DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität Marburg

THE INTERMEDIAL THEATRON:
A PARADIGM SHIFT IN EDUCATION AND PERFORMANCE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE?

FREDA CHAPPLE

This paper assesses a pilot research project into the impact of digital technology on British theatre practice and learning set in the context of government education and skills policies in the UK, and as a result of the findings poses the wider question of whether the intermedial theatron is a paradigm shift in education and performance in the public sphere with the potential to impact the curriculum and pedagogy of British Higher Education in Theatre and Performance studies.

1. The Research Framework: Intermedial relationships between education, media and theatre

»Education, education, education« was a ringing phrase in the 1997 election manifesto of the English Labour Party, which helped sweep ›new‹ Labour, under Mr Tony Blair, to a landslide election victory and into the Government. In June 2007, at the time of writing this paper, Mr Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer since 1997, was set to become the next UK Prime Minister. During the decade 1997-2007, Higher Education Institutions have been funded by the Government Department for Education and Skills, and British theatre has been funded largely by Arts Council England via the Government Department for Culture, Media and Sport. In 1997, the *Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education*, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing set the agenda in which higher education, theatre, and new media were to play their part; the Dearing (1997) Report not only defined problems within higher education, but also contained a vision.

»The vision that emerged is not just about higher education, but about the role of a total national education system in supporting and enriching a society and an economy. The role of universities and colleges is seen embedded in a world of compulsory education, of professional and vocational learning throughout life, and the use of educational resources for personal development; in other words of a learning society« (Watson/Taylor: xiii).

This vision of a learning society forms the backdrop of this paper. In 1997 the British theatron (derived from the Greek word for ›a viewing place‹) was well placed to present a Labour vision of an inclusive learning society, for it has strong roots in British Socialism. It is epitomised in the work of Joan Littlewood's plans

to create a ›playground of learning‹ in the deprived East End of London (Nicholson: 1) and is enshrined in the growth of the regional repertory theatre companies during the Labour government under Harold Wilson (1964-70 and 1974-76), three of which form the focus of this paper: Nottingham, Sheffield, and Leeds. The Wilson government used the analogue television medium of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to deliver mass higher education via a blend of live and mediatized learning by creating the Open University in 1969.

Today, ›new labour‹ has built a new digital ›open university‹ through *Learning online* initiatives broadcast via the BBC (www.bbc.co.uk), which acts as a national learning hub with connections to local courses, partner centres, and learning zones. Here we find networked links to the performing arts, where theatre is located as one of the ›Creative Industries‹ and part of the *Culture online* web-learning opportunities. This has led me to coin the phrase ›the intermedial theatron‹, for on the World Wide Web digital representations of *theatre online* become a very visible ›viewing place‹. Inter-acting with *theatre online* places our bodies in an intermedial position where we are located *in-between* the live theatre performance and its representation in digital coding within a network of Government led skills-based learning initiatives. There are many pathways in, out, and around the intermedial theatron, but all connect to the hub at www.culture.gov.uk, which is accessed via the ›human-computer interface‹ (Manovich).

A notable theatron web-presence within *Culture online* is www.stagework.org, which is endorsed by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, located on the web page of the British National Theatre and produced by the aptly named Illuma Digital Ltd and Simulacra companies. The site provides information about the back-stage working of theatre productions and provides on-line education packs regarding dramatic texts and their cultural context; these are linked directly to key stages of the national education curriculum for schools and for the general public who wish to learn about theatre, via recorded interviews with stage directors, actor diaries, and weblogs from the community of stage and lighting directors who have created the concept of each production. Furthermore, www.stagework.org is a government sponsored web site that links what the government considers to be flagship theatre companies, including the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company, and provides a web-based networked display of key British National Theatre. In turn, *Culture on-line* resonates with *Europe-online* and European initiatives to deliver theatre performances via new media, for example, *Theatron*.

What we can see emerging is a pattern of change driven by digital media. There is the potential to move the experience of live theatre performance from one where the individual citizen attended the local theatron to view and participate in a live representation of their community, to a mediatized simulacrum of theatrical representation accessed via digital technology, which is linked directly to the education and skills agenda of the Labour government, thus widening participation and direct links between professional theatre and education.

2. The research project – The impact of digital technology on British Theatre practice and learning

Working as a solo researcher with a grant from British Society for Theatre Research, the pilot project was a speculative investigation undertaken with the intention that if the findings proved fruitful an application would be made for larger funding to enable a national project. Given my location at the University of Sheffield, I limited the pilot to a reasonable travelling distance from Sheffield, which gave me access to a triangle of northern cities and an interesting mix of building-based theatre companies:

- The Crucible Theatre at Sheffield, the Nottingham Playhouse, and the West Yorkshire Playhouse at Leeds are repertory producing houses.
- The Lyceum Theatre at Sheffield and the Royal Centre in Nottingham (a combination of the Theatre Royal and the Concert Hall) are receiving houses for touring productions in theatre, dance, classical, and popular music.
- The Grand Theatre at Leeds is both a receiving house and the home base of Opera North – a major opera company in the UK, with a remit to tour nationally.

3. Research questions

I sub-divided the central research question of »What is the impact of digital technology on British theatre practice and learning?« into the following specific questions:

1. What impact, if any, does digital technology have on programming?
2. What impact, if any, does digital technology have on performance practice?
3. Is the presence of the digital within the theatre complex changing the way the buildings are being used?
4. Is the inter-active nature of digital technology changing the nature and location of theatre education?
5. Could the inter-active nature of digital technology change the relationship between the community it serves and the theatre as provider of artistic performance? Should it?
6. Theatre and Citizen – Has digital technology changed the balance between citizen and artist?
7. In what areas would the theatres like to increase their use of digital technology? What might inhibit an increase?

One reason for these sub-sections is to offer a contextual framework for discussions I hoped to have with people working with digital media as part of their daily practice. Another was because this enquiry grew out of the work of the I.F.T.R. research group into *Intermediality in theatre and performance* (Chapple/Kattenbelt), which had completed a mapping process of intermediality in theatre and performance. Conscious that the perspective we had used then was essentially from the audience, I recognised that our assumptions and research results into the concept of intermediality needed further testing, and from the perspective of back stage. Essentially, I was acting on a speculative hunch that digital media was more firmly

embedded in daily theatre practice than is generally visible and that change would be happening and therefore formal and informal learning processes might be taking place.

4. Methodology

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews between January 2005 and January 2006. Initial contact with the theatres was by post, enclosing an outline of the proposed research. The theatres selected who was available for interview and interested in participating. Table 1 gives an overview of the participating theatres and specialists who have been willing to participate in the research. They represent the areas: (a) Marketing and Development, (b) Production Management, and (c) Education.

City and Category of Theatre Buildings	AREA: A Marketing and Development.	AREA: B Production Management.	AREA: C Education (schools, lifelong learning)	Number of interviews
NOTTINGHAM Nottingham Playhouse (Repertory)	Head of Marketing Box Office / Customer Services Manager	Head of Lighting Production Manager	Head of Education programme	5
NOTTINGHAM The Royal Centre (Receiving House)	General manager	N/A	Education Officer	2
SHEFFIELD The Crucible Theatre (Repertory) and Lyceum Theatre (Receiving House)	Box Officer / Marketing Manager	Production Manager	Director of Creative Development programme Adult Learning Co-ordinator	4
LEEDS West Yorkshire Playhouse (Repertory)	Box Office Manager Website Manager Press Officer	Director of digital technology	Director of Education Cyber café manager	6
LEEDS Grand Theatre, (Receiving House and Home base of Opera North	Marketing Manager Development manager	Production Manager	Education Special projects	5

Table 1: The theatres and areas within performance practice represented in the research.

5. Results

Not all specific questions could be answered. Access to the senior management, for instance, was not available so it is not possible to comment on the area of programming (research question 1), but interviews with the production staff (Area B) revealed that all of the theatres use digital technology for stage design and lighting and sound operation, with associated patterns of change in their working practice and learning. In addition, in marketing and development (Area A) and Education (Area C) digital technology became a structural element of the theatre production process. In the discussion of the results, I restrict myself to the research questions 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

To make the voices of the experts I interviewed clearly heard, I have chosen to present parts of the interviews as illustrations for selected results. Although the citations are extracted from longer interviews, they can stand for the whole, as each theatre identified similar patters of change.

5.1. (Research Question 2) Impact of digital technology on performance practice

The general feeling regarding the introduction of digital technology within the performance practice is well characterised by means of the following citation:

»I think initially, as the new technology came in generally, it became used in theatre productions because theatre people had an interest in it, and this is the essence of theatre - a lot of theatre is packed with people who self-learn out of a passion, out of a desire to see what they can do with new things, out of an interest and then they apply that process to theatre. But, obviously, once it's become an accepted fact, then you've got to do something about formal training because there are people who haven't done things and therefore need to learn« (Production Director, Opera North).

In addition, within the production area clear tendencies could be deduced from the interviews for the following specific functions:

- Set Design – change due to the influence of computer programmes

»If one looks at it industry-wide in Europe and the UK in terms of set design, automated CAD packages have been in use to a greater or lesser extent for the last 10 or 12 years, primarily on the scenic producing side. Not a lot of designers design with them, they don't use them as a design tool. […] So what we do is translate their drawings onto AutoCAD and it works very well. […] We just didn't have the time to employ banks of draughtsmen to continually update changes for each venue, whereas now one person very quickly can make the alterations and do the printouts, so in scenery terms that's a big plus« (Technical Director, Opera North).

- Lighting – changes to boards and lanterns requires more stage time

»We have a computerized lighting desk that drives the whole thing, but instead of a lantern having just one function, we've now got digital multi-functional moving lanterns, so we need to plot their position, colour, gobo and whether they are moving, so although we may

have fewer lanterns in the rig they do more jobs. There's a lighting session that didn't really used to have to happen before, but if that session does go in with the lights, it saves an enormous amount of time later on« (Head of Lighting, Nottingham Playhouse).

- Digital video projection – the arrival of a new discipline in theatre practice

»My department used to be a department of two disciplines, with lighting and sound, but now there's this third discipline because it's a creature all on its own« (Head of Lighting, Nottingham Playhouse).

- Sound – Informal learning happens as a result of medial advances

»Sound is the area that has changed the most whilst I've been in the industry by going digital – I trained on real tape, and by the time I finished my training the tape had been turned into minidisks, so I just picked it up as I was working, and then digital sound desks started to come in. With digital sound desks you don't have to go away and re-record anything; it's all just there and you just build it in chunks – cut and paste« (Head of Lighting, Nottingham Play-house).

- Operational redundancies and job description changes

»There are certainly fewer people needed. I've done very complex sound and video designs that have been operated by the stage manager from the corner. It's pretty much parcel of the West End. Unless it's absolutely necessary they will not pay for sound operators and they will not pay for video operators. It used to be just on straight plays with few cues that this was the case, but last year *Brand,* which had probably 120 sound cues was operated by the DSM, and this year I have had DSM's operating both the sound and the video and calling the show as well« (Director of Digital technology, West Yorkshire Playhouse).

- Stage management, props, and the Internet

»Stage management prop from E-bay because they can buy period items there. It has completely revolutionised how we prop because you can say »is that the sort of thing you mean« to a designer. We had to get the kind of sword that Byron was given when he fought an Albanian, and we found one on E-bay. Where would we find one otherwise?« (Production Manager, Nottingham Playhouse)

So far the research reveals a clear need for training in the computer programmes that now underpin contemporary theatre practice. This result is confirmed also by the answers to the general research 7:

5.2. (Research question 7) What more would they want to do with digital media?

»I want the CAD packages and training, because none of them are useful without training. Training would be absolute priority. If we had absolutely no limit on the money I'd want to have a stage in the Crucible with hydraulic computerised lifting sections in it because at the moment all our work on stage is manual. So every time we build any levels or reduce

the height of the stage at all, it's all done manually and it's a bit ›cave man‹« (Production Manager, Crucible Theatre).

With respect to the need for training in digital technology in theatre practice the government stands ready to fill the skills gap[1] and thence a link to Learn Direct, which is part of the government-sponsored University for Industry, with a remit to provide high quality post-16 training. We need to notice this transfer in learning from the higher education sector to industry as it may be significant.

The research has revealed informal learning taking place as theatre staff adjusts to new ways of working, and we can see knowledge transfer between the different theatre departments.

The research brings the unseen elements of the intermedial theatron to the surface, for driving the audience and the actors' experience of the performance is the digital media of the lighting desk, the sound desk, and parts of the scenery on the stage and in the fly floor. Whether or not projectors are visible, digital media is running underneath the performance, which raises ontological issues for the ›live‹ theatre performance. All performances are remediated to become an intermedial mix of live and mediatized performance.

The research raises the question of the ontology of digital media itself, as theatre has borrowed and adapted digital media designed for other areas, such as architecture (AutoCAD), popular culture (digital multi-functional lanterns), and music (sequencing and sampling software). With the transfer of media across disciplines, people, and spaces comes knowledge transfer.

The research questions 5 and 6 relate mainly to the box office, publicity, marketing and development section of the project.

5.3. (Research questions 5 and 6) The relationship between theatre (or artist) and community (or citizen)

The research questions 5 and 6 mainly relate to the Box Office, Publicity, Marketing, and Development sections of the project. The Box Office, one of the interfaces between theatre and citizens, uses digital programmes to sell tickets. This technology remains more or less invisible for the community. The lack of visibility on the part of the box office represents a striking contrast with the area of Publicity, Marketing, and Development where the marketing officers actively use the theatre web sites to promote productions.[2] Since the pilot finished it is notable that the web sites continue to change and become artistic performances in their own right. Opera North, with its musical sound and image bites, is evidence of a particularly good practice.

The inter-active nature of the web sites is taken up by the community, contributing to the on-line comment list about the productions, as in *Back-chat* on the Sheffield site, which links directly to the national newspapers' critical reviews of Sheffield productions; this feature is repeated on the other sights. There is also a section where members of the public can comment on the facilities that the theatre has to offer.

---

1   via www.bbc.co.uk/learning/subjects/performing-arts.shtml.
2   www.nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk, www.operanorth.co.uk, www.royalcentre-nottingham.co.uk, www.sheffieldtheatres.co.uk, www.wyplayhouse.co.uk.

5.4. (Research Question 4) Inter-activity and the changes to theatre education

This has been referred to earlier in the discussion of www.stageworks.org, which took as its model the work done on the Sheffield Creative Development Programme web site. The Crucible education site is a separate website accessed by a link to the Crucible web page, and so positions the education programme as connected to the centre of the theatre and looking out to the community. Their creative development programme encourages the community to come into the theatre for learning about stagecraft, acting, and playwriting through contact with the professional actors and directors associated with the Crucible Theatre, thus connecting with the national trend.

At West Yorkshire Playhouse, a cyber café is located in the large open theatre foyer, which is open all day to the community. Here there are free skills courses offered to the general public that are operated by *Learn-Direct*, and so again we see the national picture of the government skills agenda emerging. In this project, a large increase in community drama for all ages is a common feature in regional theatres, and links into the government widening the participation and social inclusion agenda, which continues to gain national momentum.

6. Conclusion

Analysis of the research project reveals that the impact of digital technology on British Theatre practice is considerable, and that if this pilot project were repeated at a national level there is a weight of evidence to suggest that formal and informal learning is taking place in the theatre nationally. What is required now is to consider whether we can now say that the intermedial theatron is a paradigm shift in education and performance in the public sphere. It is clear that the repertory companies have grouped around the funding opportunities offered by the government policies in widening participation and lifelong learning. We have seen a vision of a learning society that is enhanced by the communication offered via digital web sites, and where the community can experience an intermedial theatron – as far as the programme will let them enter; however, ultimately, the computer programme only offers a simulacrum of the live theatre experience.

Although the evidence of the interviews does indicate a paradigm shift in British theatre performance practice, there is limited evidence to support a paradigm shift in education. However, there is a new initiative from Arts Council England *Arts, enterprise and excellence: strategy for higher education* (November, 2006), which promotes a closer involvement of professional theatre to Higher Education, and I am persuaded that this might be the beginning of a paradigm shift. If the policy becomes fully implemented, then Theatre Departments in Higher Education Institutes in Britain will need to consider the potential impact on HE Theatre curriculum, pedagogy, and practice, as this will bring the UK closer to both European and global movements in educational policy and social inclusion debates worldwide (Kenway).

Literature

Arts Council England (2000): *The Arts Council of England's National Policy for Theatre in England.* London: ACE.

Arts Council England (2006): *Arts, enterprise and excellence: strategy for higher education.* London: ACE.

Arts Council England (2006): *Creative Industries: Performing Arts.* London: ACE.

Arts Council England (2006): *Theatre policy.* London: ACE.

Arts Council England (2006): *Public Investment in the Arts: a decade of change.* London: ACE.

Chapple; Freda/Chiel Kattenbelt (Eds.) (2006): *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance.* Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi.

Dearing, R (Chair) (1997): *Higher Education in the learning Society: Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education.* London: HMSO & NICHE Publications.

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2000): *Creative Industries Mapping Document.*

HMSO (2003): *The Future for Higher Education.* London: HMSO

Kenway, J (2001): »The Information Superhighway and Postmodernity: the social-promise and the social price«. In: Carrie Paechter/Margaret Preedy/David Scott/Jasnet Soler (Eds): *Knowledge, Power and Learning.* London: Paul Chapman & Open University Press.

Manovich, Lev (2001): *The Language of New Media.* Cambridge Mass: MIT press.

McDonnell, Bill and Shellard, Dominic (2006) *Social impact study of UK theatre.* London: Arts Council England.

Nicholson, Helen (2005): *Applied Drama.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shellard, Dominic (2004): *Economic Impact Study of UK Theatre.* London: ACE.

Watson, David/Richard Taylor (1998): *Lifelong Learning and the University.* London: Falmer Press.