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Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of  
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## Barbara Fuchs. *Theater of Lockdown. Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic*

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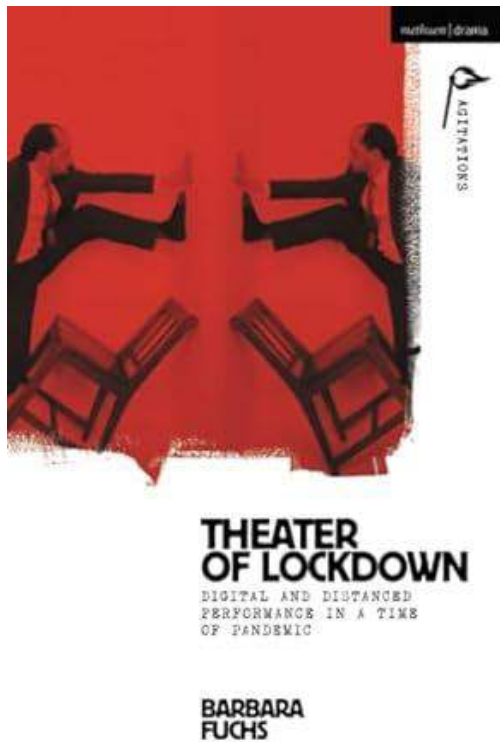
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REFERENCES

Barbara Fuchs. *Theater of Lockdown. Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic*, London, New York, Dublin, Methuen Drama, 2022, ISBN: 978-1-3502-3182-5



- 1 Barbara Fuchs's *Theater of Lockdown. Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* is part of the Methuen Drama Agitations series, edited by William C. Boles and Anja Hartl, whose aim is to “investigat[e] the lively dialogues between theatre and contemporary lived experience” (n.p.). Fuchs’s book sheds light on our very recent history as it examines the closure of theatres in most parts of the world during the Covid-19 pandemic in the year 2020 and the strategies adopted by theatre makers to keep reaching audiences. As the title indicates, *Theater of Lockdown. Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* focuses on the transfer of plays from stage to screen as well as on other necessary reconfigurations of performance spaces. Fuchs’s aim is to show how online theatre during lockdown started as a “life raft” to make up for a dire situation and became a “flotilla of rapidly proliferating possibilities” (1). The book is a most welcome analysis of a turning point in the history of theatre and, as Fuchs points out in her introduction, probably only the beginning of further innovations in the field. Fuchs’s book moreover raises a crucial question that is often sidestepped in works focused on digital theatre: is theatre still theatre when physicality is replaced by live virtual performance?
- 2 *Theater of Lockdown* is composed of seven chapters, a postscript, an appendix containing a list of works and twenty-two illustrations. The first six chapters are devoted to American, Australian and European digital theatre, with a clear focus on American productions (as evidenced by the list of works in the appendix), due to the author’s geographical situation. Even though online productions are no longer constrained by spatial boundaries, Fuchs, who is a Professor of Spanish and English at UCLA in the United States, quite logically focuses on American companies and theatre makers which she has better knowledge of. The book, however, also tackles Australian, British, Columbian, Chilean, Greek, Irish, Mexican and Spanish works (Fuchs’s realm of research), enabling readers to discover various approaches to digital theatre across the globe. Chapter seven focuses on outdoor performances.

- 3 In her introduction, Fuchs presents her corpus as composed of “pieces that reflect on the pandemic itself” and “work that treats the closures of the theaters as an opportunity for formal experimentation” (3). She defines her methodology as offering “a mix of scholarly analysis, interviews with practitioners, and an account of reception” (3), the latter clearly being the book’s strongest asset, as Fuchs very precisely describes the logistics and aesthetics of online productions and her own viewer experience. Fuchs aptly opens her book with a reminder that the grief felt after the closure of theatres can by no means be equated with the grief of those who have lost loved ones during the Covid-19 pandemic. She thus avoids an ethical pitfall which several scholars and critics seem to have fallen into these past years and immediately puts things into perspective. Fuchs then proceeds to present the various characteristics of this quickly developing form of theatre as well as the many material obstacles which theatre makers had to face. Fuchs’s statement that digital theatre “reminds us of how form can address social and political matters” (10) appears as a bit superfluous as it can be applied to contemporary drama more generally, as Sarah Grochala has pointed out in her 2017 book *The Contemporary Political Play: Rethinking Dramaturgical Structure*. Fuchs’s definition of digital theatre as inclusive may also be qualified. Even though audiences who may not have been able to attend a play otherwise are now able to log on to their computer, we may argue that many are still excluded from the experience due to a digital divide which is yet to be bridged. Fuchs convincingly points out how it has affected actors who sometimes did not have the means to adapt to these new technologies but marginalised audiences could be given more space.
- 4 As the title “Straight to Zoom: Theater Moves Online” implies, Chapter One examines the “quick fixes” referred to in the introduction. It investigates the solutions found on the spur of the moment by theatre practitioners, which often first consisted in making video archives available, mostly thanks to the National Theatre London’s streaming platform. When the theatre industry realised that the closure of theatres was a long-term prospect, many decided to move to Zoom. American playwright Richard Nelson’s *What Do We Need to Talk About* was one of the first Zoom plays, first aired live on 29 April 2020. The one-hour long play, written by Nelson in just a few days, stages the Apple family who had already appeared in Nelson’s previous plays, creating a much-needed sense of comfort in times of lockdown. The characters are moreover all impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic thus echoing the viewers’ own situation. Fuchs describes the play as quite conventional in both form and content yet as a milestone in digital theatre, paving the way for other Zoom performances, especially since the play was hugely popular with “over 80,000 views across thirty countries during its streaming run” (31). The play soon became a trilogy with the following plays being less successful as Nelson now seemed out of touch with reality, failing to consider the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement or clumsily, and unconvincingly, trying to address it. Fuchs also shows how artists first reluctant to switch to digital theatre quickly embraced the medium. Bryan Doerries, artistic director of Theater of War, an American company “focusing on access for those not usually present in theaters and insisting on theater as a tool of public health rather than a cultural artefact” (34), told Fuchs that he perceived Zoom as a “miraculous technology [...] when imbued with spirit and humanity for bringing people together and achieving a kind of intimacy that [he] actually didn’t think was possible through technology” (qtd 35). Their *Oedipus Project* was a rewriting of Sophocles’s *Oedipus* which strongly resonated with the pandemic. The reading of the play by famous Hollywood actors – among whom Oscar Isaac,

Frances McDormand and John Turturro – was broadcast on 7 May 2020 and was followed by 15,000 people from forty countries (35). The performance was followed by a conversation with people involved in the crisis, reminding viewers of the emotional and political impact of theatre. Chapter One ends by looking at American actor Bill Irwin’s ten-minute piece *In-Zoom* which explores the possibilities and limits of virtual physical comedy.

- 5 Chapter Two, “Bending the Rules: Experimenting with Zoom”, drifts away from the first tentative Zoom plays and looks into “more self-conscious explorations of digital platforms and their limitations” (43). It examines several online plays, among which British company Forced Entertainment’s *End Meeting for All*, first broadcast in May and April 2020. Fuchs shows how the company’s turn to the digital enhanced their already established preoccupations with collage, self-reflexivity and a “poetics of failure” that critic Sara Jane Bailes has defined as one of the company’s main features (qtd 47). With its six performers, each in their own Zoom box, trying to create a play and often failing to do so, *End Meeting for All* “voices a rich reflection on both the pandemic itself and the necessarily imperfect responses to it, whether artistic or quotidian” (48). The next play under scrutiny is Elli Papakonstantinou’s *Traces of Antigone* which offers a feminist perspective on lockdown theatre by reminding viewers that the seclusion now suffered by all once was women’s unhappy lot. The six female members of the company play with the possibilities offered by the Zoom boxes and display their sometimes half-hidden, sometimes grotesquely transformed bodies to address voyeurism, the reification of women’s bodies and gender stereotypes. Fuchs then examines several online productions, some of them innovative and others more conventional yet always topical in their attempt to address a younger generation’s despair during lockdown and “the concomitant racism of their society” (63).
- 6 Chapter Three, “Thinking outside the box: Multiplatform” focuses on hybrid productions which combine various media and sometimes dispense with Zoom. Fuchs shows how these plays, such as Spanish company Grumelot’s *Game Over* or *Y es mayor dolor la ausencia que la muerte*, attracted new audiences more familiar with gaming than with theatre. They also turned the spotlight on participatory modes by using various platforms such as Whatsapp, Instagram, Zoom or even letters sent to the participants to include their audiences in the creative process. The line between theatre and gaming was further blurred by New York Theater Workshop’s *The Seagull on The Sims 4* in which American playwright Celine Song tried to adapt Chekhov’s play on The Sims and commented on her creative process on Twitch. Fuchs shows how an entertaining happening also raises “important conversations about our classical canon, the nature of adaptation and the centrality of agency in so many aspects of theatrical practice” (80).
- 7 In Chapter Four, “Thinking outside the Box: Simulation”, Fuchs looks into digital theatre which attempts to simulate copresence. The chapter more precisely focuses on what Fuchs calls “technical wizardry” (98) and examines the means used to create a virtual community, as when San Francisco Shakespeare Festival’s technical director Neal Ormond uses a software to “cut the actors out from their green screen backgrounds, as so many paper dolls, and past[e] them into a composite scene” (96) for their production of *King Lear* in Spring 2020. Even though these details are amusing, the readers may wish for more theoretical considerations at this point. Social, economic and political questions are in fact raised shortly after when Fuchs looks at Dublin-based Dead Centre’s *To Be a Machine* (Version 1.0), based on Mark O’Connell’s 2017 book. Not

only does the play address the central question of bodily versus virtual presence either on or offstage (“Can we even be an audience without a body?” Fuchs asks p.110) but it also suggests that virtual theatre may be more democratic than stage plays since, as Fuchs observes, “in a virtual production, everyone has front-row seats, undoing the differential access that applies even when audiences actually manage to attend the theater” (111).

- 8 Chapter Five, “Solo: Small Scale theatre”, scrutinises more intimate productions with single performers rather than virtual communities. Interestingly, Fuchs’s analysis of digital theatre once again gives way to more general considerations on theatre and on its collective dimension. The chapter asks “how much coming together does theater require?”, a question that is not new but which “takes on a new urgency in the context of social distancing and the public health imperatives on the pandemic” (115). By focusing on Joshua William Gelb’s *Theater in Quarantine* project, Fuchs shows that even individual performances are collaborative since they always involve “the labor of many artists” (123). Fuchs then proceeds to remind the readers that these digital performances are often firmly rooted in their time, as evidenced by Christine Jones’s *Theatre for One* and the series *Here We Are*, composed of eight plays by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of colour) artists created as a response to the Black Lives Matter protests.
- 9 Chapter Six moves away from digital theatre and addresses the turn to audio. “Audio Theater, from Telephones to Podcasts” examines how audio productions “take advantage of the phenomenal popularity of podcasts, yet must also push back against an increasingly visual culture” (142). Fuchs scrutinises productions that rely solely on sound, such as Public Theater’s *Richard II* podcast, as well as others that combine the aural and the visual such as Neil LaBute’s *True Love Will Find You in the End*, a play reaching its eight audience members seated in the same space via voice-over. Fuchs describes this last piece as one that “suggests the limitations of audio” (158) and a longing for embodiment.
- 10 Moving further away from digital performance, Fuchs explores outdoor theatre in her last chapter entitled “Distanced Theater: Reinhabiting the City and Beyond”. Fuchs identifies a recurring aspect of these outdoor productions which consists in reverting to previous forms of theatre. She mentions the Mexican production *El merolico desde su balcón* inspired by Hispanic classical theatre and the *corral de comedias* and *Every Everyman*, by the West Philadelphia company Shakespeare in Clark Park, which had performance wagons inspired by medieval morality plays. Not only were site-specific plays performed in the city but they were often about the city, as exemplified by Canadian company Tableau d’Hôte Theatre’s socially distanced micro-plays dealing with gentrification. The most flagrant example is the piece *Why Y* in which people are evicted from a local YMCA, the play being performed right next to the recently sold off real-life YMCA.
- 11 Fuchs ends her book with a postscript which charts the many positive consequences of the turn to digital theatre from learning “how to engage audiences, increase viewership, and mobilize technology” (183) to exposing “the vulnerability of the artists that make theater possible” and arguing “for fairer and more sustainable arrangements” (184). She once again underlines the democratic nature of digital theatre and hopes that stage plays will be able to address such a large audience in the future.

- 12 Fuchs's book offers an essential assessment of a turning point in the history of theatre, one that saw theatre practitioners forsake stage presence to adapt to new modes of production. As I am reviewing the book in 2024, it is still too early to know if the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown have truly and enduringly modified the theatrical landscape. People have returned to the theatre, although not as willingly as they used to before the pandemic, while many theatre practitioners keep expanding their digital horizons. A follow-up to this book a few years from now would be most welcome to assess whether the strategies adopted in times of crisis have become part and parcel of the theatrical landscape.
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## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** théâtre audio, Covid-19, théâtre numérique, théâtre et distanciation physique, théâtre multimodal, confinement, Zoom

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