

Digital theater or the art of human revitalization

We will see how the use of VR in theatrical creation can be a source of renewal by increasing both the stage space and the presence of the actors themselves. The virtual zone, which questions the notion of humanity and its limits, nevertheless allows us to transcend spatial, temporal, cultural, and political boundaries by opening a path to a community that is also undergoing change in a wave of creolization (to use Édouard Glissant's terms). This quasi-anthropological research thus generates a new narrative. Like the actor, the playwright-director duo is working with new tools that are transforming the theatrical landscape and, in the case of the conversational robot, can even interfere with the casting of the show.

Most of the examples used in this paper are drawn from my experiences as a dramaturg working with Polish director Krzysztof Garbaczewski, as well as from our activities within the Digital Performance Network (DPN). I will therefore begin by introducing the DPN in order to contextualize these examples. The DPN is a platform created in 2023 on Garbaczewski's initiative, dedicated to the creation of live performances that take place simultaneously on several stages in different countries. Each venue has one or more actors and two or more projections, with a live audience present in both the physical and virtual reality layers using VR equipment.

I – The avatar, a medium for anthropological research

When considering the introduction of digital technology into theatrical creation, I believe it is important to first revisit the role of the actor within the performance.

The term “live performance” implies the physical presence of at least one actor on stage and spectators in the auditorium. The actor, as a living being, is therefore at the heart of the creative process, and questioning how the digital age can trigger a process of revitalization in our theatrical practices may seem provocative. Indeed, for some, the introduction of new technologies on stage represents more of a loss than a gain. Theatrical institutions fear that human contact will be lost, that the performance will be devitalized in a way, while actors fear that they themselves will be reified and transformed into a kind of puppet whose sole function would be to animate their digital double, their dematerialized replica, their avatar.

I think it would be interesting to reverse this point of view and examine how avatars can be a privileged medium for rediscovering humanity and its powers.

Let us first return to the figure of the avatar, which is far from being a newcomer. Before becoming a digital incarnation, the avatar was a divine incarnation in Hinduism that descended from heaven to earth. Indeed, Hindus called the different incarnations of the god Vishnu avatars.

Today, we could see a connection between the digital avatar and the puppet (in its various forms: shadow theater, etc.), which has been present on stage for a long time. The digital avatar could be seen as a kind of puppet freed from its physical dimension, a kind of dematerialized puppet.

Much more than a disembodied digital entity, the avatar possesses great symbolic power.

On stage, just like a puppeteer, it is the actor who breathes life into his avatar. But the actor cannot hide behind the avatar and must continue to occupy the stage physically, to be truly present as an actor.

In this regard, it is important to emphasize that the actor, who wears virtual reality glasses to manipulate his avatar, performs a truly interdisciplinary task, as he finds himself at the crossroads of puppeteering, dancing, and acting. He must animate the inanimate using his physical body, his

breath, and his voice. To do this, they must understand what makes humans alive, where their different centers of vital energy are located, and which postures and gestures convey the information that a body is alive. The avatar then becomes their double. During this research, the actor rediscovers his body by distancing himself from it, examining it, dislocating it, moving it in a more precise, as yet unexplored way, because the avatar has a different way of moving and communicating, a rhythm of its own, often out of step with our own temporality. It cannot perform certain gestures; on the contrary, head movements suddenly animate it. In an interview I conducted with Greek actor and puppeteer Kostadis Mizaras for the puppet magazine *Unima/USA*, the artist said:

I was first an actor and then became a puppeteer. Now I don't distinguish between one or the other, even when I am working as only one of the two. There are many ways to enter puppetry. [...] I like to say that – for me – puppetry is mostly a manipulation of weight and that is what was so bizarre in the VR environment. There is no weight, as there is no body. But avatars are puppets, they need – from the puppeteers' point of view – a thorough understanding or a deep understanding of how they move, which ultimately determines their character and their whole existence.

Or Polish director Krzysztof Garbaczewski, in an interview for the French theater magazine *Théâtre Public*, said of his staging of the opera *Jephte* in Krakow:

The avatar is one of the most exciting theatrical entities for me – because it contains a contradiction. On the one hand, it is digital, disembodied, artificial. On the other, it bears the traces of a human being, a gesture, an intention, a glance. In *Jephte*, I wanted to juxtapose the avatar with its progenitor, the doll. These two entities – puppet and avatar – met on stage as father and daughter. It was a revelation for me: the realization that the avatar is not a novelty, but a contemporary mask, a contemporary puppet. And at the same time something more – because it does not so much hide a person as divide them. An actor in VR can be here and there at the same time; they can exist in a symbolic, psychic, spiritual space. This transition – from puppet to digital avatar – also reflects the transition from a linearly inherited father-son relationship to a more complex, emotional, and open father-daughter relationship, in which technology not only transfers power but also enables the creation of new, non-deterministic forms of intimacy, empathy, and coexistence.

Ultimately, playing with the avatar calls upon an eminently human quality: empathy. It is the ability to understand how another body works, to give oneself entirely to animate the Other. An intimate and ambiguous relationship is thus formed, torn between dialogue and power struggle.

This interplay between the actor and the avatar also evokes the myth of the Dibbuk, a ghost from Jewish legends that takes possession of a living body, with dybbuk meaning “attachment” in Hebrew. Indeed, more than a puppeteer's game between the actor and the avatar, we could see it as a game of possession in which it would be difficult to differentiate between the possessor and the possessed.

“Becoming one” implies the notion of playing with identity, with the avatar becoming the astral projection of the actor who, in a new form, can then experiment with playing with this other self. But unlike Jung's persona, the avatar is not a mask meant to conceal one's inner self; on the contrary, it reveals it, showing the complexity of the being, sometimes through multiple avatars, like so many diffracted personalities. The avatar or avatars thus represent the essence of the actor, who offers the viewer his physical form on stage and the projection of his spirit on the virtual stage.

During rehearsals for Garbaczewski's *Flatland*, an actress who was experimenting with virtual reality acting told us that she felt even more vulnerable when wearing VR glasses. Indeed, scenes in VR can make actors feel fragile, as they lose visual control of the stage and their bodies exposed to the audience, while a part of them, perhaps even more intimate, located elsewhere in the virtual world, is simultaneously projected onto a screen on stage. Given that the virtual world is, in a way, the actor's intimate landscape, we could say that we are witnessing an overexposure of the intimate, as the virtual world is forged from the dramaturgy of the show, which feeds on the characters'

fantasies and unconscious. It is an architecture of intimacy into which the spectator is invited to enter.

It is therefore clear that the living element on stage, the actor, remains the rotate of the theatrical event. His avatar contributes to increasing his presence within the show, in which he and his character unfold in several dimensions.

II – Digital theater, a path toward an international community

The virtual zone allows different artists to collaborate and experiment independently, outside of theatrical institutions that are often resistant to the use of VR. It offers artists a new multicultural space that is easily accessible to as many people as possible, whether they are creators or spectators. This zone also promotes a de-hierarchization of the performing arts world and creates an international digital agora where we can reinvent our relationship with the stage and its traditional modes of expression. As a result, the virtual stage temporarily removes us from the country to which we are assigned and allows us to distance ourselves from our territory of origin, offering a kind of shelter, a place for reflection and intercultural debate.

Our show, *Agora*, based on Alain Badiou's *Plato's Republic*, was the most representative of these. The text by French philosopher Alain Badiou, which is the result of his dialogue with Plato's text, which he had undertaken to retranslate, served as the basis for our show, produced with a South Korean team composed of Kyounghee Ann and her students from Far East University in Gangneung. On the Polish side, the show was produced by Fabryka Sztuki in Łódź and the Chorea company. This project took on a new dimension when the democratic crisis erupted in Seoul, triggered by President Yoon Suk-yeol's declaration of martial law on the night of December 3, 2024.

So, I asked each South Korean actor to write an intimate monologue in which they would recall where they were and the thoughts and emotions they experienced when martial law was announced. These monologues, which were incorporated into the show, also served as its central theme, in dialogue with excerpts from Michel Foucault's *Utopian Body*. The show *Agora* is therefore a unique show because it was marked by a completely unexpected political event, which fed into the theme of the scheduled show. But we could also mention other shows in which the participation of countries such as Ukraine and Georgia had a definite influence. Their national identity alone gave the staged texts a unique significance and demonstrated the need for a virtual community capable of giving artists a voice and, above all, a presence beyond their geographical borders.

In light of global events, virtual theater is becoming a necessary and urgent proposition in a world whose cartographic contours are constantly being redrawn by authoritarian, even dictatorial leaders.

The use of new technologies can therefore also revitalize theater on several levels: geographically, by bringing places and buildings to life, but also at the city level. The term “city” is understood both in the sense of a town, as we have just seen, and in the sense of a political community whose citizens take control of their own lives. It should be noted that the term “city” is used here in a very broad sense, since this form of theater transcends both institutional and geographical boundaries, allowing for international unity and action on the margins.

III – The Dramaturgie of The Connection

• Dramaturgy with the conversational tool

Theater, by incorporating digital elements to a large extent, not only in its aesthetics but also in its thinking and creative process, is also rethinking dramaturgy. With the emergence of conversational agents such as ChatGPT, dramaturgical experiments are appearing in performances. Of course, this raises the question of the poor writing and formatting of this machine. However, the role of theater is also to observe and question its surroundings in order to avoid cutting itself off from scientific and technical advances that directly impact our daily lives and can be used for a wide variety of

purposes depending on who is using them. The arts and philosophy are there to offer other ways of looking at things, and what we refer to as artificial intelligence, with tools such as the ChatGPT conversational robot, can be diverted from its original use.

I would cite, as an example, the dramaturgy of Garbaczewski's play *So called humanity in madness*, based on the lost play by Ignacy Witkiewicz. Only a copy of the title page of this 1938 play remains, with the names of the characters. Garbaczewski therefore had the idea of generating the lost text using ChatGPT. It quickly became clear that the aim of this work was not to reconstruct the lost play by creating the illusion of a play written by Witkiewicz, which would be of interest to us, but rather, on the one hand, to convey the very essence of Witkiewicz's work and, on the other hand, to reveal a creative process, to open up the machine, so to speak, and show how it works.

My “conversations” with the machine during the production of the dialogues bring to life characters who are never fixed but always evolving, since the aim is to evoke their possible trajectories, just like the possible paths the play could have taken.

I also chose to include the director (Garbaczewski) and the author of the lost play (Witkiewicz) in the show, as well as Artificial Intelligence itself, making the machine a character. This kind of Trinity allows us to reflect on the creative act, yesterday and today. This leads to another dimension of the conversational tool, that of an interface with the world of the dead, its gigantic database representing, in a way, the memory of humanity. The dialogue with AI allowed me, one might say, to get in touch with Witkiewicz and bring him back among us on stage, even though it is obvious that I am the source of this projection, with ChatGPT merely reflecting my own fantasy back to me. Nevertheless, the very idea of collaborating with AI is exciting, and the creative process between the playwright and the machine is even more interesting than the result itself. For the playwright, it is an encounter with otherness, as AI can be more than a tool by becoming a character in its own right in the show, a kind of revealer. There is therefore an aspect of futuristic anthropology, that is to say, the study of a mutation, the encounter between man and machine, but a machine that is almost humanized and a man that is augmented.

- **Dramaturgy for hybrid performances**

However, dramaturgy in the digital age does not necessarily use AI. Creating hybrid performances is also a way of thinking about connections, with digital theater promoting, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, “rhizomatic thinking.” Platforms such as the DPN have a horizontal and rhizomatic structure that inevitably impacts the process of creating shows and the works themselves. The theatrical performances of the various participating members have unique aesthetics that nevertheless fit together like facets in a shared show.

The basic text, which is common to all, must be treated in an open manner, allowing for different entries or exits, depending on individual needs. The common dramaturgy provides meeting points that allow the show to be performed simultaneously, but each country has a margin of freedom to adapt the script to its own staging needs and personal interpretation. Creating shows in the DPN is like walking a tightrope between a common vision and a desire to let each individual express themselves. In my interview with Garbaczewski for the magazine *Théâtre Public*, he explained, and I quote:

At the DPN, we create what I would call a symphony of diversity – we have a common score, but each theater can play it differently. For me, the balance between community and individuality is not a final state, but a dynamic equilibrium of forces – the creative process then resembles a choreography of variables – not a hierarchy.

As a hybrid process, theatrical creation incorporating VR, far from dehumanizing performances, actually allows the artistic team to increase its creative capabilities by opening up new areas of exploration and freedom, facilitating exchanges and the formation of communities. It revitalizes the presence and performance of actors through their avatars and allows for the development of additional writing using a robot whose humanity and adaptability are astonishing. The virtual world,

by participating in the “creolization” of the real world, could therefore, against all odds, invigorate the world. To quote Antoine Lavoisier, nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed, and I would add, transforms us.