

Faraway, So Close: Bringing the Online on Stage

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Until relatively recently, science and technology on the one hand and various forms of artistic expression on the other were generally considered to be separate manifestations of human cultural production. Today, however, more and more examples of how they can interact in complementary and mutually enriching ways. In the words of Charlotte Hale, science communicator, choreographer and dancer with the Flux Dance company: “You’ll probably leave a performance with an opinion. You’ll talk about it afterwards and it’s that conversation that is the key to science communication and engagement”. Or, as Alexander Kelly, co-artistic director of Third Angel company puts it: “Theatre and science collaborations can help anticipate the future and help ... understand what’s coming ... pose some big questions about who we are as human beings ... the massive impacts on our lives”.

Here Luca Giacomini and Giorgio Bertolusso propose ways in which experiences that involve both theatre and digital technology can build awareness of the complex nature of each of them and the roles they can play in the lives of each one of us.

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Why acting or, better still, why acting in 2019? Why do we feel like meeting unknown people to watch and listen to what the actors (they also unknown) want to tell us? All the world seems to go in the opposite direction. Technology, Science and Economy are leading to an airier and more aseptic society, where social interactions between humans are falling apart.

Narrowing down the question, why are we acting in 2019, anyway?

The question is not quite precise. The right question should be: why am I going on acting, even though I started without any artistic flair (just to forget my old girlfriend, to find a new one or to understand that I am not looking for a girlfriend at

all)? I laid open to unknown critical looks and to ridicule many times, I did not find a new girlfriend and of course I realized that I will not get rich on stage, so why am I going on acting? I could attend a foreign language course instead, or a master's degree which might increase my career opportunities or the dear old course of Latin American dance...

The answer is easy: like all drugs, acting is highly addictive. You cannot do it without those unknown looks, you need them, you look for them, a thread runs between you and those looks, you investigate them, play with them, you thrill them and are thrilled by them.



And so, again, the direction is opposite to that of the world. Because we are not talking about scripts able to make you cry at minute 37, musical scales in minor keys to make your heart leap or algorithms to improve your mood. We mean a dialogue which keeps among people a good amount of improvisation and emotional appeal, different every night.

Communication becomes deeper and touches the soul, contents pass in a more effective way. Some

studies confirm this. Staging plays on emotional channels, that makes contents more understandable.

Our challenge was to imagine a conference-play which could tell in a different way what we knew from our job and personal interests: digital technology. Exactly what seems opposite to the ICT world, the insubstantial versus the presence. A performance on stage can't do without an audience. Actors and audience need to feel and

smell each other, mistakes and fear must be shown, the actor must show their faults. There are no reductions, actors are scared if they feel the audience is inattentive, they are scared to lose their attention, and are willing to fight for it.

We were sure, like more influential others, that thinking about the digital revolution is important, so we tried. It was not easy. At the beginning we started with a real conference about the least known aspects of the fourth digital revolution, but since then we were so bored that we found it impossible. Then our acting experience helped us, so we started to plan something more similar to a play. All we had read, learnt and discussed was emerging, giving us the frame on which to build short scenes and monologues. Real stories were created, they were ridiculous, dramatic, surreal. So a plot was born, with a structure and different scenes, each of them about diverse aspects of digital technology. We had to make choices, since the topic was so wide that it was impossible to include all the subjects: social media, cyberbullying, the internet of things, self-driving cars, digital ethics, cyber-wars...

We were also aware of the quick changes the single aspects are undergoing. The risk of obsolescence is real. Our structure divided in scenes helped us, each of them is a single module which can be enriched or deleted. We can also add new modules if we find new subjects that we are interested in.

First, the beneficiaries of this work should have been adults, people who had not grown up with these new technologies and that probably did not know their real possibilities. Maybe they had a computer at work or at home, but they looked at it suspiciously or a little scared. Ours was also a pedagogical aim, a contribute against the risks and mistakes of surfing the web. We thought that young people, born with digital technology, may have found our contents trivial, too didactic or even useless. We see them surrounded by electronic devices and continuously online. We believed they are immersed in the digital world with abilities we could not even imagine at their age. We see young people living so much in this augmented reality that we thought they did not need our words or our help, but we were wrong.

The most effective image that struck us was that of an ostrich, since they are immersed in the new technologies with their head, but their body is left out, they do not even know they have a body, keeping their head under the digital sand. They have a very shallow knowledge of their devices, but above all, they have no awareness.

Digital awareness is the project's title. Our motivation was that many young people live and

use technology and devices without being aware of the consequences of the underlying processes. Privacy about data, their persistence, induced social effects, the relationship between digital technology, politics and wars. Another main theme is the future of work in our world, which young people are bound to and that new technologies are dramatically changing.

Our first test was at the Scientific High School "Gobetti" in Turin, with a group of students from different classes. It was a day of self-management and they voluntarily decided to attend the play and the following debate. They liked the performance very much and the discussion was very passionate with a lot of questions. We were really surprised: the students, even the youngest, were greatly interested in the risks of the new technologies, in the relationship between technology and wars. It was clear they had thought on those issues and they considered them relevant.

We then performed our show in other scientific high schools in Turin, in Italy. Each time a hundred, a hundred and fifty students were paying attention to our show (which is difficult to believe since such groups of young people can develop astonishing levels of noise), they wanted to tell and listen to stories about that digital planet. We were talking about their world. Some were really odd episodes related to the social media, like the one of a guy who had a namesake of the same age but living in a different region, who had died in a car accident. Some friends of the unlucky boy had looked for his profile but had found that of his namesake who received hundreds of messages, even though he tried to explain the mistake.

But it was not always like this. Moving away from the city and reaching schools in the province of Turin, we met students who were elsewhere, taken by that same world we would have liked to discuss. Perhaps we spoke different languages, maybe they didn't know the language of theatre enough. In those occasion the presence was not sufficient to set a connection.

"Reality is often more boring", Luca Giunti, Park Keeper, says. "It takes six hours to hide and five seconds to take that beautiful picture of the eagle. But we are beneficiaries of the shots only and often we observe them for less than five seconds. Of the other six hours no memory is left."

As actors, it was painful to lose that contact we look for with so much effort. But we reflected that those are the right places to take our work. Those are the guys who need a higher reflection, (also suggested by their teachers) on the digital world of which they are unaware consumers.

We would like to realize a "suburb tour", as we call

it, since there is where a show like ours is more needed. We would like to win the challenge and find the solutions, modifying the language, maybe with the help of a team of teachers, psychologists and sociologists, introducing new topics and thus breaking through blue screens and bent heads. Distance is the word we began with. This word sounds in a special way to actors. A “faraway” show is the one which gives no emotions. A “faraway” actor is somebody who does not care about the audience. A performance on stage does not make sense on screens, since a dimension is missing: the relationship between actors and audience. Theatre is physical and emotional

presence. Theatre is “closeness”. If theatre is here and now, the relationship between humans filtered by a device and then by a software is faraway, devoid of many aspects. Living without these aspects is convenient, especially for a teenager. As we actors say, it is a world with limited sensitivity, where we risk less but we also live less.

Distance is what divides those young people and us. They do not understand the technological evolution processes that we started and we do not realize what they are doing with it and how they are experiencing it.

(Translation by Marinella Depperu)