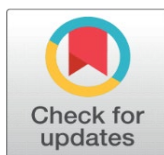
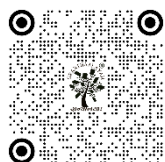


NEGOTIATING TRADITION AND TECHNOLOGY: THE STRATEGIC DIGITALISATION OF INDIAN THEATRE BY MODERN INDIAN PLAYWRIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Advancements in science and technology have progressively driven the world toward digitalisation. Its impact extends across multiple domains, including theatre, where digital theatre has emerged as a significant area of critical inquiry. Theatre, a performing art, should continually adapt to changing scenarios. The integration of digital technology into theatre is an attempt to revamp the existing theatre to align with the ever-growing digital world and cater to the modern Indian taste. However, unchecked intrusion of digital technology has overshadowed the embodied, communal experience central to theatrical practice, rendering the stage equivalent to a cinematic set. At such a juncture, it becomes pertinent to ask 'how' and 'to what extent' should theatre be digitalised to keep its essence alive. Drawing on Masura's concept of Digital Theatre, this study explores how select Indian playwrights, such as Dina Mehta, Girish Karnad, Ramu Ramanathan, Mahesh Dattani, and Manjula Padmanabhan, strategically integrate digital technologies into their plays to sustain audience-performer interaction while minimising reliance on digitally mediated modes of performance. This study argues that digital technology should be used as per the demands of the playwright or director, or to realise scenes otherwise impossible to stage, while also enabling innovative visual strategies that enhance audience reception of a particular scene in a true sense.

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Keywords: Digital, Theatre, Indian, Tradition, Drama, Plays



1. INTRODUCTION

Theatre, as a performing art, has continually evolved into a dynamic entity, responding to shifting social, cultural, and technological contexts. From classical and folk traditions to proscenium stages and forms such as absurdism, existentialism, realism and naturalism, theatrical practice has continually adapted to reflect changing scenarios.

In the contemporary era, innovations in science and technology have permeated everyday life and communication. Such advancements have also changed the way of cultural consumption. This transformation has inevitably influenced the arts, compelling theatre to engage with digital media and technological tools, to remain relevant to the audience's

taste and compete with the shifting landscape. The theater, which should be the image of our time and perhaps the one art form most peculiarly conditioned by it, must not ignore these signs of technology (Schlemmer, 1961, p. 18). Digitalising theatre is an attempt to revamp the existing theatre to align with the ever-growing digital world. Through the incorporation of multimedia projections, digital soundscapes, virtual platforms, and online dissemination, theatre seeks not merely to modernise its aesthetic but to renegotiate its relationship with space, time, and spectatorship. According to Steve Dixon (2007), "what can be seen as 'digital performance works' are all those productions where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery forms" (p. 6). Digital interventions serve as catalysts, enhancing narrative possibilities to offer an immersive experience mediated through technology. Nadja Masura (2020) observes, "Digital Theatre is live theatre which incorporates digital technology into the production in an essential way that fundamentally shifts our understanding of the principals of theatre, and potentially the world we inhabit" (p. 6). Masura indicates the possibility of an overhaul of traditional embodied theatre, alongside changes in performer-actor relationships. In this sense, digital theatre emerges as a strategic adaptation that sustains theatre's relevance in an era defined by digital culture. Masura (2020) suggests a range of technologies to ensure a fully functional digital theatre.

Digital Theatre as a term can relate to performances which utilise a large range of technologies and their multiple uses, including but not limited to: digital video, digital projection, animated sets and characters, virtual reality, digital robotics, online writing and real-time audience feedback, interactive content creation, motion capturing, motion-triggering, web and video-conferencing, and many other forms of digital media inter-play. (p. 9)

Her idea is to broaden the show's horizons by using multiple technologies to enhance the theatrical effects. It also expands the scope of live performances across various online platforms. However, there is a dearth of a proper framework for integrating them into theatres or performances. Consequently, a number of critical questions emerge amid the unchecked digitalisation of theatre, such as the increasing reliance on technology that overshadows the playwright's original intent or reinterprets the script, diluting its core meaning. It shifts or even diminishes the director's creative authority by transferring control to digital tools and technicians. Additionally, how does the digitalisation of theatre change the relationships between actors and audiences on a hi-tech stage that resembles a cinematic entity? These concerns highlight the need to balance technological innovation with artistic integrity, collaborative roles, and inclusivity in contemporary performance practices. The current definitions allow for flexibility and creative experimentation. However, this openness does not imply unchecked usage. Technology should be integrated thoughtfully, enhancing performance without overshadowing the core essence of theatre.

The modernisation of Indian theatre in terms of themes emerged primarily after Independence. However, many of its performance techniques had already been introduced during the colonial rule. As a result, modern theatre practitioners often blended Indian themes with Western theatrical techniques to create a distinctly modern form of Indian theatre. The methods included facial expressions, gestures, movements across the stage, lighting, groupings, shadows, shapes, colours in the costume and décor. Common technologies included spotlights, a foot mic, a projector, sound effects, and background music. Charlie Gere (2008) defines digital by saying, "to speak of the digital is to call up, metonymically, the whole panoply of virtual simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media and global connectivity that constitutes much of our contemporary experience" (p. 15). Despite the use of these technologies, the digitalisation of theatre in India progressed at a relatively slow pace. While the idea of fusing performance with technology (spotlights, mics, projectors, sound effects) is not entirely new, the intervention of digital technology in theatre (motion capturing, interactivity, virtual reality, video conferencing, etc.) to enact performances in myriad ways, as discussed by Masura, remained a less explored field in India. Through close readings of select plays such as *Broken Images*, *Brides are Not For Burning*, *Lights Out*, *A Big Fat City*, *Shakespeare and She*, *Jazz*, *Astro-Nuts* and *The Skelton Women*, this research article examines how playwrights such as Girish Karnad, Dina Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Mahesh Dattani, Ramu Ramanathan, Prashant Prakash, and Kalki Koechlin integrate digital technologies in limited but meaningful ways to enhance the audience's sensory perception in a true sense. The article also examines Asif Currimbhoy's *Om Mane Padme Hum* and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, which were previously considered difficult to stage but can now be performed with the aid of digital technology. It further explores the unchecked aesthetic, narrative, and performative implications of these technological interventions, focusing on how digital media reshape stage space, character construction, and audience engagement.

2. DIGITAL INTERVENTIONS IN INDIAN PLAYS

Basic technologies such as dimmers, spotlights, and sound systems have been integral to the stage since the emergence of modern proscenium theatre, which has significantly shaped how a play is written and perceived. Playwrights demonstrated sound awareness of these technologies while composing their plays. Girish Karnad took inspiration from 'dimmers' in his early years and wrote his first play, *Yayati*. Karnad (1989) admits:

What impressed me as much as the psychological cannibalism of the play was the way lights faded in and out on stage. Until we moved to the city, we had lived in houses lit by hurricane lamps. Even in the city, electricity was something we switched on and off. The realisation that there were instruments called dimmers that could gently fade the lights in or out opened up a whole new world of magical possibilities. (p. 333)

The introduction of merely 'dimmers' changed how a playwright could visualise their script on stage, and how performers could act in response to them, offering the audience a new set of experiences. Fade in, fade out or blackout became the standard operating procedure for a scene or act shift. In response to a shifting landscape, the incorporation of technology into the composition of Indian plays has evolved. A specialised field of 'light engineering' emerged, employing an array of multicoloured lights arranged on stage to suit the requirements and emotional tone of the play. The majority of contemporary theatres in India are now integrated with the necessary technologies within the domain of playwrights and plays. Although the basic technological tools (as mentioned earlier in this paper) were in tradition since the modernisation of theatre, it was only toward the latter twentieth century that the Indian plays began to show an affinity for digital technology, albeit in a limited way. It does not meet Masura's criteria for a theatre to be considered digital; however, the plays elucidate scenes that require digital technology for effective staging.

Brides Are Not for Burning (1979), by Dina Mehta, introduces a scene in which the character is engulfed in fire. Initially conceived as a radio play, it won first prize in the BBC Playwriting Competition in 1979 and was broadcast thereafter. Following its success as a radio play, it was later adapted into a popular stage play in 1993. To portray one of the scenes, the stage directions suggest the intervention of digital technology. As Malini is screaming "murder", the death of her sister by burning may be enacted, with visual effects behind a scrim, *Blackout* (Mehta, 1993, p. 83). Depicting a figure engulfed in flames poses significant practical and aesthetic challenges in live performance. Most of the theatre's venues do not allow it due to security reasons. However, this moment can be rendered convincingly through the strategic use of digital projections or on-stage screens. Kevin Stone (2015) suggests possible ways to enact it:

The classic way to simulate open flame is to use strips of orange, yellow, and red silk or tissue paper, a colored light source, and a fan. Secure the ends of the silk or tissue paper to the logs. Hide colored lights beneath the logs, and place the fan beneath the whole. Turn on the lights and fan, and the silk or tissue strips should waft upwards, creating a simulation of an open fire.

Techniques such as LED screens, projection mapping, holographic imagery, smoke machines, dynamic lighting, and sound design create the illusion of blazing fire while ensuring safety on stage. Digital fire effects can be synchronised with actors' movements and stage transitions, enhancing dramatic intensity and audience immersion. Mehta suggests using a theatrical 'scrim,' a specialised, loosely woven mesh fabric used as a scenic backdrop to create magical, instantaneous, and filtered lighting transitions. A scrim can function in a variety of ways depending on the position and colour of the light source. The usage of digital technology here would help expressively enact the scene. The dynamic transition between amber, red, and orange light tones creates the illusion of flames, while digitally designed soundscapes, crackling flames, and collapsing structures deepen the audience's sensory perception of fire.

Lights Out (1984), written by Manjula Padmanabhan, was based on the factual events narrated by her friend that happened in Santa Cruz, Bombay, in 1982. Padmanabhan (2020) observes, "In real life, as in the play, a group of ordinary middle-class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalised in a neighbouring compound" (p. 59). To critique this social negligence, Padmanabhan foregrounds the real incident as a clear message in the play's conclusion. To enact the play's final scene, she suggests using digital technology, specifically a slide projector, to display the messages, thereby blurring the boundary between the real incident and the play. Padmanabhan (2020) further says, "And in real life, as in play, no one went to the aid of the victims" (p. 59). The purpose is to offer social commentary to remind people of their indifferent attitude toward heinous crimes such as rape. The play can be dismissed as fiction or entertainment, but its connection to reality is hard to ignore. In this play, Padmanabhan holds up a mirror to the society that the audience themselves are part of. The stage direction suggests, "Each slide stays on for about five seconds. By the

time the fifth one has appeared, the cast has exited. There is a silence. The last slide is held on the curtain. Slowly, it fills over with red, till the lettering is quite obliterated” (Padmanabhan, 2013, p. 59). A slide projector connected to a computer would be sufficient to enact this scene. The last slide requires predesigned animation. Early slide projectors relied on analogue signals and optical-mechanical systems rather than a binary system (digital) to project physical images. Nonetheless, it signals a departure from the conventional staging to create a more impressionistic effect for the audience, allowing them the space to reflect and contemplate. Projectors have gone digital with time, using electronic technologies such as DLP or LCD to display data from computers or digital files, providing higher resolution, greater consistency, and eliminating the need for moving parts. It is also noteworthy that Padmanabhan also proposes an alternative method for staging the scene in the absence of a slide projector. This alternative implies that, at the time of her writing (late twentieth century), access to screens or slide projectors was not yet standard across theatre spaces.

The theatre lights dim and the cast starts to exit. From outside the window, the harsh bright light remains on. The text of the slides is heard as a voice-over, read in a quiet, unemotional tone, with distinct pauses between each message.

The light from behind the window turns gradually red so that by the time the last message is heard, the stage is livid. (Padmanabhan, 2013, p. 129)

The two techniques engage the audience’s senses in different ways. The use of slides (visual) appeals to the eyes, whereas the voiceover techniques (aural) appeal to the ears. Visual information generally stays in the human mind for a longer time and is recalled better than aural (auditory) information. The final slide, with the screen splashed with red and the letters obliterated, serves as a powerful visual metaphor. The colour red symbolises danger, violence or emotional intensity. The obliteration of the letter suggests a breakdown of communication and the silencing of truth. In contrast, the voice-over takes a more didactic approach. As a familiar theatrical device, it provides information or commentary, guiding the audience toward a particular understanding. However, it is important to note that to enact the second scene, technical assistance with lighting is required. Thus, while the final slide provokes a multitude of thoughts through visual symbolism and open-endedness, the voice-over constrains interpretation by directing it, making the former more impactful in stimulating deeper audience engagement. *Astro-Nuts*, another play of Padmanabhan, written after *Lights Out*, requires a digital screen to enact a scene in a more sophisticated way than the previous one. The stage direction suggests, “The stage is bathed in a cold blue arctic light. The display on the back screen shows views of the polar ice-either a single beautiful scene or a gently changing slide show” (p. 312). The cold-blue arctic light can be achieved through several array of lights on the stage. However, a digital LED/LCD screen, fitted at the rear part of the stage, is required to enact the scene as visualised by the playwright. The use of digital screens, along with Padmanabhan’s decision not to offer any alternative here, signals an age increasingly polarising toward digital technology.

Karnad’s play *Broken Images* (2005) mandates the use of digital technology right from the beginning. A digital/plasma screen becomes an essential component for staging the play, as the protagonist, Manjula Nayak, engages in dialogue with her mirror image throughout the performance, which functions as an active, co-present interlocutor. The play starts with stage directions, “The interior of a television studio. A big plasma screen hangs on one side, big enough for a close-up on it to be seen clearly by the audience...At the back of the stage are several television sets, with screens of varying sizes” (Karnad, 2005, p. 261). The other plays, which are aided by digital technology, *Broken Images*, rely entirely on it for their staging. The backstage, with several television sets of varying sizes, highlights the growing role of digital technology in shaping the performance. Nayak has been invited to serve as a guest speaker at a broadcasting studio equipped with advanced technology. It is immediately evident that she is at home in broadcasting studios (Karnad, 2005, p. 261). It should be noted that broadcasting is one of the features listed for digital theatre. Chatzichristodoulou (2017) says, “Another example of the strategic deployment of digital technology as a means to an end is in its use for the live broadcasting of theatre, as in the case of Metropolitan Opera Live in HD and NT Live (p. 315). What sets this premise apart is that the character in the play is centred within a broadcast studio rather than the play itself being transmitted as a broadcast. The props instil in the audience a sense that the play is live. Hence, Karnad’s play foreshadows the future of theatre that is now a reality. *Broken Images* compares and contrasts the rapid digitalisation in the developed nations, while India still grapples with the traditional mode:

Ah! I see. New technology. Isn’t it scary? The rate of obsolescence? (Listens.) Of course I have. In London. And in Toronto. But when you think of Indian television studios, you always imagine them cluttered. Lots of men and women scurrying about, shouting orders. Elephantine lights. Headphones. Cameras. You know what I mean. But here... I mean, it’s all so spartan... I know. But a bit lonely too. Like a sound studio... All right. All right... No camera. I just look ahead and speak to an invisible audience in front of me. (Karnad, 2005, 261)

The statement, though made in the context of studios, can also be viewed in light of theatre. On the one hand, Karnad acknowledges the ease of access enabled by new technologies abroad and sharply critiques the poor management and technological shortcomings of Indian studios, whereas, on the other, he expresses an underlying anxiety about the rapid pace of technological advancement, describing such spaces as desolate and lifeless, places where one speaks to walls and cameras, stripped of the humane touch, a debate central to the digitalisation of theatre. The notion of 'liveness' becomes central here: Is it defined by the immediate, physical co-presence of performers and audience, or can it be equally constituted through real-time technological mediation? Auslander (2012) observes, "It may be that we are now at a point in history at which liveness can no longer be defined in terms of either the presence of living human beings before each other or physical and temporal relationships" (p. 6). Conscious of the crucial role technology plays in human life today, he defines liveness as human interaction with technology. According to him, "Liveness does not inhere in a technological artifact or its operations- it results from our engagement with it and our willingness to bring it into full presence for ourselves" (p. 8). 'Liveness' in performance is not determined solely by the physical presence of actors on stage, but emerges through the dynamic interaction between performers and audiences. Even in digitally mediated settings, a performance feels 'live' when audiences are actively engaged, emotionally, intellectually, or responsively in real time. Therefore, liveness becomes a shared construct, shaped as much by reception as by performance, whether the experience unfolds in a theatre or through a screen. In this play, Karnad highlights another side to technology as well. The downside of technology is validated when Nayak is trapped in her own mirror image within them, a moment that moves the play forward and unveils the darker side of her carefully constructed image.

Ramu Ramanathan, another Indian playwright who has been writing actively since the 1990s, demonstrates the requirements of a technologically advanced setup in his plays. In *Shakespeare and She* (2008), the play demands both, the technology, "There should be lots of lights and naked bulbs- bright, white, harsh lights for the counselling sessions and a contrasting setting for the Aisha scenes and the songs" (Ramanathan, 2012, p. 290) and digital technology, "A dot appears on the screen. Many dots appear. It finally transforms into an image of Shakespeare!" (p. 291). The stage directions become complex in the further section, which calls for strategic incorporation of digital technology:

Silence. The screen lights up with an email chat between *Insomnia* and unknown person.

Message: Beep! Beep! Beep!

Insomnia: Who's there?

Message: Me

Insomnia: Me? Who?

Message: Me.

Insomnia: Come on, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself. Who are you? (p. 303)

The intervention of digital technology here is not merely stylistic or a choice but functionally necessary, as the scene's dramaturgy cannot be realised without it. As the scene unfolds, Ramanathan also uses emojis to articulate shifts in mood and emotions. It highlights the growing use of social media, where emojis are a crucial part of textual exchanges. They serve as a way to transcend the limitations of machine conversation, making it more humane, visually appealing, and relatable, helping connect with audiences in a fast-paced digital environment. Another play, *Jazz* (2008), by Ramanathan, also suggests using a digital screen to create another space alongside the stage. Like Karnad's *Broken Images*, the action occurs simultaneously at two locations: one physical and the other virtual. He writes, "A rapid-fire five-minute scene with Boy on stage and Boy on screen. This scene is the *Jazz In Bollywood Antakshri Competition*" (p. 359). Ramanathan places the boy on the actual and virtual screens, highlighting how technological intervention has shaped both the stage and life. He further writes, "The bits between the songs will have Charlie Chaplin type slides to aid the audience. These slides can contain information about the Film, the music director and arrangers!" (p. 359), which calls for slide projector or a digital screen, like in Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* to enhance the audience's reception and supplements the play with the requisite information to comprehend it appropriately.

The *Big Fat City*, a play by Mahesh Dattani first performed for the public in 2013, features a notable incorporation of digital technology. The stage directions outline the requirements for a screen to display the text messages, instead of email chat, as in the previous play. Dattani (2013) writes, "One section of the wall is used as a screen to project the text messages. White projections indicate outgoing messages. Red ones indicate incoming messages. Each message stays on the screen till the next one appears unless otherwise specified" (p. 155). Though the play unfolds with a group of actors on stage, the exchange of text messages drives it forward.

SCREEN (from Niharika): KAILASH IS HERE. COME WITH BANWARI AND CARRY HIM HOME.

They take Kailash to the bedroom. Niharika gets a message.

SCREEN (from Lolly): OH NO NOT AGAIN! NIKKI DUMP HIM IN A CORNER SOMEWHERE PLEASE.
(Dattani, 2013, p. 175)

Conversing through text messages or exchanging information through chats has become an integral part of our lives today. Achint Kaur (2014), in her note to the play, observes, “one of the fascinating devices in the play is the use of text messages to reveal what the character is really thinking or feeling” (p. 149). Dattani seeks to expose the characters’ hidden private worlds by bringing them into the public sphere, revealing that what seems perfect from the outside is, in reality, fractured and deeply conflicted within. Through social media, individuals curate a public image of themselves that may differ entirely from their actual reality. Dattani unveils both sides in this play. Kaur further says, “Lolly’s relationship with her son is hidden from the world of the other characters, yet the audience is only too aware of what is going on in her private world through the exchange of SMSs and video clips with her son” (p. 148). Social media also has dual aspects. The first one is for public viewing in the form of posts, stories, and statuses. The second is messages, where you can talk privately with others. With affordable internet connections and several apps offering free services, social media is widely used for conversation across national and international borders. The plays, introducing these elements of digital technology, are representative of contemporary times. It also demonstrates how our lives are increasingly intertwined with digital technology to the extent that it is difficult to imagine a present or future life without it. Contemporary playwrights like Prashant Prakash and Kalki Koechlin demonstrate a heightened engagement with emerging digital technologies in their work. In the play *The Skeleton Woman*, Prakash and Koechlin (2011) suggest using projection to portray the sequence of imagination, “Sea sounds fade in as the lights fade out. An overhead projection begins. B notices large shadows drifting across the whole stage” (p. 82). The description of clouds, sea, goose and monstrous creatures follows. Overhead projection produces immersive visual effects while maintaining flexibility in staging. In contemporary digital theatre, it is frequently combined with multimedia technology such as sound and lighting to enhance the audience’s visual experience.

There are other playwrights whose plays were previously difficult to stage due to their cinematic nature and superficial stage description. They can now be enacted with the help of digital aid. The dystopian play *Harvest* (1997) by Padmanabhan requires so many futuristic technological props that practitioners questioned its viability on stage. As soon as *Harvest* became available in print, a number of Indian theatre professionals dismissed the play as unperformable (Padmanabhan, 2020, p. 183). Despite this, the play remained in production since then primarily abroad, aided by the technology. Padmanabhan also admits, “I wrote the play at a time when Skype and FaceTime did not exist so the technology must have seemed far-fetched” (p. 184). However, technological advancements bridged the gap between these plays and their stage performances. Asif Currimbhoy, one of the foremost Indian English playwrights, wrote stage directions as if they were cinematic sets. In *Om Mane Padme Hum* (a historical play written in 1971), Currimbhoy suggests the scene as, “While this sequence is taking place, there are flashes of Rimpoche in the dark cave, motionless, sitting in Buddha pose, receiving the messages...and flashing back his own ‘third eye’ transcendental meditations to the General who feels its own enormous persuasive pressures” (Krishna, 1987, p. 102). S. Krishna Bhatta (1987) renders such stage directions as a cinematic entity, since it’s not possible to enact them with the technology (which he refers to as modern) that theatres were equipped with during the late twentieth century.

But the playwright appears to have forgotten that he is writing for the stage, not for the film. The dream sequences about the legendary origin of Tibetans and other scenes in the second act are, no doubt, interesting; but, even with all modern stage direction and techniques, it is very difficult to present them. (p. 102)

However, with recent advances in digital technology, such as projections, laser lights, and animations, these scenes can be effectively enacted on stage. While digital tools can expand the visual and sensory range of a performance, Bhatta contends that their excessive use risks undermining the organic quality of theatre. He critiques Currimbhoy, “he overdoes his use of theatrical gimmicks by reducing the scope for dramatic dialogue and by employing excessive cinematographic devices which appear to be cumbersome and artificial on the stage” (p. 111). Consequently, such devices may appear intrusive and artificial, which distinguishes theatre from film. The analysis thus underscores the balanced integration of technology by Indian playwrights, which supports rather than surpasses the dramatic core.

3. DIGITAL OR TRADITIONAL: A ROADMAP TO 21ST CENTURY THEATRE

Despite the requirement for digital aid, the use of digital technology or visual media in Indian theatre has always been a subject of ongoing contestation and debate. Digital theatre reconfigures the traditional understanding of theatrical space. Masura (2020) suggests that digital theatre might include using projected elements with live actors, including animated sets, motion-triggered effects controlled by performers to cue video or sound media, or online performances between performers at locations in different rooms, states, or even countries (p. 9). Based on this definition, there are two major considerations within the scope of digital theatre. The first is that, for a 'theatre as a space' to be digital, it should incorporate the latest, advanced technology to enact a performance. In this premise, the usage of numerous digital tools, techniques, and technologies can make the primary life event appear artificial and disconnected from reality. The only remarkable aspect that sets theatre aside from the film is its capacity to present people instead of pixels (Richardson, 2015, p. 212). Excessive digitalisation also presents a counterpoint, as it risks undermining theatre as a lived spatial experience and introduces a sense of artificiality into performance, a concern hinted at by Bhatta. Moreover, to establish such a hi-tech theatre, a huge investment is required. The ticket price is likely to rise, creating a class divide among the audience.

The second consideration, dispersing performance across screens, networks, and virtual environments, thereby decoupling theatrical presence from a fixed location, is also within the purview of digital theatre. What difference does it make to watch a performance, be it a play, a dance, a comedy, any poetry or music show, when visited in person and when viewed on screens, whether live or recorded? The foremost is the 'environment.' People gather at a specific place, preferably a theatre, at a scheduled time to savour the art. Their common goal is to relish the performance to the fullest, which unifies the audience. The distraction or intervention is reduced; consequently, the audience's receptivity increases. Additionally, people travel from different places, which incurs time and money beyond the ticket price. Those who attend want their money and efforts to count. People come with the mindset of getting entertainment equivalent to the resources they spend. Visiting the theatre is not limited to watching a play and leaving immediately after it ends. It comprises various activities that connect people, foster a healthy atmosphere, and promote overall well-being and holistic development. One also learns about several technical aspects related to staging a play. The illustration below represents the benefit of the physical presence:

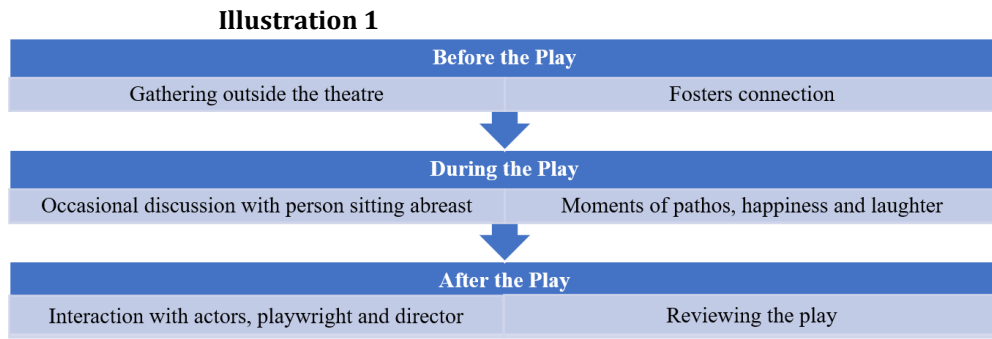


Illustration 1 The Whole Theatrical Process

4. ILLUSTRATION 1.0 THE WHOLE THEATRICAL PROCESS

While waiting for a play to begin, people from different sections and varied backgrounds can exchange their thoughts. Many people visit a theatre to seek respite from their official work. Once the play concludes, the stage is open for the audience to interact with actors and other members of the production, including the playwright and director. People also gather outside the theatre to discuss the play they just watched. The audience's response, particularly during moments of heightened emotion, such as clapping, laughter, and other expressions, determines their active participation, thereby boosting the actor's morale. Most of the time, there is a book or art exhibition, an interview with the author/playwright, and other activities that make the visit multipurpose.

Now consider a situation in which a play reaches us through online platforms, mediated by digital technology. The screen, however big it is, fails to give the grandiloquence of the theatre. Also, watching on screen is never free from

distractions. Advertisements, subtitles, network errors, calls, and messages keep intervening. Such audiences feel they are secondary viewers; hence, they do not give the requisite attention. While TV studio audiences may feel that they are at a public 'live' performance, these performances are often edited and remixed for the benefit of the home audiences which are viewing the mass broadcast in private (Masura, 2020, p. 7). Through editing, camera selection, sound mixing, and even retakes or time delays, the broadcast is reshaped to enhance clarity, emotional impact, and narrative coherence. This creates a paradox- the performance retains the label of 'live', yet it is mediated, manipulated, and optimised for mass consumption. Feral and Bermingham (1987) also observe: Kumari (2026)

Imagery brought to the stage through the use of the various media creates the rupture that forces us to adopt a critical stance with respect to stage. Such imagery displaces the subject of enunciation, bringing a different point of view to the stage, i.e. that of camera with its corresponding relationship to reality. Media such as screen, video, television, and film introduce a non-polarised subject, a new subject of enunciation that disbands the process of representation in progress. (Feral and Bermingham, 1987, p. 470)

Unlike the live actor, who traditionally anchors the 'subject of enunciation,' the camera produces a fragmented and mobile point of view that redefines how reality is perceived. This creates a rupture in spectatorship, as the audience must navigate between the live performance and the screen's constructed, selective vision. Online performance would be frequently measured against physical presence, disrupting the flow of perception. Consequently, the authority of representation shifts away from a singular, embodied source to a dispersed and 'non-polarised' subject, where meaning is no longer stable or unified. This decentring effect exposes the mechanics of representation itself, compelling the audience to adopt a critical stance rather than passively engaging with the performance.

As performance shifts to virtual platforms, creative control often shifts toward those who can navigate audiovisual storytelling, multimedia integration, and platform-specific demands. Chatzichristodoulou (2017) aptly captures, "Digital theatres, as well as all theatres embedded within digital culture, are both gifted with and hounded by an often inherent capacity to capture and document themselves or be captured by others" (p. 318). The playwrights, though familiar with technological advancements, demonstrate an inadequate understanding of advanced digital technology, signalling a significant gap in contemporary dramaturgical discourse. As theatre increasingly intersects with virtual platforms, mixed-reality environments, and digitally mediated narratives, playwrights face the challenge of imagining structures, aesthetics, and modes of engagement that move beyond the conventions of stage-bound dramaturgy. Consequently, the playwright's role, once central to shaping narrative, dialogue, and dramaturgy, has increasingly been overshadowed by the prominence of tech and multimedia artists. The original plays would be replaced by technology-enabled improvisations of existing plays. Chatzichristodoulou (2017) takes a wise stand and says, "Thus, when referring to the digital, we do not refer to a specific technological paradigm but look to address a wider set of socio-cultural phenomena that cannot be reduced to computer technology" (p. 313). Theatre is a centre of varied socio-cultural activities and serves as a space for actor-audience interaction. Digitalising to the point where it is reduced to computer technology is akin to distorting the fundamental essence of theatre. Mahato and Doreswamy share another concern: turning the performances into recordings and selling them to OTT platforms. According to them, "They could change how performances are shared, but they also carry risks such as turning art into a business, weakening culture, and pushing traditional art to the side, as digital contact can paradoxically reorient the authentic identity and jeopardize the ritualistic practices considered essential to the performance" (2024). However, such practice has already started. A repository of all plays filmed using enhanced technology has been uploaded to the website and can be rented or purchased for a fee. Though it is not currently under the scope of digital theatre, it is increasingly in fashion. In addition, archival or real-time webcasts which do not generate feedback influencing the "live" performances are not within the range of Digital Theatre (Masura, 2020, p. 7). Feedback is what differentiates a live performance from a recorded one. The website's 'About' section says, "Your online home of world-class theatre, streamed directly to your Sofa." If you can watch a play on the screen while sitting on your sofa, would it be wise to call it a theatre? Theatre is a space where performers, in flesh and blood, present a live performance without retakes or cuts, allowing the audience to experience it in real time. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance (Phelan, 1993, p. 146). Once such a practice begins, improvisation, one of the essential characteristics of theatre, would cease to exist. There is a risk that such a form of theatre may ultimately evolve into yet another superficial or cinematic entity.

5. CONCLUSION

Ideally, any technology should not replace performance but reframe it, negotiating between traditional dramaturgy and contemporary modes of representation. Integrating digital technology into theatre has revitalised theatrical possibilities through interactivity and multimodality, while also introducing new forms of interaction, such as psychological, spatial, and relational. It has also opened the possibility of distributing theatres on screens through broadcast or online platforms. However, the concern arises when such technologies seek to replace humans as the centre of artistic activity. The extensive use of digital tools will promote artificiality, whereas online platforms will emerge, thus distorting theatrical space. Technological interventions in Indian theatre emerged from either playwrights' conscious artistic choices or the specific demands of the plays themselves. A digital screen is a paramount requirement in Indian plays, enabling the display of slides, images, and videos. Additionally, digital technologies can be employed to stage scenes that could not be staged as effectively otherwise. Whatever audience Indian theatre attracts depends on its ability to remain authentic and preserve its natural flavour. Indeed, there is a need to renovate the theatre to meet the tastes of the modern age and audience; however, a proper framework is required. Only enacting plays with a multitude of digitally advanced techniques and relocating theatres to screens would not serve the purpose. It should also involve identifying socio-cultural contexts, geographical spaces, and audiences, as well as educating playwrights on integrating digital interfaces into theatre. The digital transformation should, as demanded by the play or playwright, be used to enact a scene that cannot be represented any other way. Additionally, it can be used to explore innovative approaches that enhance the audience's visual reception in a true sense, without compromising on the essence of the play or disrupting the theatre as a space.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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