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# **TECHNOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY THEATRE AUDIENCE :**

## **Escape Theatre and the Ludic Impulse**

**Isabelle STARKIER**

### **Abstract**

"Play with us to help us play" could well be one of the defining ideas of 'Escape-Theatre', which uses not only comic illusion but seeks to unite both audience and actors by 'playing together in the same story'.

In this paper, we discuss how placing spectators and actors together using the technology of video-conferencing creates, not just a new technological medium, but a new artistic form.

### **Biography: Isabelle Starker**

Former student of the ENS, an associate of modern letters, lecturer HDR in theatrical studies at the University of Evry, Isabelle Starkier is also a director, actress and company director. Her theatre work focuses on the relationship between theatrical theory and stage practice in a career lasting three decades and over 40 productions. Most recent productions include: *Le bal de kafka*, *L'homme dans le plafond*, *Le bourgeois Gentilhomme*, *Un gros grand gras Gargantua*, *Le tango des étoiles errantes*, *Boxing Shadows*, and *Scrooge*. During the Covid period, working with her theatre company, she created an online theatrical experience she named "Escape Theater".

## **The Concept of Escape Theatre and How it Developed**

Theatre is an ancient form, but today faces a new, and perhaps, unique challenge: how to involve an audience that is used to more participation than traditional theatre usually allows.

In the 17th century, theatre was defined as a "closed box with a transparent wall that could be penetrated by the gaze of the spectator" (Biet and Triau 2006, 225). But times have changed, and as new generations emerge, new challenges follow. People of all ages have become habituated to watching the world through their computer screens. But this 'watching' is not always passive. Video games exist because the previously-passive watcher, sitting at home, wants to be a central player in the drama unfolding on their computer screens.

The society-wide restrictions that Covid created brought about a re thinking of the role of audiences; in particular, how to shift the actor-audience relationship from one where the audience is a passive watcher to one where the audience is part-spectator, part-actor in the very experience they are watching. The key piece of equipment in this audience-expansion is the computer and video-conferencing.

Allowing on-screen participation by audience members led the Companie Starkier to create a theatrical experience we called "Escape Theatre". It is a theatre game—but also a video game. Like most video games, if the on-screen player/participant/watcher does not make the on-screen characters act, then nothing happens. By responding to the developing story, on-line participants help to build and influence the very

narrative they are watching. They are both inside and outside the performance.

To speculate for a moment: What if the famous 'fourth wall' of the traditional theatre 'box' became a porous computer screen which allowed previously passive audience members to assist in shaping the very story or characterisation they initially began encountering as passive witnesses? Might not then the passive 'theatre gaze' devolve into a spontaneously active gaze? In this way, we are adhering to the definition Diderot gives of the theatre in *The Paradox of the Actor*.<sup>1</sup> A double paradox it is, since, like in the theatre, we are all in the Shakesporean "to be or not to be" (like a theater being the mirror of the world being itself a theatre). We, as actors, are the characters and in the same time we are not. Like in the *Dybbouk*<sup>2</sup>, Leah, the main character, is possessed by her dead fiancé's spirit : he is her and he is not her or she is him and in the same time she is herself...

To believe or not to believe, on both sides of the stage and on the screen.

We are faced with the impossible representation/performance of a direct/indirect moment which consists to play (a live show in real-time) through a screen (the quintessential tool of indirectness). Can we say then with Meyerhold that "in art, there is no forbidden technique. There are only misused, inopportune and ill-timed ones" (Meyerhold 1992, 46). What persists and makes the heart of that "technique" that is theatre and which founds the "theatrical assembly" (Sarrazac 2011, 24) dear to and wished for by Enzo Cormann<sup>3</sup> or the

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<sup>1</sup> We are referring to Denis Diderot, *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, Flammarion, 2000

<sup>2</sup> The *Dybbouk* was written in yiddish 1917 by Shalom Anski

<sup>3</sup> « L'assemblée théâtrale est composée de tous ceux qui concourent à la représentation : spectateurs, acteurs, concepteurs artistiques, techniciens etc... » Enzo Cormann in

"emancipated community" invoked by Jacques Rancière is to play (Ranciere 2008, 29)<sup>4</sup>.

## **Technology and the Ludic Impulse**

In the ideal, participatory theater, everyone plays. We play at believing that a bicycle is a motorcycle and that a cellar is a palace like the children we are and we persist in being, actors and spectators all alike. The Ludic Impulse (from the Latin word 'ludus': "to play") means that we play by enjoying what we are seeing, but even more, by our enjoyment 'forcing' the actors to keep playing, so that, in our imaginations, we are playing through them, like the avatars and heroes they are, buried deep in the stories of our intimate tragedies and human comedies. The "spect-actor" (so to speak, as an actor of the "theatrical assembly") joins in this theatre makes the comic illusion work through the reciprocal game of belief. That is, "I, the audience member, pretend to believe he is Hamlet which allows the actor to pretend he is Hamlet."

Thus, the "spectator-actor" (who becomes an actor because he or she responds to and plays with the actors and has an active role in the play) of the escape-game will make the actor play like the chorus of a greek tragedy that addresses and summons and makes them act in its place and space.

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<https://www.cormann.net/images/ouvrages/aquoisertletheatre/a-quoi-qert-theatre.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> We are referring to *Le spectateur émancipé* de Jacques Rancière, La Fabrique éditions, 2008, where Jacques Rancière says « L'émancipation, elle, commence quand on remet en question l'opposition entre regarder et agir, quand on comprend que les évidences qui structurent ainsi les rapports du dire, du voir et du faire appartiennent elles-mêmes à la structure de la domination et de la sujétion. Elle commence quand on comprend que regarder est aussi une action qui confirme ou transforme cette distribution des positions. Le spectateur aussi agit... »p.19

It is a theatre where the periphery becomes the center, unlike the "King's eye", which, with its central focus on the stage and on the actor, carries my belief and/or my identification. A theatre whose fragmented space brings together its chorus and federates its members to make one of them play. Unlike in videogames, the spectators are not the heroes but rather the playwrights, allowing the story to be written through its characters and to (re)constitute itself. If in the theatre, imagination invites us to "enter" in the story, here, it is in the active voice of the spectator, the one that makes people speak and so the one that makes the hero play, which is at work. We are here, as with the Torah, in holes that must be imagined to try to find the meaning of the narrative or philosophical enigma (the holes of the vowels in Hebrew make the consonants act and so, give a meaning or one of the meanings).

## **Some Examples of Escape Theatre**

### ***Divine Diva***

Company Starkier created *Divine Diva*<sup>5</sup> in collaboration with author Daniel Jean by mixing cinema and theatre, and the dialectic they maintain between them, even in the psychological 'release' of real theatre time. We examined and used other contemporary social networks, such as Instagram, TikTok, Face Book, which, to many, have become more real than reality itself. To many, these social networks are 'truer', and more authentic than modern life and its reality. In *Divine Diva*, a former movie star is attacked in her mansion where members of her entourage disappear one by one. Mixing tropes derived from as varied sources as Anton

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<sup>5</sup> Divine Diva, an escape-theatre, created in March 2021, with Vincent Jaspard, Daniel Jean, Claire Mirande, Clara Starkier

Tchekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard*, (1904), and *Sunset Boulevard*, the film of Billy Wilder (1950), the online spectator is invited to summon up characters both in response to and in need of the developing story, who become characters who live only through each other and through the gaze we cast upon them<sup>6</sup>.

In *Divine Diva* we enjoyed ourselves in pushing the principle of live performance since the dead arrive facing the audience playing with the narrowness of the field of vision and the paradoxical powerlessness generated by digital technology. It is then necessary to play but also to play with the frame which is at the same time a physical constraint and a dramaturgical freedom. The dead, following one another on the stage during all the performance make the screen resonate much more theatrically, recalling us that direct is indirect and that the performance takes place in real time before us but not near us.

"The richness of a device, of a protocol is relative to its ability to nourish an exchange" (Freydefont 2010, 49). We were able to imagine this interactive theatre from an exchange (this link that serves as a place) between actors and spectators. We involved the spectators at the very heart of the problem set by the text, that is to say, its very contextual reading, for them to be able to retrace the text through its dramaturgy in a treasure hunt game. In short, it is the game which makes the actors play.

In the theatrical investigation around the death of Don Juan<sup>7</sup>, it is my own dramatic interpretation that enabled me to generate the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvEhclRqUnk>

<sup>7</sup> *Mais qui a (vraiment) tué Don Juan ?* An escape-theatre, written by Pierre Sabrou, Isabelle Starkier, Clara Starkier created on February 2021, with Baudoin Cristoveanu, Anne Le Guernec, Clara Starkier, Cedric Zimmerlin <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAneE9c9vu0>

dramatic situation through the characters and their journeys. I started with a contemporary perspective on the seduction of the "great" of our world, those who benefit from the aura given by their dominant positions leading to an abuse of power and in particular sexual abuse (#Metoo) and I decided to reconstruct an investigation around the death of Don Juan. Who had any interest in killing him? Starting with this "backward" question, the challenge was to rediscover the play by Molière, through the myth and its representation, through our reading and therefore through his dramatic and scenic (re) writing.

From the signs around which the dramaturgy is articulated, the online audience members will themselves generate the text of the characters and even, entire sections of the original text.

Thus, we will see and hear through Mathurin, Charlotte, Pierrot, Elvire, Sganarelle...for example: Pierrot will tell us about Don Juan's clothes, we will have Elvire's plea, Charlotte will narrate her encounter with him...It is through the police interrogations that the spectators' words emerge, which, in turn, will influence the direction of the story. In this way, we pass seamlessly from the firmly contemporary language of the interrogated characters assembled on a barge where the murder of Don Juan (a famous movie director) has just taken place (Don Juan was giving a party before the start of the shooting of his new film *The Stone Feast*) to Moliere's original language that easily and naturally infuses itself into the improvisations inspired by the questions of the spectator/participants.

The spectator becomes the "*impersonnage*" (Sarrazac 2011, 18) to use Sarrazac's words which designates the character thanks to the deictic

function of the game which activates it. We leave behind the spectator-actor duality of the 4th wall where the spectators are the implicit actors of those who see them" (Freydefont 2010, 31), to build a 5th wall that would be constructed deitically by the speech of the actor-spectators who make the actor play, while animating them.

### ***The Enigma of the White Rabbit***

*The Enigma of the White Rabbit* is another of our Escape Theatre works for young audiences. It is a variation on *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice through the Looking Glass*, where the characters of these books come to on-screen life both inside and outside of the narrative world they originally inhabited.

When online participants begin to question these ‘fictional characters’, they have begun the process of penetrating deeply into the inner lives of these characters, well beyond the initial narrative they were born from. In this way, the complex act of deciphering of Lewis Carroll's creative world is simplified—and comes alive. The actors play several characters (the Rabbit, the Mad Hatter, the Queen of Hearts, Humpty Dumpty...) while bringing to life John Tenniel's drawings. (John Tenniel was Carroll's first illustrator.) Using the ‘Character Animator’, the on-line participants make the drawings speak, gesture and move in response to the movements of the actors behind the screen.

Alice, played by an actress, leads the search for the Queen's stolen tarts. It is around this investigation that young people (and older people)

will immerse themselves into Lewis Carroll's universe, thus, finding the way to the original text<sup>8</sup>.

Alice's symbolic journey is little by little revealed by the questioning of the spectators in order to understand the double meaning of the world they are watching. It is both a real and fictional world, both visible and invisible, both a material and a spiritual world. It is through this questioning that Carroll's universe can be set in motion—and understood. It is the investigation which, like a metaphorical key, can make Carroll's work vibrate and/or resonate.

All the characters make the author's voices as well as his journeys heard and they move only because they meet Alice and her quest companions. Their being created comes gradually from their solicitations. As in the theater, one says about it: "Here he comes!" and he enters. By playing at acting, the actor becomes an actor who acts out the speech of the spectator-actor, the latter makes it exist in its destiny, the character's fate.

Therefore, the actor's acting is also showing that he or she plays and he shows that he plays. In this sense, we can talk about "Sur-Jeu", or 'Playing beyond the Playing'. Against the cinematographic naturalism which must accentuate the illusion of belief, the acting of the actors in the escape game is acting and though it is "sincere", they play at acting and they show it. The truth of theatrical acting imposes itself in a framework it denounces, making it explode. By the emergence of "playing at acting", we help the online audience to understand the very craft of 'acting'. Thus, using all the craft of theatrical art, we enter the domain of

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<sup>8</sup> *L'énigme du lapin blanc*, an escape-theatre, written by Pierre Sabrou and Isabelle Starkier, on april 2021 with Stéphane Barrière, Stéphane Miquel, Clara Starkier, Isabelle Starkier  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rw3XPURZxZw>

representation/performance through the characters and through the spectators, so that, in this way, the status of "actor" can rightfully be claimed by all the characters, actors, and participants in *Divine Diva*.

Conversely, the spectators of escape-theatre go beyond the game (that treasure hunt which involves them in the very fiction they give a meaning to by reconstituting its signs), they go beyond the simple representation/performance and its length and they will put themselves in motion as actors of their own destiny. We are currently undertaking (since the creation of *Association de Bienfaiteurs*<sup>9</sup>) research around "pedagogical escapes". In *Association de Bienfaiteurs*, three characters from the future take the spectators on a journey visiting their past mistakes, looking for daily solutions to stop global warming. There, the spectator is truly encouraged to work in it, through discussion groups and through a behavioral game...

Theatrical fiction aims at being more didactic, just like in the two educational escape games we set up at the University.

Denis Guenoun defines theatre as Drama being the act which designates "the agent facing an alternative" (Guenoun 2005, 6). It is these Brechtian dramatic construction we are confronted to with escape-theatre. The fourth wall seems to be replaced by a fifth wall which could be the screen – that let the spectators enjoy the fact that they act together with the actors. The spectators play spectators acting as activating the game and the actors play to play. "Drama would be the designation of the agents facing an alternative, a double possibility, which engages their liberty or

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<sup>9</sup> Association de Bienfaiteurs, an escape theatre created in

responsability(...) The dramatic action would then be essentially a place of bifurcation always involving the one who can accomplish it, achieve it or not. We reach the very core, the very centre of dramatic action in characterizing it as a *decision*" (Guenoun 2005, 95). Escape theatre emerges from the world of gaming : acting through a character (more than simply 'projecting the character' as in theatre), treasure hunts, deduction games, pursue clues. Escape theatre involves opening up a new form of theatrical representation, a hybrid form which, with that "direct-indirect" manner, merges the interactivity of videogames with the alternative enigma of the escape-game and the cinematic naturalism and theatrical acting.

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