

# Interactivity and togetherness in digital theatre

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Theatre has continuously reimagined itself  
with «the tools» of its own time.<sup>1</sup>  
Shannon Jackson

Every epoch accepts certain performative  
actions as theatrical, whereas others are  
excluded from the realm of «theatre».<sup>2</sup>  
Wilmar Sauter

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Norway in March 2020, the performing arts faced challenges few could have imagined. Some theatres sent staff home while others explored alternative ways of engaging with their audiences. Production circumstances changed overnight, and theatre institutions and theatre companies responded as best they

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1 Jackson & Weems 2015: 2.

2 Sauter 2008: 72.

could. The number of conventional productions decreased, but some companies and theatres soon adapted to the new conditions and used digital technologies in new, creative ways. Consequently, audience experience was moved from the usual theatre spaces to other locations, such as private homes. The pandemic became a sudden new production context for Norwegian theatre, requiring that theatres use their knowledge and technologies in new ways.

Examples of such experiments started appearing mere weeks after the pandemic reached Norway. In March, Haugesund Teater (Haugesund Theatre) created a digital video version of their production *Blindness* by José Saramago.<sup>3</sup> The show was recorded from actors' homes and recordings were edited into six YouTube episodes released weekly. In April, Rogaland Teater (Rogaland Theatre) produced *Scener fra et ekteskap* (*Scenes From a Marriage*) by Ingmar Bergman, directed for the theatre by Kjersti Horn.<sup>4</sup> It was performed on the theatre stage by two actors without a live audience, but streamed live on Facebook, reaching an audience of 1600 people in one performance alone. In May, Tromsø's Performing Arts Festival – Vårscenefest (Spring Scene Festival) – rebranded itself into Vårskjermfest (Spring Screen Festival) and asked artists to adapt their performances to be shown on online platforms rather than physically in a room.<sup>5</sup> This curatorial twist resulted in a variety of experiments where audiences could not only watch from home but also interact with the performances.<sup>6</sup> Around the same time, Det Andre Teatret (The Other Theatre) started a digital improvisation series streamed on Facebook, YouTube and Whereby, offering spectators a way to participate in the shows similar to how they could participate in live improv.<sup>7</sup> In May–June, Kilden teater og konserthus (Kilden Theatre and Concert House) moved the street

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3 August 2020.

4 Horn 2020.

5 Vårscenefest 2020.

6 Intakt 2020; Næss 2020.

7 Det Andre Teatret 2020.

performance *Culpa!* written by Taro Vestøl Cooper and directed by Mine Nilay Yalcin to the theatre stage and streamed it live on YouTube.<sup>8</sup> By using a 360-degree camera and integrating interactive strategies, *Culpa!* received extensive media attention and was deemed by critics to suggest the contours of a new type of theatre experience to come.<sup>9</sup> These are just some examples of initiatives emerging from the professional theatre scene in Norway during the pandemic's first months.

For this article, we have chosen to focus on one exemplary case, *Culpa!*, because of how it used and combined different interactive strategies that connect with the digital performance tradition (which started long before the pandemic and is independent of it). By analysing *Culpa!* as part of this tradition, we will show that it used interactive strategies common in the history of digital performance, only now in a new context and perhaps in new ways. We argue that *Culpa!* represents innovation in the current field of digital performance as well as continuation of established traditions in it.

Our method is performance analysis with the theatrical event as focal point.<sup>10</sup> We are inspired by Michael Eigtved, who proposes that performance analysis must depart from one's personal experience of the performance and its context.<sup>11</sup> The analysis is limited to aspects related to the digital strategies of the performance and how they created meaning and audience engagement. *Culpa!* was shown twice as a publicly accessible live stream and then toured eight times, as a live stream for secondary schools only with Den kulturelle skolesekken (The Cultural Schoolbag). The material we analysed is the live-streamed performance for a general public on 6 June 2020, a video recorded version Kilden provided to us, and the performance's manuscript. We also include insights provided by the director Mine

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8 Cooper & Nilay Yalcin 2020.

9 Berg 2020b; Erichsen 2020a, 2020b; Grimstad 2020; Ribe 2020.

10 Sauter 2008: 4–14.

11 Eigtved 2007.

Nilay Yalcin in an interview on 9 March 2021. Finally, we examined mass media materials about the performance, such as online debates, interviews, radio programmes and newspaper reviews.

What constitutes theatre today? What elements must exist for a performance to be considered theatre and not something else – a film, a game, an app? We address the ways in which digital media challenge the common understanding of the established positions of actor and spectator, giving insight to what is gained and what is lost, as artists use «the tools of our time».<sup>12</sup>

We start by presenting the common notion of theatre, performance and theatrical event as consisting of four vectors: the performer (you), the spectator (me), shared space (here) and same time (now). We then show how these positions have been challenged and discussed historically, using theoretical sources from the emerging field of digital performance. Through a thematic analysis and an examination of its interactive functions, we argue that *Culpa!* is an example of *media-turgy*, because it uses strategies to interrogate media and create a performance with a new kind of estrangement effect, a performance that employs interactive technology while simultaneously criticizing it. Combining digital strategies to create audience engagement, *Culpa!* promotes an active spectator position and simultaneously creates a sense of togetherness.

## Theoretical framework

In 1965 theatre critic and scholar Eric Bentley famously stated that «the theatrical situation, reduced to a minimum, is that A impersonates B while C looks on».<sup>13</sup> He asserts that the co-presence of actors and spectators engaging in a fictional representation constitutes theatre.

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12 Jackson & Weems 2015: 2.

13 Bentley 1965: 150.

German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte defined performance as «the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators generating a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop».<sup>14</sup> Created to describe a particular kind of performance arts practice from the 1970s, Fischer-Lichte's definition emphasizes the liveness of theatre as an intimate co-presence of here and now with lesser or no emphasis on representation. This definition is in line with Wilmar Sauter's definition of the theatrical event as «the interaction between performer(s) and spectator(s), during a given time, in a specific place, and under certain circumstances».<sup>15</sup> Sauter's definition aims, however, to expand the understanding of theatre from an intimate exchange between actors and spectators to encompass the heterogeneous circumstances under which the event takes place, and it introduces concepts such as *eventness* and *playing culture*. Bentley's, Fischer-Lichte's, and Sauter's definitions of theatre differ slightly. They emphasize different things: Bentley emphasizes the as-if of theatre, Fischer-Lichte emphasizes the quality of presence, and Sauter emphasizes the event's situated circumstances. Theatre scholar Christopher Balme sums up these differences in his definition that brings performers and spectators together under the same umbrella. He defines theatre as «performers and spectators exchanging libidinal energies in a *communitas* of the here and the now».<sup>16</sup> When we put these four definitions together and compare them, we see that they all agree on the four vectors: the performer, the spectator, shared space and same time. In other words, whether the definitions speak about theatre, performance, or event, theatre is something that happens between you and me, here and now.

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14 Fischer-Lichte 2008: 38.

15 Sauter: 2008: 20.

16 Balme 2014: 174.

## Challenging the four vectors of theatre: you, me, here, and now

We build our theoretical framework from an overview of the current field of digital performance. The current field enhances new practices along with new ways of thinking around what theatre and performance may be now and in the future. This field of arts' practice evolved during the 1960s and 1970s, with historical roots in the theatre and technology experiments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a field of scholarly research, it has risen internationally since the 1990s, producing new insights that try to come to terms with a vast landscape of digital performative practices that proliferate as rapidly as new technologies appear and disappear. The body of literature produced is vast and varied. It aims to come to terms with wildly different practices that use different technologies, and simultaneously aims to understand them as parts of the same overarching field. Concepts such as digital performance, intermedial theatre, virtual theatre, mixed reality, telematic performance, multimedia performance, pervasive theatre, and new media theatre and performance are attempts at theorizing these practices.<sup>17</sup>

The field of digital performance might seem hard to classify, but there is a growing consensus that theatrical performances are possible even if some vectors deemed essential are missing. This is because one can devise media strategies to cover, figuratively speaking, for the missing vectors. Regarding theatre during the pandemic, it became particularly important to find ways to bridge the spatial distance between actors and spectators since they were not allowed to meet, and to create a sense of liveness even if physical proximity was impossible. It became necessary to watch theatre without being in the same physical space as the performers and therefore crucial for practitioners

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17 Dixon 2007; Chapple & Kattenbelt 2006; Crossley 2019; Giannachi 2004; Benford & Giannachi 2011; Kozel 2007; Ascott & Shanken 2003; Klich & Scheer 2012; Pérez 2016; Eckershall mfl. 2017.

and scholars alike to understand what kind of digital strategies can be used to negotiate audience relationship and still understand the event as theatre and not as a film or other kind of product.

American performance and music theorist Philip Auslander was the first to examine how using digital media – specifically in musical performance – has changed the understanding of *liveness*.<sup>18</sup> The concept of liveness is used to describe an experience in the moment, something that happens when there is physical co-presence of performers and audience, and temporal simultaneity of production and reception.<sup>19</sup> Auslander claims that liveness can be created even though the performer may only be digitally mediated (for instance, projected onto a screen onstage), rather than physically present because, in his view, every element of performance is always already mediated. Auslander argues that the perceived opposition between live and digitally mediated performance is a cultural construct because any live performance is already mediated in ways, we have become accustomed to and forgotten about. An example is the use of microphones in live performance, and the now common practice to augment actors' voices, without threatening the performance's liveness.<sup>20</sup> So, projecting actors' images onstage and augmenting their voices are two of the many ways in which live performers can be substituted through a combination of media.

German theatre scholar Christopher Balme argues that there can be theatrical performance without live spectators because the audience can engage with the work in a distributed manner.<sup>21</sup> Balme examines the audience's changing role in the internet age. He studies hybrid theatre forms that mix audiences at physical sites, where there are performative actions on online platforms, with audiences of online users. He has conceptualized this kind of work as «distributed

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18 Auslander 2008.

19 Auslander 2008: 61.

20 Auslander 2008.

21 Balme 2014.

theatrical aesthetics», as theatre that connects multiple and distributed locations thanks to broadcasting media and internet platforms.<sup>22</sup>

Seeing the potential that the internet brings to theatre, Balme advocates expanding the concept of audience to incorporate new ways of engagement with a theatrical performance that do not imply physical co-presence. He suggests that we should think of the audience as a community of users both online and offline,<sup>23</sup> and that it might not be necessary to have an onsite audience if one can offer different forms of spectatorship through interactivity. An example of such interactivity in a Norwegian context would be the improvisation shows created by Det Andre Teatret during the spring of 2020 for online spectators only, who could choose between just watching the show on YouTube or participating in it by connecting to a video chat.<sup>24</sup>

Sharing time and space in a theatre performance depends more on action than on bodily presence, according to scholars Gabrielle Giannachi and Katherine Hayles. Giannachi explains that in online environments it is rare to experience moments of synchronous co-presence between actors and spectators. It is more common for spectators to find themselves alone in the online platform, having to explore the qualities and significance of the online environments on their own, without a performer's guidance. She suggests that it is the spectator's possibility to choose or *do* that matters, and not physical co-presence. This argument has also been made by Katherine Hayles discussing so-called *telematic performance*. She emphasizes the environment's capacity to respond to spectators' actions and argues that it is the possibility for the spectator to carry out an action, supported by the online environment, that creates a sense of togetherness rather than physical proximity in space and time.<sup>25</sup>

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22 Balme 2014: 174.

23 Balme 2014: 177.

24 Hagen 2021.

25 Hayles 2007.



## Interactivity

In 1962, Marshall McLuhan introduced the idea that «interfaces mean interaction».<sup>26</sup> Since then, numerous definitions of interactivity that use interfaces have been developed by academics and artists working in different fields to describe the mode of communication between a user and a system. Independently from interfaces and technological devices, theatre has its own history of interactivity with a focus on the dynamic relationship between actors and spectators. Interactive theatre practices encompass the Futurist experiments in the early twentieth century, inviting their audiences into participation in their *Serate Futuriste*, and the American experiments of the 1960s with the Happening and Fluxus movements. Strategies for activating theatre audiences have equally been an essential part of the rise of improvisational and educational theatre, and, more recently, the so-called participatory turn.<sup>27</sup> These all represent milestones in the history of theatre that challenge the relationship between actor and spectator, suggesting that boundaries between performers and spectators are malleable and reversible. Equally, the ideas of audience agency and non-hierarchical ways of audience participation have been aspects of the development of theatre history during the twentieth and well into the twenty-first century, with and without technology.

For our case study, we found Steve Dixon's four categories of interactivity useful: navigation, participation, conversation, and collaboration.<sup>28</sup> These categories are relevant because they help us understand the variety of interactive strategies at work in *Culpa!* and how they are combined. They highlight the potential for a myriad of interactive strategies within one particular performance. Navigation refers to the «simplest» form of interactivity whereby audiences use remote

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26 McLuhan in Dixon 2007: 560.

27 Berg 2020a; Berghaus 2005a, 2005b.

28 Dixon 2007: 563–598.

controls, telephones, or computers to steer direction in a space,<sup>29</sup> while participation is a form of interaction whereby the audience is asked to join in, making decisions such as voting.<sup>30</sup> Dixon argues that these two forms of interactivity can offer the spectator an energetic sense of engagement, even if there may be little impact on the narrative action of the performance, which stays more or less fixed, unaffected by the spectator's actions.<sup>31</sup> The third form of interactivity, conversation, requires a form of dialogue with or through an artwork – «a dialogue that is reciprocated and subject to real interchange and exchange».<sup>32</sup> Finally, through collaboration, the audience can alter the work significantly, becoming a co-author of the performance. For Dixon, play is an important element of interactivity, but instead of defining it as a fifth category, he understands interaction as playful in different ways and intensities across the four forms.

## ***Culpa!*: presentation of the case study**

*Culpa!* is a play written by slam poet Taro Vestøl Cooper based on an idea from stage director Mine Nilay Yalcin.<sup>33</sup> With Norwegian writer Jens Bjørneboe's (1920–1976) poem «Mea Maxima Culpa» from 1976 as a starting point, Vestøl Cooper and Nilay Yalcin developed the play text through workshops with young people from Kristiansand and surrounding areas. Bjørneboe was born and raised in Kristiansand. The performance was one of Kilden's contributions to the Bjørneboe centennial in 2020. Bjørneboe's poem addresses themes such as guilt, indignation, and how to cope with living in a hard-hearted world full of denial, injustice, and pain. Nilay Yalcin and Vestøl Cooper's version

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29 Dixon 2007: 566.

30 Dixon 2007: 579.

31 Dixon 2007: 581.

32 Dixon 2007: 584.

33 Full title in Norwegian: *Culpa! i unntakstilstand*.

adds new levels of meaning by connecting Bjørneboe's poem to the pervasiveness of social media in everyday life and consumer society.<sup>34</sup> *Culpa!* touches on topics such as the climate crisis, isolation, the tyranny of beauty, racism, and displacement. It interrogates whether social media can create meaningful engagement around serious issues and complex challenges of society. The performance questions and explores whether it is possible at all for social media to be more than a site for superficial exchange and consumerism.

*Culpa!* was originally planned as an outdoor street theatre performance for young audiences. The idea was to address the youth directly in places they normally inhabit: the schoolyard, the youth club, the parks, and neighbourhoods where they hang out.<sup>35</sup> Due to the pandemic, the staging was moved from the street to an online platform. It went from being a site-specific, outdoor performance to a digital theatre performance, streamed on YouTube, and lasting only twenty minutes.

The performance took place in an empty black box with four actors moving around a 360-degree camera placed in the middle of the box. The camera's eye was at the same height as the actors' eyes – so that they could address the camera as if it were a person. The 360-degree camera captured everything in the black box where it was located. The audience could attend from anywhere with their smart phones, tablets, or computers, or using VR glasses to get a three-dimensional effect. They could use the controls of their devices to navigate the performance space and decide where to locate themselves digitally and where to look from. An online chat function provided an opportunity for those who wished to make comments during the performance, even if they could not be answered by the actors, who were busy performing. Shortly after the performance, the actors took an iPad each, located themselves in front of the camera, and responded live to the comments

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34 Cooper & Nilay Yalcin 2020.

35 Kilden teater og konserthus 2020a.



➤ Picture 1 The performance *Culpa!* was filmed with a 360-degree camera placed in the middle of the black box with actors moving around it.

that had been posted in the chat and that continued to be posted during this post-performance event.

This alternative way of staging the play – in a black box without a physical audience and streamed online and recorded – was integrated in the overall artistic concept. Even though it was initially used as an emergency solution – hence the extended title from *Culpa!* to *Culpa! I unntakstilstand!* (*Culpa! In a State of Emergency*) – the ensemble had sufficient time and resources to work with the new concept, creating a different performance than originally planned.<sup>36</sup>

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36 Kilden teater og konserthus 2020a.

## Thematic analysis

As mentioned, *Culpa!* touches on themes such as the climate crisis, isolation, the tyranny of beauty, racism, and displacement. Each of these themes is brought forward by an actor in the form of a monologue delivered to the camera. We will not discuss each of these themes separately but will instead focus on the overarching theme of the pervasiveness of social media in everyday life and consumer society. As we see it, *Culpa!* interrogates social media while laying bare strategies used by social media to suppress or silence public discussions of these themes.

One main theme refers to how social media may lead users to feel overstimulated. To explore this kind of overwhelming experience, *Culpa!* creates a fast-paced rhythm overloaded with disruptions and distractions. Performers seemingly compete to gain our attention as spectators. The performance, as we analyse it, critiques how our society today is dominated by market politics and consumerism, and how this dominance is reflected and augmented online.

The performance starts at a brisk pace. Actors agitatedly address the camera, speaking in sharp rhythms and phrasings, much like a musical score mixing rap, slam poetry, and spoken words. The four actors' movements are also sharp and fast paced. The choreography thereby mirrors the text, resulting in a vigorous acting style typical of contemporary physical theatre practices. On the script's first page, Vestøl Cooper writes that the text is to be spoken fast and rhythmically – increasing in tempo and volume – with contrasts between silence and explosion in the presentation. He continues, « [t]he performance moves forward like a *locomotive* – does not stop until the end».<sup>37</sup> The stage direction conveys this notion of a forceful machinery by juxtaposing the serious messages that the actors are trying to convey and the distractions of the commercials and social media signs. The director,

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37 Cooper 2020: 1. Our translation and emphasis.

Nilay Yalcin, confirms it was part of the artistic intention «to create an atmosphere where the actors are trying desperately to express themselves while drowning in a jungle of emojis and likes».<sup>38</sup> The actors are interrupting each other. For instance, at one point an actor speaks vehemently about the need for equality and says, «Vi er alle like» – «We are all equal». Then another actor steals his words and screams, «like, like, like», shifting the serious context to a superficial one with this frivolous response.

Another way the actors interrupt each other is by reading aloud texts from commercials of yoga retreats or resorts with appeals for relaxation and mindfulness. These commercials snub – though in a «soothing» way – the actors' efforts to express themselves and to argue for what they believe in by telling them and the spectators – literally – to relax by buying and consuming. The commercial interruptions stop the flow of what the actors are trying to communicate, reminding us of real life today, also dominated by zapping, scrolling, and trying to keep up with multiple stories simultaneously. With this reminder, *Culpa!* reinforces the connection between media's rhythm of overload and market politics and consumerism. The actors are constantly hindered as characters in their attempts to communicate with the audience. Serious issues drown amongst ludic and commercial ones, as if being pushed away by a marketing system that invades the space, thereby taking that space away from the actors and what they are trying to communicate. As we understand it, *Culpa!* conveys a commentary on current reality dominated, in many parts of the world, by an overload of social media and online activity. It is not that social media has become all white noise, random talk without meaningful content, but rather that it has become a system that excludes voices not aligned with consumerism.<sup>39</sup> Themes critical of consumer society are thus silenced and swiped away.

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38 Kilden teater og konserthus 2020b.

39 Delillo: 1985.



➤ **Picture 2** An actor addressing the camera while performing a monologue addressing the refugee crisis. The image shows the audience perspective through the camera.

The next theme that emerges from the staging of the performance is how social media leads to volatility and a struggle for attention. This theme emerges in the way the swipe is used as metaphor and performance strategy. The performers alternate between two actions – one of trying to express oneself and be heard, and the other of trying to deal with constantly being pushed away. The alternation between these actions is signalled through a cue, «swipe», that is uttered by the actor interrupting. One of the current definitions of the verb «to swipe» by *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* is «to move your finger quickly across the screen of an electronic device such as a mobile phone or small computer to move text, pictures, etc. or give commands».<sup>40</sup> In the context

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40 Swipe u.å.

of *Culpa!*, the swipe becomes a metaphor for how context and people are left behind, made redundant and swiped away. While one actor is talking to the camera, another in the background says, «Swipe». This is the cue for all four actors to react by making a short, choreographed movement sequence that serves as a transitional moment where they all rotate clockwise around the camera and to the background, and crouch with their eyes looking towards the floor. Then, a new actor steps to the front and starts her monologue, speaking right to the camera's eye, and so she continues until she is interrupted again by a swipe cue and must rotate to the background and crouch. In this way, the swipe is also staged intentionally as a strategy, used consistently throughout the performance to send the actors to the background and again to the foreground. In some cases, we see facial expressions of disappointment and desperation by the actors when they are swiped away, which makes visible how hurtful it may be to lose the opportunity to speak up and be heard. The performance conveys that the swipe action affects real human beings. It is a mechanical gesture with emotional consequences for people. Thereby, *Culpa!* transmits some of the complexity of its own staging – partly brutally efficient and partly sensitive to normal human responses. The performance therefore stands out as a commentary on how it has become normal for people to scroll down on their mobile phones as an almost pastime activity, and swipe from post to post without being fully attentive to and aware of the content. In *Culpa!* the swipe becomes a metaphor for this kind of recognisable form of volatile attention that echoes contemporary rhythms brought about by the internet and social media.

## **Interactivity I: embedding themes into the navigation function and streaming platform**

The themes we discussed above, such as overstimulation, volatility and the struggle for attention, are emphasized in the performance through



the dramaturgy, choreography, and spoken words. Furthermore, they are also embedded in the navigation function. That is, the themes are echoed in the way the spectator uses the controls to watch the performance.

As a spectator on any device, one must use controls to navigate the performance space. When watching *Culpa!* on a computer, one must move the mouse to navigate the screen. When watching on a touch screen phone or tablet, one can navigate by moving one's fingers on the screen. Spectators must continuously use the controls to change angles and reposition themselves on the screen. The actors move and change places at a fast pace, forcing spectators also to reposition themselves digitally to be able to see the actor and listen to what she is saying. Because this repositioning happens quite often, the swipe creates a pattern where it is difficult for spectators to orient themselves in the black box where the performance occurs. One must move the controls to find a place of calmness where it is possible to watch and listen from, while simultaneously having to deal with distractions that make concentrating difficult. The actor, on the other hand, is trying to perform and speak up, but is also being interrupted, so she is forced to constantly reposition herself physically while simultaneously trying to stay calm to deliver her message. Thus, the spectators' and actors' situations of overstimulation simulate and mirror each other. Both spectators and actors are «trapped» in a dynamic machinery they cannot fully control.

The mirroring of the performance's theme of overstimulation in the interactive strategy of navigation contributes to create a stressful atmosphere because the theme is so effectively embedded in it. This way of embedding the theme in the interactive strategy resonates with the term *mediaturgy*, introduced by Marianne Weems, artistic director of the American theatre company The Builders Association. She uses mediaturgy to describe their working method, which consists of an interweaving of design and dramaturgy. In each production,

media design is both the material and the metaphor.<sup>41</sup> *Culpa!* echoes the concept of mediaturgy by using social media as both tool and topic. Shannon Jackson argues that it has become characteristic of The Builders Association's work to stage media while simultaneously interrogating it.<sup>42</sup> *Culpa!* does something similar in that it uses the very same media it is criticizing. Spectators must swipe on the phone/tablet screen to change location, while the swiping is heavily exposed on stage. The choice of streaming platform also follows the logic of inviting spectators to use the same tools being interrogated onstage. *Culpa!* was streamed on YouTube, an online platform known for embedding commercials in content. *Culpa!* appropriates this strategy of intertwining advertising and regular content, creating a potential ambivalence for spectators when reflecting on their own relationship with these kinds of media and calculating schemes. By exposing YouTube's strategy, the performance invites spectators to reflect critically about their participation and use of the platform.

Using media while simultaneously interrogating it has become a common strategy in contemporary art works at the intersection of art and technology. Shannon Jackson argues that using this strategy in, for example, the work of The Builders Association, connects to a history of theatre that has been concerned with the role of theatre in its social and political contexts. She suggests that «Bertolt Brecht exhorted theatre makers to critique the political apparatus of society by deploying techniques that exposed the apparatus of theatre itself».<sup>43</sup> By attempting to make their own technological dependency visible, Jackson argues that «The Builders Association connects to Brecht's exhortation for a different contemporary moment of history».<sup>44</sup> The Builders Association and *Culpa!* have found similar ways to maintain a

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41 Jackson & Weems 2015: 384.

42 Jackson & Weems, 2015: xiii.

43 Jackson & Weems 2015: 9.

44 Jackson & Weems 2015: 9.

critical distance from media by making technological dependency visible and available for critique. The crucial difference is that *Culpa!* does so by implementing interactive strategies. The result is that spectators are invited to use the very same media tactics that are simultaneously being interrogated onstage. In this way, the performance points to the spectators' participation in and responsibility for creating this social media mess we find ourselves in. They (we) are part of it – literally – it is in their (our) hands.

Using digital interactive tools to make technological dependence visible is a new type of estrangement effect that actualizes Brechtian aims of achieving critical distance and political awareness within theatre. Dixon claims that the navigation function can achieve a productive engagement in the spectator, even if navigation is the form of interactivity where users have the least creative freedom.<sup>45</sup> As we have seen, *Culpa!* proves this point and takes it further by embedding the performance theme directly into how the interactivity and audience relationship are set up. By extension, the performance offers an innovative exploration of interactive navigation for theatre and performance practices, by demonstrating its potential as a reflective and critical tool when used with artistic intention, as here.

## Interactivity II: creating forms for conversation and collaboration through the chat

In this section we will discuss the chat function, what kind of interactivity it creates and how it connects to the performance theme. Steve Dixon's third category of interactivity is conversation, which he defines as a form of dialogue with or through an artwork between the participants.<sup>46</sup> In *Culpa!*, the organizers set up a chat room in the YouTube

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45 Dixon 2007: 566.

46 Dixon 2007: 584.

stream for the audience to communicate with the actors. The chat was the only way to establish direct contact between actors and spectators. Even though it was primarily used after the performance was over, we see the chat room as an integral part of the performance and not just an extra feature because of how it was the only way to make direct contact in synchronous time.

During the live performance of *Culpa!* the chat was set up for spectators to leave comments about and reactions to actions happening on stage, as a one-way feedback feature. Spectators wrote a variety of messages, ranging from comments, cheers, likes, and thumbs up that the actors could not see, since they did not have a screen to view these messages while performing. Once the live performance was over, actors informed the audience they would leave the room to pick up an iPad each, return to the black box with it and in front of the camera, would read and respond to comments by improvising live to the camera. Typical comments from spectators were questions about the different actors' backgrounds, both cultural and professional, questions about the process and questions about the technology and how it worked. This form of conversation is an unusual way of making communication work in theatre. It is however also symptomatic for this particular time in history with COVID-19, where speakers and the general public were and still are, in 2022, becoming increasingly used to answering questions posed in the chat function during Zoom meetings.

The use of the chat function in *Culpa!* echoes the social, informal exchange that sometimes takes place in the theatre's foyer after a performance. In general, the post-performance exchanges on the chat can be understood as simple forms of interactive conversation, while audience responses during the performance (in the form of comments, cheer ups, etc.) can better be understood as a form of interactive participation. During the performances of *Culpa!* in real time, spectators could join in by posting comments and emojis and thereby their participation was also visible for the other spectators. In this way, *Culpa!* is truly an example of distributed theatrical aesthetics, a hybrid

performance where actors are gathered in a physical theatre and spectators are participating online and can communicate through the chat function, set up to allow space for different interactive possibilities.<sup>47</sup>

## Digital heckling

According to the director of *Culpa!*, Nilay Yalcin, most of the comments and conversations in the chat were positive and full of encouragement for the actors and production team. However, some comments were rude and counterproductive. Sometimes they were critical of the performance's content and form. Examples of hate speech directed to the actor with darker skin and a different cultural background occurred. After a few performances, a moderator was introduced to re-direct the conversation in case it went awry and to stop harassment by deleting hurtful comments. This action, which limited spectators' possibility to express themselves, made them find other ways to express their criticism of the show. For example, some spectators discovered that YouTube has created a procedure that allows users to report or flag context they find inappropriate.<sup>48</sup> The process consists of clicking on the three-dot menu icon, and then on «Report» below the player of the video that one wants to report and selecting the reason that best fits the violation in the video. Reports are anonymous, so other users cannot tell who made the report. According to information published on the YouTube platform, reported videos are reviewed by their staff – a combination of human reviewers and machine-learning algorithms – who decide whether the video will be removed.<sup>49</sup> In the case of *Culpa!*, one or several spectators reported the performance in such a manner that the streaming was stopped in the middle of the performance on

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47 Balme 2014: 174–202.

48 YouTube 2022a.

49 YouTube 2022b.

two occasions. The consequence of the reporting, together with hate speech, weighed heavily on the crew, and after the eighth performance, it was decided to close the chat function completely to ensure the safety of the actors.<sup>50</sup>

This kind of inappropriate online behaviour is perhaps related to the anonymity that social media allows, where one can interact anonymously or from behind a fake profile without having to respect social conventions, because there are no consequences for these actions. In digital performance, mischievous audience inputs in the chat have unfortunately happened before, and the anonymity that the chat allows has been pointed out as an important factor leading to this behaviour.<sup>51</sup> By setting up the chat as an interactive strategy, the production team had similar experiences to those many actors have had to deal with when inviting audiences to interact. Dixon suggests that this kind of behaviour may happen because «[t]he normal hierarchy privileging the actors over the audience is no longer apparent, and it is in many ways reversed and power and status relations are renegotiated».<sup>52</sup>

Nilay Yalcin explains that the hate speech, even if extremely difficult to tackle by the crew, was an indication that the performance was touching the right nerves.<sup>53</sup> Because one of the monologues in *Culpa!* is about racism, the hate speech could be understood as a response to the performance's take on racism. Concerning interactivity, the hate speech can be understood as a form of conversation, where there is an exchange between participants, even if we see it as an unfortunate conversation. We can even argue that the hate speech and what it provoked – the inclusion of a moderator, the shutting down of the performance twice by some spectators, and finally the closing of the

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50 Source: Mine Nilay Yalcin, interview, oral communication, March 9, 2021.

51 See the case of the *Chameleons 3. Net Congestion*, by Steve Dixon, and *The Ethno-Cyberpunk Trading Post & Curio Shop on the Electronic Frontier*, by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes, in Dixon 2007: 502–510.

52 Dixon 2007: 508.

53 Source: Mine Nilay Yalcin, interview, oral communication, March 9, 2021.

chat – can be understood as a form of collaboration in line with Dixon’s definition.<sup>54</sup>

The decision to close the chat can also be seen through the lens of the concept of mediaturgy, where media is both a tool and a topic. The chat function and the anonymity it allows led to harassment and toxic communication, which were also themes addressed critically in the performance. Though the harassment and toxic communication served a negative purpose and constituted a negative experience for the actors, there might be ways of turning things around so that the chat can be a site for constructive exchanges between actors and spectators. Nilay Yalcin told us she would like to address interaction in the chat next time she works with a digital theatre project. Perhaps a place to start would be by looking into so-called heckling in live theatre and performance, well known from, for example, stand-up comedy, and how it is addressed in these contexts.<sup>55</sup> Heckling refers to interruptions by spectators, often with loud voices that in an unwanted way draw attention away from what performers do onstage. To avoid these kinds of interruptions, performers must have clear strategies for how to establish and maintain a good connection with the audience. Comedians and performers used to interact with spectators, be they children, youths, or adults, must learn to deal with potentially negative attempts to interfere with their act and must learn to use audience responses to serve the show as best they can. In the case of *Culpa!* the hate speech surprised the actors and made them uncomfortable. In the future, it will be interesting to know what Nilay Yalcin and other artists learn about dealing with «chat heckling» in digital performance and theatre. We think that the ways live heckling can be stopped, turned around and even integrated skilfully into a live performance can be used in digital theatre, too. It seems that the abrupt challenge of COVID-19 for theatre artists and companies worldwide has revealed and accelerated the

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54 Dixon 2007: 584.

55 Kadar & Robinson 2016.

need for developing further interactive strategies for digital theatre and performance.

## The new you, me, here and now

In this last section, we reconnect our analysis to its theoretical frame, namely how the four vectors of theatre – you, me, here, and now – are challenged and reconfigured by using digital media. We look particularly at how using digital interactive strategies in *Culpa!* created a sense of togetherness. The impossibility of establishing a shared space (here) forced a distance between actors and spectators not only in *Culpa!* but also in most performances during the pandemic. The lack of the vector here destabilizes the other vectors to different degrees. The new here becomes the online platform, and for this new space to be activated as theatre and not as filmed theatre, spectators must be able to carry out action(s) that are supported by the environment, as Giannachi and Hayles have suggested. The actions spectators were able to carry out in *Culpa!* were a combination of interactive strategies in the navigation and chat functions that afforded navigation, participation, conversation and collaboration. It is the online environment's capacity to support interactivity that generates a sense of togetherness for spectators, even if they are watching and responding to the performance at different times.

The vector now (same time) was important for *Culpa!*, since spectators had to actually make the performance happen in real time by their interactive navigation. As mentioned early in the article, *Culpa!* was made publicly available only as live streaming along with several digital theatre productions created during the first wave of COVID-19, such as Rogaland Teater's *Scener Fra et Ekteskap* and Det Andre Teatret's improvisation performances. Though a few performances still exist as recorded video and can be replayed, such as Haugesund Teater's *Blindness* or the interactive performances created under Tromsø



Vårskjermfest, we see an intention of providing a sense of synchronicity, of shared time, at least for the premiere. For Giannachi and Hayles, the vectors of here and now, shared space and shared time, go together, and spectators can be dispersed in an online environment both in time and in space if there is interactivity.

*Culpa!* worked to achieve a shared time by setting up the chat room for actors and spectators to communicate live after the performance. During the performance, spectators could post chats that were visible to other spectators, and after the performance, they could continue posting, and those posts were also visible to the actors. All the exchanges in the chat were important for different reasons. They supported a sense of synchronous togetherness amongst spectators, because they could see each other's comments live and respond to them. The chat also created a sense of synchronous togetherness between actors and spectators, since they knew they would be able to communicate shortly after the performance concluded. But still, the main tool for creating here and now was due to the direct interaction and to the necessity to interact with a device to actually make the performance happen.

In digital theatre and with interactivity, the positions of actor and spectator, you and me, are challenged and reconfigured. In *Culpa!* the interactive strategies invited spectators into an active role as navigators with continuous choices that would alter their experience of the performance they were watching. Further, even if activating the chat function led to a difficult situation, the chatting highlighted the reality of theatre as communication in real time and the risks it entails. Both Auslander and Balme suggest that when digital strategies are used, it often happens that the actor and spectator roles change. For Auslander, the actor may even leave the stage entirely, while for Balme, the spectator often takes a more active role. In *Culpa!* the conventional theatre hierarchy privileging the actors over the audience was intentionally renegotiated by using interactive strategies. In this kind of digital theatre, new power relations are negotiated and played out, not

only between the audience and performers, but also, as we have seen, between participants in the chat room.

The perspective of the actor (you) has also been challenged by the pandemic. For actors, the absence of a live audience has had an obvious impact because it is imbricated in their craft to perform *for* someone present. With the pandemic, a lot of theatre, opera, dance, and concerts were moved to online platforms without any physical audience present, except colleagues and the production team, as was the case with *Culpa!*. The awareness that the audience is online or will be seeing a recorded version of the performance has been a new experience for most artists and companies performing live. It is a different experience for actors to «play for nobody» or for an almost empty auditorium, compared with playing for a packed house. Nilay Yalcin explains that for the actors of *Culpa!* it was unfamiliar to perform in front of a camera located in an empty room, and that they had anticlimactic experiences in which they missed the warmth of the audience.<sup>56</sup> During live streaming, the actors knew that the audience was watching through the camera. A blinking green light confirmed that someone was watching. So, they were playing for nobody – in that there was no body present, but they were not playing for no one, since they knew spectators were watching via the camera. Thanks to the chat function, actors and spectators could meet, something that relieved the feeling of performing for nobody. However, once the chat function was closed, a feeling of emptiness took over for the performing crew, because each performance felt the same time after time, since they experienced that, with no audience present, there was no way of setting them apart.<sup>57</sup> This feeling is not surprising and is perhaps only an acknowledgement of the craft of acting. Eccentric experiments have been conducted to help actors feel bodily co-presence, including with non-human actors, such as Liceu Opera Barcelona,

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56 Source: Mine Nilay Yalcin, interview, oral communication, March 9, 2021; Bruun mfl. 2020.

57 Source: Mine Nilay Yalcin, interview, oral communication, March 9 2021.

which opened the season with a concert for plants, an idea replicated in other venues in the world.<sup>58</sup> New ways of organizing auditoriums have emerged to give a sense of a fuller room, such as Trøndelag Teater's use of comfy chairs and cosy lighting for an audience of ten.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the perspective of the spectator (me) has also been reinvented. An interesting trend, due to COVID-19 restrictions, has been how alternative forms of being together as a live audience have emerged. For example, when we watched the recorded version of *Culpa!* with a group of students, we organized an online event in real time. We began at 19:00, the normal start time for theatrical performances. Before the viewing, we met in an online platform to discuss our expectations, similar to mingling physically in a theatre's foyer. We then shared the video link in the chat, and everybody pressed play simultaneously. Twenty minutes after the performance, we met again and discussed our experience and impressions of the performance. By thus creating an event in real time, we co-created a communal sense of liveness. Everybody was aware, of course, that the performers were recorded, but we would still argue that this shared experience created a sense of togetherness amongst us as spectators.

## Conclusion

*Culpa!* provided a digital theatre experience for spectators in which they could interact through familiar ways of relating to their devices, be they phones, tablets or computers. By employing these digital devices creatively and connecting their common use to the themes of the performance, *Culpa!* was able to show the ambivalence and complexity that we have framed as mediaturgy. In our view, *Culpa!* therefore represents an interesting case of digital theatre because it not only

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58 Urra 2020.

59 Trøndelag Teater 2021.

uses digital strategies as a means for conveying meaning but also puts the way we have become used to communicate through social media under the magnifying glass. Still, *Culpa!* draws on interactive strategies well known to the tradition of digital performance, such as navigation and conversation. The redistribution of the four vectors, you, me, here, and now, is done in an original way, and without a doubt, *Culpa!* comes across as theatre, not as something else, like a film or an online game.

To conclude, *Culpa!* critically exposed the digital media that it was dependent on to exist. The blending of interactive strategies – the navigation function and the chat – generated a sense of togetherness, even if, simultaneously, dilemmas arose. The new perspective of the performers, that of performing for an empty auditorium, opens new potential for exploring interactive ways of connecting with audiences. As for any invitation to interact in theatre, there must be careful planning and testing beforehand. With this in mind, we still argue that *Culpa!* offered interesting interactive strategies to create a sense of togetherness and that these strategies will be part of future explorations. These strategies will also apply for alternative ways of gathering as an audience remotely and simultaneously creating an experience of liveness and a sense of togetherness by other means than by replicating the conventions of live events. Not surprisingly, the forceful consequences of the pandemic made theatre makers and audiences miss and appreciate the conventional theatre experience of physical co-presence in large crowds. Conventional live performances will surely continue to be appreciated and also developed on their own terms, with or without digital theatre strategies. But, as the performance analysis of *Culpa!* reveals, the pandemic has also actualized the international legacy of digital performance practices and theories. It has been important for us to discuss the tradition of digital theatre and shed light on how this international legacy is negotiated and innovated in *Culpa!*. The performance and our analysis of it lay bare some interesting and alternative grounds for emergent digital theatre forms in Norway that we are probably only just seeing the start of.

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