



A Shift Towards Digital and Participatory Performance Practice Post-Pandemic

Bianca Mastrominico, Queen Margaret University, UK, bmastrominico@qmu.ac.uk

Elizabeth de Roza, The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, elizabethderoza@hkapa.edu

This perspective analyses and reflects upon the experience of conceiving, curating and participating in Bodies:On:Live – Magdalena:On:Line, the first online multi-platform Magdalena festival. The festival brings together digitally competent artists with creative roots in the immateriality of the internet. In dialogue with current shifts in performance making, performers, writers, and directors declare their uneasiness towards online adaptations of live work. As part of the global reaction to the standstill brought about by the Covid pandemic, we argue that shifts in practice for women in contemporary theatre associated with the Magdalena network – whether as an attempt for immediate artistic survival or a conscious experimental choice – were not exclusively determined by the available sharing of technical knowledge. Neither were they determined by the need to increase awareness of the digital medium in order to gain experience of different working modalities, but rather served as a participatory and social purpose. These conditions were surfacing due to the digital space manifesting as a specific format of gathering through the Zoom windows and other platforms, which framed the encounters within a democratic performance arena, making the boundaries between participation and spectatorship porous. Therefore, the shift provoked by the festival not only pertains to the aesthetic sphere, but it is also dynamically and organically geared towards the recognition of new working contexts arising from the unsettling experience of ‘disembodiment’. This experience – as an ontological paradox of the original in-person Magdalena festival – embedded arguments of the creative use of new technologies for a more sustainable and accessible future of performance making with both live and digital.



Perspective

This perspective analyses and reflects upon the experience of conceiving, curating and participating as artists and spectators in *Bodies:On:Live – Magdalena:On:Line* initiated by Elizabeth de Roza and co-organised by Helen Varley Jamieson, Christina Papagiannouli, Janaina Matter, Karin Ahlström, Nur Khairiyah, Suzon Fuks and Zoe Gudović. Conceived as a cross-cultural and inclusive digital space for creative exchange within the Magdalena network of women in contemporary theatre, this first online Magdalena Festival, which took place in June 2021, was driven by the intention to foster a space and a time for celebrating artistic identities in the unprecedented circumstances arising from the Covid19 pandemic. Our aim is to assess and discuss the shifts in practice within the festival, which it is argued were not just the product of creative exploration of (and adaptations to) new technologies but served a participatory and social purpose, made possible by the format of gathering through online platforms.

As the title suggests, the festival invited participants to capture the somatic experience of connecting and interacting through digital platforms, and to embrace the perception of liveness that came with the possibilities of immediacy through a mediated encounter, when in-person alternatives were not an option. As the pandemic generated the building blocks of the online Magdalena gathering, its embedded argument for a more sustainable and accessible future of performance making, both live and digital, opened a shared opportunity to think creatively outside the box, to break the isolation and loneliness imposed by the lockdowns, and for each of us attending to become curious learners of new and diverse approaches with a non-judgemental attitude. As participation was shaped by the daily act of entering the digital space through multiple video calls on the Zoom platform (chosen as the main online space for the festival), each meeting proposed a constellation of individual experiences and narratives in adapting and shifting, digitally replicating focused and connected body-mind training, as well as facilitating the sharing of on-going performance processes, in a collective and voluntary act of opening, tuning in and reaching out through the membrane of the technology. The presence and work of experienced digital artists and scholars was instrumental in directing the gaze towards the use of new technologies, inviting spectators to be co-actant and co-creators of meaning. Meanwhile, the experimentation in practice for those with no previous history of live online performance making explored the creative potential of engaging with technology, translating and adapting embodied knowledge to its perceived limitations. In both instances, the search for technical approaches on how to retain the connection and transmission of energy between the performer's body-mind and that of the spectator through screens made the boundaries between

performance and spectatorship porous, as it engaged the viewers-as-actants, thus allowing a liminal social space of online participatory praxis to surface.

Out of the paradox of remoteness and disconnected bodies, the online group behaviour that emerged seemed to reinforce the attitude historically associated with the context that made the Magdalena Project come to life in 1986 through the work of its founding artistic director Jill Greenhalgh: that of promoting a societal bond amongst women in theatre coming together with an urge to rethink their artistic practice, and to support each other in doing so. However, in pandemic times the legacy, which Odin Teatret actress and director Julia Varley (2011) defines as ‘an open space between the intersecting threads’ as well as ‘the need to populate the spaces with action’ was operating in a state of crisis and social paralysis, with lack of physical connection and from remote personal spaces. Though as a result of moving the gathering online, rather than insisting on the corporeal absence of our bodies in space, the notion of (dis)embodiment through digital technology became a catalyst for re-configuring the dynamics of participation and for (re)focusing on a more concrete function of the exchange, such as reciprocal support and quality of personal attention and connectivity.

It is undeniable that the consolidated sharing practice of the network generated a spirit of solidarity amongst the artists involved, which helped challenge the assumption of a hierarchical status in terms of technological expertise within the group and amongst participants. This paved the way for a fertile dialogue – born out of necessity during the pandemic – between established digital practices and emerging modes of working through online platforms. Due to this, the digital engagement seemed to acknowledge the potential for a democratic, equal, diverse, and playful arena, privileging the action of listening to each other and the collective need to be heard at this critical time, over doing and being artistically productive.

For women and theatre makers whose personal and professional identities became stranded in the Covid19 stillness, there was grief and trauma for the loss of creative continuity, contacts, training and opportunities to create and perform, and the online encounter became a space for realisation and release. On the other hand, there was also an instinct and willingness to rebuild broken social ties through the levelled position of interacting within a global, curated and meaningful technological space. Consequently, from the opening workshops to sharing of work in progress and performance proposals, the festival morphed into a DIY communal site for creative digital experimentation, which prepared the ground for questioning notions of ‘professionalism’ in a fluid debate about the value of performance craft and techniques lived through the digital medium.

In this process, one of the core activities preceding the festival was re-connecting at the monthly At:Home:Live meetings on Zoom. In these informal gatherings, which were foundational to the festival in building collaborations and participation, regular collective conversations around the challenges (and chances) arising from the increasing hybridisation of creative trajectories were interspersed with micro-training sessions, pills of technological wisdom and focus groups within breakout rooms. Alongside discussing and discerning the changes in working conditions and the opportunities inherent to the online format over an extended period, the ethos produced by At:Home meetings predisposed to and generated a pattern of regrouping, sharing information, and emotional housekeeping which became the template for the main event. When similar protocols were adopted during the festival, following an unspoken feminist agenda of care, the Magdalena tradition of the Round, where ‘each woman said what she needed to say [...] without anyone else being allowed to respond or intervene’ (Varley 2011a) was digitally recomposed. Though the silence on Zoom had a stillness and loneliness to it, which provoked physical tension in waiting for the right moment to speak, the positive factor was that the Magdalenas kept looking *after* each other as well as looking *at* each other through screens.

What de Roza (2011), elaborating on her experience of the Magdalena events, calls ‘a space that is transitory, transforming and real’ started to manifest a different kind of corporeality in the digital dimension. Therefore, the very process of coming together on the platforms – virtually connected in doing and witnessing some new and familiar work in an unfamiliar territory – proved crucial in creating a mind set of remote proximity. This allowed women taking part to appreciate each other’s online presence, despite openly questioning notions of embodiment, both theoretically and in practice. Through honest and invested conversations, personal circumstances were highlighted and practical adjustments to making work were made. Online sharing cemented a communal environment where the interchangeable dimension of private and public participation was enhanced by the open communication between the organisers and those invited to take part. This in turn formed an ‘ecology of becoming where participation and creation is progressive, fluid, and accepting of the changes of the hybrid working conditions’ (Mastrominico 2021).

This was most apparent in the temporary migration onto the UpStage platform, where cyberformance workshops and two works in progress were also shared: *Mobilise/Demobilise* by Helen Varley Jamieson with the UpStage team; and *Jeux the Massacre* by Christina Papagiannouli. Papagiannouli also curated the exhibition space of the ObservaStory on gather.town, doubling as a space for socialising outside the Zoom matrix and pointing at a notion of liveness in online culture. This, she states, is ‘directly

connected to the interactive and participative character of the Internet' (2016). While beginnings and endings of events blurred and overlapped with online front of house duties through vocal announcements and posting on the chat, the running of the festival presented a fluidity which affected participation in several ways. For example, the fact that the Zoom space was activated as an online stage – inhabited simultaneously by those who were making and those who were watching and functioning as an online audience – was a crucial factor in upsetting dichotomies between private/public, visible/invisible, and personal/shared spaces. In this way, as Jamieson (2011) states, internet itself was activated as 'a space to meet and create [and as] a playground for artistic experimentation'.

On the other hand, in her video introduction to the festival website, Greenhalgh (2021) reflects on liveness and digital engagement, asking 'what happens when I cut off, I stop listening, I get bored?' While candidly admitting her ambivalence towards migrating her live performance *Daughter* online for the festival, Greenhalgh further shared that it was necessary to master the rigidity of the Zoom frame which separates us at a time when we crave for some form of connection and intimacy, enquiring how one might transcend its limits in our way of seeing and perceiving. In so doing, she was problematising the very essence of connecting through the platform, resisting and questioning technology-driven translations of work conceived as a theatrical experience in-person. While for Greenhalgh a major consideration was that she would never take for granted the chance of being able to work with other artists in a material space post-pandemic, such critical stances also aimed at imagining the potential for regaining human connectivity through adapting interpersonal communication to the technology. An example of this was the *Public Address System* by Lois Weaver (2021) seeking 'to empower individuals and their communities' while finding an equivalent online dialogue to that of 'porch sitting'. In a participatory approach to online communication, Weaver affirms the power of listening while engaging in simple human conversations.

By insisting on the necessity of hosting community building and performative rituals, the festival also called for the online presence of the Indian Baul singer Parvathy Baul, who performed an invocation to a menstruating Kali, whose periods were meant to bring good luck upon the event. When the singer's vocal power saturated the computer mic and made the screen go black, Parvathy Baul attributed the technical glitch to the destructive descent of Kali upon the platform. She responded to this digital impasse with ancient wisdom and devotion, as well as transcending and mythologising the disruption through an image of epic proportions set against the mundane deficiency of Zoom audio settings. However apparently dismissible as

technical naivety, these material frictions between spaces of cultural belonging and the empty shell of technology, apart from demarcating the nitty gritty of dos and don'ts on the medium, showed how through her embodiment of an ancient spiritual act of singing with and for a community, Parvathy Baul was focusing on human connection at a deeper level through the screen barrier. Defiantly, like an Indian Goddess herself, she was shooting her arrow to break the confinement of the online format to exorcise feelings of disempowerment and disconnection.

What is evident from the above example is that at the threshold between a material and an immaterial gathering space lies the acceptance of what Frank Camilleri (2019) defines as 'the sociomaterial dimensions of performer practices'. This is also true of our working contexts, of which the digital platforms used in the festival are part. Within these liminalities we are therefore witnessing post-pandemic modalities of co-existence, sharing, expressing and interacting in online participation that could make us more receptive and in tune with one another, also when meeting face-to-face. This is reflected in the way participants take more careful notice of when to speak, contribute, use the chat, make comments or questions, use emoticons, send hearts or applause, be affective, outspoken, take the lead, and give space. All these actions mould the quality of awareness in relating and interacting through the medium, in an evolving and mutating context where the technology influences us and our psychophysical responses to it, while at the same time we influence each other through being plugged in, in a state of 'becoming' and of mutual receptivity.

Yet while we seemed to be connecting, in her talk for one of the festival's panels Rakini Devi (2021) asked 'whether we are striving in this online space and what is needed to create a charged space online'. As the online festival unfolded and shifts were made, we were still witnessing and experiencing personal and collective grief for the loss of physical connection and of the 'live' encounter. Thus, the online festival also became a space for collective grieving because of the absence of our bodies, in the invisibility where we began to realise that our existence relies on so many factors and how necessary being physically together is. Perhaps that was what was needed, a time to grieve where we could slow down and listen, and in going slowly, we would be able to catch a glimpse of stillness. In silence we could create proximities of closeness and begin to inhabit this sense of erasure while existing in a precarious online environment.

Beyond the inevitable and somehow anticipated Zoom fatigue and the difficulties of catering for global time zones, the boot-camp experience of the Magdalena festival predicted by its creators was retained to the full. With a compulsion to attend events which, as much as it might be interpreted as FoMO (the dysfunctional Fear of Missing Out induced by social media), it came from a genuine inner desire – born from the

perseverance, the coherence and the cohesion of our coming together – to witness what our collective energy had been capable of generating. There is therefore a special kind of human energy necessary for personal growth and artistic survival in the dystopian scenario of the pandemic. The festival recomposed a sense of community created in this time, while opening up more worlds at different levels, and as participants/spectators we were invited to inhabit them, blurring the boundaries between being and performing in a fluid exercise of our communal creative muscles and expressivity. This sense of community can expand the shared experiences into a digital intimacy while embracing the absence of live encounters. In so doing, there is potential in transcending the frame and entering a newfound intimacy, and as artists, we can (re)imagine that there is more than one possibility within a frame.

The shift provoked by the online Magdalena festival therefore not only pertains to the aesthetic sphere, but it is dynamically and organically geared towards the recognition of new working contexts arising from the unsettling experience of disembodiment as an ontological paradox of the Magdalena gatherings. Participants at Bodies:On:Live carried the embodied memory of the original festival in presence, forming an online space which enabled organic responses to the mediated situation, while instigating creative networking and socially hybrid encounters, which intuitively innovate its own tradition. Which questions are now raised in inhabiting this online space? What is the renewed sense of scrutiny and attention we as artists must consider? This erasure is an evocation for us. As artists, we need to dig deeper into the past and reinterpret our intellectual resources by interrogating how we formulate our imagination within the realm of digital intimacy. In creatively encountering new technologies it is about remaining curious and conscious as we make shifts in our practice, asking ourselves how this might affect our ways of looking, thinking and being, while we remain committed to creating a sense of community through a shared online experience.

Competing Interests

EdR is a member of the Magdalena Project and initiator of the Bodies:On:Live festival. BM is a member of the Magdalena Project and was an invited artist at the Bodies:On:Live festival.

Author Information

Bianca Mastrominico is a performance maker, performer, writer and scholar. Since 2002 she has been co-artistic director of Organic Theatre (www.organictheatre.co.uk), an international and cross-cultural performance laboratory rooted in ongoing training and research for innovative practice and pedagogy. Bianca is Programme Leader for MA Digital Performance and BA(Hons) Performance at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, as well as an associate member of the Centre for Communication, Cultural and Media Studies. She is an active researcher within the Practice Research Cluster: Finding and Understanding Creative Knowledge at QMU and is a member of the TaPRA Performance & New Technologies Working Group.

Elizabeth de Roza (www.elizabethderoza.com) is an artist-scholar, performance maker, theatre director, actor-movement trainer. Elizabeth's research focuses on cross-cultural embodied experiences, thinking, practice through making at the intersections of decolonial and feminist theories. Elizabeth is known for her cross-cultural theatrical productions and collaborated on many international performance projects, and presented at various prestigious contemporary theatre festivals in South America, Europe, the UK, Asia. She co-convenes the Embodied Research Working Group within IFTR and serves as an Assistant Editor for the *Journal of Embodied Research*. She is currently the Head of Performing Arts Research at The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

References

Camilleri Frank 2019 *Performer Training Reconfigured: Post-Psychophysical Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century*. London: Bloomsbury

de Roza, Elizabeth 2011 'Close Encounters' in *MagdalenaProject@25 - Legacy and Challenge*, ed. Gilly Adams, Geddy Aniksdal, Maggie B. Gale, Jill Greenhalgh, and Julia Varley (Holstebro: The Open Page Publications) 144-145

Devi, Rakini 2021 *Panel - Bodies:On:Live*. 19 August. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLGGFrL1agc> (Accessed: 20 October 2021)

Jamieson, Helen Varley 2011 'Network Connections' in *MagdalenaProject@25 - Legacy and Challenge*, ed. Gilly Adams, Geddy Aniksdal, Maggie B. Gale, Jill Greenhalgh, and Julia Varley (Holstebro: The Open Page Publications) 62-64

Magdalena Online Festival 2021 *Jill Greenhalgh x Theatre Director, Founding Artistic Director of the Magdalena Project - UK*. 27 May. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmSXxDL7U50> (Accessed: 20 October 2021)

Mastrominico, Bianca 2021 *Towards an Ecology of Becoming: Digital Performance Research Under Covid-19*, 18th January 2021. Available at <https://www.qmu.ac.uk/campus-life/blogs/bianca-mastrominico/towards-an-ecology-of-becoming-digital-performance-research-under-covid-19/> [Last accessed 25th October 2021]

Papagiannouli, Christina 2016 *Political Cyberformance – The Etheatre Project*. Basingstone: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137577047>

Varley, Julia 2011 'Marking the Way' in *MagdalenaProject@25 – Legacy and Challenge*, ed. Gilly Adams, Geddy Aniksdal, Maggie B. Gale, Jill Greenhalgh, and Julia Varley (Holstebro: The Open Page Publications) 212–251

Weaver, Lois 2021 Public Address Systems. Available at <http://www.split-britches.com/porch-sitting> [Last accessed 25th October 2021]

