REVIEW Theater of lockdown: digital and distanced performance in a time of pandemic, by Barbara Fuchs, London, Methuen Drama, 2022, 248 pp., £72.00 (hardback), £26.09 (paperback), £20.87 (eBook), ISBN:9781350242074

The Internet felt like a refuge for theatre-makers during the pandemic. But as Barbara Fuchs shows in this comprehensive, if sometimes overly descriptive and occasionally repetitive book, lockdown theatre is more than a life raft. It represents a significant turn towards the Internet as a performance medium whose form embodies the digital-corporeal hybridity emblematic of contemporary social reality. Performances on social media, or in virtual environments, or in physical sites mediated through mobile technologies, are not temporary fixes to a finite emergency, 'but a flotilla of rapidly proliferating possibilities' (1) representing genuine artistic innovations. Consequently, the 'virtually unprecedented conditions' theatre produced during lockdown operated under mean that it 'necessitates its own categories and questions' (5).

The extreme circumstances that lockdown theatre was created in raises the question of how dependent this iteration of online performance is on the specific context of Covid-19 to become a distinct practice in its own right. Understanding how the case studies relate to each other in the highly unusual social conditions they were born out of must be a consideration when analysing and critically situating this work. Indeed, Fuchs presents the book itself as a 'record of 2020' (3) written by a critical observer and, of equal import, human being who was living under the same conditions as the artists whom she critiques. *Theater of Lockdown* can therefore be interpreted as an edited journal of field work into cyberspace, but Fuchs largely avoids subjective commentary in favour of scholarly analysis. This approach makes for a clearly articulated set of arguments about the meta-theatricality of lockdown theatre yet can also underplay the keen sense of intimate connectivity and commitment to trying something new lockdown theatre engendered in audiences. The reality of living an online life during the pandemic and the performances created in response to it are impossible to disentangle.

Fuchs persuasively suggests that lockdown theatre's self-conscious reflexivity brings it closer to the schema of postdramatic theatre than theories of intermediality and digital practice. This foregrounds the concept of the 'digital' in performance as the politics of interconnectivity rather than one associated with specific technologies. Several references are made to the political turmoil of Donald Trump's last year in office and the demands for racial justice following the murder of George Floyd in the US. The pandemic, the Black Lives Matter uprising, the crisis of American democracy, and living primarily digital lives all symbolise a fundamental reconfiguration of the coordinates that make reality comprehensible. A defining characteristic of lockdown theatre is the attempt to make sense of a world changing in real time with audiences who share the same fears and anxieties as the artists. Trying to comprehend the pandemic's political, social, and medical consequences through theatre requires, these case studies suggest, building collaborative relationships with audiences. The Internet in this context becomes a site for democratic and antagonistic exchange, with lockdown theatre acting as a space to create alternative forms of co-existence in virtual environments during a time of simultaneous international crises.

The book's seven chapters concentrate on work that reflected on the trauma of the pandemic and those pieces that embraced the closure of theatres to experiment with digital and socially distanced dramaturgies, including an impressive number of case studies from the Americas, Europe, and Australia. The first two chapters focus on the popularity of Zoom as the platform of choice for live shows that were quickly adapted for online environments. It is difficult to appreciate in retrospect, but Fuchs reminds us that before the pandemic struck Zoom was generally used for business meetings and was therefore greeted with understandable suspicion from theatre-makers and

audiences alike as a viable performance medium in the early weeks of lockdown. But the ostensibly rigid and bland grid of windows quickly became an iconic image for how digital communication places people in contact whilst never able to erase the void between them, 'even as critics struggled to name and define what they were seeing' (27). The Zoom windows became interconnected stages that occasionally offered tantalising glimpses into the private worlds of the actors – a bookcase, clothes drying, the fleeting appearance of a cat – the mundane stuff of life serving as a constant reminder that the fiction of lockdown theatre could never fully escape the social circumstances in which it was performed (10). Multi-platform performances on Instagram, WhatsApp and the like which Fuchs discusses in later chapters enhanced this sense of fluidity, whilst performances on Twitch and Second Life showed how a single digital performance can have parallax structures that can be experienced as theatre without converging into a single, synchronous, harmonious event. The site-specific performances *El merolico*, *Sunnymead Court*, *Fire Season* and *En Pointe* that are discussed in the final chapter demonstrate how socially distanced theatre does not have to be an isolated experience when audiences are technologically immersed in theatrical worlds.

Whilst Fuchs does not provide a new theoretical axis to engage with ideas of virtuality, presence, mediation, embodiment, and the convergence of online and offline worlds, she asks pertinent questions about the dramaturgical possibilities digital performances afford artists when theatre becomes enmeshed in the technological fabric of everyday life. Fuchs touches on debates about the definition of liveness and theatre's often rhetorically fraught relationship with digital technology. The brevity of this material is refreshing and underscores how this discourse often fails to reflect the now almost quotidian affordances of medial hybridity. Indeed, Philip Auslander's argument that liveness is historically contingent (6) requires the definition of the theatrical event to evolve in step with technological developments. As the creator of Russian Troll Farm: A Workplace Comedy (a case study that frames 'the digital as a specific site' [102]) Jared Mezzocchi, states, online performances can borrow from film and theatre to create hybrid performance aesthetics not bound by the conventional delineations of artistic mediums (8). However, I appreciated Fuchs' explicit description of this work as theatre to emphasise how the Internet does not automatically foreclose the possibility of being present to other bodies and stories in the company of strangers – the factors that are still often cited to define live performance in distinction from recorded media. Read as a historical record of an emerging theatrical form characterised by digital-corporeal hybridity, Fuchs' analyses of the performances situates the experience of simulated presence in virtual environments as the most authentic representation of reality in the age of the metaverse.

This book will appeal to students studying intermedial, multimedia, and online theatre, whilst also providing an excellent introduction to the discourses of liveness and computation in performance without rehearsing familiar arguments concerning embodiment and systems of reproduction. Theatre and film scholars will also find it useful to discover new artists and companies who are experimenting with Internet dramaturgies and online interaction. It remains to be seen if lockdown theatre can be scaled up into a more established practice, but Fuchs makes one hopeful that the Internet represents a new frontier in theatrical experimentation designed to dissolve the imaginary and physical borders that isolate artists and audiences alike.