FUTUR STAGE

PERFORMANCE IS A HUMAN RIGHT

Performance isn't a commodity. It isn't a luxury. It isn't something that gets added
on top of the flow of life. It doesn't belong to the ether, to the state or to private funders.
It doesn't belong to the places where it's performed.

Whether it assumes the form of a streetside improvisation
or a formal staging of a consecrated work from centuries past,
it belongs to the moment.

Performance is interstitial and conjunctive: it's forever
emergent, performed afresh in the act of performing. It's an
enactment involving sounds, sights, smells, bodies, spaces, time,
and touch. Far from standing apart, it is virtuously entangled
with every other art, from the spatial to the visual.

Performance is a fluid edifice built out of interactions:
between performer, production team, and audience;
between nature and culture; between human
and machine; between architecture and living beings.

Performance is a human need: for freedom of expression, for forms of fantasy
and make-believe, for a deepened sense of individual and collective belonging, for the
shared experiences upon which communities and commonalities are built. In the hierarchy
of essential human needs, it provides the tools for self-actualization, self-esteem, a sense
of intimacy and of social interconnection within communities and among communities.

Performance is a human right. Not in the familiar Enlightenment sense that too
often has smuggled homogenizing realities into universalist ideals at the expense
of indigenous cultures and colonized or disenfranchised peoples. It is a "right"
freighted with universals and with critical questions such as: how might a right
to performance build on, refine, critique, or repair the postwar human-rights
conversation? How does that right scale across the spectrum of the arts from
dance to opera, music to theatre, video to streaming media, or with respect
to bottom up vs. top down models of culture? How might it intersect not just the
local publics and practices that make up the world of performance but serve
as a bridge across peoples, cultures, social classes, and generations?
How might it more equitably translate into a system of property rights for
performers and creators?

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Because performance is a human right, the right to perform
and to experience performance must become an integral part
of policy planning and economic life embedded into the social
fabric of public spaces and civic discourse, especially
now as the world grapples with the trauma of pandemic losses
and the need to rebuild a new sense of local and global community
and a shared responsibility for the destiny of the planet.
Likewise, as regards educational policy: no child's education
should be considered complete if they haven't experienced
the performing arts that are integral to their culture.

CONNECTIVE ARCHITECTURES

Because performance is a fundamental aspect of society, the "stage" (conventionally understood) is only the most visible, formal outcropping of the multitude of stages that characterize the life of a community at a given time and place. This is why the future stage cannot be partitioned off or solely aligned with models of performance that were forged in the recent or remote historical past. This is why the future stage needs to be intimately entangled with the other stages on which contemporary life is performed, from the streets and sidewalks to Tiktok and Zoom to the workplace to cultural festivals and fairs.

Dedicated spaces that support on-site modes of performance cannot, thus, be just the stages of the past. They must serve as connective tissue between the intramural and the extramural, between the past, present, and future, between the onsite and the online. Their physical structure necessarily reflects this connective identity, even when a given mode of performance may choose to eschew the digital.

What does such a theater or performance space look like?
What shape should it assume? A multitude of shapes that are site
-and context- and genre-specific.

In setting A, the future stage is a broadcasting laboratory that builds on the past century of laboratory theaters, communal gatherings, and rituals. In setting B it's a production studio where the audience is front and back, side to side, on stage and off stage, onsite and online. In setting C it's an interactive, participatory playground where the real is layered with virtual illusions and dreams. In setting D it's a distributed "space" that resides only in the cloud where artificial intelligence is the storyteller and only virtual reality persists. In setting E it's the animation of indoor and outdoor spaces conceived without any reference to becoming stages. In setting F it's a stage of the mind, with no need of any other incarnation.

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There's no one answer.

But it's not enough either to replicate traditional forms or to simply build black boxes, leaving to the future the task of filling them in.

New theater architectures need to place bets and those bets will be interconnected, transmedial, and transcultural.

LIVENESS PLUS

Among the stages that most powerfully shape contemporary life are those associated with the ubiquity of networks and networked devices, and the many ways in which they are reshaping the contours of human experience and interaction. Whether for performers or audiences, the resulting halo of data streams and algorithms that now surround, inform, and emanate from every human act demands an expanded notion of live performance: what we are calling liveness plus.

"Liveness" can and must remain an essential attribute of all spectacle forms both past and present. But "liveness" on the future stage means grappling with the when, what, and where of performance under conditions that blur the boundaries between presence and tele-presence, between the embodied and the mediated, between human actions and flows of data, between consciousness and the metaverse.

This expanded mode of staging can no longer be understood as an afterthought. Rather, it entails the opening up of new horizons of experience for audiences and performers: experiences from hitherto unimaginable angles, and on hitherto unimaginable perceptual or time scales; events designed to add value to each and every channel that structures the experience.

Liveness plus not only needs to be hard-wired into every future stage, but implies new management, programming, and business models; new models of inclusivity, access, and outreach; new governance and ownership models, as well as legal frameworks. It implies new modes of training for performers that grapples with the changing nature of performance itself and the attenuating boundary between performers and audiences. It implies a rethinking of such basic features of artistic practice and the arts economy as the tour.

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THE TOURING TEST

Touring remains one of the pillars of the modern performance economy. But touring is less a human right than a necessity for performers who, due to the expanding role of labels, publishers, galleries, streaming services, and other intermediaries, cannot survive on the basis of sales of tickets and recordings alone. This must change.

The harsh realities of climate change demand new models of program development, sharing, sustenance, and distribution… a reinvention of the tour, a reimagining of how we ensure the free movement of ideas and culture across national borders. They suggest that touring, as currently understood, must increasingly become the exception rather than the rule. They demand innovative redefinitions of touring: agile, low cost, telematic, multi-sited modes of performance; cross-border collaborations that leverage the power of digital platforms; performances devised and bundled up so that they can travel from site to site and company to company with sharply reduced human travel; performer residencies in a concentrated number of hubs instead of costly city- and continent-hopping. These are but a few glimmers of the future world of "touring" that underscore an increasingly urgent imperative: in all their deliberations, cultural policy makers and decision makers today, not to mention artists and production teams, must tackle the carbon footprint of performance.

OWN THE STREAM

Next comes the question of live streaming, the most widespread default upon which cultural institutions and performers have relied during the pandemic lockdown. But let's enfold within the notion of the "stream" all of those modes of dissemination that enable the location- and site-specific to travel in space and time; and let's understand the word "ownership" in the expanded sense of "embrace," "recognize," and "assume responsibility for."

As a surrogate for liveness and onsite experience, live streaming has a unique potential to democratize and de-localize otherwise costly or inaccessible cultural forms. It is certain to play a key role in the future of performance. But not as a mere add-on or compromised surrogate for liveness. And not without fundamental changes to existing models of ownership and revenue generation. (As even highly successful artists have discovered in the course of the pandemic, art today cannot live by streaming alone). And also not without addressing the profound asymmetries that exist between nations, regions, and generations when it comes to access to broadband, asymmetries that compromise the future of the performing arts.

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To simply broadcast performances that were designed for certain spaces and on certain scales without adapting or altering them is not an innovation that taps into the depth or breadth of the digital media revolution. At best, it is like pouring old wine into new bottles. At worst, it adulterates the quality of the wine. Streaming fulfils its promise by reflecting creatively or critically on its specificity, capabilities, and affordances as a new cultural medium. That means exploring a new universe of online experience that is fundamentally different from the onsite even when the two intersect. And intersect they can. This point of intersection needs to be explored differentially as a value-added proposition, enriching and animating both online and onsite experiences.

For streaming to become a key expression of liveness plus, the stream must become a fully integral feature of every performance, no less integral or material than the site of performance, the company, the performers, the atmosphere. Accordingly, it needs to become part of the conceptual and physical infrastructure of every future stage.

"Own the stream" means multiple things: from the standpoint of audience, engage with the stream as an integral feature of every performance; from the standpoint of economics, make the stream support content creation, creators, and performers through new business models; from the architectural standpoint, hardwire the stream's production into every future stage in as dynamic, futureproofed a way as is possible.

Owning the stream is a multilayered endeavor. It implies inclusivity, co-creation, and democratization, but most of all a reconceptualization and redistribution of both actual and symbolic capital.

NEW PERFORMANCE PROFESSIONS

Just as the future stage requires new physical architectures, infrastructures, and modes of performance, it demands new, more versatile and flexible approaches to organizational and business structures, and to performing arts management and staffing.

SKILLS

In place of traditional performance schools, it requires multi-dimensional, deeply interdisciplinary approaches to training, exploring new kinds of relationship between creation, production, and consumption and, for the new worlds of technically enhanced liveness, bringing performing and technical training much closer together.

In place of traditional performance directors, it needs to foster a new generation of directors who develop their work with liveness plus as an organic, fully integrated element within the creative process.

In place of traditional performers, it requires performers to whom the historic boundary separating artists and audiences has become a permeable membrane, and for whom technical and virtual expansion and enrichment of their work has become a daily given.

In place of traditional theater consultants, it imposes an integrated view of performance spaces from a liveness plus perspective, expediting new kinds of relationships between creators, audiences, and interactively minded consumers.

In place of traditional marketing, it demands more sophisticated kinds of interactive dialogues with audiences and consumers, personalization, recognition of the extent to which we have moved beyond the traditional impermeable boundaries between artists and audiences.

In place of traditional accountancy-trained finance directors, it requires more sophisticated and inventive kinds of business modellers and revenue architects.

STRUCTURES

Assuming a need for everyone involved in performance to work in interdisciplinary ways, so that new business and organizational structures don't perpetuate traditional skills divisions.

Assuming a need to put aside traditional professional hierarchies (often rooted in historical inequalities and exclusionary centralization of power and resource distribution) and instead recognize the primacies arising afresh from new ways of working, with the aim of better identifying, fostering and, realizing fundamental workflow innovations.

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The above considerations are beginning to shape an expanded universe of performance professions for the future stage. Here's a list, speculative in character, of some of the transmedial roles that may emerge as a result:

1. Waiting Room Hypester [=WRH]: The Zoom-era equivalent of a pre-show agitator who greets the audience in the digital waiting room and focuses its attention as it waits for a performance to begin. Whether the hypester operates as an actor, musician, comedian, carnival barker, or magician matters less than that he or she serve as an agent of audience activation and concentration.

2. Virtual Space Realtor [=VSR]: An independent expert in technological "houses," VSRs help productions navigate all available digital platforms and find the combination of softwares/hardwares/programs that best serve a given production's needs. With strong ties to the world of entertainment tech, they also help to broker mutually beneficial deals that support and sustain the programming stream.

3. Lag Master General [=LMG]: For the foreseeable future, visual and auditory latency and glitches are an inevitable part of transmedia and digital performance. Part producer, part technician, the job of the LMG is to make such "irregularities" seem like designed-in features of every performance by means of his or her on-the-fly interventions and improvisations.

4. Live Captioning Maestro [=LCM]: Connected and networked performances offer the possibility for increased accessibility, as well as for new modes of expression, by means of captioning. Live captioning comes in many flavors. It can serve as a support, providing the right balance of textual supports for a performance that might otherwise prove elusive for reasons of language, historical context, or complexity. It could also serve as a performance mode in its own right, with captions providing feedback and annotations on the fly, in pursuit of estranging, comic, or dramatic effects.

5. Screenographer [=S+]: A scenographer for screens. Trained to think creatively and critically about the design of digital, AR, and VR spaces, the Screenographer adapts the skills and tools of a scenic designer to digital environments and explores new modes of screen/space hybridity.

6. Accessibility ombudsman [=AO]: The AO is responsible for ensuring access in all of the senses of the word: from physical access to facilities for both audience and staff to online access for remote audiences. The responsibilities in question include not just preparation and planning, but also on-the-spot and on-the-fly problem solving.

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7. Performance Doula [=PD]: the PD operates as an on-site producer whose responsibility is to bring new works into existence across the analog/digital divide. A creative (not merely technical) role, the PD seeks to interpret a given performance in ways that reconcile site- and space-specificity and the need for capture, broadcasting, and remote viewing.

8. Metabundler [=MB]: involved in the design of a performance from the outset, the MB is responsible for creating the necessary toolkit, documentation, and technical supports that will render it shippable and suitable for multiple venues, reducing or eliminating the need forpersonnel to travel with the show.

NEW FUNDING MODELS

Performing arts financing is broken; broken in a multitude of ways. It innovates as an afterthought. It allocates resources asymmetrically, on the basis of precedent, often with scant regard for shifting demographics and societal change. Instead of thinking ahead, it thinks backward. And it underestimates the role of cultural institutions as drivers of value creation beyond local and regional economic development.

What needs to be reinvented? Most everything.

— Public funding remains as essential as ever because the future stage demands innovation (the costs associated with building state-of-the-art new venues or revitalizing old stages will NEVER be captured by ticket revenues alone).

— The precondition for public funding must be not tradition or precedent, but INNOVATION and NEW ADIENCE BUILDING. Too many of the most august institutions in the performing arts have become backward looking and self-referential, and there's an urgent need for participatory and community-based mechanisms for the allocation of resources at the local and national level, as well as for imaginative thinking about both local and international partnerships.

— Private funding is more welcome than ever: not to replace public funding but instead to complement it (and especially to serve as an agent of disruption and revitalization).

— The fiscal regimes that govern the performing arts sector are out of date, focusing on local value-creation (for our city, our region etc.). Rarely, if ever, do they tap into the full range of potential revenue streams, leaving money on the table, most often to the detriment of artists (too often treated as mere "cost-factors").

— Most Value Added Tax systems class the performing arts as a luxury good (that's just plain wrong: PERFORMANCE IS AN ESSENTIAL GOOD).

— Sponsorship models remain sclerotic, ill-suited to current needs. The time for contributing money in return for featuring corporate logos is past. New partnership models are needed that create genuine value both for sponsors and recipients of sponsor funds.

— Innovation in financing and intellectual property rights management is urgently needed (it's time to experiment with alternative models from crowdfunding to decentralized autonomous organizations and/or NFTs).

What will happen if new funding models aren't embraced to build, support, and sustain the future stage? Physical venues will languish. Future audiences will gradually abandon them. They will come to know the performing arts on the screen alone. BUT the screen and the stream are the best friends of the future stage: the very means by which liveness can be reinvented and renewed in its foundational role ...as liveness plus.

TAKEAWAYS

— THE FUTURE STAGE DEMANDS NEW ARCHITECTURAL, ORGANIZATIONAL, AND HUMAN INFRASTRUCTURES (new physical plants, new funding models, new professional roles).

— LIVENESS PLUS IS THE NORM ON THE FUTURE STAGE (let's double down and build an ecosystem that promotes inclusivity, enhanced access, and reduced costs, along with participatory modes of performance and audience interaction).

— FUTURE AUDIENCES FOR THE FUTURE STAGE (they need to be cultivated, they need to be welcomed, only fresh approaches to programming will bring them into being).

— STREAMING IS A CREATIVE MEDIUM (NOT A SUPPORT) ON THE FUTURE STAGE (let's explore its medium-specificity).

— THE FUTURE STAGE DEMANDS BETTER, FAIRER, MORE CREATIVE DIGITAL PLATFORMS (in support of content creators and audience participation; platforms that promote equitable and distributed ownership models for cultural content).

— Like the stages of the past, THE FUTURE STAGE REQUIRES BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FUNDING BUT WITH A RAZOR-SHARP FOCUS ON BUILDING NEW AUDIENCES.

...most important of all...

— THE FUTURE STAGE IS NOW (there can be no post-pandemic return to the old "normal," which was already broken; the time for courage, vision, and action is NOW).

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