Technology & Performer Training (Online) Hosted by University of South Wales May 18th, 2020

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Events Review

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While the Technology and Performer Training event was arranged before the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequential lockdown for a large proportion of the globe, the subject of the event, and the context in which it was delivered (virtually), brings questions relating to our relationship to technology into view in a very tangible way.

The Technology and Performer Training (Online) event hosted by the University of South Wales, which took place on the 18th May 2020, was born out of the collaboration between the Theatre and Performance Research Association's (TaPRA) working groups 'Performance and New Technologies' and 'Performer Training'. The collaboration manifested in a joint session, at TaPRA's 2018 annual conference hosted by Aberystwyth University, 'addressing performer training in relation to digital/networked technologies' (TaPRA 2018). Three of the contributors to that session, Maria Kapsali, Christina Papagiannouli, and Sarah Crews (in absentia) have come together in an event expanding on some important themes around technology and performer training.

Papagiannouli presented the co-authored paper (with Crews): 'InstaStan – FaceBrook – Brecht+: a Performer Training Methodology for the Age of the Internet'. This presentation explored and extended the ideas from their 2019 published article of the same name in the *Theatre, Dance, and Performance Training* journal (Crews and Papagiannouli 2019). Papagiannouli points out that these pedagogic methodologies and ideas could be remodelled for a post-COVID-19 world via online platforms, despite being formulated pre-pandemic.

At the heart of this presentation is the notion that the contemporary performer training field runs alongside, intersects, and interacts with new technologies and online platforms and there are useful methodologies that can be garnered from those relationships for the purposes of performer training pedagogies. Papagiannouli and Crews' case study for this was their work with second-year BA (Hons) Performance and Media students at the University of South Wales, where they explored how different artists and companies have embraced new technologies as platforms for live performance, before embarking on experiments utilising technology in their practice. The genres of digital performance, cyberformance, telematic performance, and networked performance, were examined through three pedagogical devices utilised within the authors' teaching practice including a) Brecht+: (cyber)-documentation and (cyber)-feedback; b) FaceBrook: (cyber)-collaboration and the empty (cyber)-space; and c) InstaStan: building and exploring characters online.

What Papagiannouli and Crews have established here is a conceptual framework for a performer training pedagogy that is not just reflective of practitioners that can be borrowed from in terms of training the performer, but something that is immediately contemporary. Simultaneously, they set up a dialogue with established practice while

creating a methodological platform that can be responsive to change, and developed to the will of many other forms of performer training. This is urgent work in its potential in dealing with questions of how performers learn to navigate relationships between themselves and new digital realms of performance, both in terms of practice and philosophical underpinnings.

A key voice within technology/digital/performer training discourse is Maria Kapsali, the guest speaker to this event. Kapsali's paper at the Technology and Performer Training event is based on ideas from her forthcoming monograph 'Performer Training and Technology: Preparing Our Selves (Kapsali, forthcoming in October 2020). With her presentation, Kapsali opens up the conversation to the theme of philosophy. Within her introduction, she spoke about how she utilises the field of philosophy of technology to bring 'certain tools, certain theories as lenses that allow us to understand performer training, but also to see how performer training may be a site, or a space, or a praxis for enabling us to respond and negotiate our relationships with technology'. Kapsali shared a picture of performer training in practice, to unpick a 'moment of transmission of embodied knowledge, […] we can assume will later enable [the trainees present] to perform'. Kapsali analysed this picture as a catalyst to help us to understand how performer training can be useful in understanding the relationships between human and non-human entities.

Early in her presentation, Kapsali invited the virtual audience to take part in an activity to think about the modes of technology that were in sight via a picture she shared, by looking around the spaces the audience members found themselves in at the time, or thinking about technologies they engage within their own practice. She asked us to consider 'whether you use any of these technologies in ways other than the prescribed or established ones'. Apart from being quite an engaging activity, it was an illuminating experience in that we were invited to think about technologies beyond their original functionality. My experience included thinking about the

physical space that technologies take up and how this may disrupt or enhance the training space. I thought about the air conditioning duct within the studio I teach carrying songs from a neighbouring music room, while I try to negotiate breathing exercises with my students.

This activity and the wider presentation was extremely accessible in terms of its relatability to the listener and because of the experiment we were invited to engage with, the philosophical discussion that followed was within our grasp as we now had our own immediate terms of reference. As such, this work would be as useful for trainees developing their performance practice as much as it is for trainers reflecting on their own pedagogies.

Both papers presented complemented each other well; the former showed us an example of practise that embraced and explored technology in the context of performer training with a nod to philosophical underpinnings, and the latter brought the philosophy of technology to the fore with theory and practice in mind.

The event as a whole was particularly helpful to those in the audience that are performer trainers and that teach on performance-related courses, who want to engage and utilise the training possibilities that technology and digitality can offer. It also engaged in worthwhile theoretical and philosophical discussions relating to technology and performer training, particularly in the context of the 'i' generation. Participants of the event, and those that engage with the content thereafter, will no doubt be looking forward to Kapsali's aforementioned publication, where they will be able to return to the themes raised at this event in finer detail, much like they can with Papagiannouli and Crews' 2019 article within the 'Digital Training' issue within this journal.

References

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