THEATRE, PRESENCE AND *COMMUNITAS* IN SOCIAL ISOLATION: COVID-19 AND ZOE SEATON'S *THE TEMPEST* AND *OPERATION ELSEWHERE* ONLINE

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Abstract: Responding to the Covid-19 crisis, Zoe Seaton, Artistic Director of Big Telly Theatre Company, directed the adaptation for an online experience of two productions that had been conceived originally for face-to-face stagings. The first, co-produced with Oxford's Creation Theatre, was based on a 2019 multi-site production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* that challenged many of the dominant conventions of theatrical spectatorship. The second, *Operation Elsewhere*, had been initially planned as part of a sequence of performances that used gaming approaches to reconfigure and imagine towns and villages in Northern Ireland. Seaton staged both productions via ZOOM to connect audiences and performers enduring various conditions of lockdown – primarily in the UK and Ireland, but also from further afield. Each of the productions was performed in real time online. Each provided a new experience of contingency and co-presence to create a reciprocity in performance that had hitherto been the preserve of body-to-body theatrical encounters or online gaming. In a time of intense social isolation, I suggest too, that exercising this mode of spectatorship has the potential to create an experience of *communitas* that constitutes participation in an assembly that exceeded the limits of co-location in a physical social space.

Keywords: ZOOM Theatre, liveness, *communitas*, Northern Irish theatre, assembly.

Introduction

In March 2020, huge swathes of public life in the United Kingdom and across the world changed radically in response to the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic. Globally, public spaces emptied out and closed down as up to three billion people entered into some state of lockdown and people who could retreated into the

safety of home.[1] Theatre venues closed with no clear indication of when they would re-open. In response, Zoe Seaton, Artistic Director of Big Telly Theatre Company, Northern Ireland, directed the adaptations for an online experience via ZOOM of two productions that had been conceived originally and staged as face-to-face events. Big Telly is based in Portstewart on the north coast of Northern Ireland and, as one of the oldest touring theatre companies in the region, had a long-standing track record of live and innovative theatre, locally, regionally and internationally.

This essay reflects on the experience of watching these two productions to suggest that they reveal a potential impact in generating an experience of *communitas* to serve as a basis for forms of assembly.[2] I begin by laying out the origins of both productions as in-person events, drawing out the ways in which they manifested a matrix of characteristics associated with live events. Setting out the ways in which these were adapted for presentation on ZOOM allows me to revisit the elements of that liveness matrix. I propose that liveness might be experienced and conceptualised less as a binary between live and non-live and rather as a continuum. The experience of liveness along this continuum has the potential to create bonds between people, something of particular value during the enforced isolation to preserve life and health during the pandemic. In turn, those bonds fulfil a necessary condition for political resistance that might be activated not just in response to the pandemic but also to the atomising effects of neo-liberal capitalism.

Context: The Original Live *The Tempest* (2019) and *Operation Elsewhere* (2018)

The first example, co-produced with the English company Creation Theatre, was based on a 2019 multi-site, very much abridged version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* directed by Seaton. That original production was staged as a form of immersive game in Oxford, England across July and August that year. Designed as a "site-responsive"[3] production, it involved the audience navigating between twelve "stations" in geographically distinct spots in and around the Osney Mead

1 Natalia Martinelli et al., "Time and Emotion During Lockdown and the Covid-19 Epidemic: Determinants of Our Experience of Time?" *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, 6 January 2021, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.616169.

2 See Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) 185ff.

3 For a further discussion of "site-responsive theatre" see Dorothy Max Prior, "Right Here, Right Now: Site Responsive Theatre," *Total Theatre Magazine*, 3 June 2013, http://totaltheatre.org.uk/right-here-right-now-site-responsive-theatre/.

Industrial Estate on the outskirts of Oxford city. Each station was a stand-alone episode from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* produced in a different style. The audience travelled between the stations and both in their moving between the stations, and sometimes within them, spectators could participate through interactive physical comedy or by helping characters further their own narrative.

The second ZOOM production directed by Seaton, *Operation Elsewhere,* had its genesis in events staged by Big Telly in 2018 as part of a sequence of performance interventions that used gaming approaches to reconfigure and re-imagine spaces within towns and villages in Northern Ireland. An immersive theatre game, played in multiple locations across towns, *Operation Elsewhere w*as based around an original piece written by Jane Talbot, reworking Irish mythical stories of Tír na nÓg – the Otherworld of Celtic myth and legend. In teams of eight, spectators entered the Otherworld and were tasked with protecting the delicate fabric between this world, and the land of the faeries. Initial productions were staged in Enniskillen and Donaghadee and involved a laminating of the mise-en-scène of the fictional world onto the physical locations of each place. The effect was the creation of a sense of "both-and"-ness – belonging simultaneously to the fictional world of the narrative and the actual location, what elsewhere Augusto Boal has termed "metaxis," a state of belonging simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds;[4] though here, unlike in Forum Theatre, this is the familiar world of the everyday and the imagined world of the performed narrative.

Theories of Live Performance

Both original productions manifested those characteristics associated with a sense of a fully live performance, or what Philip Auslander terms "classic liveness" or "the default definition of liveness."[5] Previously, Auslander had proposed that the distinction between live and mediated performances should be focused on issues of reproduction and distribution.[6] These issues can be further broken down into characteristics that together form a matrix of features of liveness.[7] The principal

4 Augusto Boal, "The Cop in the Head: Three Hypotheses," *TDR* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 38.

5 Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008) 62.

6 Philip Auslander, "Against Ontology: Making Distinctions between the Live and the Mediatized," *Performance Research* 2, no.3 (1997): 50-51.

7 I am indebted here to the work of Dr Verity Peet in her doctoral research project at Ulster University, "A Multi-Modal Investigation of The Effects of Technological Medium on Gameplay in Live Interaction" (2014), https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.654098.

characteristic is the co-location of audience and performers in space and time: what is now widely referred to as face-to-face experiences. Auslander has outlined that "[t]he default definition of live performance is that it is the kind of performance in which the performers and the audience are both physically and temporally co-present to one another."[8] That physical co-location brings into play a raft of embodied experiences and forms of embodied knowing and interpersonal relationships. Many of the claims to the power of performance's social and political functions are predicated on precisely this embodied experience as foundational to liveness.

Such co-location requires a further characteristic: that the performers and spectators attend to each other, generating a feedback loop such that whatever happens within that presentational space during the course of the performance constitutes the event.[9] It is in such reciprocity that co-location becomes co-presence,[10] so that the uniqueness of each staging comes in part from this reciprocity, even for spectators attending for a second or more times. Just as importantly, that co-presence allows for shifts within even the most exhaustively rehearsed theatrical production and the possibility, if not the actuality, of spontaneity in how the event might unfold. The temporal dimension by which co-presence and spontaneity are determined resonates in a further condition of liveness. Peggy Phelan declared that "performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance."[11] Phelan's emphasis on the ephemerality of performance as a defining characteristic of its liveness is connected both to a distinction between it and its documentation through recording and to her own sense that human lives are themselves defined by their disappearance in death.

This matrix of features of liveness has been regarded by many as providing a foundational distinction between mediated and live performances. The clarity and purity of such a distinction is disrupted by a variety of practices within and outside theatrical performances. The integration of forms of technology within live theatre events as part of the mis-en-scène or in forms of digital scenography,

8 Philip Auslander, "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 3 (2012): 5.

9 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London and New York: Routledge, 2008) Chapter 3.

10 Cormac Power, *Presence in Play: A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008) 40-59.

11 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 146.

for example, is now ubiquitous.[12] The deployment of digital technologies was already having a significant impact on the production, distribution and reception of theatre before the pandemic.[13] Other forms of 'live' spectacles deploy screens as technologies of display to relay performances simultaneously to the spectators present, including major sporting events, festivals and concerts, and even graduation ceremonies.[14] Spectators themselves use mobile technologies of capture to view or document such events and their presence at them, even in the face of those committed to a more traditional theatre etiquette.[15] In these instances, the technologies might be considered to mediate between the spectator and elements of the performance, but are used so routinely that they might equally be thought to have become a constituent part of the experience.

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Live Theatre

For many theatre companies across the world, the public health provisions of lockdown directly threatened their existence on a number of levels. Economically, prohibitions on public performances meant the loss of immediate and foreseeable box-office income. Across the United Kingdom, for example, it was reported that "In the first 12 weeks of lockdown, more than 15,000 theatrical performances were cancelled with a loss of more than £303 million in box office revenue."[16] At a local level in Northern Ireland, the Lyric Theatre in Belfast reported in December 2020 that

> All scheduled on-site live productions through to February 2021 have been cancelled resulting in the direct refunding of c£164k in advance sales and forecasted lost ticket revenue of c£1.03m across all cancelled events. We've also incurred cancellation costs of £69k, notably on contracted artists and

12 See Néill O'Dwyer, *Digital Scenography: 30 Years of Experimentation and Innovation in Performance and Interactive Media* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021) 9-17.

13 AEA Consulting, *From Live-to-Digital: Understanding the Impact of Digital Developments in Theatre on Audiences, Production and Distribution* (London: Arts Council of England, 2016) 8-16, http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/From_Live_to_Digital_OCT2016.pdf.

14 Auslander, *Liveness* 25-26.

15 Kirsty Sedgman, *The Reasonable Audience: Theatre Etiquette, Behaviour Policing, and the Live Performance Experience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018) 63-65.

16 Parliamentary Sub-Committee for Culture, Media and Sport, *Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS Sectors: First Report*, 23 July 2020, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/2022/documents/19516/default/.

> creatives for productions which were in progress, which we were able to honour in full.[17]

Actors, directors, designers, technical and administrative support staff, many of whom had been working on a freelance basis, were now faced with an even more precarious prospect where it would be impossible to make a living. For many, too, their very sense of professional and personal identity was threatened and as the lockdown proceeded, many in the theatre industry turned to other job roles.[18]

In response, some theatre organisations presented filmed versions of previously staged work. For organisations with experience of streaming productions "live"[19] such as the Royal National Theatre's NT Live programme, they were able to draw on a pre-existing repertoire of material, albeit now being shown asynchronously. Others created new material conceived of and performed online, such as The Abbey Theatre's *Dear Ireland* series of streamed monologues delivered to camera. However, the experience within Northern Ireland can be viewed as typical of the sector internationally. A November 2020 Arts Council of Northern Ireland survey "found that attendance at an arts activity or event fell from 76% in the year prior to lockdown to 23% in the period between lockdowns."[20]

The Turn to ZOOM

The scale and immediate impact on theatre and social life more generally of the crisis unfolded in March 2020. The group that is the focus of this article, Big Telly Company, had had to cancel six projects because of lockdown with a very real impact on the 16 freelance actors who were contracted to work on them.[21] As

17 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Theatre, "Open Letter to Oliver Dowden: The Impact of Covid-19 on the UK's Theatre Industry," 21 December 2020, https://uktheatre.org/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?alId=3187408.

18 Annabel Jackson Associates Ltd, *Research into Freelance Practitioners Report to The Arts Council of Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2021), http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/images/uploads/publications-documents/ACNI-Freelance-Practitioner-Research-Report.pdf.

19 Martin Barker, "The Many Meanings of Liveness," *Live to Your Local Cinema: The Remarkable Rise of Livecasting* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013) 39-60.

20 Annabel Jackson Associates Ltd, *Research into Freelance Practitioners* 6.

21 Jenny Lee, "Zoe Seaton on How Big Telly's Plunging Down Rabbit Hole of Online Interactive Theatre," *Irish News,* 29 October 2021, https://www.irishnews.com/arts/2020/07/29/news/zoe-seaton-on-how-big-telly-s-plunging-down-rabbit-hole-of-online-interactive-theatre-2015722/.

Artistic Director, Zoe Seaton turned to the opportunities of online performance as a way of addressing two imperatives: to entertain the audience and find ways to pay freelance teams to make work. The first production was to be a version of *The Tempest*, this time for ZOOM and retitled as *The Tempest LIVE*. Produced in just over two weeks, the performance featured nine actors working in isolation from their own homes in front of green screens that could be filled with a variety of backdrops. A small number of scenes were pre-filmed, the rest rehearsed and then performed live over ZOOM. A central framing device saw Prospero commanding the action from a control centre, appearing to switch between scenes and actions with a push of a button as the online host and controller.

The degree of innovation in a short time here was remarkable. ZOOM had hitherto been a video-conferencing platform, but its use as a medium for a simultaneous performance across the internet that would connect spectators and performers interacting in the structured process of an unfolding narrative had not been tried before. In 18 performances staged between April and May 2020, *The Tempest LIVE* would reach over 1400 households across 30 different countries for an audience entirely online, with a maximum audience of 2827 spectators estimated.[22] *Operation Elsewhere* quickly followed on this success in May 2020. Here the audience were invited to engage in pursuing a quest from their own homes. Seaton summarises it thus: "*Operation Elsewhere* introduces audiences to an anarchic and contemporary version of Irish mythology. The show's playful quest format breaks down the fourth wall, letting audiences join in a truly live experience. It's theatre born in isolation but with a mission to connect us all in magic and myth."[23] After its initial run, watched by audiences in 13 countries, the performance was remounted later that same month.

While the turn to ZOOM at this point as an online platform was innovative, what was also of crucial importance was that the imagined world being staged by the actors and production team would not be separated from the world of the audience. Spectators were not being engaged as idle online watchers of what other people were doing. At key points, spectators were involved in the action, creating sound effects, undertaking tasks in support of the fictional characters, and interacting with each other as cameras from their own devices revealed where and how they were experiencing lockdown and engaging in the performance. As Laura Jayne Wright put it in her review of *The Tempest LIVE*:

[22] Pascale Aebischer and Rachael Nicholas, *Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study and Digital Toolkit*, (Oxford: Creation Theatre, 2020) 87, http://hdl.handle.net/10871/122587.

[23] "Big Telly Theatre Announce Operation Elsewhere," *Theatre Weekly*, 20 April 2020, https://theatreweekly.com/big-telly-theatre-announce-operation-elsewhere/.

> when the play began and Ariel conjured a storm, suddenly it became clear that – despite our isolation – we too were part of the action. The audience's microphones (muted while the actors spoke) were suddenly raised and we were asked to click our fingers to make it rain. The screen was full of audience members – and their pets, and their glasses of wine, and their pyjamas – and the storm was, even if I say so myself, convincing.[24]

Thus, the kind of immersion experienced in the original productions was reconfigured. The presentational space extended now from the home spaces of the performers and into the home spaces of the spectators, provoking a similar experience of metaxis: I am both in my sitting room and on Prospero's island; but I am somehow also in the homes of other spectators too, sharing in the intimacy of their personal spaces.

Discussion

I'll briefly revisit the elements of the liveness matrix introduced earlier as a way of teasing out further some characteristics of these two ZOOM events. The most obvious distinction from the classic live event was the physical separation of participants in the event, spectators, performers, and the production team. However, even here, some people were co-located in bubbles of friends or family with whom they were isolating together and with and for whom they themselves would be performing. Importantly too, each of these productions was performed in real time online, experienced synchronously. However, due to differences in time zones for spectators in other countries, that degree of synchronicity was stretched with, for example, people on the east coast of the United States watching an evening performance from the United Kingdom mid-afternoon. Even for people within the same time zone, the different ways in which lockdown was experienced spatially often produced quite different effects on the experience of time. As Martinelli et al. found,

> it is not the space *per se* that really plays a role in the experience of time but what people do in this space and the emotion experienced by the person living in it. Writing, reading, and watching a good movie with your children all require little space. And one can be unhappy and bored on a large deserted island even if the sun is shining.[25]

[24] Laura Jayne Wright, "Shakespeare on Zoom: How a Theatre Group in Isolation Conjured up a Tempest," *The Conversation.Com*, 23 April 2020, https://theconversation.com/shakespeare-on-zoom-how-a-theatre-group-in-isolation-conjured-up-a-tempest-136974.

[25] Martinelli, et al., "Time and Emotion During Lockdown" 17.

As I have already mentioned, reciprocity via audience interaction was a key feature of both productions, with activities carried out by spectators in their homes, but shared within the frame of the fictional narrative across ZOOM. In *The Tempest* this was mostly led by Ariel, functioning as an intermediary between the dramatic world and the audience. For example, she instructed the audience as "spirits" to create sound effects for the storm of Act 1. Repeatedly, the ZOOM medium allowed the company to spotlight spectators as they joined in with such participatory activities. For *Operation Elsewhere,* as Seaton noted in an interview for the BBC, "[p]eople turn all the lights off and get under blankets because we need cover of darkness […]. There was one point where a character says, 'If you've got war paint get it on now', and you see people rushing to the kitchen and getting ketchup and things."[26]

The effect of this was powerful. As one reviewer noted, "[t]he idea that the figurative power belongs to the audience is the most memorable impression I got from attending this production […]. Theatre is not a fixed thing, *we* create its magic."[27] It must also not be forgotten that for performers and the production team, themselves isolated from their fellow professionals and, as freelancers, facing an even sharper sense of precarity than those in full-time permanent employment, the reciprocity in making a performance was an important source of personal and professional connection and validation.

While it is of course possible to record ZOOM events, the key characteristic of these performances was that they were ephemeral. Having attended different performances, I was conscious of variations on behalf of the performers and in the participation of others from one performance to the next. And of course, one cannot step into the same river twice, so my own experience second time around was itself necessarily different. I am going to propose that these features require some amendments to previous conceptions of liveness, no longer a live-mediated binary but a continuum. Thus, each production here pressed on previous debates around the ontology of liveness,[28] including our understanding of contingency and co-presence in theatre, where interaction via the online medium between spectators and performers and between spectators and other spectators, creates a reciprocity in performance that had hitherto been the preserve of body-to-body theatrical encounters or online gaming.

[26] Ian Youngs, "How Live Entertainment Is Evolving Online to Be a Lifeline in Lockdown," *BBC News*, 18 May 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-52619188.amp.

[27] Heidi Lucja Liedke, "*The Tempest* (2020) by Creation Theatre: Live in Your Living Room Performance Review," *Miranda* 21 (13 October 2020), https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.28323.

[28] Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, "Liveness: Phelan, Auslander, and After," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 29, no.2 (2015): 69-79, https//doi:10.1353/dtc.2015.0011.

Liveness in Performance as a Continuum

At one end of the continuum, there are performances that can be regarded as fully live, as per the classic definition set out earlier. However, we can also view as live, performances where all of those characteristics of the liveness matrix are fully present, but in which technology is used to focus, amplify or intensify some element of the experience: for example, through the use of theatre lighting, microphones or amplifiers. This "live – mediated" hybrid might also include elements of digital technology through which parts of the performance are presented or experienced.

Next along the continuum are those performances which can be described as "mediated – live," what Auslander has identified under the term "live broadcast."[29] This most obviously applies to these ZOOM theatre experiences. Here the distinction is that the medium through which the performance is presented now takes precedence in the experience of the event – even though the event is constituted by performers and spectators simultaneously present, but separated spatially and distributed across multiple sites. These events have some of the other characteristics associated with the liveness matrix. They are ephemeral and allow for some sense of spontaneity, though the extent of reciprocity might be more or less limited. Interestingly, Big Telly has further investigated the possibilities of such reciprocity by staging its latest show, *Department Story* in October 2021 at the Belfast International Festival, for an audience in its venue in Belfast's Royal Avenue and for an online audience who control key elements of the performance for that face-to-face audience.

The sense of liveness is diminished as we move further along the continuum towards the "mediated – recorded." Here the medium relays a performance that has been pre-recorded, what Auslander, rather dismissively, terms "recorded live"[30] and Gabriella Giannachi as "remediated performance."[31] However, it is still to some extent a live event of which the recorded performance is only one part, since the audience experience it in a specific moment in time and space. I am thinking, for example, of those drive-in film screenings that people attended during the pandemic where the eventness exceeded the presentation of a film in the social drama that the drive-in constructed. There are distinctions to be made here between performance and, for example, cinema, where boundaries might begin to blur, yet it is possible nonetheless to maintain a distinction.[32]

29 Auslander, "Digital Liveness" 5.

30 Auslander, "Digital Liveness" 5.

31 Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004) 5.

32 Martin Barker, "CRASH, Theatre Audiences, and the Idea of 'Liveness,'" *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 23, no.1 (2003): 21-39.

This formulation of a continuum of liveness in performance, providing some kind of taxonomy, may be useful for fine theoretical distinctions but may appear to have little application. In the following sections, I argue that it has the potential to extend our conceptions of the ways people gather together in public spaces and how that gathering may have important impacts for individuals and groups. I am attempting to draw a line then between the potency we accord to live theatre as means of generating public space and intervene in public discourses, and the possibilities that these mediated live events might offer as a form of *communitas* that will contribute to the same function.

Communitas

In a time of intense social isolation, the experiences of production and spectatorship online have the potential to create a sense of *communitas*: the bond between people expressed initially by Victor Turner as "a relatively undifferentiated community, or even communion of equal individuals"[33] and further glossed as "a flash of mutual understanding on the existential level, and a 'gut' understanding of synchronicity."[34] There are two dimensions to this. The first concerns the relationships between spectators. Here, I am leaning on concepts of bridging social capital outlined by Robert Putman.[35] For Putnam, bridging social capital refers to the ways in which people separated by a range of social cleavages come to form, experience, and engage in connections with people outside their own social in-groups. It is not difficult to see the theatre events in which all of these isolated individuals engaged via ZOOM as an experience of such bridging. Of course, this bridging is short-lived, and the connections formed might be considered as examples of what Granovetter has described as "weak ties" between individuals.[36] Weak ties are formed between people who may encounter each other only fleetingly or occasionally. Nonetheless, they allow us to check and adjust the understanding of the world and our place within it that we experience through the strong ties through which we are bonded to our social groups. As well as providing new knowledges and perspectives, they can have a strong affective

[33] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 96.

[34] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982) 48.

[35] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) 22-23.

[36] Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360-80.

impact on personal well-being.[37] It is precisely opportunities for those weak ties that were most affected by the conditions of lockdown, where serendipitous interaction with others was highly restricted, if not impossible. The impact of engaging with others provided within these events was potent, as one reviewer of *The Tempest LIVE* noted:

> It is an incredibly moving moment to witness what can happen when the technological divide is broken up and bridged. I feel myself wishing to be pulled into the screen as well, an emotional yearning that is only heightened when I see the other spectators, including the woman who had watched the performance with a neutral facial expression a moment ago, start smiling brightly. To see the faces of my fellow spectators is a new and wonderful addition, something impossible in the regular setting when one is, in comparison, left on one's own, in the darkness, having to wade through the emotions the performance confronts one with in isolation until the lights go up. Here, we may be alone in our living rooms, but we are more aware of the actual community of spectators we are part of because we can see them and see their reactions.[38]

The second dimension of *communitas* to which I draw attention relates to the audience's engagement with the performers. Both productions ended in the dismantling of the performers' online spaces, revealing the green screens onto which settings had been cast and beyond them the spare rooms and cupboards that have been rigged up as the physical representations of the fictional world. As the actors come out of costume too, they foreground the labour that has gone into the making of these productions. This revealing of the medium of the technology of representation may function a little like Piscator's devices of alienation, but I'd suggest that they are much more potent as a form of bridging social capital between spectators and performers. As the same critic noted, "[w]e look into exhausted, sweaty faces and the joy of theatre is as palpable and somehow more intimately so than in the traditional setting of curtain calls in a theatre that are over after 30 seconds, with the lights going on and everyone rushing off to get home."[39] At a point in which theatre artists – amongst thousands of people working across

[37] Gillian M. Sandstrom and Elizabeth W. Dunn, "Social Interactions and Well-Being: The Surprising Power of Weak Ties," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, no.7 (2014): 910-22.

[38] Liedke, "*The Tempest* (2020) by Creation Theatre."

[39] Liedke, "*The Tempest* (2020) by Creation Theatre."

the creative industries – were struggling to get any kind of government support and in which across multiple interventions the value of theatre as an art form and the provision of its training were under attack from the UK government, witnessing the labour involved here was an affirmation of both the power of the performers and the value of the performances in bringing people together.

I propose then an extension of Judith Butler's proposition of the political potential of assembly, which elucidates the performative power of the human bodies in interaction with each other in public spaces.[40] Butler takes account of the ways in which digital technologies amplify and disseminate the perspectives from those physically assembled to those who can only join online. I suggest that in these performances where there is only a very limited face-to-face aspect, through their embodied interaction within the confines of their own spaces, everyone involved has nonetheless come together to constitute themselves in a form of assembly online. That assembly is an expression of solidarity committed to remaining socially distant for the greater good, and experienced positively: as one reviewer noted, "[i]t's such a joy to enjoy the show together. And that feeling of clapping together, while apart, at the end of the show? The stuff that dreams are made on."[41]

Conclusion

My proposal here is that this experience of *communitas* overcomes the social isolation in the face of the experience of the public health response to Covid-19. But more than that, I would suggest that in bridging between the domestic spaces of spectators and performers and between these spaces and the fictional worlds of the performances, they create a necessary condition for political resistance to the atomising effects of neo-liberal capitalism. Sennett argued in 1992 that under the conditions of late capitalism, the private has overtaken public life with the effect that we experience society only as a series of private social relationships and connections.[42] Ironically, at the very moment that these spectators and theatre makers were separated under lockdown, these performance events created an experience of assembly as outlined by Butler. Post-Covid, and here in Northern Ireland still in the shadow of Brexit and facing into the realities of the climate crisis,

40 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assem*bly 7-11.

41 Miriam Gillinson, "The Tempest Review – Interactive Online Production Goes Down a Storm," *The Guardian,* 12 April 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/apr/12/the-tempest-review-interactive-online-zoom.

42 See Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992).

it may be through precisely these experiences of *communitas* that individuals come together across space and time in new forms of assembly to demand a politics that will be better than lockdown and better than what previously passed for normal.

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