of the UK – from Belfast to Glasgow, Cardiff to London. And, as well as broadcasting new and recent productions, we are also using our broadcast and digital platforms to celebrate all that theatres do for our society. Theatre has been at the heart of our culture for centuries and will continue to be so for many to come. (Claypole)

Therefore, it doesn't come as a surprise to the audience when BBC announced that it would be collaborating with more than 12 theatres and theatrical producers across the UK for more



than 15 newly-recorded plays. Each play was a partnership between BBC Arts and a theatre or producer and many productions were recorded on the stages of empty theatres.

Along with BBC, the National Theatre at Home Project run by the National Theatre, London supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies has a dedicated website to let subscribers watch the recordings of their popular productions. Marked as “Hidden Gems” in the website, a separate section contains recordings of many popular previous productions by the house like *Consent*, *Medea*, *I Want My Hat Back* etc.

The concept of Virtual Theatre as the safest feasible option for theatre lovers in the post-Covid era has been embraced by the US Theatres as well. The Broadway HD founded by Stewart F. Lane and BonieComlie in 2015, for instance, has been engaged in streaming full length stage plays recorded specifically for multiplatform viewing all over the world. Similarly, On the Boards, a Portland based experimental theatre production house has been recording and streaming its performances online for reasonable rates of subscription. On the other hand, the Digital Theatre website is making pre-recorded British stage productions available to its paid viewers.

While most of the theatre houses are allowing subscription bound views of the on-line streaming of their old and new productions through their own websites, there are some performances which are being put on air through the popular media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Youtube. For instance, Theatre without Theatre has an Instagram handle with 7096 followers where the theatre artists collaborate to enact small pieces, sing songs or just share their theatrical experiences to keep the theatrical vibes alive. Even National Theatre,



UK has also posted recorded versions of full-length plays in Youtube for free-viewing, with gentle requests made towards viewers' contributions as a fundraiser for theatre workers in distress. Each of these videos get near about thousand views which is a sign of its acceptance among the viewers.

Sometimes these require subscription to enable people to watch them, thereby enabling the production houses to meet their financial needs. Some other times even when watching such plays would require no subscription we find that they are interspersed with advertisements, which again help the production houses meet their financial demands through sponsorship.

Virtual Theatre in India

There is, however, a slow but steady trend of recognition of Virtual theatre that is taking place in the Indian theatrical scenario. Important cultural bodies have finally come to terms with the present reality and are entering into the domain of Virtual theatre. While most theatre groups of fame aren't too eager to deem virtual theatre as a befitting replacement of the traditional form, yet it is heartening to see that some of them are gradually responding to the digital platform with an affirmative note of acceptance.

SangeetNatak Academy, an autonomous body under the Government of India was set up to promote Indian performance culture. In these trying times this academy is relying on the virtual media to continue its function. It has a dedicated Facebook page that showcases various performances including plays and choreographies. They had also organized a festival called *Rang Sangam Natya Samaroha* between 26th and 29th March, 2021. This festival



featured five plays from four different language regions of India. They were recorded in empty theatres before being posted in SangeetNatakAcamedy's Facebook page and Youtube channel.

Similarly, eminent playwright and theatre director Mahesh Dattani has also embraced digital theatre as a medium of his expression in the post- Covid era. His play *Hasmukh Sahab Ki Wasihat*- written in 1985 out of the necessity of submitting a play for a competition- is now available in Zee Theatre which is an online platform with a considerably good collection of both national and global 'teleplays'¹. Zee Theatre, which is also available over various DTH platforms, requires monthly subscription, ensuring that the financial requirements of a theatre production are adequately taken care of.

As has been already mentioned, financial concern is one of the major impetus for the emergence of virtual theatre in the post-Covid era. But that is not all. Some theatre personalities do find the challenges involved in making a virtual production of a play challenging and rewarding as well. Theatre artist Dipti Mahadev, for example, was touring the entire country with her solo play *Kabutar JaJa* when the country got hit by the pandemic and all shows were stopped. Cancelled shows caused the team a financial setback and to cope with such incurred losses she had to accept offers to direct online plays for financial sustenance. Initially skeptical about the acceptability of such productions, she later found more people watching her plays online than she ever had in her live performances. She also found dealing with this new genre aesthetically challenging and satisfying too. In an interview to *The Citizen* she has said:



As a team, we were skeptical about the whole medium initially, but soon the process of discovery led by the director went on to be as enriching as any stage play I had done (Mahadev)

What is evident from Mahadev's realization is that while there certainly are some merits of a Virtual theatre most theatre enthusiasts avoid it because of their habitual acceptance of the dictums of the proscenium. But once that habit is broken, virtual theatre may be found to be a genre with prospects. What is implied in this deduction may be one of the reasons why big brands in Indian theatre have either adopted the virtual version of performance late or haven't accepted it at all. Their preoccupation with the traditional theatre as a sanctum sanctorum is a part of their brand identity and they might have considered this radical shift a gross violation of principles.

Things are however different with the amateur theatre groups. Still in search of established reputation, they are more at ease with experimentations of this kind. While the big names in Indian theatre have partially accepted the budding form but not without a grain of salt, for the amateur theatre groups Virtual theatre has resurfaced as a boon. Now their performances are available for viewing globally through Facebook telecast, both live and recorded, Instagram handles or even as WhatsApp links, Skype broadcast or Telegram uploads. A case in point would be Raveesh Jaiswal of the Bombay Theatre Company who was about to set his production in April, 2020 when the pandemic hit them hard. Being new the block they had to depend on online platform to showcase their effort. Raveesh told *The Citizen*:



I thought of putting my plays on Instagram. As I thought that no one would watch an hour or more on Zoom, YouTube, I decided to use the Instagram feature of going live to do shorter plays. (Sahni)

From the same report one is informed that the response that Jaiswal received for his 10 minute Insta plays was more that what he had thought for. His short plays were viewed online by around 2-3 thousand viewers, much more than he would have got for offline performances.

Reactions to Virtual Theatre

Globally the emergence of Virtual theatre in the post-pandemic era has received mixed reactions from professionals, critics as well as audiences. The more conservative section refuses to admit that such emergence has any significance on following grounds:

First, theatre is distinct from other narrative performances by virtue of the kind of communication it provides between the performers and the audience. Live interaction between them is what makes the experience of the theatre memorable. In absence of any such communication theatre loses its essence. Critics find that:

...it has something to do with location, and feeling, and your invisible relationship with individual performers and the whole panoply of action on the stage (Cunningham)

Secondly, such performances require a certain kind of continuity to engage the audience into the make believe world of theatre. Possibility of technical glitches like poor



network and drop of network may, thus, affect the audience's experience adversely.

Thirdly, theatre is one such performance space where audience's choice of spectacle is not obstructed by the singularity of the director's perspective. Yet in virtual theatre camera angles become very important in determining the focus of the audience. Thus, virtual theatres create restrictive experience for the audience.

While most of the adverse criticisms showered on Virtual theatre are from the perspective of audience experience, there are certain technical difficulties involved too which we cannot overlook. Director and Theatre critic Emily Lyat comments:

One of the biggest struggles about doing a virtual show is just the fact not everyone's internet connection is stable, not everybody has the same processing speed, I guess, and that not everyone has the right areas or access to put up a green screen, which is one of the things we were definitely troubleshooting with... (Melcher)

In spite of plethora of criticisms one cannot deny that the emergence of Virtual theatre wasn't only inevitable, but it has also surfaced as beneficial for many related to theatre. For example, it has increased the number of viewers for performances:

While theatres remain dark, there is seemingly more theatre taking place now than before, or rather, more people are able to participate. Prior to this time, the ability to access theatre largely depended on your geographic location.
(Warrington)



Thus, Virtual theatre is bridging the gap between audiences of different regions and connecting them to audience from the entire globe.

To conclude it may be said that while the emergence of Virtual theatre came as a necessity during a period of shut theatre halls, it is here to stay. Especially in the post-covid era when even opened theatres would encounter diminished number of spectators following the norms of social distancing, Virtual theatre can act as a means to reach to more number of people at a lesser cost; more so because Covid has drastically minimized people's capacity to spend globally. To quote James Nicola²:

Virtual theatre isn't a replacement for the magic that happens within the walls of a theatre, but it's another stage to explore—one that removes obstacles that might have otherwise prevented someone from attending; removes the limitations of what's physically possible within a theatre, and one that allows many more artists to be developing and sharing new work in real-time (Warrington).



Endnote

¹ The term ‘teleplay’ has been used in the homepage of the website of Zee Theatre to refer to recorded theatre plays.

² James Nicola is the Artistic Director at The New York Theatre Workshop and a practitioner of theatre in Virtual mode.



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