Digital Theatre Transformation:  
A case study and digital toolkit

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Foreword

The last six months at Creation Theatre have been a whirlwind; I don’t think any of us could have predicted where we would be now. When lockdown started, it was clear to us that we had a duty to do two things – entertain our audience and find ways to pay our freelance teams to make work.

This clarity of purpose has shaped the focus on creating work with the audience experience at its heart. It’s also done more than supporting artists financially by achieving their buy-in with what in the “old normal” could have been a very difficult ask. I don’t think the performers, Equity or ourselves as producers would have thought it was feasible for actors to perform regularly from their own homes and yet the situation we have found ourselves in has exposed some significant benefits to access, work life balance, and the environment in doing so.

It was apt and completely by chance that The Tempest was the show we had up our sleeve to explore this new medium with. With theatres closed, in the performing arts it really did feel like we were fighting for our lives in an enormous storm over which we had no control, with a swell of waves that could engulf us all. Like the characters in The Tempest, though, we found our way to a strange, new, magical world to explore. We’ve been enormously lucky that we had the most incredible team to embrace this new medium, and the genius that is Zoe Seaton at the helm. ‘How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, that has such people in ’t!’

Lucy Askew (Creation Theatre) and Zoe Seaton (Big Telly), 6 August 2020
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Introduction

‘That’s what Creation did so beautifully. They said just “how are we going to make work for freelancers, and how are we going to make work for ourselves and continue to connect and to make and create this environment.”’  - AL BARCLAY, PERFORMER

‘Making the decision to charge the audience was really good, and it paid off for us. … It was such a feeling of accomplishment, for the actors as well, for them it was just such an amazing feat to achieve what they achieved.’  - CRISSY O’DONOVAN, PRODUCER

Purpose of this report

This is a preliminary report on the lessons learned from the digital transformation of Creation Theatre and its co-production with Big Telly of The Tempest on the Zoom videoconferencing platform during the national Covid-19 ‘lockdown’ of 2020. This Case Study provides a snapshot of Creation Theatre’s operations at the start of July 2020 against the backdrop of the economic crisis in the theatre industry caused by the pandemic and a retrospective view of its first digital show in April and May of that year.

The purpose of this report is to share, as rapidly as possible, the experiences of backstage and creative staff involved in Creation Theatre’s digital transformation. The report offers an insight into Creation Theatre’s business model along with practical advice on digital homeworking for creative practitioners.

The ‘Digital Toolkit’ for companies who want to produce live digital theatre while working remotely, with which this report concludes, consists of advice on Zoom performance offered by Creation Theatre’s The Tempest team, a set of guidelines drawn up in consultation with a representative of Equity, and a checklist for Zoom performance compiled with Creation Theatre’s Production Manager.

The report will be republished in October 2020 in a revised and enlarged version that will integrate feedback, updates on technological developments and solutions, as well as more in-depth research on the digital audiences of Creation and Big Telly’s 2020 Tempest, which will include a full quantitative data set of audience responses to our research questionnaire.

Context

On 16 March 2020, the British Government responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by issuing guidance that ‘everyone should avoid gatherings and crowded places, such as pubs, clubs and theatres’,1 prompting UK Theatre and the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) to advise its member venues to close and face-to-face performance to stop across the UK.2

1 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51917562
By 23 March, the country had entered a comprehensive ‘lockdown’, with guidance suggesting a ‘social distance’ of 2m. While £160M Arts Council England emergency funding\(^3\) and the Government’s Furlough scheme, combined with donations, have helped some companies survive the crisis through to July 2020, financial reserves are rapidly drying up. Research by SOLT and UK Theatre suggests that 70% of theatres will exhaust their financial reserves before the end of 2020,\(^4\) and they estimate that 70% of the jobs of the 290,000 workers employed by the venues they represent are at risk of disappearing.\(^5\) In all, Arts Council England research suggests that the UK’s Arts and Culture industry in 2019 generated 363,700 jobs and contributed £10.8 billion a year to the UK economy. The threat to the industry is therefore not just measured in terms of jobs, but also in terms of contribution to the economy and to tax income, which is estimated at £23 billion per year.\(^6\)

While outdoor performances have been allowed to resume from 11 July 2020, indoor performance is, at start of August 2020, still prohibited even with ‘social distancing’ reduced to 1m+. The Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden’s five-stage ‘Roadmap’ to reopening theatres, published on 25 June 2020, does not name a date for the final stage in which ‘performances [are] allowed indoors/outdoors (with a fuller audience indoors)’.\(^7\) As Chris Wiegand explains, ‘[w]ith the government’s job retention scheme set to end on 31 October, theatres now face a period of increased risk during winter, which will be made worse if they do not have sufficient preparation time to stage profitable pantomimes.\(^8\)

The Government’s £1.57bn rescue package of support for the arts announced on 5 July 2020 is aimed at supporting ‘national cultural institutions in England and investment in cultural and heritage sites’.\(^9\) However, the package does not include extra funding for non-building-based companies. Only £2m have been set aside by Arts Council England to support freelancers employed by the industry,\(^10\) who make up almost 50% of the theatre workforce,\(^11\) and who are dependent on the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme which is limited in the duration of the support it offers.

Meanwhile, Indigo’s survey of 232 cultural organisations and 62,000 audience members has shown that while 67% of respondents ‘would consider attending events if venues re-opened with social distancing’, 70% would not consider booking for events for at least three months from July 2020. Indigo’s research also bears out Anne Bonnar and Hillary Keenleyside’s suggestion that, ‘For performing arts organisations, the immediate threat is not the withdrawal of funding, but earned income disappearing in terms of ticket sales, performance fees and ancillary income.’\(^12\)

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3 https://www.arts council.org.uk/covid-19/covid-19-response-reset  
6 https://www.arts council.org.uk/publication/contribution-arts-and-culture-industry-uk-economy-0  
8 https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jul/29/theatre-reopening-oliver-dowden  
11 https://uktheatre.org/who-we-are/what-we-do/uk-theatre-blog/focus-on-freelancers/  
Indigo’s survey finds that while 83% of respondents are ‘interested in online culture’ as a substitute for physical engagement in the arts and almost as many (81%) were concerned about the ‘survival of cultural organisations’, fewer than half of the respondents would be willing to pay for digital cultural content.13

For Creation Theatre’s Chief Executive and Creative Producer Lucy Askew, this situation ‘could become an enormous challenge’, especially in an environment in which larger venues and companies, such as Shakespeare’s Globe, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, have been able to throw open their high-quality theatre broadcast archives to the public for free, with a request for donations to support the industry. Among the most prominent examples, the National Theatre has been running the ‘National Theatre At Home’ programme on YouTube with a weekly show since 2 April 2020, with the tagline ‘Enjoy world class theatre online for free.’14 While its stream of One Man, Two Guvnors garnered 937,000 views between the start of the stream at 7.30pm on 2 April and 11am on 3 April and raised more than £50,000 in donations within that time period,15 by 7.30pm on 9 and 11am on 10 July, the viewing figure for Deep Blue Sea had dropped to just over 59,000 and just over £3,600 were raised through donations.16

With the government package supporting such larger building-based companies in covering their overheads and paying a skeleton staff, there is a risk of flooding the market with high quality, free-to-view, arts content. This risks habituating audiences to not only viewing content for free, but also to accepting archival recordings as a substitute for live experiences even as the appetite for such recordings is ebbing off along with audiences’ willingness to donate.

Meanwhile, while no new work is being produced, many freelance creative personnel (directors, production managers, stage managers, technicians, performers) will not be able to continue working in the industry. For Askew, ‘there’s a real risk that theatre just gives the work away for free with donations and ... it becomes the norm that you don’t expect to pay for a show.’ As Crissy O’Donovan, Creation Theatre’s producer, explains, companies that create free content ‘are not giving themselves longevity. They’re expecting the audience to invest in them when they’re not investing in themselves. ... Making the decision to charge the audience was really good, and it paid off for us.’

**Creation Theatre**

Creation Theatre is Oxford’s largest professional producing company, with 9 permanent members of administrative, front of house and leadership staff and 4 Artistic Associates. It was founded in 1996 by David Parrish, is a registered Charity, and is currently headed by Chief Executive and Creative Producer Lucy Askew.

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14 https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?gclid=Cj0KCQquw6D4BRDgARiuA6uNt1L4XPn5FZ9ycOLgwBoXB6L8hUnUcrsdY5LBKjfwFL1TRKtWhsS-o-Bponsors-stream
16 Data from live view of viewing figures and donations on National Theatre At Home’s YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uw68Djxw6exU. 11am on 10 July 2020; the figure for donations in USD is $4550.
The company specialises in performances of classic texts staged in unusual locations in and around Oxford, UK.

Performances are targeted at local family audiences with an age range of 5-95 and often involve interaction with the audience and game-based theatre. The company has produced over 70 shows to date.

Creation Theatre and Big Telly’s The Tempest, 2019 vs. 2020

From 19 July – 15 August 2019, Creation Theatre put on The Tempest as a site-specific, immersive production that moved between twelve locations in Osney Mead, an industrial estate on the outskirts of Oxford. It was directed by Zoe Seaton, who herself is the Artistic Director of Big Telly, a theatre company based in Portstewart on the north coast of Northern Ireland specialising in site responsive touring performances and participation projects.

The show was rapidly adapted for Zoom performance at the start of lockdown in 2020, reuniting the director and cast of the 2019 production. Shows ran from 11 April to 10 May after just two weeks of rehearsals with a cast and technical crew who were entirely new to the Zoom platform. The performance involved actors performing either before green screens or projector screens that conjured up various vistas from a sea cruise to the buildings and nature on Prospero’s island, with five interspersed moments of interactions with the audience, who could be spotlight to appear on all participants’ screens.
Audience members were variously cast as reporters interviewing the members of the Neapolitan court and as Ariel’s spirits, called upon to help torment the shipwrecked courtiers with noise, pets, and food.

Only a minimal amount of pre-recorded video footage was used to show Miranda wandering through her garden to find Ferdinand, Miranda reaching her hand through the side of her Zoom frame and a matching female hand entering Ferdinand’s Zoom frame and have a ring put on it, and to show the lovers on a screen together in a demonstration of Prospero’s magic. At the end of the performance, audiences and performers entered Zoom’s Gallery View for the curtain call, as the performers dismantled their green screens to reveal the interiors of their homes and audiences were able to enjoy a moment of unstructured interaction and communality.

Whereas the 2019 production had reached 3,368 individual audience members with summer visitors from 11 countries, in 2020 it reached over 1,200 households in 27 different countries, with a sizable proportion of its audience participating from the USA, Ireland and Canada. The critical and financial success of the production, for which Creation Theatre charged £20 per viewing device, is helping it stay open during lockdown and continuing to produce new work. Between May and July 2020, Creation Theatre and Big Telly have co-produced Alice, which was in rehearsals at the time of writing this report, while Creation Theatre produced Time Machine and a rehearsed reading of Henry VIII, while Big Telly produced Operation Elsewhere and The Machine Stops.

Scope and methodology of this research
The observations of practice, recommendations and guidelines in this preliminary report are based on the information gathered through a detailed survey of thirteen members of administrative and creative staff involved in the production of The Tempest between April and July 2020, twelve of whom we subsequently interviewed with follow-up questions. We used responses from the following members of the Creation Theatre/Big Telly team, whose answers also included references to the other digital shows they have been involved in since April 2020:

- Creation Theatre and Big Telly’s Management and Front of House Team:
  - Lucy Askew – Chief Executive and Creative Producer, Creation Theatre
  - Zoe Seaton – Artistic Director, Big Telly
Crissy O'Donovan – Producer
Emily Walsh – Assistant Marketing Manager

The Tempest Artistic Team and Cast:
Zoe Seaton – Writer and Director
Giles Stoakley – Production Manager
Sinéad Owens – Stage Manager/’Zoom Wizard’
Al Barclay – Alonzo
Ryan Duncan – Ferdinand
Rhodri Lewis – Trinculo
Madeleine MacMahon – Sebastianne
Simon Spencer-Hyde – Prospero
Giles Stoakley – Antonio
Paul (P.K.) Taylor – Caliban
Annabelle May Terry – Miranda

The findings regarding audience demographic, behaviours and responses are based on a comparative analysis of audience data obtained by Creation Theatre’s box office at the time of booking for the 2019 and 2020 productions of The Tempest. We also draw on the first 93 responses to an online questionnaire sent to audiences who attended a Zoom performance of The Tempest in April/May 2020. This data was supplemented by observation of recorded audiences spotlight in 10 recordings of the 2020 Creation Theatre/Big Telly Tempest.

Additional audience research is planned for the revised and enlarged version of this report scheduled for publication in October 2020, with a new quantitative and qualitative audience dataset generated from the analysis of responses to a research performance of The Tempest on 11 July 2020 and a pre-recorded broadcast of that performance on the 12 July 2020.
Summary of findings

Business Model and Changes to the Company’s Administration

Business Model and Restructuring
- Creation Theatre’s overall turnover reduced by 32% between 17 March – 17 July 2019 and the same period in 2020
- Creation Theatre’s permanent staff base was cut from 9 to 5, with two maternity leaves and two furloughs, and non-furloughed staff reduced their contracted hours by 20%
- The physical office was immediately closed in March 2020 and all operations moved online
- Income from grants and education activities has proportionately shrunk, while income from shows and fundraising has proportionately increased
- The company’s rate of productivity has grown, with its first show, The Tempest, adapted from a physical production staged in 2019 to a virtual production staged within 3 weeks of lockdown in April 2020
- Creation Theatre has been able to pay its staff Equity wages and make a modest surplus, made possible by a very significant reduction in its overheads and by charging audiences £20 per device

Challenges
- the current economic uncertainty
- the flooding of the marked with high-quality archival recordings
- the UK Government’s funding package for the performing arts which largely neglects non-building-based companies like Creation Theatre and the freelancers who create its shows
- the reduction in income from Education activities and grants
- the changes in audience behaviours

Opportunities
- reduced expenditure and increased productivity
- less time and carbon expended on travel
- audience development including national and international reach and access opportunities for d/Deaf, disabled and neurodiverse audiences as well as for families and elderly audience members
- increased opportunities for diverse casting
- new networks and creative partnerships
- new sources of funding
Understanding the impact of shift to online working for Creation Theatre staff

Working from home
• for Creation Theatre’s administrative staff, home working has involved setting up a home office with laptop/PC, webcam, and secure internet
• working online facilitates multi-tasking and enables the Creative Producer, Producer, Production Manager and Stage Manager to have greater oversight of creative processes and of the wellbeing of the creative team
• Digital shows facilitate the visibility of the Company’s ‘face’ (Lucy Askew, CE and Creative Producer and/or Crissy O’Donovan, Producer) before and after each show, enabling direct contact with the virtual audience
• Digital home-working has greatly increased the flexibility of working hours and cancelled the need to travel for work, with benefits for work/life balance, wellbeing, concentration and productivity

Environmental gains
• Digital home-working has brought tangible environmental gains, with a reduction in the use of paper and printing, travel, and waste packaging

Challenges
• Maintaining work/life balance in a flexible home-working environment
• No longer having informal chats in the office
• Difficulty having conversations with the audience outside the shows

Opportunities
• Overall mostly positive changes from home working
• Reduced fatigue from travel
• Increased ability to combine work with childcare
• Increased productivity and ability to multi-task and have creative oversight
Making Digital Theatre

**Digital Theatre Transformation**

- Digital transformation of creative work was facilitated by Creation Theatre’s prior experience of site-specific immersive modes of working and the adaptability of the creative team.
- Digital theatre is related to live film and live gaming, with a palette of genres it can draw on and combine, involving various levels of audience participation.
- Digital theatre is much faster to produce than physical theatre and requires fewer core members of backstage creative staff.

**Changes to Roles and Skills sets**

- The roles that have been most affected by the digital transformation are those of the production manager and stage manager, with lesser but still significant changes for the director, designer and the performers.
- All members of the creative team have developed new digital skills sets and required training.

**Equipment Requirements**

- All members of the creative team have needed additional computing hardware, software and applications, and performers have needed additional studio equipment (lights, green screen).

**Performing on Zoom**

- Performers had to adapt their performance style to Zoom and learn to work with cameras, microphones, and do virtual blocking to establish eyelines and exchanges of props.
- Performing for Zoom puts a high cognitive burden on performers who have to operate their own technical cues and be ready to improvise to cover up connectivity glitches.

**Designing for Zoom**

- For backgrounds: using chroma key and green screens for virtual backgrounds which may be static or moving, establishing spatial depth through virtual background design/props/positioning within the frame, guiding performers through the physical transformation of their home studios using accessories.
- Costumes and props that are complementary to the green screens.
- Lighting individual studio sets, which involves separate diffuse lighting of green screens and diagonal lighting on actors.
- Sound design, including use of underscoring music, microphones, and volume control.
**Directing for Zoom**

- Recognising the hybridity and specific affordances of the platform as a performance medium
- Establishing a dramaturgy that affects running time and script editing, audience participation, pre-recorded video content, storytelling, and creating a strong sense of liveness and community, with a focus on the curtain call

**Challenges of the Zoom platform**

- Its design as a videoconferencing platform
- Tiny lags that make synchronisation of sound and movement impossible in live performance
- Compatibility with software and hardware
- Connectivity

**Opportunities from performing on Zoom**

- Reduction in overheads (no venue, rehearsal room, theatre lighting, physical set design, travel, accommodation, physical adaptation for accessibility)
- Comfort of access for audiences
- Environmental gains

**Understanding the impact of shift to online working for creative staff**

**Rehearsals**

- Reduction in length of rehearsal time overall and of individual rehearsals, to accommodate Zoom fatigue and maximise focus
- Producers, Production Manager and Stage Manager are able to be on-hand throughout rehearsals to resolve issues without delay
- Zoom rehearsals affect company cohesion and social interaction, presenting challenges for performers used to physical modes of interaction with one another and their audience
- Zoom rehearsals therefore require additional structural frameworks to facilitate social exchanges and open communication, as well as clear signposting of what the company is expected to do in breakout room rehearsals
- Zoom rehearsals are very technical. Performers find the lack of physical cues challenging and have to re-train themselves to focus on scene partners’ voices and maintain virtual eyelines and awareness of the camera’s location.

**Performing on Zoom**

- Multi-tasking is required to stay in character while operating technical cues
- Performers need to manage the volume of both voice and performance control
- Performers use skills that are more akin to performing for TV and radio in order to work with the cameras
- Zoom performance involves interacting with the audience, responding to spotlight audience members and talking to the audience in a way that can create a strong sense of intimacy
Behavioural changes and wellbeing

- Members of the creative team for Creation Theatre’s The Tempest responded positively to the changes in their working patterns, but were also mindful of challenges as they adapted to working on their own, managing their own studio sets and internet connections, and the structure of their working day.
- The reduction in travel made a significant difference to company members in terms of wellbeing and being able to be with their families/households.
- Overwhelmingly, company members found that working from home benefited their work/life balance and that Creation Theatre had set clear boundaries regarding working hours.
- Working from home had an impact on company members’ families/household members who had to accommodate the use of home space as a studio and the use of broadband during rehearsals and performances.
- Being able to continue working during the Covid-19 pandemic had a highly positive impact on the company members’ sense of wellbeing and financial security.
- Company members missed physical social interaction with one another and with their audience.
- At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, company members, especially if in isolation, needed additional welfare support.

Environmental impact

- While energy use by individual company members has gone up, the environmental gains from not travelling to work are considerable.

Ethical and equality issues

- Digital theatre work may bring inequalities of access to work based on a performer’s access to adequate home space and equipment, as well as their technical skills.
- Companies can be proactive in providing company members with equipment and training, and in guiding them through setting up their home studio.
- Home working may actually increase opportunities for diverse and geographically remote performers who can access auditions more easily.
- The casting process is critical in creating an environment in which diverse performers know that the technical and access support is there to create a level playing field.
Understanding the impact of the shift to online working on audiences: Preliminary Findings

The Audience
- 1428 tickets were sold for the 17 Zoom performances with a potential reach of around 2800 individual audience members.
- Audiences tended to watch the Zoom productions mostly alone or in groups of two, but larger groups were not uncommon.
- Audiences for the Zoom production were similar in age to those for the 2019 analogue production, with the data indicating that the Zoom audience may have been slightly older than the analogue audience.
- The Zoom performances attracted audiences from a wider geographical area, both nationally within the UK, and internationally.

Marketing and Audience Motivation
- Audiences for the Zoom performances were mostly audiences already familiar with Creation Theatre, but it was also effective at reaching new audiences.
- Email and social media were the most common ways that audiences found out about the Zoom production of The Tempest, but radio and online/newspaper articles were also effective ways of reaching audiences.
- Audiences were motivated to participate by the format, by the opportunity to support the theatre, and because they missed theatre; the content itself was less important to audiences.
- The majority of audiences felt that the Zoom experience was good value for money, and would be willing to pay to watch other Zoom theatre (both in and out of lockdown).
- Audiences said that they would be most likely to watch adaptations of well-known works, as well as new plays via Zoom.

Navigating Technology
- Audiences found it easy, or very easy to use Zoom technology during the performance.
- Just under half of audiences in the initial survey said that participating had helped a bit or a lot with their confidence with videoconferencing technology.

Liveness, Community and Audience Participation
- Watching ‘live’ as the actors performed was important to audiences.
- Audiences agreed that participating in the Zoom performances made them feel part of a community.
- Audience participation, seeing themselves and seeing other audience members on screen was key to contributing to a sense of community and connection.

Overall Impact on Audiences
- Audiences overwhelmingly enjoyed the experience of participating in the Zoom performances.
• The majority of those surveyed said that participating in the Zoom performances provided them the opportunity to do something with friends and family, that it helped to maintain/improve mental wellbeing, that it helped them feel engaged with the arts and that it reduced feelings of isolation/loneliness.
Case Study: Creation Theatre and Big Telly’s 2020 digital Tempest
Digital Theatre Transformation, Part 1: Business Model and Changes to the Company’s Administration

Changes to company structure and responsibilities

Before the lockdown, Creation Theatre was run from a physical office on in The Mill Arts Centre in Banbury, Oxford. The space was organised as an open-plan space that incorporated a kitchen/prop-and-costume store as well as an open-plan office which accommodated production and education work on one side and marketing and general management on the other side, with all 9 members of the permanent team, including occasional interns, sharing the space. At the start of lockdown, with revenue streams under immediate threat, the company underwent rapid restructuring. Notice was given on the company’s Banbury office, which was immediately closed. All administrative staff shifted to working remotely from their homes. The permanent staff base was, at the same time, radically reduced from 9 to 4. Two members of the Education and Marketing team who went on maternity leave were not replaced for the duration of their leave. Two further members of the team (Marketing Manager and Social Media Manager) were furloughed, taking advantage of the UK Government’s Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, which continued to pay 80% of their wages.

The administration of the company has since then been carried out by a skeleton staff from their individual homes working flexible hours and covering multiple briefs. Some of that extra workload and general management work has been shouldered by the Chief Executive and Creative Producer, who is now also more involved in the everyday running of the company and its creative work. In January, the role of Box Office and Groups Manager has broadened to include some of the marketing work and closer ties with the Education Administrator; the job title has shifted to Assistant Marketing Manager to reflect the new set of responsibilities. Since lockdown, the role has additionally included box office and group bookings, events, sales analysis, general marketing and design, social media (posting, sharing, thanking, retweeting), audience database management and administrative support for the Chief Executive and Creative Producer. The roles of the Producer and members of the Education team have remained largely unchanged.

Members of this smaller permanent team and the freelancers brought in to work on The Tempest report both working more closely with one another and taking on ‘more responsibility ... with less consultation’ (Giles Stoakley, Production Manager). Those extra responsibilities were consistently framed in responses to interviews as opportunities to acquire new skillsets, with the fact that Creation Theatre is a charity cited as the motivation ‘to give a little bit more, and I think it’s kind of inevitable in these circumstances that you do give up a bit more time and a bit more energy’ (Emily Walsh, Assistant Marketing Manager). The upheaval has also allowed one of the freelance performers on The Tempest to acquire new skills and expand into the roles of producer and writer for a new children’s show in collaboration with Creation Theatre.
Changes to the business model

The restructured company is significantly leaner and requires an income of c. £15,000 per month to break even at its current stripped-down level; it has also adopted a significantly faster pace of work as a result of its digital transformation. The bulk of the company’s income relies on ticket sales and its Education programme with its Holiday Workshops and Drama Clubs, with additional income from contributions to individual shows by the Arts Council and sponsorship, and various tiers of individual and corporate sponsorship. In an ordinary year, the combined income from the ticket sales for the Christmas Show and the Drama Clubs covers the majority of the overheads, so that the company’s other activities need only produce a small profit to break even.

The graphs below show the proportion of income from education, fundraising, grants and shows generated between 17 March and 17 July in 2019, a ‘normal’ year, and in the same time period in 2020, during lockdown. They reveal that during lockdown, the proportion of income generated from education activities and grants has shrunk by 11%, and that 8% more of the company’s overall income in 2020 has been generated by ticket sales and 3% more has been generated through its proactive fundraising activities.

In the restructured company, the Drama Club and Holiday Workshops have rapidly transitioned to the Zoom platform, where they have become something akin to ‘a live TV show that children participate in’ (Lucy Askew, CE and Creative Producer). They remain absolutely vital to the company’s financial survival, along with cost savings on all non-essential overheads, which have been cut, and on the pay of Creation Theatre’s permanent full-time staff, who have agreed to go down to a four-day week, with a 20% reduction in their pay, reflecting the 32% drop in the company’s overall income between 17 March – 17 July 2019 and the same time span in 2020.
The company's survival, reflected in the 8% proportional growth in income generated from ticket sales, also crucially hinges on its ability to keep producing more plays and set up new events. This is where the move to digital production methods is an advantage: not only is it significantly easier and faster to move through the processes of casting, design, rehearsal and performance, but without the expenses caused by travel and accommodation, physical set design, lighting, front of house presence and accommodations for physical access, it is significantly cheaper, too, to capitalise a new show and continue to pay freelance performers an Equity rate of pay.

For The Tempest, which was capitalised on a 'stripped-back survival budget' (Lucy Askew, CE and Creative Producer), the director and the designer agreed to a reduction to their usual fee in recognition of the pressures on the company and absence of the need to travel. The actors were paid the Equity rate, with rehearsals that would normally have been concentrated into a single week spread across two weeks. There was a corresponding reduction in the hours of rehearsal per day and the cast were paid a £100 supplement in recognition of the inconvenience caused by the need to rearrange their households to accommodate the rehearsals and performances.

For subsequent productions, actors have been paid the Equity rate, with an additional £25 per week 'subsistence' contribution to utility bills. With actors no longer needing to travel for work or pay for accommodation away from home, the usual subsistence fee has been dropped.

The squeeze on production costs, combined with the ability of digital shows to sell more of their overall capacity, has allowed the company to generate a small profit from its production of The Tempest and to expect modest profits from its current and future digital theatre work.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ticket price (not discounted):</td>
<td>£25 per person</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1,428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of customers:</td>
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<td>1,202</td>
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<tr>
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<td>£27,761.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total income from funding:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total expenditure:</td>
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<td>£12,360.18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total profit after costs:</td>
<td>£29,420.50</td>
<td>£15,400.82</td>
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At the start of lockdown, the company decided to honour all contracts with freelancers employed for scheduled shows and to produce a Zoom version of their 2019 The Tempest. They also decided to continue to charge for their work, albeit at a reduced flat rate of £20 per device, potentially enabling an entire household to watch the show together on one screen.17

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17 For the first six performances (11-13 April), the company offered two types of ticket: 'One Device' designed for those watching alone and a slightly more expensive 'Household' ticket for those watching in groups. Following feedback from audiences who felt that it was unfair that those watching in smaller groups were paying the same as those watching in larger groups, the company amended their pricing structure to £20 per device regardless of how many people were watching.
For the physical show in 2019, the rate for a standard ticket had been £25, with a range of discounts available. The rationale for continuing to charge is that Creation Theatre are still producing new work at ‘as high a quality as we can physically make it’. Therefore, audiences should be asked to pay for the work and for the live experience of high-quality theatre, which in turn will allow Creation Theatre to ‘create a better quality of work for … audiences going forward’ (Crissy O’Donovan, Producer). The reduced rate reflects the pressure on the market brought about by Covid-19 and the more affordable ticket price in turn means that ‘digital performances … are selling more of the capacity than our physical shows’ (Emily Walsh, Assistant Marketing Manager). The sales figures show a simultaneous increase in the number of paying customers and a simultaneous decrease in the income. This, however, is offset by the reduced overheads for the digital show, which meant that despite the lower overall ticket income, the company was able to make a modest profit from its digital Tempest. As Crissy O’Donovan concludes, ‘Making the decision to charge the audience was really good, and it paid off for us.’ On the other hand, Giles Stoakley (Production Manager and Performer) worries that ‘commercially, I think there is a limit to what you can legitimately charge for online theatre, which must make the economics difficult.’

Given the usual reliance of the company’s finances on the surplus generated by the Christmas show, Creation Theatre are planning a Christmas show for December 2020 that will build on their experience with digital performance. The company is also looking towards new sources of funding that they can apply for now that they have moved so decisively in the direction of digital innovation and creative partnerships. Ultimately, the company expects to have to either ‘build up the digital work or get back live or get more funding’ (Lucy Askew) in order to be able to return to its pre-Covid-19 size.

**Challenges**

The current economic uncertainty, coupled with the risk that audiences may get too habituated to free-to-view theatre work in a market that is flooded with high-quality archival recordings by venues whose funding has been stabilised by the UK Government’s package to support arts venues, has created a challenging environment in which to produce new pay-to-view work. Lucy Askew (CE and Creative Producer; Creation Theatre) cites ‘keeping an audience valuing live theatre and paying for it when so much streamed theatre is free’ as one of the main challenges faced by the company.

The company faced potentially significant losses from the cancellation of their physical show The Time Machine at the start of lockdown. Creation Theatre took the decision to transfer the show to the Zoom platform, which allowed the company to cover the bulk of the expenditure on the physical and the digital show, with the remainder covered by Creation Theatre’s financial reserves. The company needs to continue generating a regular income through their Education work and an increased rate of production of new shows in order to continue supporting its skeleton staff base. Lucy Askew is clear on the company’s ‘need to build up the digital work or get back live or get more funding before we go into the next financial year and everyone wants to come back’.

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18 A £5 Ticket Offer: a 2 for 1 Tempest deal, Groups discounts (10+1), a discount for “Extra” Club members and discounts for members of sponsor organisations.
Productivity and expenditure:
The digital transition has significantly increased the productivity of the Creation Theatre team and the speed and efficiency of their work, including their ability to schedule and produce new shows and collaborate with partners in different locations, whether in the UK or abroad. The cost of capitalising a production has been dramatically reduced as the overheads for venue hire, set construction and travel/accommodation have disappeared and the company is no longer held up by venue scheduling and funding cycles in the way it was for physical shows. Not needing to travel has increased the speed with which the team can move through a series of meetings and decisions, while also reducing fatigue and expenditure. As Zoe Seaton notes, one of the benefits of the increased speed of production is that shows can now much more easily be topical and engage with debates while they are still current.

Audience development:
‘It is a big selling point, if people, if families are in different … locations and can’t experience things together, then you can do something that is as close to normality as we can get it whilst remotely or digitally together.’ – Emily Walsh, Assistant Marketing Manager

‘Digital theatre acts as a great leveller where actually everyone can access it in the same way… And actually, the ways to do BSL or captioning, they are there, and that’s the next step to make more of the Zoom shows even more accessible’ -- Lucy Askew, CE and Creative Producer

‘The fact you can access people in their homes makes it more accessible to audiences e.g., if normally they have a gang of kids to get out of the house and shepherd to a theatre, or for carers who struggle to leave home or take those they are caring for to the theatre. […] For family audiences it’s so much easier, it takes away so much hassle […] if you […] have this great experience and your kid can be on TV, that brings a new level of excitement.’ – Ryan Duncan, Performer

As Part 5 of this report explores in greater depth, while many of Creation Theatre’s audiences have continued to support the company, their work has also reached new audiences both in the UK and overseas. It has allowed the company to use its existing audiences to recruit new audiences that would not ordinarily be able to watch the show with them: there is strong evidence to suggest that families and friends in different geographical locations are enjoying the digital shows together from their individual homes.

It is also notable that the 2020 Zoom Tempest reached a far larger international audience than the 2019 Oxford production. Much of that international audience was located in Anglophone countries, with the majority of audience members outside the UK joining in from the USA, followed by Ireland and Canada, with a total of 10 households participating from as far away as Australia and New Zealand. To maximise access to the show for North American audiences, the company put on a show at 11pm UK time/6pm on the North American East Coast for one performance on 25 April.19

19 The 11pm performance on 25 April attracted 22 UK bookers, with an additional 23 from the target markets in the United States (19) and Canada (4), 7 from Australia, and 1 each from New Zealand, Ireland and Germany (where it was midnight).
While adjusting performance times to accommodate different time zones could grow the international Anglophone market, captioning or subtitling would further open up the non-Anglophone international market: there were small numbers of participants from 19 non-Anglophone countries, the majority of which were European and therefore in time zones that are more easily compatible with watching synchronously with UK audiences.

Working digitally has widened the access to shows not just geographically, but also physically. In that sense, digital performance can ‘level the playing field’ for audiences whose needs are not easily met in physical performance venues (Rhodri Lewis, Performer). As Al Barclay (Performer) noted: ‘You think of people who are in nursing home, or people who have limited mobility in one way or another and can’t get to the theatre. And yes, they want to be part of a live experience of theatre like they’re part of a community that isn’t just in that nursing home. … that’s an interesting kind of thing that we can push now.’

Younger audiences, too, might benefit more from digital than from physical theatre, if only because, as Ryan Duncan (Performer) points out, the relative cheapness of putting on digital performance rather than as a physical Theatre in Education touring production makes shows more affordable for schools: ‘suddenly you don’t need to rent a van, you don’t need to pay for the transport, you don’t need to pay for the actors’ time to do that, you don’t need to pay for accommodation.’ Working through a digital medium allows a company to perform for more than one school in a single day, reducing the cost to the school while still being able to ‘pay your actors well.’

Digital performances are also intrinsically suitable for neurodiverse audiences and viewers who may normally stay away from a theatre for fear of being disruptive. Performers also noted the extent to which the interactive affordances of Zoom appeal in particular to younger audience members who are excited to see themselves spotlight when they participate in the show. Anecdotal evidence from post-performance conversations with audience members suggests that audiences with mobility issues have also benefited from being able to participate in live theatre in a digital format. For Creation Theatre, whose physical shows are in unusual, site-specific locations that are challenging in terms of physical access, the digital format has brought with it the opportunity to widen the access to its shows. As such, Zoom performance opens up access to live theatre to groups who are underrepresented in the audiences for building-based performances. Additional audio-description and captioning could further widen access to live theatre for D/deaf audiences while simultaneously opening up new markets inside and outside the UK for non-native speakers of English who find captions helpful in aiding comprehension of unfamiliar English accents and dialects.

Casting:
Online casting has had multiple benefits for the company and its freelancers: a reduction in travel and expenses, and increased access to work for diverse performers who are no longer limited by geographical distance and pressures of time, finance, and other commitments, allowing both Creation Theatre and Big Telly to be yet more inclusive and diverse in their casts.
As Zoe Seaton (Artistic Director; Big Telly and director, The Tempest) points out in relation to the casts she normally works with from her base in Northern Ireland: ‘there’s a very very small number of professional artists based in Belfast, which is where we draw most of our casting from, who come from diverse communities so … we haven’t always been able to have a very diverse cast, whereas now, that’s easier.’ The change has been perceptible in the casting for Big Telly and Creation Theatre’s co-production of Alice, as performer Annabelle May Terry points out:

‘I believe this way of working is more accessible and inclusive as it’s available to anyone and everyone at any time. I had the privilege of sitting in on Creation’s Alice auditions in which they were actively seeking to diversify their casting and broaden their pool of actors of colour. It was wonderful to see so many performers getting the opportunity to showcase their talent to the company and be cast in the show as a result.’

Using videoconferencing for casting therefore enables what Terry dubs ‘virtual equality’ in an environment with a level playing field for previously disadvantaged performers.

**Networks and creative partnerships:**
digital working has vastly expanded the range of people and partner organisations Creation Theatre and Big Telly are now able to engage with. As Zoe Seaton (Artistic Director; Big Telly, and director of The Tempest) says, ‘we have more access to other people than we would have done before, like other universities and other theatre companies, other venues, other artists…. There are huge advantages to that, and I’m talking to artists all the time now in New York and LA and Australia and Munich and Oxford and that’s fantastic, it’s a real positive.’ As a result of these new connections, Creation Theatre and Big Telly’s current production of Alice is being created in partnership with tech company charisma.ai (https://charisma.ai/), whom Seaton describes as ‘a natural fit’ because ‘they were interested in our kind of live immersive interactive storytelling and we were interested in their technical skill and ability to work with bigger audiences.’

**Funding:**
The company’s digital transformation has opened up new avenues for funding that is geared towards creative partnerships, local enterprise, gaming and digital innovation in addition to traditional sources of funding such as Arts Council England. Creation Theatre and Big Telly’s current partnership with charisma.ai, for example, has opened up access to the tech partner’s Innovate UK funding stream and to funding from Future Screens NI (which Northern Irish Big Telly is eligible for). This, Lucy Askew (CE and Creative Producer; Creation Theatre) recognises, ‘is indicative of the fact that there’s a whole load of funding and support that is geared at tech industries and gaming and innovation that normally theatres wouldn’t even consider looking at.’

**Looking ahead:**
The shift to digital shows has been so successful that Creation Theatre is keen to continue producing digital work alongside its physical shows even beyond lockdown to continue growing its digital audience, with some shows planned from the start in both physical and digital formats. The benefits from remote working have been such that the company anticipates that even after Covid-related restrictions on movement and social interaction are relaxed, meetings will continue to be mostly held online and that members of the team will continue to work remotely (subject to consultation).
Digital Theatre Transformation, Part 2:  
Understanding the impact of shift to online working for Creation Theatre staff

**Equipment requirements**

The shift to home working has necessitated all employees to use their private mobile telephone and laptop or PC for work, to have a webcam, and to have a work space and secure internet connection in their home.

**Workflows and Processes**

All meetings have moved online as a matter of course, and this is a practice that is likely to continue beyond the Covid-19 period, as it has been a key means of cutting down on travel, with savings on time, money and environmental cost (see Environmental Gains, below). Despite the increase in the workload for individuals, there has been no significant change in the overall number of hours worked. Working patterns have become much more flexible to fit around specific tasks (e.g. supporting a performance) and individual needs and household set-ups.

Several members of the team report that the change to digital modes of working not only on the administration and organisation of a company and its shows but on the show itself has led to an increased ability for members of staff who need to have some oversight of creative processes to be at hand to contribute to those processes when needed, without the delays that characterise the work on a physical production. Digital working enables multi-tasking, Key figures (Creative Producer, Production Manager, Stage Manager) are able to work on organisational tasks while also being available to drop in on Zoom rehearsals. The ability to switch webcams off while listening into a discussion allows for a more discreet presence in the virtual rehearsal room than would be possible in a physical space. That, in turn, enables Production Manager and Deputy Stage Manager to trouble-shoot and Chief Executive and Creative Producer Lucy Askew to keep a ‘top level awareness of the conversations going on and how the work is developing’ and to be closer to the cast, whom she regularly joins at the beginning and at the end of each performance.

That closeness is key at a time when performers are adapting to new ways of working and she needs to be at hand to know ‘how they’re all feeling, and also supporting their mental health in lockdown.’ It also enables Askew, along with Video Designer Stuart Read, to help out with the technical aspects of the production and feed into the audio-visual work (pre-recorded video content and virtual backgrounds).
Online working also facilitates Chief Executive and Creative Producer Lucy Askew’s remote participation in front of house activities before and after each show to greet the audience, introduce the show and, at the end of it, open up the show for applause, further information and informal exchanges. For her, the fact that ‘we know our audiences really well’ has been an important factor in the company’s regular audiences returning to see their digital work. Askew explains:

‘Even on a normal show, even though I wouldn’t be there as much, I will go to the Front of the House to meet the audience and talk to the audience and see the audience as much as I can. So for me it’s been quite an important part of our development is to see the audience every night.’

Seeing who is in the audience and how audiences respond to the digital work enables her to gage the success of the show along with its ability to continue engaging the company’s regular audiences while reaching out to a new audience base (see Part 5 of this report).

**Behavioural changes**

For Creation’s staff, the change to home working has involved greatly increased flexibility in working hours, which now extend to include supporting performances as they happen. This is offset by no longer needing to travel to work and the benefits of being able to organise workloads more independently and fit work around other commitments. This has benefits for the work/life balance of members of staff who have young families and caring responsibilities, but it has also involved staff having to be much more careful to take regular breaks and get some exercise.

‘Due to my home circumstances (juggling childcare) I have to be slightly more flexible with my working hours. … There are positives to this too of course. … I don’t have to travel to London and Oxford for PM meetings/auditions etc. We are successfully navigating these on Zoom and everyone’s time is used more efficiently. … so although I miss a coffee with colleagues and the likes, I don’t miss the office structure.’ – Crissy O’Donovan, Producer

‘Being able to cook and relax on lunch breaks in your own home is a huge benefit …. As my living and working space have merged, I have often found it difficult to ‘clock off’ and stop thinking about work at the end of the day and on days off. I have stored my work diary and laptop in a cupboard and planned after work activities such as running, cooking, cycling to be able to maintain a work/life balance.’ – Emily Walsh, Assistant Marketing Manager – Emily Walsh, Assistant Marketing Manager
'The digital element and being at home makes it easier to maintain some element of work/life balance. Overall I feel online work and working from home has been very beneficial for my wellbeing.' — Lucy Askew, CE and Creative Producer

Members of staff also reported consciously making the choice to take on extra work and not be too concerned about their work/life balance at present. As Lucy Askew put it: ‘It’s very difficult for anything else to feel important when the stakes are so high for so many people.’

Generally, Creation Theatre staff reported higher levels of concentration and productivity in themselves and their co-workers since shifting to home-working, with Emily Walsh (Assistant Marketing Manager) reporting: ‘I have been able to focus on writing content for the website, emails etc. much more quickly, easily and successfully at home, and generally feeling like I get more work completed.’ Members of staff cite the absence of travel, of interruptions and the ability to multi-task in a digital workplace as key factors that increased their productivity.

**Environmental gains**

Moving to exclusively digital marketing strategies has obviated the need for printed leaflets, posters, and banners, with a large reduction in the use of paper and printing. Staff no longer travel to work. This, depending on their job role and need to attend casting sessions and production meetings in various parts of the country, makes a significant difference (especially when the collaboration between Northern Irish Big Telly and English Creation Theatre for The Tempest is taken into account, which involves flights). Staff also generate less waste packaging from meals and drinks consumed during the working day.

‘I’m even considering getting rid of my car, and much easier to take the time to peg washing out to dry instead of using the tumble dryer!’ — Lucy Askew, CE and Creative Producer

The energy consumption gains from no longer running a physical office in Oxford are offset by the extra energy consumption generated by all staff working in their individual homes.

**Challenges**

The main challenges in the shift to digital work for Creation Theatre’s permanent core team had to do with maintaining a work/life balance when the physical and temporal boundaries between the two are blurred, and the fact that they miss informal chats with colleagues and the ease with which some problems are dealt with in an office setting in which informal communication is the norm.
For Lucy Askew, an additional challenge has been that it is ‘harder to have conversations with the audience outside of the shows’, a problem she counters by engaging with remote audience she recognises as regular attendants after the shows and in making sure she is highly visible both before and after the end of each show. This helps in continuing to build ‘that personal connection to the company’ and provide the audience with ‘a sort of anchor point where they go ‘this is Creation’ and it is a sort of personal thing.’ To maintain a personal relationship with The Time Machine’s sponsors, furthermore, Creation Theatre set up a breakout room for them at the end of a show.

Opportunities

All Creation Theatre staff with organisational responsibilities who replied to our questionnaire reported that overall, the move to working online had been a ‘mostly positive experience, with some challenges but also positive changes’. Staff reported reduced fatigue from travel, increased ability to combine work with childcare, increased productivity and the ability to multi-task and be more involved in the creative aspects of the organisation, in rehearsals and in the running of shows.

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20 Answer to the questionnaire question: “How do you rate the change to your work patterns resulting from the move online?”, which allowed the following responses:

1 = very difficult, very negative experience
2 = difficult, mostly negative experience
3 = not that different from my normal experience of work
4 = a mostly positive experience, with some challenges but also positive changes
5 = a highly positive experience, work has become easier.
Digital Theatre Transformation, Part 3: Making Digital Theatre

A key component of the company’s digital transformation was its rapid shift from an analogue mode of making theatre to a digital mode. In part, this was facilitated by the fact that neither Creation Theatre nor Big Telly own their own venue but specialise in putting on immersive, site-specific and promenade performances in found indoor spaces and outdoor locations. For Al Barclay, there is a clear connection between the company’s specialism in site-specific theatre and the ease of digital transformation: ‘Creation don’t have a building... so they immediately shifted because of course they make [theatre] wherever, so they made it online, that’s their new building... It is “adapt or die”, we’re at that stage, unfortunately.’

The transition was also made easier by the intrinsic adaptability of the company’s permanent staff and the freelancers it employs. Giles Stoakley (Production Manager and Performer) explains:

‘Theatre is great at evolution. Because you tend to combine a set of people who are … open to new ideas, who are creative and open to trying things, and from a technical point of view, are very committed to improvisation and working quickly. So I suppose we’re … an ideal industry to move this forward.’

Paul Taylor (Performer) concurs: ‘The skill of having to adapt so quickly is not a new skill to actors or directors, because we have that as a soft skill anyway.’ Even so, members of the company and its performers are aware of being one of the first companies to have managed a complete digital transformation of both the administrative and the creative sides of the business. Annabelle May Terry, who played Miranda in The Tempest and has since been involved in Alice, expresses a widespread view within the team when she says that Creation ‘do really feel like pioneers and it did feel like that even when we were doing the Tempest right at the beginning it felt like we were part of something amazing and the next, a new genre almost.’

That sense of the being pioneers who are just beginning to understand the creative potential of digital theatre is echoed by Lucy Askew (CE and Creative Producer), for whom the company’s creative work with Zoom is ‘moving into a territory which is as much live film or as much live gaming as it is theatre.’ Zoe Seaton (Artistic Director; Big Telly and director; The Tempest and Alice) concurs: ‘It’s looking at what we can do on Zoom that we can’t do in the real world […] and that feels like we are finding a new art form rather than an old one.’ Askew is keen not to see their work defined as, and thereby limited to, ‘Zoom theatre’. She prefers to describe their work as ‘digital theatre’, which allows for ‘a whole palette of possibilities that we can play with […] a kind of spectrum of things we can draw in and learn from and we can meld together, but that means that there’s space within that for wildly different levels of interactivity, there’s space within that for wildly different levels for how an audience experiences that, of whether they’re seen or not seen and what their position is within that experience.’

This is an important caveat to bear in mind for readers of this report which, with its focus on the performance on Zoom of the 2020 Tempest, is necessarily concerned primarily with how Creation Theatre in collaboration with Big Telly adapted the Zoom platform for performance.
Workflows and processes

Just as the administration of the company entirely moved to online communication via email, telephone and videoconferencing, the creative side of the company’s work also moved to remote ways of working and communicating. This could, at times, lead to additional delays in decision-making. On the whole, however, this led to an acceleration in the speed of the creative work, as Producer, Creative Producer, Production Manager and Stage Manager could more easily be virtually present during rehearsals while also working on their other tasks and could therefore often answer questions and work on solutions within a rehearsal rather than between rehearsals. As Sinéad Owens (Stage Manager) put it: ‘Because you’re working on your computer already, it’s much quicker to do the things that need to be done.’

Shifts in responsibilities

The economic pressures on the company meant that The Tempest was produced with the lowest possible number of creative staff. The 2019 physical production’s creative team of seven (Adaptor/director, Designer, Sound Designer, Lighting Designer, Video Designer, Stage Manager, Production Manager) was shrunk to a core team of four for the digital production, which no longer needed a physical set and could be created without needing individuals in exclusive charge of sound and lighting design. For the 2020 Zoom Tempest, the team consisted of Adaptor/Director Zoe Seaton, Designer Ryan Dawson Laight, Stage Manager Sinéad Owens, and Production Manager Giles Stoakley, with occasional assistance from the original production’s Video Designer Stuart Read, who helped out with the digital show’s pre-recorded video footage of Miranda and Ferdinand which presented the illusion of Miranda and Ferdinand sharing a screen as an effect of Prospero’s magic.

The transition to digital, and the concomitant reduction in the size of the creative team, resulted in the following shifts in their roles and responsibilities:

**Director:** For Zoe Seaton, the show’s director (and Big Telly’s Artistic Director), the changes were confined to the modes of working rather than her role and responsibilities, although she also reported feeling ‘more involved across the whole business.’

**Designer:** for The Tempest, much of the designer’s job was to do with working with the performers individually on their costume design and the adaptation of their existing wardrobe for the purposes of the production. Performers had to provide him with measurements and costume fittings were done via Zoom, with the designer guiding the performers to adapt their own clothes where possible, with additional items (costumes and properties) mailed to them. With no physical set to construct, the designer became responsible for suggesting the aesthetic for the digital backdrops. Sinéad Owens (Stage Manager) describes this as being ‘like doing a mood board in the real theatre world, but he was able to just give pictures of the things that he wanted and then we would put those in as the background.’ The designer also guided one member of the cast, who had been unable to use green screen or projection technologies, through assembling the props and décor needed to effect the conversion of a cupboard into their character’s den for the performance.
Production Manager: this role expanded and shifted significantly. For the 2019 Tempest, the production manager had been in charge of allocating and overseeing budgets and, taking over some of the traditional roles of the stage manager, had helped with the building and striking of the physical set, carrying out major repairs on it and checking of its safety throughout the run. For the 2020 digital production, the role became much more technical. Giles Stoakley (production manager) describes his work on the Zoom production as ‘just monitoring things’ and as being there in rehearsals to ensure the financial and technical feasibility of ideas. This does not, however, lead to a reduction in the production manager’s workload, as

‘the other stuff becomes much more difficult, just because you can’t access people, because it’s incredibly difficult to teach an actor who isn’t technological and has no basis of knowledge of this, to use a relatively complicated software programme and to not only teach it to them, but to teach it to them remotely.’

The production manager’s remit on The Tempest also extended to organising the logistics of shipping costumes, props, and elements of set design to performers’ homes and organise their return at the end of the run, and to thinking through the impact of rehearsals and performances on performers’ lives and the people with whom they shared their homes. New strategies had to be devised for remote risk assessments of performers’ home studio sets, and new challenges arose to square the production’s budget with performers’ needs for loans of tech equipment (see ‘Equipment Requirements’ below).

Stage Manager: This is the role which underwent the most significant shift. All physical aspects of the role were dropped and made way for an entirely technical role which combined ‘elements of television producer and Deputy Stage Manager’ (Giles Stoakley, Production Manager). The change brought with it opportunities to work with a new set of people and ‘huge opportunities to upskill as a result of working online’ (Sinéad Owens, Stage Manager). The process of technical upskilling involved taking online tutorials on how to use the Zoom platform, a lot of ‘playing around’ with the software, as well as experiments in and between rehearsals to work out the platform’s compatibility with other types of software that could amplify Zoom’s affordances and adapt it for performance. With the shift in the Stage Manager’s role came a tongue-in-cheek re-naming of Sinéad Owens’ credit for the Zoom Tempest, which identified her as ‘Zoom Wizard’.

‘I started being mentioned in reviews for the first time ever. All the shows I’ve ever done on stage, stage managing in theatres, and stage managers never get mentioned. And then we did it on Zoom and people starting mentioning the stage manager – it’s so weird!’ – Sinéad Owens, Stage Manager

Much of the work of the Stage Manager on Zoom involves live vision mixing, using the platform’s ‘spotlighting’ function to select which screen to show to the audience. When all performers are designated ‘co-hosts’ for the Zoom call, they are automatically presented at the top of the list of call participants, making it easier for the SM to find and spotlight them on cue. A function that was available in April/May 2020 but which has since been disabled by the platform was the ability of the Zoom host to mute and unmute the audience; by July 2020, the ability to unmute has been disabled as a safeguarding measure to prevent eavesdropping on participants without their consent.
For The Tempest’s moments of audience interaction that involved the collective creation of sound effects by all participants (e.g. the rain of the opening tempest, or the cry of the birds pursuing the shipwrecked courtiers), the Stage Manager was responsible for unmuting and muting audience microphones and spotlighting and thus integrating in the production members of the audience who were participating with particular enthusiasm.

The Stage Manager was also responsible for operating the sound effects for the show. Because Zoom is designed as a videoconferencing platform, it privileges the sound of the human voice over other sounds, which presents challenges for the use of music and other sound effects. The platform is also designed to automatically spotlight whoever is speaking, so that unmuted performers could, by making a noise before starting to speak their next line, have their screen spotlighted without the Stage Manager’s input, making it possible for the Stage Manager to work on other cues in the background. The Stage Manager furthermore was in charge of spotlighting whoever was not speaking but was either listening to the speaker and responding in an interesting way or doing something else to which the audience needed to pay attention.

The additional requirements regarding sound and vision mixing were effected by using pieces of software that were compatible with Zoom. Vision mixing was done by using ManyCam, which Zoom recognises as one of the camera options and which allows the Stage Manager and performers to switch between the different cameras of individual performers (where applicable). For sound, the company settled on QLab, which was operated as QLab Remote via the Stage Manager’s smartphone. This was connected to Zoom on her laptop through the use of a shared IP address, allowing the Stage Manager to spotlight a performer on the Zoom screen while also cueing sound via QLab Remote. For sound editing, Owens used Adobe audition, which allowed her to feed in sound effects even during rehearsals.

Throughout, the Stage Manager maintained her normal role of people management within the creative team, looking after the performers’ welfare and acting as a go-between between the actors and the company. This was more challenging without face-to-face conversations and opportunities, in the margins of rehearsals, to catch up with individual performers. On Zoom, Owens finds ‘it’s hard to gauge whether people are being involved’ and additional structures need to be put in place to ensure that performers do report and discuss whatever issues may be affecting them.

Performers: The digital setting also affected the responsibilities of the performers, who, guided by the Production Manager and Stage Manager, had to convert a part of their home into a studio set and learn a set of new technical and cognitive skills (see ‘skills set requirements’ below) in order to operate their equipment during rehearsals and performances. Guided by the Designer, performers were also required to take their own costume measurements, adapt costumes, and assist in the sourcing of props by using suitable items they had in their homes. The move to digital forms of working therefore meant an expansion of the performer’s role to work more closely with the creative team to co-produce elements of the design and technological solutions; it also involved in a decrease in their responsibility for managing the audience during and after performances.

21 In addition to ManyCam (https://manyacam.com/), OBS (https://obsproject.com/) and vMix (https://www.vmix.com/) were used by various members of the team.
Casting

Save for one performer (Rhodri Lewis, who stepped into the role of Trinculo), the cast for the 2020 The Tempest was drawn from the same pool of actors who had previously been part of the 2019 production. Two roles (the Captain and Head of Security) were dropped, which resulted Giles Stoakley slotting into the role of Antonio. The cast were selected for their fit for the role rather than their technical abilities and set-ups. Since then, all of Creation’s digital shows have used videoconferencing for auditions and have taken no account of performers’ technical limitations but cast the best performer for the role, on the assumption that the company would be able to supply whatever technological upgrades were needed by an individual performer.

‘Creation are really committed… that you can’t cast people on their technical limitations.’ – Giles Stoakley, Production Manager and Performer

‘We’re not doing a demonstration of Zoom wizardry, we’re telling a story. Some kind of technical skill can be helpful because it’ll make people feel freer to be playful I think but I think it’s the kind of people who want to write their own show or have already done this or have devised something. I think those actors thrive really well and they go away after rehearsal and come in and go ‘I’ve got a yoghurt pot and a toilet roll does it look like a gas mask?’ and they are genuinely investigating the medium and those are the people.’ – Zoe Seaton, Artistic Director of Big Telly and Director of The Tempest

Equipment requirements

Many members of the creative team have needed to either upgrade their broadband connection or to get additional mobile phone data, to transfer from their WiFi or broadband connection to their smartphone in the event of connection issues.

Additionally, members of the creative team had the following equipment needs:

Stage Manager:
Computing Hardware: laptop, smartphone, monitor.
Computing Software and Applications: Zoom, QLab, ManyCam, Adobe Audition, WhatsApp

Performers:
Computing Hardware: laptop or PC, smartphone, monitor, webcam(s) (if not integrated in laptop or PC, or if more than one camera angle is required), podcast microphone (if not integrated in laptop or PC), GoPro remote control (if performance requires distance from the laptop/PC).
Computing Software and Applications: Zoom, WhatsApp
Other equipment: Soft box lights to light the green screen(s), LED lights, green screen(s), blackout curtains or panels.

For Zoom’s specifications for static or moving virtual backgrounds, see https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/360043484511-System-requirements-for-Virtual-Background. Note that the way Zoom is set up for iPad tablets restricts gallery view in a way performers have found difficult to work with. On The Tempest, one of the performers was working with a device that did not have the specifications needed for chroma key/virtual backgrounds; the solution was to use a projector to create the backgrounds for this performer’s scenes.

The size of monitor is an important factor: the larger, the easier it is to see the faces of other performers and the audience, making the job of the performer easier. Note that Zoom can be set up to split the screen between two monitors, with one monitor on “Speaker View” and the other on “Gallery View”, making it possible for performers to keep an eye on the rest of the cast and the audience while performing a scene.
Skills set and training requirements

Zoom:
The main responsibility for learning to use Zoom and its compatibility with QLab and ManyCam lay with the Stage Manager (for the Stage Manager’s Skills Sets, see ‘Shifts in Responsibilities’ above). All members of the team had to learn to use the platform, guided in part by online tutorials and in part by the Stage Manager and the Production Manager as well as other members of the team.

‘We just got very used to zoom in the first few days of rehearsals and navigated it together.’ — **Madeleine McMahon, Performer**

‘We learnt as we went through the first ever rehearsals we had for The Tempest. We learnt through trial and error and from one another.’ — **Annabelle May Terry, Performer**

Performers also had to learn, again with guidance from Production Manager and Stage Manager, to set up a studio in their homes, with green screens, repurposed lights owned by the performers, soft box lights, and microphones, and they had to learn to operate that equipment. Performers were required to be able to learn the commands on the Zoom platform and be able to set up and change their chroma key backgrounds on cue. Some performers additionally learned to edit videos for their backgrounds and to use ManyCam so as to be able to switch between more than one webcam within their individual home studio set, or switch between backgrounds.

In addition, performers had to adapt their performance style to Zoom, which involved learning to look into the camera rather than the screen, using depth within the shot while keeping at least a one-metre distance from the green screen to avoid casting a shadow onto the screen. Coming in on their cues more rapidly than would feel appropriate on stage was a strategy performers developed to cover up connectivity lags. Some of the performers report using skills that they had learned when acting for television, reducing the size of their performance to fit the medium and matching their eyelines with those of other performers.

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24 For The Tempest, performers were still required to change their own backgrounds. This is now no longer a necessity, as ManyCam and V-mix software allow the Stage Manager to operate background changes remotely.
Eyeline matches between Trinculo (Rhodri Lewis) and Caliban (Paul Taylor)

As Madeleine McMahon (Performer) put it:

‘telling a story on this level a performance can quite quickly look quite large and over the top, but if you were to do it this size in the middle of the Olivier theatre, it would seem a very small character. So you’re paring down the way that you perform the character while at the same time being aware that the interactive nature that the director wanted was for a theatre crowd.’

For Rhodri Lewis (Performer), acting for a laptop camera can create a sense of ‘intimacy’ and facilitate Shakespearean asides directly to the audience. Performers had to become their own director of photography to check their lighting, framing and camera angle. They also had to learn to be sufficiently quiet when it was not their turn to be spotlit to avoid accidentally ‘pulling focus’ and being spotlit automatically. Conversely, when required, they had to get used to starting their lines with a plausible sound (such as clearing their throat) in order to trigger being spotlit in time for the beginning of their actual line. Giles Stoakley (Production Manager and Peformer) sums it up as: ‘just wrestling with Zoom is a skill in itself but we have all learned a completely new style of acting that is a curious combination of screen and stage acting.’

‘If you’re in a scene with somebody, or speaking to somebody else over here potentially and then if you cut to them and see where their eyeliner is […] After doing that I discovered that actually, in film and TV there is a person whose job it is to do that, in film especially, there is a person on set and that’s their job, to work out those eyelines and making sure that you’re looking in the right place and stuff. It’s just interesting […] to play with that but you don’t normally get the opportunity to do that, but because we are rehearsing, because we take the time to do it — in theatre you rehearse quite a bit compared to TV — you were able to spend time doing that, seeing what difference that makes and suddenly if you’re in a scene or you’re doing something, especially if you’re doing Shakespeare then you’re have an aside and suddenly the aside is right there in the screen, it sort of really changes it.’ — Rhodri Lewis, Performer

‘90% of our communication is non-audible so it’s not the stuff that we say but the way we say it and our body language. On Zoom, you’re not getting all of that so people are doing a lot more nodding and going ooh and ahh and in a normal setting we would usually take all of that information in, all in one go in a big circle of people, when everybody is a little square you feel like you have to make that clearer, going yes I’m agreeing with you, good idea. It can be quite tiring actually.’ — Madeleine McMahon, Performer — Madeleine McMahon, Performer
Most performers commented on the additional cognitive demands of this mode of performance, although some also recognise that it is not intrinsically different from the multi-tasking required when speaking a line while hitting a mark on stage and handling a prop. Zoom theatre requires actors to perform for a camera while also discreetly getting ready for the next technical cue to mute or unmute themselves, change their own chroma key background, or trigger being spotlit automatically by making a sound while unmuted. All the while, performers also need to keep an eye on the team’s WhatsApp group chat to check whether another performer is having connectivity issues and needs someone to improvise to cover the glitch while it is being resolved.

Improvisation of that kind was called upon in several performances in which a performer’s internet connection was unstable or a microphone had accidentally left muted, prompting another performer to intervene with “It sounds like you’re saying to me…” and then exactly saying [the muted performer’s] line’ (Al Barclay, Performer), or, as happened in Henry VIII, to come up with a pastiche of meta-Zoomic Shakespearean English such as ‘Sirrah, unmute thy microphone!’

**Designing for Zoom**

Whereas the design for The Tempest relied on what the creative team could quickly throw together by combining virtual and projected backgrounds with home-sourced props and costumes, design is probably the area in which the most rapid developments are taking place. For Alice, Creation Theatre and Big Telly are working with partner Charisma A.I. to create an immersive digital experience that involves the illusion of disappearing into the rabbit hole, while also experimenting with more theatrical conventions. The show’s director, Zoe Seaton, who also directed The Tempest, describes the evolution between the two shows:

‘We’ve probably refined it in Alice, we’ve been clearer about, having done a few Zoom shows, about what we care about and when we feel it comes alive and, for me, there’s so much storytelling we can do and anything can happen in this space and let’s tell a story and let’s use film as foley and let’s use puppets and let’s use shadows and let’s rig up a snow machine and let’s make this space extraordinary.’

**Backgrounds:**

Chroma key was used in The Tempest to produce the digital backgrounds for the majority of the performers who had been able to rig up green screens in their home studios and had access to hardware that matched Zoom’s specifications. Digital backgrounds could be static or, hardware permitting, could include video.

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25 For Zoom’s specifications for static or moving virtual backgrounds, see https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/360043484511-System-requirements-for-Virtual-Background. See also footnote 18.
To achieve a sense of spatial depth, performers needed as large a room and green screen as possible, so as to be able to act in the space between the camera and a minimum 1 metre distance from the green screen. Maintaining that distance from the green screen was key to keeping the screen evenly lit without casting shadows over it that interfered with chroma key. Performers whose home set-ups did not allow much distance between the camera and the green screen were restricted in their ability to convey a sense of depth and were confined to head-and-shoulder shots, whereas cast members in larger rooms were able to do three-quarter and even full body shots and move more freely within the frame, stretching the videoconferencing aesthetic of the platform to a more filmic aesthetic.

‘had a very restricted plane of movement and where I fitted some of the scene, and then I took a bit of time adjusting and tweaked all the lights and sorted, kind of, the background, and moved the laptop further away from the green screen. So then I could use perspective, I could make myself smaller or bigger and I could come in and out of shot a bit more.’
In order to create the illusion that actors sharing a scene were in the same space, it was not possible to use the exact same virtual backdrop for those actors. Instead, the angle of the backdrop had to be adapted along with the performer’s positioning vis-à-vis the backdrop and within the frame, so that they could plausibly be imagined as being in slightly different parts of the same environment. Stage Manager Sinéad Owens recalls being ‘quite precise: when two people were in the same room, you’d see them at a slightly different angle so it didn’t look like they just had a picture behind them … but you could believe they were in the same room.’ For Henry VIII, this included, for example, different ends of the hall in Oxford’s Convocation House to be shown for two scene partners who were consequently imagined as spatially located face-to-face in the middle of that room. The design of virtual backdrops furthermore needed to bear in mind the plausibility of dimensions in relation to the size of the actor’s body, with, for instance, ceilings high enough not to visually press down on the head of a character.

Giles Stoakley (Production Manager and Performer) explains:

“You have to spend a lot of time making it look like you are in the space, because scale is something that you obviously can’t control. Because if you’re building a set, you’re building it human-sized. If you’re pulling a picture out and putting it on a flat surface behind an actor, it may be that the door is far too small for them to get through. So you’d have to look at either editing that photo, or you have to move the actor towards or away from the camera, but space limits that.’

For The Tempest, one performer was unable to use any backgrounds but opted, guided by the show’s designer, to create a physical set design in a cupboard that was repurposed as Ariel’s cave. Zoe Seaton (Artistic Director and Director of The Tempest) recalls: ‘we just started trying to help her to build a space in her house which felt like Ariel’s cave and for me that was more beautiful than any virtual background we could have had’. Another performer did not have access to the hardware needed for chroma key and therefore used a projector to cast an image of a background onto a white wall; all scenes involving that performer were accordingly performed against projected images to maintain a sense of shared location between characters in the same scene.

Costumes and properties: Costume and prop design was limited for The Tempest, given the speed at which it was converted into a Zoom show, to items that had been used for the previous year’s physical show, small items that could be shipped to performers, and items owned by the performers and adapted for the production with the guidance of the designer. For subsequent shows, Creation Theatre’s designer has worked with performers to obtain their measurements and done costume fittings via videocalls. Performers report having to be very careful about the colour of their garments when using chroma key, as colours that are too close to the colour of the green screen can be absorbed by the virtual background:

‘… if I got it just a little bit wrong part of me would just vanish. … I kept disappearing into [the projection behind him] because if the light was wrong, the black of my jacket, so I’d get it off as quickly as I could. Or the blue of my tie: there was no point wearing a tie at all, really, it kept being eaten up. So until I had a proper green screen that was… a lot of it had to do with “how do I light myself”’ - Al Barclay, Performer
Performers report that working with what was at hand "limits the creativity of the design and places more emphasis on the creativity of the use" (Giles Stookley, Production Manager and Performer). Properties and their imaginative use in *The Tempest* were a key way of maintaining the theatricality of the production in a screen setting. Examples include a simple board repurposed as a trap door entrance into Prospero's control room; a combination of computer wires, headphones and a live snake that allowed King Alonso to rig up an impromptu communication device through which he could interact directly with the audience and ask them to show him the pets and cuddly toys that helped them through their respective solitudes; and a hole in a 'tree trunk' (a flat panel with a tree trunk print on it) enabling Miranda and Ferdinand to communicate in a manner that worked as an intertheatrical citation of Pyramus and Thisbe's wall in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Performers also report that having to rely on them to provide elements of props and costume design made them feel somewhat under pressure. As *The Tempest*’s director Zoe Seaton also explains, the reliance on home-sourced props and costumes, while ‘brilliant’ in that ‘actors [are] more involved in the process of home made props/effects,... also needs a designer to pull the aesthetic elements together.’

**Lighting:**

Lighting design for Zoom is more akin to lighting for television than it is to lighting for a theatrical set. The basic principle of Zoom lighting to enable a smooth functioning of chroma key is that the green screen behind the performer needs to be lit clearly and evenly, without shadows cast onto it by the performer or props, and that the performer needs additional lighting on their face and body.
Production Manager Giles Stoakley explains the ideal lighting set-up for the use of chroma key on Zoom: ‘in a world of dreams you’d be in a studio and the actor would have lighting on them from the two diagonals in front them, the key light behind them, and then your green screen would be separately lit. And then, in a world of dreams, you’d never be closer to your green screen than a metre... so that you’re not casting shadows on the green screen.’ He concludes: ‘We can’t do that in bedrooms. So it’s just about trying, and it’s a really difficult battle.’

Lighting design for The Tempest was the responsibility of the Production Manager and the Stage Manager, who guided performers to repurpose whatever lights they had in the house and to position the additional soft box lights several performers purchased with the bonus payment they referred to as their ‘tech budget’ so as to achieve the dual goal of lighting both the green screen and the performer. Lighting also turned out to be a factor in creating the perception of depth in the relation of an actor vis-à-vis their virtual backdrop. Performers working in rooms with a lot of natural light additionally had to find ways of blocking out that light if it interfered with their studio lights, as natural and artificial light are not on the same spectrum.

**Sound:**

Like lighting, sound design is challenging on the Zoom platform, mainly because it is a platform designed for videoconferencing rather than performance and is therefore set up to privilege and respond to the human voice, which can trigger the automatic spotlighting of an unmuted participant’s screen. If performers are using webcams or laptops with integrated microphones, furthermore, those, too, are designed for videoconferencing rather than performance and are therefore predominantly directional, with good audio for speech addressed to the camera but less good audio capture for sounds produced from the side or to the side or towards the rear of the home studio. Some performers therefore used additional podcast microphones that could capture their voices from other parts of their home studios than their laptop’s or webcam’s built-in microphone.

> ‘Sound quality can be improved by separating microphone from speaker, i.e. using a separate speaker that is far away from the inbuilt microphone in your laptop.’  – Ryan Duncan, Performer

Performers also found it challenging to know how loud they should be in their vocal delivery and reported that it was ‘hard to [...] self-monitor as you are only at the production end of sound for yourself’ (AI Barclay, Performer). The problem is compounded by the fact that the sound levels that the Stage Manager hears when feeding a sound effect or an underscore into the performance using QLab (see Part 3: Shifts in Responsibilities: Stage Manager), the sound that can be heard at the Stage Manager’s end is at a different level from that heard by participants in the show. Stage Manager Sinéad Owens stresses that ‘If you want an underscore, it has to be really quiet or else it will become the dominant sound’. Production Manager Giles Stoakley adds that ‘the limitations of Zoom mean that [sound] design is necessarily compromised by the importance of hearing the actor clearly.’

For The Tempest, the production team also ran up against problems with permissions. They were unable to use some of the music that had been part of the 2019 physical production and for which they had obtained PRS permissions when they moved online, mainly because staff at PRS had been furloughed and the company was asked to secure permissions directly with the rights holders.
As this process was too slow for the timeline of the production, the team had to resort to using music that had no copyright restrictions and to changing the sound design for the production accordingly.

Directing for Zoom: Zoom affordances and dramaturgy
Zoom affordances: a new performance medium

‘The Tempest, you know, it was a new form in a way for all of us’ – Al Barclay, Performer

Members of the production team for The Tempest expressed their awareness that while what they were creating involved borrowing from the conventions of theatre, film, television and even radio, they were essentially experimenting with a new, hybrid, performance medium that has unique affordances. Giles Stoakley (Production Manager and Performer) is clear that ‘Zoom theatre is not a piece of film and the live element of the form means that striving for perfection is actually obstructive to the story telling’. Zoom theatre, thanks to the use of virtual backgrounds, allows for swift and creative changes in location and scene: ‘Change your background in the blink of an eye! Disappear and reappear! Basically lots of special effects’ (Annabelle May Terry, Performer). As that comment shows, a key element for members of the Tempest team was the playfulness that was possible in the medium: when they realised that performer Rhodri Lewis’ green screen was prone to ‘swallowing up’ the bottle he was holding as Trinculo, they worked the magical disappearance of the bottle into an alcohol-fuelled set piece.

![Trinculo (Rhodri Lewis) and the disappearing bottle](image)

That playfulness, in turn, was understood as a signifier of both the liveness and theatricality of the medium:

‘There’s a joy in the playfulness. Live theatre is about the playfulness. So when an audience goes and watches a live show, everybody knows that an actor can forget their lines, … and everybody sometimes watches the prop that doesn’t do what it’s supposed to do or is not there, and everybody watches a live solution, and then afterwards they go: “I couldn’t tell whether that was supposed to happen or not” and that [is the] joy of the knife edge, of the possibility of total collapse — and the fact that it doesn’t happen.’ – Al Barclay, Performer

It is this playfulness, too, that turned potential disasters into serendipitous gains, as happened in a performance in which Paul Taylor, playing Caliban, had issues with his internet connection and Zoom issued the warning, visible on audiences’ screens, that ‘Caliban’s network bandwidth is low’ [check], which was promptly interpreted by audiences as the software’s validation of the character’s lack of intelligence.
While videoconferencing cannot replicate entirely the experience of co-presence in a single time and place, and performers reported missing the ability to physically interact with the audience through touch and share sensory experiences such as smell with them, some performers actually reported an increase in the quality of interaction with the audience on Zoom. For performer Annabelle May Terry, the ability to ‘see the audience and how they are reacting’ was in some ways superior to what is ‘possible in traditional theatre space’ when the house lights are down. Ryan Duncan (Performer) concurs: while Zoom doesn’t allow performers to ‘touch audience members, lead them somewhere, share a prop with them … now you have the opportunity of someone in their living room not feeling everybody’s eyes on them, feeling safe, so people do really silly things.’ Other performers commented on the intimacy possible between the performer speaking to the camera as if directly to an individual audience member, likening the experience to radio technique, which also involves treating the microphone as a single conversation partner. Al Barclay (Performer), too, took a positive view of the forms of togetherness facilitated by the videoconferencing platform: ‘You know, we enjoyed the fun of the backgrounds, we know the people aren’t in the room together and that’s sort of making an advantage of a disadvantage, which is what Creation and Big Telly sort of taught us could be so fun and fulfilling in a way because when we can’t be in a room with each other we kind of more and more we want to feel that, and feel like we’re connected to each other.’

**Dramaturgy for Zoom:**

**Running time and script editing:**

Members of the creative team agree that ‘Zoom fatigue’ is real and affects not only performers, but also viewers. Zoom shows therefore have to be limited in duration, with 60-75 minutes cited as the ideal to maximum lengths of a performance. This has a significant impact on dramaturgy and textual editing, with what can in the theatre be a three-hour running time for The Tempest reduced, for the 2020 digital production, to just over one hour.

**Audience participation:**

‘I don’t think that Zoom theatre is worth doing unless the audience are aware that we are aware of the audience. So you have to show audience members in a Zoom show otherwise it’s simply not worth doing.’

— Giles Stoakley, Production Manager and Performer

Members of the team agreed that for The Tempest, involving the audience in the show was crucial ‘in order that the production feels live so there has to be an insertion of some kind of interaction’ (Giles Stoakley, Production Manager and Performer). Audience interaction could take a variety of forms: it could consist of audience members volunteering to ask a question at a ‘press conference’ at the start of the show, contributing to the creation of a soundscape for the tempest or various island animals, which was possible with cameras muted but sound unmuted, or being spotlit while creating a sound, performing as a predatory island bird or dog, or while tantalisingly waving food at the hungry shipwrecked courtiers (waving a coveted packet of rice at a time when rice was unobtainable in supermarkets became a shared joke in the early weeks of lockdown). As Simon Spencer-Hyde (Performer) reported, the show’s ‘specifically interactive content so the audience could be involved […] worked very well indeed.’
Production Manager Giles Stoakley sees being able to ‘involve the audience without them feeling singled out or uncomfortable’ as a valuable affordance of the Zoom medium. For The Tempest, the Stage Manager was careful only to spotlight members of the audience who were visibly having fun:

‘Sinead’s job would be to see how playful people wanted to be and then chose them on that basis so nobody ever, I hope, got spotlight who didn’t want to. We’re trying to read them and we’re trying to genuinely be in that kind of dialogue with them. I think that’s really important to me, I feel really sad about the things I’ve seen that I think have exploited the audience rather than offered them the chance to play’ - Zoe Seaton, Artistic Director, Big Telly and Director, The Tempest.

‘I just looked for people who were taking part, and because the editing is so quick, so if the same person came up twice, I probably didn’t notice that I was spotlighting them twice. … I’m just putting people up that are the most craic, so if you’re not good craic, you’re not getting up on screen’ - Sinéad Owens, Stage Manager.

While for Zoe Seaton (Artistic Director; Big Telly and Director, The Tempest) ‘it was never an option to make something without the audience,’ that does not mean that she thinks that audience participation should always be a feature of productions using the Zoom platform. She says:

‘I suppose I’m kind of cautious around saying that is what you have to do – that is right for the kind of work we want to make but I also have been to some dreadful Zoom things where it’s been really clunky and I would prefer there to be no audience participation than it not be gently handled because I think it is really important that the audience feel that there is a spectrum of playfulness and they can play on whatever level they want and they are just as loved in this room if they choose not to play or if they want to play.’

Seaton’s insight is borne out by Creation Theatre’s rehearsed reading of Henry VIII, which involved no audience participation within the show. Audiences engaged independently by taking to Twitter to tweet their responses and also participated in the performance’s virtual curtain call, when viewers were able to switch from ‘Speaker View’ to ‘Gallery View’ to see other members of the audience and, with audio unmuted, applaud the performers. Rhodri Lewis, who played Trinculo in The Tempest and King Henry VIII in Henry VIII, reflects:

‘I think sometimes you do things and there’s a risk of doing something just because, or you have to get them involved somehow and sometimes it breaks up the flow of something that you are doing or it can be a bit panto when you don’t want it to be. I just think, it’s something you should have in your tool bag or your tool box but it’s not necessarily something that you have to use every time.’

Pre-recorded video content:
The medium also makes it possible to use pre-recorded video content, which can be either streamed through the software or played on a separate device whose screen is recorded on a camera that is part of the Zoom call and that can be spotlighted by the Stage Manager.
For The Tempest, three segments of pre-recorded material were included in the production: a shot of Miranda venturing out into her garden to look for Ferdinand, which could not be played live because the performer’s WiFi connection was not equally strong in the parts of the house she needed to walk through to reach her garden; a sequence in which Miranda and Ferdinand were in adjacent screens separated by an imaginary wall through which Miranda managed to break with her hand, which exited her screen and seemingly entered his screen to receive an engagement ring; and a scene in which ‘Prospero’s magic’ allowed the two lovers to share a screen filled with flowers.

The Tempest’s director Zoe Seaton, however, warns against using too much film in a live production:

‘I want it to feel like a live thing for me, not a dead thing and when we started doing the Tempest originally I was going to be using lots of film but I just felt that it all died. […] So the storm was going to be recorded, and then Sinead played a beautiful film of a storm and I was like, no, it’s died, the whole thing has died, it’s gone. […] So I’m not interested in a dead piece of tied-in finished film I don’t think. But I’m interested in foley, I’m interested in using film as a live thing and I’m interested in visual mixing, I’m interested in anything that makes the live feel like it’s full of surprise and potential.’

While pre-recorded material, used as ‘elastic content’ that can be dropped into the performance in case of a loss of connectivity, can serve as an important safety-net in Zoom performance, therefore, for Seaton it is most valuable when it is not functioning in the slick manner of television or film. For the Zoom performance to maintain its live theatricality, Seaton uses pre-recorded content as a form of ‘visual foley’:

‘I love the combination of different ways of playing “let’s pretend.” So for me, when I started making Zoom theatre it felt a bit like visual foley, it felt a bit like taking images and using them in the same way that you would use sound foley and I wanted to use film in the same way that foley uses sound as a component, I wanted to use film as an element rather than the end game.’

Her key advice for Zoom theatre makers is: ‘don’t try to make a film.’

**Storytelling:**

Given her experience in site-responsive theatre, game theatre and in curating immersive experiences for Big Telly, Zoe Seaton’s approach to re-imagining that production for Zoom was concerned with ‘crafting an experience for the people who go through the story’ (Al Barclay, Performer). Stage Manager Sinéad Owens stresses how easy it has become, on Zoom, to ensure that audiences spot the telling detail needed to progress with the story:

‘on Zoom, because there’s a camera, you can draw the audience’s attention exactly where you want them to. … it’s a bit like film in that sense that we show the audience what we want them to see. They will have picked up on other things as well, but they will have seen the things we want them to see that maybe on stage they might have missed maybe if they had watched somebody else.’

Seaton finds directing for Zoom gives her ‘more potential to tell a story using different techniques’ and gives her access to ‘more visual options’.
Virtual backgrounds are one of those options, but they come with the risk of ‘flatness’ and ‘dullness’, which Seaton seeks to combat: ‘I like it when it’s a virtual screen and then you lift something from it so you go oh I didn’t know that was a virtual screen so you play with that illusion I think.’ In The Tempest, making Paul Taylor, playing Caliban, step between two green screens, for example, made his legs disappear into the virtual dinosaur that was swallowing him alive, with only his upper body emerging from the dinosaur’s mouth, giving the virtual background a disconcertingly three-dimensional feel.

This creative approach to storytelling and Seaton’s insistence on not attempting to produce a film meant that the production was able to accommodate a range of stylistic choices that included an Ariel who was resolutely analogue in her magic. In striking contrast to the 2016 RSC production which, in partnership with Intel and motion capture studio Imaginarium, imagined Ariel as a technological spirit whose avatar took on a range of digital shapes, Ixtaso Moreno’s Ariel in the 2020 Creation Theatre and Big Telly co-production, performing from her cupboard repurposed as the spirit’s cave, ‘gave us the key to that playful theatricality of how she was making a storm in a bowl in her room’. For Seaton, that ‘was much more interesting than if she had been able to use video and was magicking up a piece of tech so it felt like that was a real portal into the world of “we’re all going to make a storm by clapping our hands”’. Within a digital environment, Ariel’s analogue magic was a prime example of how it would be able to create an imaginary world in which there was a space for ‘physical things rather than virtual things’.

**Liveness:**

‘if you took away the interactive elements, you’d still be watching a live piece of theatre, but all that that is … is a not quite as good a version as if you got to see it live in the theatre. Or you’re competing with the National Theatre that has all this equipment and cameras and you’re doing it over Zoom in your living room: you can’t compete with that. So how do you use this, the fact that you can see the audience and they can see you and you can interact with them, how do you make something that is different’ – **Ryan Duncan, Performer**

For many members of the creative team, liveness is a key affordance of the Zoom platform which distinguishes it fundamentally from the archival recordings of past productions by organisations such as NT Live, RSC Live from Stratford-upon-Avon, Globe on Screen and the many archival recordings made available during the Covid pandemic by European theatre companies and the Stratford Festival Theatre in Ontario. Whereas Al Barclay (Performer) describes such archival recordings as ‘not theatre. It’s just a memory’, he sees The Tempest as ‘a live response, where other people who were isolated as well were able to tune in and share the connection with the actors in this […] space which is about trickery, it is about this insubstantial pageant and yet, for that moment until it faded we had it, and we remember the connection we felt.’

Simon Spenco-Hyde (Prospero) during the curtain call while removing his green screen.

It is this sense of connection that is particularly obvious in the virtual curtain calls Creation Theatre shows include, which involve chroma key backgrounds disappearing to reveal the actors in their homes standing before their green screens which, in The Tempest’s curtain call, they began to take down, leaving ‘not a rack behind’. Audiences in their individual homes were able to unmute their audio and give the cast a collective round of applause.
Giles Stoakley (Production Manager and Performer) recalls: ‘One of the things that we found in our shows is that [the applause] is a really important part of people feeling like they’re in a communal space again....to hear yourself and other people reacting to something that you have shared despite not having shared it.’ Especially in lockdown, this live experience of being part of a community, as the audience research in Part 5 of this report confirms, was an important factor in the warmth with which the production was received. Stoakley comments: ‘I think that people are desperate, I think that’s what they’ve really missed about theatre, it’s as much about enjoying the performance, but actually a communal sense of having shared an emotion or an emotional journey, which applause is an expression of.’

**Challenges and limitations of the Zoom platform for theatrical performance**

Zoom is a videoconferencing platform which is not designed for performance and which is dependent on high internet speeds to produce optimum sound and picture quality. Tiny lags between participating devices are inevitable, and while these are negligible for videoconferencing purposes, they make synchronous communal singing and/or dancing, or for that matter any action that depends on exact synchronicity between devices in different locations impracticable even if all participants have excellent bandwidth. It is therefore currently impossible to perform musicals, operas, concerts and ballets live on Zoom, with all successful Zoom performances in these genres to date relying on pre-recorded material being edited together to eliminate lags. For The Tempest, tellingly, the lag was used for comic effect in an audience participation sequence when audiences were asked to sing the courtiers to sleep with a rendition of ‘Twinkle, twinkle little star’ that was catastrophically out of sync and tune.

‘you are relying heavily on the internet being on your side. Basically the main challenge is the risk that a performer/audience member has poor bandwidth.’ — **Crissy O’Donovan, Producer**

‘You are always on the screen and the audience see everything. Unless you physically exit the screen, you have to remain in character and not look bewildered if something technically is going awry.’ — **Annabelle May Terry, Performer**

For maximum functionality, the software is furthermore dependent on the hardware on which it is used matching its specifications, and the software reacts differently to different operating systems (Windows vs. Apple). The platform’s design also necessitates the use of additional software, such as ManyCam and QLab, to make it possible to spotlight more than one screen at a time or play underscoring sound. It is automatically set up so as to respond to human voices that trigger spotlighting of the speaker’s screen and does not, without additional software, enable the simultaneous spotlighting of more than one screen in a spatial arrangement of the Stage Manager’s choice. Whereas up to May 2020, it was possible for the Stage Manager to mute and unmute the audience, a Zoom ‘host’ is now no longer able to unmute participants, who have to perform this action themselves.

**Dealing with connectivity problems:** The main challenge of working on Zoom, all participants agree, has to do with internet connectivity and the danger of disconnecting from a call or struggling on with low bandwidth. Participants with fibre-optic cable connections fared better in terms of reliability than those relying on WiFi connections, and some members of the team had to rely on additional smartphone data to re-route their connection via the mobile phone network in the event of their bandwidth being low. As Lucy Askew (CE and Creative Producer) remarks, however, for companies like Creation Theatre and Big Telly that have a lot of experience working outdoors and in found locations, the disruption to a performance caused by a poor connection does not pose an entirely novel challenge, as ‘bandwidth interference is a part of [live digital theatre] in the same way rain or a flock of ducks would disrupt open air theatre.’
‘The internet here isn’t very good. So permanently I have my phone ready on 4G so I can tether my connection on that the minute my connection drops out. But you have to keep an eye on the bar levels because by the time you’ve got the message “your internet connection is unstable” that’s too late, you’re gone. So the minute that happened, I’d had to switch over to tethering to my phone, then switch back when the 4G dropped out so I had to go onto WiFi again. … Then we had a WhatsApp emergency group on the phone if while we were there one of the actors was booted out we got an emergency message saying “So-and-so has been booted out, can you do the next scene up to this bit? Get ready to jump in at that point.”’ – Paul Taylor, Performer

‘Regarding the internet, there is only so much you can control. We improved actors tech and upgraded/supplied back up data if necessary. We also had people in every show who could jump in and read or who could provide some filmed content as a place holder while the actor returned to the call. It’s all about having procedures in place really. But the reality is that we’re still very much at the mercy of the internet.’ – Crissy O’Donovan, Producer

Creation Theatre and Big Telly use a range of safety nets and strategies to deal with internet disruptions. While Crissy O’Donovan, Creation Theatre’s Producer, describes their approach to connectivity for The Tempest as ‘so naive’, as they relied entirely on actors’ improvisation skills and the goodwill of audiences, since that first Zoom show, a hierarchy of backups has been set in place.

Throughout each performance, a WhatsApp group call connects all performers and members of the creative team, including the Producer, Stage Manager, and the Chief Executive and Creative Producer; who are all at hand to jump in if necessary. In the event of an internet failure, in the first instance, the company attempt to replace live with live, with performers improvising to cover up the fact that another performer has dropped out of the Zoom call. If that is not possible, there are two options: either a member of the creative team will jump in to read the performer’s part until the connection has been re-established, or a piece of pre-recorded video will be played that functions as ‘elastic content’, i.e. content that is not specific to a particular scene but that can plausibly be slotted into any place in the production and played until the performance can resume. Crissy O’Donovan (Producer, Creation Theatre) muses:

‘Is the best thing to put the elastic content in and then allow the actor the time to return to the call and pick it up, or disrupt the creative flow by having someone read in who’s not the actor? And I think in that context, elastic content … is actually the best option… My gut instinct, creatively, is to prefer elastic content so that the audience doesn’t realise that there’s a delay or that there’s something wrong, to keep them within that world.’

It is only if all those measures fail that there will be a ‘show stop’ – a situation that has not arisen to date.

**Further Opportunities arising from using the Zoom platform for theatrical performance**

Performing on Zoom brings with it a range of benefits beyond those discussed above. This mode of working radically reduces overheads, as it requires no venue or rehearsal room hire or set construction. Audiences can be instantly transported to new locations, while neither audiences nor members of the creative team have to travel to a venue. Performers and audiences alike are able to participate from the comfort of their own homes, which involves a significantly smaller investment of time and a greater sense of safety, as performers are able to ‘talk to people who are in their own homes, relaxed and feeling safe’, making it easier to ‘Get them to be silly with us’ - Al Barclay, Performer.
‘I quite like the fact that someone could just be doing the dishes and then five minutes before the show starts, dry their hands and go and watch a show you know?’ – Rhodri Lewis, performer

‘Regarding the internet, there is only so much you can control. We improved actors tech and upgraded/supplied back up data if necessary. We also had people in every show who could jump in and read or who could provide some filmed content as a place holder while the actor returned to the call. It’s all about having procedures in place really. But the reality is that we’re still very much at the mercy of the internet.’ – Crissy O’Donovan, Producer

Zoom performance also brings with it environmental gains. Unlike physical theatre, whose carbon footprint is relatively large because of the need of audiences and performers to travel to the venue; sets to be built, struck and disposed of at the end of the run; and the need for lights and sound systems, Zoom theatre has a comparatively smaller carbon footprint. Lights are still used in the individual homes of performers, who are also using energy through their connection to the internet. However, the majority of the creative team report very significant reductions in their work-related travel (which, for the Northern Irish members of the team, often involved flights from Belfast to England) and the waste they generated as a result of eating out (see Part 4: ‘Behavioural Change: Environmental Impact’). As Lucy Askew (CE and Creative Producer, Creation Theatre) remarks: ‘our summer show this year was meant to be a completely carbon neutral sustainable version of Wind in the Willows, and accidentally, we’ve ended up making work that’s so much more environmental than anything we’ve ever done … and I hope we’ll really hold on to questioning the previous wastage … of the whole endeavour [that was] so wasteful.’
Digital Theatre Transformation, Part 4: Understanding the impact of shift to online working for creative staff

Rehearsal

‘Before the Covid-19 outbreak, we would all be in the same room together; collaborating, creating and devising within the rehearsal room. Now, this is all done from a distance and through a screen.’ — Annabelle May, Performer

I think it’s important to be available and to be aware that you are missing all of those chats when you get your coat on or go to the pub or you get a cup of tea — you are missing those opportunities to read how people are … you’re missing that moment to just look into someone’s eyes and go ‘are you alright’ or ‘do you want a chat.’” — Zoe Seaton, Artistic Director, Big Telly and Director, The Tempest

The company’s digital transformation, for its performers and creative team, involved a radical shift from a physical rehearsal space and face-to-face interactions during structured rehearsals as well as informal contact during breaks and at the start and the end of the day, to online-only interactions. These virtual rehearsals mostly took place on the Zoom platform, with the director occasionally reaching out to individual members of the team over the telephone outside official rehearsal times. The shift to online rehearsals presented a number of challenges, including managing screen fatigue, dealing with the lack of physical co-presence and social interaction, and working around the lack of physical cues.

Focus and screen fatigue:

Zoe Seaton (Artistic Director, Big Telly and Director, The Tempest) was keen for the cast to focus on the rehearsal without communicating via other channels at the same time: she saw actors using Zoom’s chat function during rehearsals as being as unacceptable as passing a note would be in a physical rehearsal. As a result, rehearsals were periods of intense concentration by all those involved, with an implicit expectation that even members of the cast not directly involved in a scene would focus on their screens. Unlike a physical rehearsal room, a Zoom space makes it possible for participants in a rehearsal to listen in with their own cameras switched off without looking at the screen while doing something else connected to the production, such as working on a property or a scene. This is an affordance of Zoom that was often used by Lucy Askew (Creation Theatre’s Chief Executive and Creative Producer), Sinéad Owens (Stage Manager) and Giles Stoakeey (Production Manager and Performer), who were able to dip into rehearsals without disrupting them while being able to offer support when needed. This affordance, Rhodri Lewis (Performer), suggests, might also be of benefit to members of the cast not directly involved in a scene that is being rehearsed, who could be part of the virtual rehearsal without necessarily focusing on the screen, using the time when they are not explicitly needed to ‘rest your eyes a bit or to think about the next scene’. For them, it would be helpful to have ‘an open conversation at the start of rehearsal to say, is it ok if I get up and go and walk around and sit over there, I’m still listening.’

Several other performers similarly drew attention to the need not to ask actors to sit in front of a screen all day, referring to the tactile and highly mobile nature of their training and normal ways of working to explain why they needed to be able to move around and not be entirely focused on the screen.
For The Tempest, rehearsals were spread out over a period of two weeks, rather than the single week that would have been required for face-to-face rehearsals of a show the performers had worked on previously, with four hours of rehearsals scheduled per day in total. To accommodate ‘Zoom fatigue’ and difficulties concentrating, virtual rehearsals were more limited in duration than their physical counterparts (two-and-a-half hours at a stretch was mentioned as the maximum duration any single member of the cast could manage) and were often confined to just the performers needed for a scene. As Stage Manager Sinéad Owens remembers, the team found it ‘beneficial to rehearse two people for an hour, and then the next two people for an hour.’ Generally, she finds that ‘shorter rehearsals with small groups of people are definitely more beneficial as energy levels can dip much quicker when working online and in large groups it’s hard to get focus.’ All the actors who commented on the duration of rehearsals agreed that shorter rehearsals were more productive.

Company cohesion and social interaction:
Actors also had informal Zoom rehearsals with their scene partner or alone while the director was busy with another group of performers. As Madeleine McMahon (Performer) reported, ‘time between rehearsals was as important [as the rehearsal itself], we would try and come up with ideas or solutions to our scenes without the director.’ At times, there was a formal framework for such separate rehearsal between scene partners within the Zoom platform. She explains:

‘we’d be in a big rehearsal Zoom meeting and they’d say ok you two go off and play with that scene for 15 minutes and so me and Giles [Stoakley, her scene partner] would go into a breakout room to do that, which is good because then I got to know him a bit better.’

This mode of working almost exclusively with her scene partner made her feel ‘responsible for our short section, but very removed from everyone else.’ In fact, the director’s attempts to limit the performers’ screen time and conserve their energy had the unintended side-effect of making company members feel distanced from each other, with McMahon reporting that she and her scene partner ‘didn’t feel part of a whole production until quite late on.’

‘There is little opportunity to bond outside rehearsals – it’s not the same over zoom! We had the benefit of already knowing each other, but building a good working relationship and being able to debrief in a casual environment after rehearsals and shows is harder.’ – Ryan Duncan, Performer

Other performers also reported feeling more ‘distanced’ from the rest of the cast, with the newcomer to the company, Rhodri Lewis, especially sensitive to the way in which working on Zoom made it more difficult than usual to bond with the rest of the cast, who knew each other well from working on the show together the previous year. He reflects that working in theatre is ‘a very social business’ and that working on Zoom made him realise the importance of social interaction between performers. That feeling was shared: Giles Stoakley (Production Manager and Performer) also found that it was ‘very odd to perform with someone you have not physically met’ but noted that ‘Creation often use actors who have been in their shows before which helps the process.’

Other performers mentioned ‘no hugging and winding down’ after rehearsals as one of the noticeable changes brought about by digital work (Al Barclay, Performer), with Annabelle May Terry (Performer) commenting:
‘I think we are tactile people and when we train we are all shoved in a room together and we all bond and [...] a lot of us are very affectionate [...] I miss being able to roll round on the floor and express myself and stage combat and all that kind of stuff.’

Physical distance, then, was a challenge in social terms, to enable performers literally to connect with other members of the cast and use their physical senses to relate to one another.

Since rehearsing The Tempest, its director Zoe Seaton has directed several shows for Zoom and evolved a way of working that is more rigorously structured to include softer transitions into and out of the Zoom call. Reflecting on the experience of working with a cast who ‘hadn’t seen each other for ages’, she now thinks that she ‘probably should have allowed and structured a catch-up time’ at the beginning of the rehearsal period. At the start of a day of rehearsals, there is now a period of social interaction between performers in breakout rooms before everyone gathers on a single screen for the rehearsal proper. This mode of working corresponds more closely to performer Madeleine McMahon’s desire for rehearsals to start with ‘a bit of structure’ that involves the director checking in with the cast and explaining the plan for the day’s rehearsals, including sending off scene partners to work on their scene independently and report back at a specified time. Seaton now also builds in some time at the end of a rehearsal, when she and the Stage Manager remain on the Zoom call in order to allow actors who want to have a more informal chat with them to have that conversation.

‘I think it’s important to release people but to say to people they can stay if they want. … it’s just ok to say, look the session is over now but I’ll be here for another ten minutes if you’ve any questions. … What Sinéad and I would always do on shows is that we would open up the room much earlier than we needed to and say the show is at 3 but the room will be open from 2 if you want to call in. Sometimes people did want to be there and that’s when you’d find stuff out so I think it’s about making that slightly abrupt Zoom context a bit softer on both ends. – Zoe Seaton, Artistic Director, Big Telly and Director, The Tempest

Creating virtual spaces for social interaction, most performers agree, is also vitally important once the show is up and running: almost all performers discussed the need to wind down together after a performance and the impact the abruptness of disconnection at the end of a Zoom call had on their sense of wellbeing and community. While for some performers, the ability to leave the call and return immediately to their home setting had important benefits in terms of being able to spend more time with their family (discussed below), many reported a strong desire for some communal time to chat about what went right or wrong with the night’s performance and replicate, albeit in a virtual environment, the time traditionally spent in the pub or over a drink after a physical performance. Performers who were also in the cast of Creation Theatre’s next show, TIME MACHINE, enjoyed the fact that the format of the show involved performers being put into a ‘breakout room’ on Zoom at the end of the show. Rhodri Lewis (Performer) welcomed having ‘a warm down, not necessarily drinks but some sort of social thing afterwards … for the cast and the crew and everybody just to unwind and talk’.
Lack of physical cues:
The absence of physical co-presence meant that the performers could no longer rely on their scene partners’ physical cues. Zoom, for the most part, limits the visibility of the body to head and shoulders, so that physical actors habituated to using their whole bodies to communicate have to adapt their approach to communicating not just with their audience, but also with their fellow-actors. Annabelle May Terry (Performer) describes the limitations of the medium as not including ‘that element of being tactile with someone, … there is a barrier there which you do have to overcome by watching them intently and picking up on any slight – it’s mostly in the face and arms, most of the time it’s not about your legs or your full body.’ Rehearsing in an environment in which everyone is ‘acting from the waist up’ (Al Barclay, Performer), therefore, involves ‘picking up on as much upper body language as you can, looking them in the eye’ and paying particular attention to vocal rather than physical cues (Annabelle May Terry, Performer).

Stage Manager Sinéad Owens observed that rehearsing on Zoom is ‘a very different style of working that doesn’t suit everyone.’ It also involves gradually switching from paying attention to the actions of fellow-actors visible on Zoom’s ‘Gallery View’ setting, in which performers are able to see not just themselves but also their fellow performers and respond to their facial expressions and gestures, to no longer being able to see them once the Stage Manager got involved and started to spotlight specific members of the cast in ‘Speaker View’. When performing, actors were therefore often only able to see themselves and not their scene partners or members of the audience.

Looking for a physical cue given by a scene partner on-screen was problematic even when they were visible because, as Ryan Duncan (Performer) explains, Zoom introduces tiny lags that make spontaneous interaction difficult. In addition, he points out, ‘during a performance you have to really focus on the camera, because any change in your eyeline as you’re trying to see the other performers somewhere on the screen will be seen by the audience; just as actors reading their lines can be seen to focus their eyes on their screen rather than the camera. Therefore, ‘rehearsal had an element of technical rehearsing which did slow things down’, with time spent on agreeing eye-lines, checking positioning within the frame and lighting, and working on exchanges of objects. Rehearsals therefore could end up being ‘much more about getting it to ‘work’, than about character’ (Madeleine McMahon, Performer), with performers additionally spending time on their own to rehearse how to discreetly operate Zoom commands during a scene.

Performing on Zoom

Getting into character:
Whereas some performers thought that there was not much difference between the process of getting into character on Zoom and in a face-to-face setting, others found that Zoom posed new challenges. Ryan Duncan (Performer) suggests that it was easier to be ‘a little lazy with [getting into character] as you don’t have that switch into work mode that you get when entering rehearsal rooms,’ and Madeleine McMahon (Performer) found that working from home ‘affects focus […] I like working away, as it makes me focus on my work.’ Annabelle May Terry (Performer) concurs: transitioning into the right frame of mind for a performance could be tricky, as working on a laptop was associated ‘with the monotony of sending emails, completing tax returns, writing invoices etc.’ and being at home would make it ‘easy to just lay about’.
To combat the ‘lull in motivation’ felt at the start of the day, she resorted to deliberately structuring her working day in order to be ready ‘to actually plug in and be present and coherent’ in rehearsals and performance. Al Barclay (Performer), too, found that he needed to resort to additional physical triggers to be able to get into character: ‘I found personal items that helped trigger me into the king, even if they were only visible for seconds […] Things I’d never have taken out of the house to the theatre.’

Staying in character was also a challenge for several performers, who report that the technical demands of performance on Zoom, which involves performers taking responsibility for their individual studio sets, their lighting, and the operation of Zoom commands to change their backgrounds, camera and to mute/unmute their audio and video, could interfere with their performance. Being in character was ‘no longer [a performer’s] main concern’ when working in the digital medium, Madeleine McMahon (Performer) found. Paul Taylor (Performer) agrees: while usually, he relies on instinct during a performance, having additional technical operations to carry out while performing a role – especially whenever something went wrong – could be quite demanding. He explains: ‘The camera’s there on you. You can’t show that frustration and you’re also manically trying to change things without [it showing]’ For him as for others, having to ‘break out to do something [technical] when you’re enjoying that immersion in that scene’ can be ‘annoying.’ At the same time, he admits that this ‘can be a help at other points […] It stops you getting too serious about what you’re doing.’

‘Because I’m running my own tech, which I wouldn’t normally do as an actor, it has meant adapting how I get into character because there is less time to indulge in that during the performance itself. … You are always on the screen and the audience see everything. Unless you physically exit the screen, you have to remain in character and not look bewildered if something technically is going awry.’ – Annabelle May Terry, Performer

Multi-tasking during a performance is ‘like playing tennis but you’ve got a dog with you on a lead, and you can do it, you can play tennis, it’s fine, the dog can run around and move with you as you are playing tennis but you’ve got a dog with you, you know? Every so often the dog tugs you away or maybe you trip over the dog sometimes, but it’s possible to play tennis with a dog on a lead but it’s not ideal. It’s a thing that’s always there, you’re holding the lead and you know it’s there but you go along with it and you get used to it but yeah… that’s the only way I can describe it really.’ – Rhodri Lewis, Performer

Another aspect of characterisation that was clearly affected by the digital medium was the volume of a performance, which is linked to its theatricality and interactivity. Madeleine McMahon (Performer) explains:

‘So as actors, especially the company for this who were quite experienced theatre performers, a couple of us have done bits of TV or short film, but it’s a very different volume, if you like, it’s a bit like the difference between being a sprint runner and a long distance runner, it’s the same set of skills but you are using them in very different ways. So telling a story on this level a performance can quite quickly look quite large and over the top, but if you were to do it this size in the middle of the Olivier theatre, it would seem a very small character. So you’re paring down the way that you perform the character while at the same time being aware that the interactive nature that the director wanted was for a theatre crowd.’
Rhodri Lewis (Performer) gives a similar sentiment a different spin when he describes the importance of direct address in Zoom performance. For him, having the time to rehearse with a camera, as the company did for The Tempest, allowed him to get used to the medium and play around with switching between talking to other characters in a fictional space and breaking through the imaginary fourth wall to address the audience directly. He says:

‘suddenly if you’re in a scene or you’re doing something, especially if you’re doing Shakespeare then you’re have an aside and suddenly the aside is right there in the screen, it […] really changes it […] more so than on stage I think, because it’s so immediate and because you’re breaking that fourth wall and it’s right there, as you can see the TV is close up, you can kind of see the thought processes a bit more […] It’s more intimate perhaps than I’ve experienced on stage […] I think there’s an intimacy there perhaps, that when you are directing it into the camera you can bring it right down.’

Several performers therefore identify Zoom as a hybrid medium which required of them skills associated with acting for theatre and for television.

**Interaction with the audience:**
Bearing in mind the needs of the Zoom audience and approaching the performance as a hybrid of theatrical and film modes of acting put pressure on actors’ approach to character. Sinéad Owens (Stage Manager) was well aware of how acting for a virtual rather than a physical show could be challenging because the actors are ‘just performing to a laptop in their living rooms or their bedrooms, so I think it was a completely different experience to act on Zoom’, especially during performances, when actors working with only one monitor could only see themselves to the exclusion of the rest of the cast or any audience members whenever they were spotlight. Performers report having difficulty gauging the audience’s reactions as a result. Increasingly, some performers are using a second monitor that is set to ‘Gallery View’ in order to maintain a sense of connection with their audience, although some also report that there is still a small but nevertheless noticeable lag between a performer’s action and the audience’s reaction that makes it hard to be properly responsive to the audience.

Regardless of these difficulties in maintaining a sense of direct interaction with their audience, the performers overwhelmingly agreed that ‘talking to the audience’ was important (and, for the majority, even very important), and most also thought that ‘active audience participation’ was very important in a digital performance. While many performers clearly also valued seeing their audience, the other performers and themselves (albeit to a far lesser degree), these elements of interactivity were somewhat less important to them:
Evidently, as a platform primarily designed for videoconferencing, Zoom lends itself to direct address to the audience and to interaction and thus to a mode of performance that is intrinsically extroverted and community-building. It may involve a screen, but that screen is designed to break through the imaginary fourth wall. Annabelle May Terry (Performer) remembers:

‘Zoe’s idea from the very beginning was to create a community again when we didn’t have one. When the community broke down and we all went into lockdown and the theatres closed and it was dark and scary she wanted to remind people that we’re all still here.’

In her approach to The Tempest, Zoe Seaton (Artistic Director, Big Telly and Director, The Tempest) was mindful of the audience from the start, wanting to remind them of ‘what it’s like when we watch a show and we interact and we get that amazing feeling’. For Terry, interaction with the audience ‘was amazing because I wasn’t just staring into the void and acting in the void and screaming into the void and no one is listening, I could actually be comforted in the fact that, look, people are actually watching and interacting and reacting!’. 

‘The Tempest was a live response … where other people who were isolated as well were able to tune in and share the connection with the actors in this … space which is about trickery, it is about this insubstantial pageant and yet, for that moment until it faded we had it, and we remember the connection we felt. — Al Barclay, Performer

‘The great thing about the Tempest, because it was the first one, it was just such an emotional event for us, for the audience … I didn’t expect to feel that I was with people’ — Paul Taylor, Performer

For Al Barclay (Performer), interaction with the audience and the community this generates goes to the heart of what makes performance on Zoom inherently theatrical:

‘What is theatre? Why are we making theatre? What’s the purpose of theatre? For me, it’s a lot to do with bringing people together, it is to do with the sheer […] liveness of theatre, it’s the fact […] that the actor could die on stage, literally, or that someone will fall off […] We’re all in it together and if we’re all in it together, if that’s what it feels like, then how do we make that happen when all we have is a screen.’
Annabelle May Terry (Performer) also sees interaction with the audience as the essence of theatre: ‘this is theatre because theatre is nothing without its audience and an audience is nothing without its performers’. For these performers, there is a self-evident connection between interaction with the audience and the experience of liveness they also see as central to the theatrical experience.

Reflecting on the difference between their interactive Tempest and other Zoom shows that are streamed ‘live’ via YouTube, which does not facilitate communication between audiences and performers, Al Barclay (Performer) explains that liveness is not experienced in quite the same way in the latter type of show, because the performance, despite taking place in synchrony with audience reception, ‘could have been recorded six months ago. … Even though we know it is being recorded live and streamed immediately to the internet, we’re watching it more or less in the moment that it’s made, it all somehow doesn’t feel like we meant it because we don’t have the proofs that tell us that this is now.’ He concludes: ‘It’s finding ways to keep the liveness, and to keep the connection that comes with liveness. … Because if we lose that, then it’s like ‘look at us, we’re making a cheap TV show here.’’ For him, an archival recording of a performance is ‘not theatre. It’s just a memory.’ (For points of comparison from the point-of-view of the audience, see Part 5 – ‘Liveness, community, and audience participation’; for interaction as a part of dramaturgy for Zoom, see Part 3 – ‘Zoom affordances: a new performance medium’).

**Behavioural changes**

Working from home for performers was an entirely new experience, which had a significant impact on their working patterns and approach to their work, their work/life balance, their general wellbeing and also their travel-related carbon footprint.

**Work pattern:**
The creative team all reported working long hours on The Tempest, with digital modes of working making it more difficult to switch off and walk away from work. For Zoe Seaton (Artistic Director, Big Telly and Director, The Tempest), it meant that she ‘work[s] a lot more hours’, while Giles Stoakley (Production Manager and Performer) found that, despite a seemingly lower workload because he was working on fewer concurrent projects than he is used to, his working hours ended up ‘not vastly different’. Sinéad Owens (Stage Manager) explained that she is ‘very used to working long days, different hours etc. so it hasn’t been much of a change in that sense’, with the length of her working day explained by the fact that whereas members of the cast were never rehearsing for long stretches of time, the Director and Stage Manager were rehearsing successive scenes with different performers. In fact, working on her phone and laptop extended her working day, since ‘in this way of working I am always on hand to work.’

The cast, on the other hand, were shielded from excessive hours at their screens by the company’s deliberate decision to limit their screen time and spread one week’s worth of rehearsals over two weeks. Several members of the cast took advantage of the spare time they had as a consequence to play around with their technical equipment and with the Zoom platform and video-editing software. Performers who chose to fill their day with private rehearsals, online tech tutorials and perfecting their home studio set-up reflected that doing so and having the right equipment and knowing how to use it would help them create better quality self-tapes and prepare them for virtual auditions.
Overall, the cast and creative team for The Tempest rated the changes to their work pattern that were a result of working from home as clearly positive. Of the thirteen respondents to our survey, eleven rated the changes as ‘a mostly positive experience, with some challenges but also positive changes’; one went further in rating them as ‘a mostly positive experience, with some challenges but also positive changes’, and only one respondent, who in interview reported finding it hard to structure the working day and make themselves get up in the morning and finish working in the evening, rated the experience as ‘difficult, mostly negative.’

The largely positive response to the change can be explained on the one hand by the gains the team experienced as a result of no longer needing to travel to work, and on the other the benefits of being able to work from home rather than have to stay in ‘digs’. Simon Spencer-Hyde (Performer) draws attention to the amount of time saved simply by virtue of not needing to travel to the venue: ‘The hours were a lot shorter than doing a ‘normal’ show. Eg 7.30pm show in the flesh – I’d get to the location … at 6pm latest. But with this show, I’d sit down at my desk and log into Zoom at the half-hour call, which would be 6.55pm.’ Additionally, Madeleine McMahon (Performer) enjoyed the fact that ‘It’s meant I could work from home, as opposed to living away. The hours could be more broken up into manageable chunks of who was needed when’. Working from home made even simple things such as eating between shows easier for members of the cast.

However, working from home also required the cast to take responsibility for the structure of their own working day, which is something several members of the team consciously had to work on. For Rhodri Lewis (Performer), this was in part a result of the much lower level of physical energy required by performing on Zoom:

‘I feel it has made me a bit more nocturnal than I was before, performing live and physically expends energy. Working online doesn’t “drain the tank” in the same way so I found myself staying up late to go to sleep. After a while I started going for long walks after the show and that seemed to help a lot.’

Other members of the team furthermore regretted the extent to which digital theatre put them ‘at the mercy of the internet’ (Annabelle May Terry, Performer), requiring the cast to be ‘in a constant state of preparedness in case of sudden loss of a company member and the need to ‘step in’ for the show to continue’ (Paul Taylor, Performer). Overall, then, while the change to the working patterns brought about by digital transformation was experienced as a positive development, performers also acknowledged that it required time-management skills and put them under additional pressure because they needed to be able to compensate for the vagaries of internet connectivity.

Work/life balance:
Overwhelmingly, all staff found that working from home, while bringing with it some challenges, had a positive effect on their ability to balance work and family/leisure. Creation Theatre’s explicit commitment to limiting screen time for performers and making sure that rehearsals were as short and productive as possible was much appreciated by the performers, and even Stage Manager Sinéad Owens, who admits to not being ‘the best at a healthy work/life balance normally’ and to being ‘ready to work whenever’ now that physical boundaries between work and life were absent, concedes that ‘Creation are great for checking in to make sure you’re ok and aren’t feeling pressured and they were very supportive on this project.’
'Creation are good at sticking to reasonable working hours in compliance with usual Equity contracts and this hasn’t changed with the move online.' – Ryan Duncan, Performer

'Working from home has definitely blurred the boundaries between working and leisure hours. However I would say that Creation are excellent at respecting those boundaries and the blurring is a result of my need/desire to continue working.' – Giles Stoakley, Production Manager and Performer

'Creation’s rehearsal schedule whilst working from home has not been taxing or expectant at all. They understand that we are performers, we are not used to being still and looking at a screen for hours on end!' – Annabelle May Terry, Performer

'Creation Theatre, very early on, recognised the need to limit rehearsal/working time, due to the uniquely tiring nature of working through a screen.' – Paul Taylor, Performer

Members of the cast who found it difficult to ‘clock off’ because work was no longer physically separated from life devised individual strategies to force themselves to switch off; going for walks or for a run was a popular way of separating work from leisure, as was mentally designating the area of their home repurposed as a studio as a workplace they physically left at the end of a rehearsal or show. As Al Barclay (Performer) explains: ‘I had a little area that was the show and could very easily leave it. It did mean that a section of my living room was colonised but I was living alone so it was fine.’

Ryan Duncan, a performer who was inspired by working on The Tempest to devise his own Zoom children’s show Up, Up, Up and Away!, found that he ended up ‘working late and at weekends’ simply because he ‘can suddenly make [his] own work (no cost from rehearsal space, easily access other artists to collaborate with etc.). It has been hard to build a routine because you, and the people you work with can suddenly work at any time and be flexible with other commitments.’ That general availability of creative collaborators who would, in normal circumstances, be out of geographical reach and also overcommitted, was also commented on by several members of Creation Theatre and Big Telly’s creative and management teams, with working across time zones becoming a potential additional pressure point. Even so, and despite the additional time she spent in rehearsals with successive members of the cast, Zoe Seaton (Artistic Director; Big Telly and Director, The Tempest) managed for the most part to maintain a boundary between work and life: ‘I have a home office and try to stay away from it in the evenings, although this isn’t always possible.’

On the whole, performers relished the opportunity to work from home. Like the other members of the cast who were able to set up a studio space in a spare room, Annabelle May Terry (Performer) particularly valued the luxury of being able to shut the door on work and immediately find herself at home:

‘I am in the spare bedroom of my house which I transform into a soundproof, green screened performance space! Although this has been tricky to get right, I have enjoyed being in the comfort of my own home. When I switch the laptop off at the end of the night, I can go to my own bed and relax rather than being in digs which can sometimes feel awkward, as you’re often a guest in another family’s home.’
Having a separate zone or room to work in was clearly an advantage when it came to maintaining a good work/life balance when working from home, as Rhodri Lewis (Performer) also emphasised: 'I am lucky enough to be doing these shows in a spare room so maintaining a balance was easy. I only worked when I entered that room, when I was out of the room I was able to switch off.'

Performers were also well aware of the strain their work could put on whoever was sharing their house and broadband connection. Giles Stoakley (Production Manager and Performer), describes the ‘juggling act with space in the house and my wife’s work that has to be managed.’ Annabelle May Terry (Performer) was similarly mindful of the demands the production put on her partner, who gamely helped out in one scene of The Tempest in which his hand appeared on her screen. While in the instance, this did not represent a problem, Terry warns against the risk of taking such assistance for granted: ‘I think … [companies] can’t expect … that everyone has people in their house to help them. … I think they need to understand they are employing you, and not your family.’ The whole team’s responses made it clear that both they and the company were mindful of the strain the show was potentially putting on other members of the household who had to minimise their broadband use during performances and keep down noise levels to ensure the best possible conditions for the performers.

That this was particularly challenging for performers with children to manage is clear from Simon Spencer-Hyde’s (Performer) recollection:

‘I had to make sure I put aside really good quality time at home during the run to make up for the evenings where I was ‘away’ doing the show. The effect in one way is not as bad as with a ‘normal’ show, because at least with this Zoom performance you can be at home. However that has challenges in itself, most notably everyone else in the house has to keep noise to a minimum, or the audience might hear.’

Parents of young children were also the most likely to want to forgo social ‘winding-down’ sessions at the end of a performance, preferring to return to their caring responsibilities promptly at the end of the working day.

Wellbeing:
For many members of the creative team, it was difficult to disentangle their reflections about their well-being while home-working from the wider context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the community, individual mental health, and employment prospects within the theatre industry. What shone through many responses was a mixture of profound gratitude for ‘the chance to work during lockdown’ (Giles Stoakley, Production Manager and Performer), which the cast perceived as an unexpected lifeline at a time when they were under intense strain financially and in terms of mental health, and a recognition that working in these conditions brought its own challenges.

‘Working during a pandemic. Our theatre industry is in crisis and more people are out of work than ever before, yet I am lucky enough to be working and being paid to work. I often have to pinch myself.’ — Annabelle May Terry, Performer

For several performers, the level of connection afforded by Zoom was both a marvel and the source of frustration. Ryan Duncan (Performer) reflects that:
‘while it has opened up a world of creative possibilities it has taken away the greatest joy of my work, which is face to face social interactions with audience and colleagues. I guess that’s the Covid-19 effect everyone is feeling but I wonder if it is felt more acutely by us theatre lot whose work is centred around social interaction.’

For Simon Spencer-Hyde (Performer), who also missed the ‘buzz’ and ‘camaraderie’ of the dressing-room, that social interaction is key to picking up physical cues from his fellow-performers:

‘I definitely prefer working with people in the flesh. When you’re trying out ideas and collaborating, all sorts of signals are given and picked up by the group, both verbally and through the body that can get missed with Zoom.’

Such cues are not just given by fellow-actors, but also by the audience: Al Barclay (Performer) ‘still crave[s] the back and forth’ of ‘being able to sense the audience and roll with their nuances’. All the same, he experienced enough of a connection with his audience through the Zoom performances that he ‘felt sad to be going back to my living room’ at the end of a show. For Paul Taylor (Performer), the ‘daily contact with the company, albeit through a screen’ was ‘extremely welcome and, at points, necessary to my wellbeing.’ For him, performing in The Tempest was a profoundly ‘emotional event for us, for the audience’ because it made him feel that he was ‘with people.’

That last comment points to the emotional fragility of some members of the cast at the beginning of lockdown. Paul Taylor (Performer) explains that:

‘Being able to have contact with those people that you work with and talk to… to have that back, even though it’s not physical, was gorgeous. And then seeing the pain, the hurt at times, and desperation on the fellow actors’ faces that do live on their own, that haven’t seen another person for three months…’

The show’s Director, Zoe Seaton, too, was sensitive to her cast’s emotional needs and mindful that they might be dealing with difficult home situations while also trying to work. She recalls:

‘We were working very early on in lockdown when people were quite frightened. And you don’t know what’s outside the room. When people come in you don’t know what’s outside, you don’t know what family are there or not there or what family are poorly or not poorly or what fears they had.’

It is her awareness of the potential Covid-19-related difficulties her cast were dealing with in their private lives that motivated her to reach out to some of them individually over the telephone to offer support. The availability of such extra support, as Paul Taylor sees it, should always be part of working remotely: ‘This online creativity needs to have far more of an input in our personal life because it is the only form of contact for some people. And if that’s the case, that contact has to encompass personal as well as work.’

Overall, however, while the cast made no attempt to gloss over how difficult they initially found the transition to online work, they experienced being able to work at all and being able to maintain a connection with other performers, their audiences, and the theatre industry as beneficial to their wellbeing. Being able to spend more time with loved ones was an obvious well-being benefit, especially for those with children. For some, working on this production also benefited their professional development in terms of the variety of roles they have been able to tackle, the techniques they have learned, and the visibility they have gained nationally and internationally through being involved in this work.
Environmental impact:
Overwhelmingly, the creative team agreed that there had been a very significant reduction in their travel to and from work. Performers would have had to commute from London, fly in from Northern Ireland or travel down from Edinburgh and stay in digs had the show been a physical one. Some of the cast who live far away would have occasionally gone home during the course of the rehearsal period and the show’s run, increasing their carbon emissions yet further.

‘I’m barely using my car. Previously, I pack a suitcase and drive to Oxford where I stay for the duration of rehearsals/performances, with the occasional commute home on days off/food shopping etc.’ – Annabelle May Terry, Performer

‘The environmental benefits are an enormous reduction in miles travelled. Creation’s premises are a 60 mile round trip from me so potentially 300- 400 miles a week reduction.’ – Giles Stoakley, Production Manager and Performer

‘I don’t have to commute from London to Oxford every day with everything that entails.’ – Al Barclay, Performer

‘I’m not travelling to work every day, I didn’t use an airplane to get there. I’m just in a small box room using one light bulb and a laptop so I’m not using as much electricity.’ – Rhodri Lewis, Performer

Instead of having to eat out while away from home, furthermore, and use a lot of pre-packaged ready-meals that generate a lot of waste, the cast were able to cook meals and eat in a more environmentally efficient way. Ryan Duncan (Performer) explains: ‘I’m cooking at home (not buying a meal deal from Tesco every other day with all of the single use packaging involved).’

Duncan also pinpoints a further environmental benefit of digital performance: ‘there’s no energy inefficient theatre lighting during performance’, though he also concedes that his ‘household energy use is through the roof’. It is beyond the scope of this report to quantify the balance between the carbon savings of no longer needing ‘all the electrics (lights/sound) etc that goes into running a large scale show’ (Crissy O’Donovan, Producer) and the extra energy used by performers who now each have various degrees of professional studio lighting in their own homes to light themselves. A detailed comparative analysis of either type of show in terms of lighting and energy consumption is needed to draw a reliable conclusion regarding their respective carbon footprint. The analysis the company itself has carried out to compare the carbon footprint of audiences watching the show on their private devices vs. physical audiences who travel to the shows, however, has already yielded very positive results: Lucy Askew (CE and Creative Producer) says that ‘the reduction in travel for the audience vs their power consumption using computers to watch the show is a 99% reduction in carbon emissions.’ What is amply clear from this analysis as well as the cast’s reflections about travel is that the carbon savings just from that element of theatrical activity are significant and highly likely to outweigh the carbon cost of performers working from home.

Ethical and equality issues

Members of Creation Theatre and Big Telly’s creative teams were sensitive to the potential inequalities that working from home might create between performers from different backgrounds. Ryan Duncan (Performer) worries that while ‘Theatre has always been inaccessible to those from poorer backgrounds’, this situation is compounded in an environment in which all actors have to work from their homes if they do not have the right equipment and companies do not provide performers with the computers and lights they need.
‘People need to be able to afford technology to do it. The better the tech the better they can make it look.’ – Al Barclay, Performer

‘Those with a spare room, like me, or a private space to work online, will benefit more and have access to greater opportunities, without it impacting those they live with. As well as those with more money for equipment such as lights, microphones etc.’ – Madeleine McMahon, Performer

‘What you could achieve was based on the quality of your equipment and how tech savvy you were. I can imagine some people feeling left out as they have no interest in tech or don’t have anything to allow them to perform.’ – Rhodri Lewis, Performer

For their part, Creation Theatre were proactive in sending equipment to members of the cast who needed additional pieces of kit and in guiding them through the technological set-up of their home studio and navigating the Zoom platform. The company also provided members of the cast whose broadband was unreliable with mobile phone data cards, ensuring that they, too, could have a safety net in case their connection failed. As Lucy Askew (CE and Creative Producer) explains: ‘I think we’ve done what we can to provide support to overcome any [equality issues] - sending computers and extra data to performers who need them.’ However, there is nothing that a company can do to iron out inequalities that arise from a performer not having sufficient disruption-free space in their home to set up a home studio. The potential disparity in access to work depending on home space and living arrangements comes out clearly from Madeleine McMahons’s comment: ‘We’re lucky enough to have a spare bedroom I could use as a ‘studio’, and my partner helped by not using the internet while I was rehearsing. Our old flat was a studio, so it would have been close to impossible.’

While there is thus a justified concern about the ways in which disparities in home environment might have a negative impact on equality of access to work even if a company supports its performers with equipment and training, working from home can also improve access to work for groups who are disadvantaged in a traditional theatre working environment. Such disadvantage, Lucy Askew (CE and Creative Producer) points out, can be simply geographical: digital homeworking makes it much easier ‘for performers to work from the regions’ – a point Zoe Seaton (Artistic Director; Big Telly and Director, The Tempest) also made when discussing the hurdles to employment faced by company members based in rural parts of Northern Ireland. Askew remarks ‘how London centric the industry has become’ and how this ‘often leads actors to feel they have to live in London where cost of living is higher.’ For freelancers in this situation, remote working ‘could make living in more affordable areas feasible.’

Annabelle May Terry (Performer), who worked on The Tempest and is part of the cast for Alice, also pinpoints other ways in which ‘this way of working is more accessible and inclusive’. She suggests that there are clear access benefits because working online is

‘available to anyone and everyone at any time. I had the privilege of sitting in on Creation’s Alice auditions in which they were actively seeking to diversify their casting and broaden their pool of actors of colour. It was wonderful to see so many performers getting the opportunity to showcase their talent to the company and be cast in the show as a result.’

From the standpoint of the shows’ Producer, Crissy O’Donovan agrees that
‘remote working actually increases opportunities in some cases and lends itself to creatives and performers who would normally have restrictions in working in regional site specific work (due to personal circumstances like carer roles, childcare, disability - that would normally prevent someone from shying away from this type of job).’

Older performers, she reflects, might shy away from work that involves learning to work with a computer and technical equipment, but she is confident that the issue can be addressed by ‘making people aware that there is support within the framework of casting.’ Casting, she is clear, should be based on the fit of the performer to the role and not on a performer’s technical ability, the noise in their house or the amount of space they have,

‘because that’s excluding people … and if you have an older person who is finding it difficult, whether they feel confident enough to even apply for the job, is what the bigger issue is. … How do you create a message, or create an environment where people will feel confident enough to even apply for the job, if it’s a technical job? … But I think there are ways around that, if you actually meet the actor and the actor is the right person for the job.’

With some safeguards in place (see the Guidelines that are part of the ‘Digital Toolkit’ in Part 6 of this report), digital theatre transformation therefore has the potential to level the playing field for many performers, even as it will continue to pose challenges for those who do not have sufficient space in their homes to set up a green screen studio with appropriate lighting.
Digital Theatre Transformation, Part 5: Understanding the impact of the shift to online working on audiences: Preliminary Findings

Data sets:

The following preliminary analysis of audiences for the Zoom production and their experiences comes from an analysis of the following data sets:

1. Box office data from the 2019 analogue performances of The Tempest and the 2020 Zoom performances provided by Creation Theatre.
2. The results of a general audience survey conducted by Creation Theatre in 2019 (n=583).
3. Observations of nine recordings of the Zoom Tempest.
4. The first 93 responses to an online survey sent to audiences of the April/May Zoom performances.

This is initial data which will be supplemented in a further report by an analysis of further questionnaire responses by audiences watching two research performances of the Zoom Tempest (one live and one recorded) and by data from audience interviews. The analysis below is designed to highlight some preliminary findings that may be useful to those planning to create Zoom productions in the near future.

The Audience

Audience size:

Box office data shows that a total of 1428 tickets were sold across 17 performances of the Zoom Tempest in April and May 2020. Unlike the physical ticket sales across the 2019 performances (total 3368) each ticket was per device, rather than per person, so does not accurately reflect how many people participated in the Zoom shows. Whilst the box office data from the 2019 performances provides information about group size (how many tickets per booking), most people purchased one ticket regardless of group size for the Zoom production. As a result, it is not possible to accurately say how many people watched through the box office data.

However, an analysis of the recordings of nine of the 17 performances allowed us to count the number of people visible on each screen shown during these performances (a total of 404 screens). This analysis suggested that most people watched in groups of two (42%) or alone (37%), with a further 13% watching in a group of three, and 6% in a group of four. Just six of the 404 screens contained a group of 5 (2%), with no groups larger than 5 being shown on screen. Based on this analysis, the average number of people per screen was 1.98, suggesting that a reasonable estimate for the total audience figure could be around 2827.

Whilst these figures are based on a small proportion of the audience (around 28% of screens), the majority of the respondents to our questionnaire sent to audiences of the April/May Zoom performances also said they had watched with one other person (43%) or alone (29%). A group of two was also the most common group size for the 2019 performances (30%), but group sizes for the Zoom production were generally smaller with a much higher proportion of audience members watching alone (just 4% of the 2019 audience visited alone).

26 Some people did book more than one ticket for the Zoom performances (13.9% purchased two, 1.9% purchased three, 0.8% four, 3.9% seven or more). In total there were 1202 customers for the Zoom performances and 1428 tickets sold.
Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that audiences in lockdown (in the UK at least) were unable to meet with those outside of their homes, large groups sizes were far less common on Zoom. The box office data shows that 28.9% of analogue audiences visited in groups of 6 or more, with 18% of the total audience visiting in a group of 10 or more. In contrast, just 20% of the audiences we surveyed said that they had watched the Zoom production in a group larger than 2, and none of those shown on screen watched in groups larger than 5.

It is also important to note that group sizes were far from fixed or stable during the Zoom production. Screens shown more than once during the performances regularly show people – especially, but not exclusively, children – appearing and disappearing from shot. The recordings contain evidence of people lurking in the background for a while, of people freely coming in and out of the room, of parents switching halfway through a performance, and of children falling asleep. Whilst there tended to be one or two people watching constantly throughout the performance, the freedom of audiences to move in and out of the performance and the potential of people deliberately or accidentally watching just parts production should be taken into consideration when evaluating or attempting to understand the reach of an online production.

**Audience demographics**

**Geographical location:**
The Zoom Tempest had a wider geographical reach than the 2019 performances, both within the UK and internationally. Box office data shows that 93% of audiences of the 2019 performances were based in the UK, with the remainder of audiences coming from 11 other countries including a relatively large number from the United States (2%). By contrast, 83% of audiences for the Zoom production were from the UK, with audiences from 27 other countries. There were large audiences from the United States (7%), Ireland (2%) and Canada (12%), and whilst audiences for the in-person production were mostly from European countries, audiences for the Zoom production also came from Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, South Korea and Singapore.

Within the UK, the overwhelming majority of audiences for the 2019 production were local to Oxford (75%), with 79% of the audience coming from South East England. Audiences travelled from all regions of the UK, with significant numbers travelling from London (3%), the East (3%) and the South West (2.5%). The Zoom production also attracted local audiences, but a much lower percentage of the total audience (29%) were from Oxford or the South East (39%). A large percentage of the audience were from London (17%) with a particular hotspot in South East London (4%). The Zoom production mirrored the 2019 production in that there were also large numbers of audiences from the East (5%) and South West (5%), but a much greater proportion of the audience came from further afield, including from Northern Ireland (3%) where Creation Theatre’s partners, Big Telly, are based.

**Age:**
Data on the age of those booking tickets was collected via the box office. The question was optional and a high percentage of audiences for both the 2019 (61%) and Zoom productions (47%) declined to provide their age. The data provided by those who did provide their age shows that the ages of those purchasing tickets for the Zoom performances broadly mirrored those who purchased tickets for the 2019 performances. This age distribution also reflects data collected by Creation Theatre in a survey of their audiences conducted in 2019, which suggested that the majority of Creation’s general audience are aged between 46 and 55. The only significant, and perhaps surprising, difference was that a greater proportion of the Zoom audience were aged between 66 and 75 than the audience for the 2019 production, suggesting that the Zoom audience were actually slightly older overall than the in-person audience.
The box office data, however, only provides an indication of the ages of those who booked tickets. In our analysis of the Zoom recordings, we very broadly estimated the ages of those on screen and found that as well whilst reflecting the age distribution in the box office data in there being a high proportion of adults aged between 36 and 65, a significant percentage of the audience were also under 18 (21%). This reflects the fact that many of those watching were family groups made up of adults and children or teenagers.

Gender, race and ethnicity:
Data on the gender of customers was not collected at the point of booking. Of the 93 audience members of the Zoom performances who took our questionnaire, 66% said they described themselves as women and 33% as men, with 1% preferring not to say. This is fairly similar in proportion to Creation Theatre’s 2019 audience survey (n=558) where 78% stated that their gender was ‘Female’, 21% as ‘Male’ and 1% preferring not to say.

Data on the race and ethnicity of audiences was not collected at the point of booking, and was also not collected as part of Creation Theatre’s audience survey.

Marketing and Audience Motivation

How did audiences find out about the performances?

Data on how customers heard about the event was collected via an optional survey question at the box office. 84% of customers for the Zoom production gave no answer. Of those that answered, ‘online’ was the most common way of finding out about the Zoom production (11%), followed by an email from Creation (7%). A further 2% said they found out via social media, 1% from an online listing or review and 1% via word of mouth. The results of our audience survey support the idea that online and email were key ways that audiences found out about the Zoom production, with 45% of respondents saying they found out via an email from Creation Theatre, and 16% saying they found out through Twitter or other social media. The survey results also suggest that off- and online media were also important for drawing attention to the production with 16% of respondents saying they found out via a newspaper or online review, and 3% via radio. 19% of survey respondents also stated that they found out via word of mouth.

In comparison, the box office figures for the analogue production show that 10% of audiences found out via email, 6% via a sales call or letter, 1% via the Creation Theatre website, 1% via social media and 4% through word of mouth (67% gave no answer).
The high proportion of audiences who found out about the Zoom Tempest either ‘online’, via word of mouth, or via an email from Creation Theatre suggests that existing networks are key to the marketing, and success, of online theatre. The majority of survey respondents were already connected to Creation Theatre in some way, with 51% saying that they had seen many Creation Theatre productions and 12% saying that they had seen one Creation Theatre production in the past. These respondents mostly found out about the Zoom production via an email from the company, word of mouth, or social media.

![Survey responses to “How did you find out about the Zoom Tempest?”](image)

Was the Zoom production able to reach new audiences?

The responses to our survey indicate, however, that the Zoom production was also effective at reaching new audiences. 27% of respondents said that they had not heard of Creation Theatre before watching the Zoom production, and a further 11% said that they had heard of the company but had never before seen a production. These respondents were more likely to have found out about the production via reviews, social media and radio as well as via word of mouth.

The initial survey responses also suggest that the Zoom production attracted some audiences who, before the lockdown, did not regularly attend live theatre performances. Whilst the majority of respondents (55%) said they attended theatre fairly frequently (around once a month or every few months), 13% of respondents said that they rarely attended (once a year), the same percentage as those who said that they attended very frequently (once a week or more).

Most survey respondents were also new to online theatre, with 17% saying that they had never watched theatre online, on television or in the cinema, and 50% saying that whilst they had seen theatre in the cinema or on television, that they had never seen theatre online. 27% had some familiarity with online theatre, saying that they had seen some theatre productions online, while 5% were very familiar, saying that they had seen lots of theatre online.

Why did audiences watch?

We asked our questionnaire respondents to select from a list of potential motivations for wanting to take part in the Zoom performances (see table below). Interest in the format was the most commonly selected reason, indicating that the novelty of the form may have been a key factor in attracting audiences. Reflecting the fact that the majority of questionnaire respondents were already familiar with Creation Theatre, supporting the company was also a key motivation for audiences.
Simply missing theatre in lockdown and the fact that participation offered something different to do in lockdown were also commonly selected reasons. The adaptation of the play and the fact that it was a Shakespeare play were seemingly less important to these respondents, suggesting that audiences were motivated to participate more by the experience and the opportunity to support the company, than by the content of the production.

Of those that selected ‘other’ two respondents said that they watched because their children were studying the play in school and three that they wanted to support friends who were in the cast. The desire to participate in a shared experience was mentioned by two respondents, one of whom wrote that they ‘wanted to share the experience with family’ and the other that it was something the ‘whole family could enjoy together’.

Others cite previous experiences with Creation theatre, or specifically with the 2019 analogue production as reasons for wanting to participate, saying that they ‘know that Creation productions are generally creative and brilliant’ that they had ‘wanted to see THIS production’ and that they ‘saw the original performance last summer, and was interested to see how it transferred to online’. Elaborating on their interest in the format, one respondent wrote that they were specifically interested in how Zoom shows ‘could improve accessibility to isolated people in the future e.g. in prisons, hospitals, care homes’, suggesting at the possible ways that Zoom theatre could develop for different audiences beyond lockdown.

Value for Money

We asked our survey respondents to provide a free text response to whether they felt their experience of the Zoom Tempest was good value for money. The significant majority said that they felt that their experience of the Zoom Tempest was good value for money, with 69% saying conclusively that they felt the experience was good, or very good, value for money and a further 10% that they did feel it was good value for money, but providing caveats to this in their answers. Just 2% said that they felt that the show was a little bit or slightly too expensive.

The comments given by respondents on this question provides further insight into audience thinking around the financial value of the online theatre experience. The following key factors emerge as influences on how audiences made decisions around the value of the Zoom theatre experience.
The Context of Lockdown:
Knowing that they were watching in the context of lockdown, with no access to live performance and with theatre and the arts struggling financially, had an impact on how respondents viewed their experiences. For example, respondents wrote:

‘very good value as lockdown entertainment’
‘Understanding that Creation Theatre is struggling to keep going, I was happy to pay the ticket price’
‘we would have wanted to pay anyway to help Creation’
‘Yes – given that I wanted to support live theatre’
‘happy to support the company as we miss theatre very much’

Even a respondent who thought that the performance was slightly too expensive explained that they had ‘started from the premise that I was making a contribution to support the company in difficult times, so I did not grudge what I paid’, suggesting that the opportunity to support the company during lockdown was part of the how audiences valued the experience.

The Quality and Form of the Show:
Respondents often mentioned the quality of the show as justification for their belief that the experience was value for money. One respondent wrote that they participated initially to ‘support the company’ but that ‘having seen the quality of the show […] felt it was worth the money’. Similarly, three other respondents said that having been initially sceptical about the price of tickets, that they were won over by the quality of the show:

‘Thought it was pricey at first, but once I realised the quality of the experience, it seemed very fair’
‘I was put off a bit at first by how expensive it was […] when I saw the show, however, I changed my mind and thought that it was well worth paying that much for an online show’
‘I felt that it was a risk to pay £20 but ended up satisfied by the show and pleased to contribute’

The liveness of the experience was also mentioned as a justification for the ticket price, with respondents particularly articulating this in terms of the labour required to make the performance work:

‘it was very good value for money – it was a live experience with both actors and support staff making the technology work, and all of that labour (and the labour of the director) was very visible and impressive!’
‘it was very good value for money, given the amount of planning and creativity that went into it’
‘At £11 each, that’s very good value for any kind of theatre, given the costs of production these days for company wages, audio-visual costs, props and costumes’

The short length of the show was also something that respondents took into consideration when assessing the value of the experience, with two respondents noting that they felt it was ‘quite expensive for a one hour performance’. One respondent, however, suggested that for them, the shorter length was a positive, writing that ‘it was a shorter show than if it had been in a venue, but this was fine, as it would have been difficult to focus for much longer, viewing from a PC’.

The ‘Price-per-Device’ Ticketing Model: The price-per-device ticketing model was a commonly mentioned reason for respondents feeling that the experience was value for money:

‘Yes. Especially as the cost is per device not per viewer’
‘Yes, as we were a whole family watching for the single fee’
‘Yes. Paid £20 for household of 3 people’
‘The price was very reasonable for two people with no further expenses’
‘Yes – as we could watch with whole family’
Noting the fact that the cost could be a barrier to those watching alone, one respondent wrote that ‘£22 paid for two of us to have a rollicking good time in our living room’ but that,

‘for one person £22 might feel a bit steep, depending on your income. The larger the group, the better the value, especially if you hook up the laptop to a large TV and can position the laptop in front of you to join as requested.’

Despite this, only one respondent mentioned that they felt it was ‘slightly on the expensive side for one viewer’, with one even writing that it was ‘good value for money even though I was watching alone in my home’, suggesting that individual viewers felt that the experience still represented good value for money and that they did not necessarily feel as though the price-per-device model was unduly unfair to them.

**Comparisons with Other Theatre Experiences:**
A few respondents mentioned how the Zoom experience compared in terms of cost with the in-person theatre experience, suggesting that this was part of their value assessments. This tended to be positive, with one writing that it was ‘much more affordable than in-person live theatre’ and another mentioning that it was ‘very different from normal theatre trips’ due to the lack of other expenses.

The other comparison respondents made was with other online theatre experiences. Three respondents mentioned the current availability of free online theatre as part of their answers:

‘Yes but given the quality of online content currently available for free the price might put me off in future’

‘It’s tricky because most online performances are being offered for free – which is great for [the] current situation and means I am watching more diverse work - however I think we should be paying artists for their work and I mostly give a donation anyway. I do think that £20 was a bit too much for a student to pay and there could be tiered pricing available. But better value than for example Old Vic Lungs - which prices me out (even though I want to support them) - it’s just too much for a live stream’

‘It was expensive, particularly against a plethora of free online work - however this was something very different to pre-recorded work online, and I felt so inspired I’ve no complaints. For a wider audience - especially beyond the local area with an expected ticket price - a smaller amount would be welcome. I’m very happy to pay for online work and think it’s important that a precedent is set that it is still something to be paid for, but was aware of peers I spoke to about the work being put off by the price, especially at that time of loss of income and uncertainty’

This final comment in particular points to complex position that Zoom theatre holds in the wider, currently expanding, landscape of online theatre. Whilst this comment notes that this production differentiated itself from pre-recorded work through its liveness, it also suggests that, for some audiences at least, it continues to operate alongside and compete for attention with this, often freely available, online work. Importantly, the comment also signals the ways in which the current financial situations of potential audiences are also rapidly changing and uncertain, which could influence how much audiences continue to be willing to pay for these experiences.

**Willingness to Pay for Zoom Theatre**

Overall, our initial survey responses suggest that audiences are willing to pay for Zoom theatre. 99% of our initial survey respondents said that they would be willing to pay to watch a live Zoom theatre production again during lockdown or whilst theatres were closed, and 74% said that they would pay to watch a live Zoom theatre production again at any time, even when theatres were re-opened.
There was less, but still a reasonable amount, of willingness to pay to watch a pre-recorded Zoom show whilst theatre are closed (47%), or at any time (25%). 2% said that they would only watch a Zoom show again if it was free.

A number of respondents provided extra comments clarifying their willingness to pay for Zoom theatre. Two mentioned cost, writing that it ‘depends on costs’ and that they would ‘pay for a Zoom performance at any time, but not as much as for a live performance once the pandemic is over’. Respondents also mentioned content as a factor in their willingness to pay, with one writing ‘if I were a fan of a particular play I would watch a recorded zoom show, but probably unlikely to watch something new’ and another that ‘the Shakespeare thing is a huge pull for me personally’. Two other comments clarify that they would ‘always rather attend the theatre in or outdoors’ and that ‘if theatres were open, there would have to be a reason to watch a Zoom production – i.e. the format being the point’.

**Shakespeare and Willingness to Watch Other Kinds of Content**

Mirroring the fact that only a quarter of our initial survey respondents said that they were motivated to watch the Zoom Tempest because it was a Shakespeare play, 26% of respondents said that it was somewhat important to them that the play was by Shakespeare, and 5% that it was extremely important. The majority of respondents (49%) answered neutral to this question, with a 15% saying it was somewhat unimportant, and 5% saying it was extremely unimportant to them that the play was by Shakespeare.

![Graph showing the importance of Shakespeare to respondents](image)

We also asked audiences how likely they would be to watch different kinds of content as a Zoom performance. The content respondents said they would be most likely to want to watch was ‘an adaptation of a well-known play or novel (53% very likely, 43% somewhat likely, 4% neither likely nor unlikely) suggesting that familiarity with a work may be an important factor in audiences wanting to engage with Zoom theatre. However, respondents also expressed an interest in watching new plays via Zoom (32% very likely, 47% somewhat likely, 12% neither likely nor unlikely, 8% somewhat unlikely and 1% very unlikely), indicating that audience may see Zoom as low-risk way to engage with new theatrical material.

Respondents were also more likely than unlikely to want to watch a tragedy or ‘serious’ drama, a musical and a concert via Zoom. They were more ambivalent about wanting to watch a ballet or dance performance with respondents almost evenly split on whether they were likely or unlikely to want to watch this type of content, and 26% answering neutrally. Respondents were more unlikely than likely to want to watch opera via Zoom with 23% saying they would be very unlikely, and 27% somewhat unlikely to want to watch an opera as a Zoom performance.
Navigating Technology

What devices did audiences use to watch?

Most respondents (48%) said that they watched the production via a Laptop. 28% of respondents said they watched on a larger screen by connecting a laptop, mobile phone or tablet to a television or projector. Fewer respondents watched on a desktop computer (14%) or a tablet (9%).

How easy did audiences find it to use Zoom technology?

Respondents to our survey said that they found it very easy (68%) or easy (30%) to use Zoom technology during the performance. 2% answered neutrally.

When asked if Creation could have provided any further guidance to help with using the technology some respondents commented that watching the production was amongst their first experiences of Zoom:

‘the company did a great job of working the technical instructions into the world of the show’
‘I found the advice and guidance very straightforward and reassuring’
‘I was unfamiliar with Zoom at the time so wasn’t sure how to turn off the camera’
‘I’d never used Zoom before and was nervous to get it right, but it was easier than I expected’

A number of respondents noted that they had become more adept at using Zoom over lockdown. One respondent who was already familiar with the platform noted the importance of not assuming that everyone has the same level of familiarity:

‘I didn’t find it too difficult, but that might be because I was already familiar with Zoom through work. For people who aren’t, I think it’s really important to go through everything they need to do really slowly and methodically (particularly where on the screen the thing you need to click will appear). Zoom can be quite an intimidating platform for new users because it has so many menus and things popping up in different parts of the screen. It’s easy to forget that once you become familiar with it.’
Did watching the show have an impact on audiences' confidence using videoconferencing technology?

Around half of respondents (53%) said that watching the show made no difference to their confidence with videoconferencing more generally, but 30% of respondents said that watching the show helped a bit, and 11% said it helped a lot, with their confidence using videoconferencing technology.

Liveness, Community and Audience Participation

67% of initial survey respondents strongly agreed, and 27% agreed, that it was important to them that the production was ‘live’ and that they were watching as the actors performed. Just 5% were neutral on liveness, and only 1% disagreed that liveness was important to them. Being able to see other audience members was also important to respondents, with 81% either agreeing or strongly agreeing that this was important to their experiences.

Respondents also generally agreed (54%) or strongly agreed (35%) that watching the production made them feel part of a community, with just 10% neutral and 1% disagreeing. They were less sure, however, on whether they felt as though they were an important part of the production; although 67% agreed or strongly agreed, 27% answered neutrally and 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had felt like an important part of the production.

Audiences were given the option of keeping their camera on during the show, with the understanding that they may be spotlit by the director and that the performance was being recorded, or that by turning it off they could opt out of being seen and recorded. 78% of our initial survey respondents said that they chose to keep their camera switched on throughout the show, with a further 13% saying they kept it on for parts of the show. 6% said that they chose to keep their camera switched off.

74 of 93 respondents left comments when asked how they felt about appearing on screen during the show if they did appear. The majority described the experience of appearing on screen in positive terms, and those who described it more negatively – ‘self-conscious’, ‘embarrassed’, ‘slightly uncomfortable’ – often qualified this by saying that they enjoyed appearing on screen overall despite these feelings.
Most commonly, respondents mentioned that appearing on screen made them feel part of the audience or community:

‘Pretty surprised and more engaged and connected’
‘it made me feel part of the audience, and created a fleeting sense of community’
‘It emphasised our participation in something bigger than/outside of our small family world during lockdown’
‘Connected to the performers […] and other members of the audience, some of whom I knew’
‘Especially early in lockdown, it felt like being part of the world again’
‘It brought the audience all together in that shared experience that makes this live theatre and not just TV or film’

Respondents used words such as ‘energised’, ‘involved’, ‘connected’ and ‘elated’ to describe how audience participation made them feel, indicating that it was a key part of the performance for audiences and vital for making them feel included and part the performance, something that was especially valuable in the context of lockdown.

Although some respondents report being self-conscious about appearing on screen, it was an exciting prospect for others. 9 of the respondents mention feeling excited about seeing themselves, and 8 that they thought it was fun or funny to appear on screen and see others. Two recall that they felt disappointed that they did not appear on screen, and some reported that the knowledge that they could appear on screen altered their behaviours, with one respondent saying that they had ‘thought ahead about what other viewers might be able to see in shot’ and another writing that:

‘In all honesty, I was probably being a bit more extroverted than normal in order to see if I could get on. It felt a bit like going to the circus and sitting in the front row- the slight frisson in case you might get picked’

Interestingly, although this question asked about how seeing themselves on screen made them feel, many respondents instead mentioned how seeing other people on screen was an important part of the experience for them. Respondents mentioned how it was exciting for family members and friends watching in other locations to see them, and that they had recognised friends on screen:

‘happy, as I know friends and family also watching the show in different locations would get to see me, and find it funny’
‘it was very exciting seeing other families we knew appear on screen’

Others described seeing other audience members, even those that they did not know, as an important part of their experience, and something that made them feel comfortable being on screen themselves:

‘It’s a little weird at first… but what is really interesting is being able to see all the other audience members. So it feels ok being part of the visible audience and I got a sense of being part of a live and connected group sharing an experience’
‘Thought we would be a bit embarrassed, but felt so engaged in the performance that it felt quite natural. Also seeing others doing it made it feel easier, and part of the show and audience’

A sense of community and connection was also mentioned as important by respondents when asked if they kept their camera on at the end of the show, and if they did, what they enjoyed about the experience. Although 16% of respondents said that they turned their cameras off after the show had ended, 81% said that they kept their camera on and/or watched the audience in gallery view when given the option at the end of the show, suggesting that this was an important aspect of the experience for audiences.
Again, audiences mentioned the opportunity to see and talk to those that they knew in the audience and that this moment helped to create a sense of community:

‘Loved the feeling of being part of something bigger, it felt very unifying in early lockdown’
‘Left it on and heard my best friend on the west coast say hi to me, and then my other friends do the same. It was awesome’
‘found it v moving, was first experience of live art in nearly two months and it wrecked me!’
‘Given it was the height of the lockdown period, and although I did not know anyone else taking part, it was heartening to see people engage with friends and family’
‘Wonderful to be part of a live event- especially at a time when the idea of group events felt almost impossible’

Others also said that they appreciated the opportunity not only to connect with other audience members, but to see the cast and crew and to show their appreciation:

‘Watching them change from being characters to actors fascinating’
‘Seeing the cast in their homes sometimes with their own families emphasised that theatre is always a joint/shared enterprise between human players and human audience whatever the technology involved’
‘I enjoyed the chance to applaud individual performers and see other audience members’
‘We left our camera on and it was a highlight of the show! It was great to be able to show your appreciation to the actors, wave to family and it generally created a feeling of togetherness’

**Overall impact of the production on audiences**

80% of survey respondents strongly agreed that they had enjoyed the experience of watching the show, and a further 19% agreed. 1% did not answer, and no one said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had enjoyed the experience.

Survey respondents felt that engaging with the Zoom Tempest offered them the opportunity to do something with friends/family (81%), that it helped to maintain/improve mental wellbeing (77%), that it helped them feel more engaged with the arts (76%) and that it reduced feelings of isolation/loneliness (65%).

A smaller percentage said that watching the Zoom production facilitated learning and development (27%) or helped them feel more engaged with the local community (16%). Just 4% said that watching the Zoom Tempest helped to maintain/improve physical wellbeing. Six respondents left ‘other’ benefits saying that it ‘felt good to be helping Creation’, that it ‘was the first time since “lockdown” that I felt I’d been to the theatre’ and that it represented an ‘opportunity to take a creative risk’. One respondent clarified that as they see a lot of theatre it would be difficult for a production to make them ‘more engaged’ but noted that engaging with this production had a wider impact on theatre, and their engagement with it, during lockdown:

‘this production was probably the first professional Zoom show in the world so it did all sorts of things other shows, and other Zoom shows afterwards, would not do. I have since seen 7 Zoom shows, all but one linked to Creation or Big Telly in same way, and the seventh acknowledged Creation as inspiring them to make their show’
This question mirrored a question from Creation Theatre’s 2019 audience survey. The responses reflected the responses to the 2019 survey in that the opportunity to go out with friends/family (91%), feeling more engaged with the arts (77%) and helping to maintain/improve mental wellbeing (61%) were the most commonly given answers. The responses differed in that just 10% of the 2019 respondents said that engaging with Creation Theatre shows helped reduced feelings of isolation/loneliness, and a greater percentage (27%) said that it made them feel more engaged with the local community, and facilitated learning and development (40%).

When asked if respondents had any other comments about the experience of watching the Zoom Tempest and what it meant to them, 46 respondents took the opportunity to provide further information. As well as reiterating how much they had enjoyed the experience (‘It was wonderful, thanks so much! ’It was lovely!’), some also used the chance to emphasise how participating in the show at the start of lockdown provided a source of connection and community:

‘It was heartening to be focussing in with others/strangers at a time of mental and physical isolation. Boosted me emotionally’
‘It was one of the best moments of my time spent in “isolation”. I am a professor of performance design and it was a lovely way to continue to discuss theatre with my students and colleagues.’
‘It meant a lot to me - I was feeling quite estranged from live theatre, and I was supposed to be in rehearsals but they had been cancelled, so it was really moving to be able to feel part of an audience again - I loved the sense of community, and the playfulness with the form.’
‘I’m not normally a fan of audience participation in productions, so I was surprised how much the inclusion of seeing other audience members added to this experience.’
‘I was amazed really by how well it captured the “live” feeling of theatre.’

Others wrote about how the production offered an opportunity to engage family members in an experience they would otherwise not have been open to, or to re-connect with Creation:

‘Thought this was fantastic and innovative. It engaged the whole family (me, my husband and 6 yo daughter). They would not have gone to see a traditional version of the play.’
‘Difficult time for us all, great to see some innovation. It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to make it to Oxford for a show, so a bit ironic that it was the “lockdown” that let me be able to watch a Creation Theatre production again!’

Insight into what the audiences thought about the production itself was also common:

‘I liked the mood and texture of it. It didn’t matter it was The Tempest, I enjoyed it for being its own idiosyncratic self’
‘I think being a family-orientated show lent itself to interactive theatre. I’ve watched a subsequent production by Big Telly that was more serious drama and the interaction didn’t work as well, it was a distraction and felt forced’
‘Style of the acting interesting — some acted as though they were on stage, which did not always work so well. Others adopted a more televisional style, which was better. Hard to have the first with close up cameras’
‘Important that I knew the text/story a bit - allowed the production more lee-way’

It is significant that a number of respondents who were industry professional described how participating in the Zoom show has had an impact on their professional practice, highlighting that the production was not only valuable to audiences as a lockdown experience, but that it has already had a wider impact on the industry:
‘I’m a freelance video designer for theatre, and like most of the industry had just seen most of my work vanish. I went to the show based on hearing about the use of Virtual Backgrounds in a review, and knowing one of the cast. It literally changed my life. Suddenly I could see a path to using Zoom backgrounds as a storytelling tool, a creative visual element I might be able to work in myself. But more so - more unexpectedly - it opened my eyes to the medium. The production’s playfulness, its theatricality and its live nature were all much more effective than I’d imagined possible. This was tremendously exciting, and seeing people - the audience, the cast - was surprisingly moving. In short it felt live and immediate, and has led me on to pursuing Zoom based theatre as a way to work myself.’

‘The production was inspirational. My husband and I are both actors and have both had tours cancelled due to Covid19. The future looked bleak - it still does - but the speed by which Creation got this production online was mind blowing. A real tangible example of problem solving in the most practical terms.’

‘It is something I have thought about and talked about a lot since seeing it. It was a very inspiring thing to have seen, it was very hopeful to see in the early days of lockdown, and was very hopeful for me. I am now involved in creating some theatre in Zoom, and I think I wouldn’t have believed this was possible without having seen this production.’

‘I’m a working actress myself so I was really curious to see what this production was like. A real triumph, fast and fun but true to the spirit of the play.’

Summary

This initial analysis of the audience for the Zoom Tempest indicates that overall, audiences found their experiences with the production enjoyable and valuable, providing them with a sense of connection, community and fun during a time of intense uncertainty and isolation. These preliminary results also suggest that there is an appetite among audiences for future Zoom experiences, and that audiences would be willing to pay for such experiences, especially if they were live.

Some of the challenges of evaluating this audience — especially in terms of audience numbers — demonstrates how digital audiences different from in-person audiences. If you are looking to create Zoom theatre and need or want data on audience figures for your reporting, it is important to bear this in mind, and perhaps to build this in as part of the booking system from the start.

It is important to note that these results are based on performances that occurred at the start of the lockdown period in April and May 2020, with questionnaires completed at the end of June/beginning of July. Zoom theatre has progressed quickly as a form, as has audience familiarity with the technology. This is positive in that audiences are now potentially more adept at using the technology, but may mean that their expectations in terms of the quality and finesse of Zoom productions may now be higher.

There is also a sense even in some of the initial comments from audiences, that having spent so much time at work and socialising via Zoom over the past months, viewers are suffering from Zoom fatigue. This could impact how audiences continue to approach Zoom theatre. For example one respondent said that they had liked being shown on camera during the performance but that ‘as more and more of the world needs me to show my face on Zoom’, they have recently stopped turning their camera on as it has ‘become tiring’. Another wrote that:

‘I loved the experience but now in this new time I am a bit zoom fatigued. I would be slow to pay to come again. That’s just the truth. I loved it at the time.’
Harnessing audience enthusiasm for Zoom theatre, while also mitigating Zoom fatigue, as well as dealing with the constantly changing lockdown restrictions (which mean that, even if theatres remain closed, audiences have access to a range of other cultural and leisure activities) may be a significant challenge in terms of engaging audience for future iterations of Zoom theatre.

Our further research, which will gather questionnaire responses from audiences who watched live and recorded re-runs of the Zoom Tempest in July 2020, and will conduct interviews with audience members, will allow us to further interrogate the responses to the production, as well as how audience attitudes to Zoom theatre may have altered over the past couple of months. It will also aim to provide further insight into how audiences might value liveness, and what they might be willing to pay for such experiences as lockdown eases.
Digital Theatre Transformation, Part 6: Digital Toolkit

This digital toolkit is aimed at performers and companies embarking on transforming their physical theatre practice into a digital mode of home working for both office staff and creative practitioners. It consists of:

1. Advice from the 2020 Creation Theatre/Big Telly Tempest team for creative practitioners and marketing/front of house staff
2. A set of guidelines for companies that are based on our research and written in collaboration with representatives of Equity UK
3. A checklist for Zoom productions compiled with Giles Stoakley, the Production Manager of The Tempest.

1. Advice from the Tempest team for companies embarking on Zoom performance

In response to our staff questionnaire, the cast members for the 2020 digital Tempest offer the following pieces of advice:

On the home studio set-up:
- Set up your studio! Your laptop - learn how to use it and where to store images for backgrounds, how to send and receive files. Play with the lighting, consider the natural light that you will have at different times of the day - don’t get to your first 7.30pm show and realise it’s too dark!
- make an environment that allows the greatest movement within the green screen that you set up for yourself.
- Sort out your sound quality.
- Multiple screens and large screens make life much easier

On performing for Zoom:
- Your stage is your little zoom box - learn its extremities and how to use it. Play with how close or far away you are from the camera for each moment. Learn to ‘interact’ with your backgrounds to bring them to life and make it believable your character is in that environment.
- Have a bit of knowledge about Zooms capabilities and what you can achieve online
- Watch your voice - you end up talking all day when you’re on zoom!
- Keep experimenting and growing throughout. It is crucial to find ways to involve the audience or it is just like a bit of cheap telly.
- Don’t put things in your way just because it’s unfamiliar.
- Work out your eyelines when actors are performing duologues. It makes it much more realistic.
- Be prepared for the tech to let you down.

On directorial choices:
- Involve your audience in the story, they should feel a part of the progress of the play.
- Think about how to make the audience feel important and that their involvement affects the story. Otherwise, you’d be better off pre-recording something.
- Make sure you are as slick as you can be. If we can see any technical gaps in the performance as it breaks the illusion.
- A technical stumbling block is just an opportunity to be creative
- Be playful. Trust your theatre instincts and see when you’re excited: if you are bored, be really alive to that.
- Don’t try to make a film.
- Don’t approach the medium as a compensation for live work, instead embrace it as a new platform.
- Keep the running time shorter than 75 minutes, to allow for Zoom fatigue.
On rehearsing and working with others on Zoom:
- Keep the shows and rehearsal days short (limit the online rehearsal day to 5 hours and keep any one rehearsal to less than 2.5 hours, with breaks)
- Curate the rehearsals with great care. Make everyone has said hello to everyone else. Maybe have an individual check-in at the start so everyone gets a chance to speak.
- Be hyper sensitive to all participants, in order to glean nuances in communication.
- If you are tired, inform the people you are working with.
- Be aware that it’s a very different style of working that doesn’t suit everyone. Some may absolutely love and thrive online but others may not enjoy acting/ working/ viewing online.
- Have ‘what if’ conversations so performers know what to do if someone suddenly isn’t there etc.
- Consider scheduling non-compulsory, inclusive social sessions at reasonable intervals throughout the rehearsal and performance period to allow performers to get to know one another, build relationships and trust, exchange notes and debrief after a performance.

On stage management for Zoom:
- Embrace the fact that some things are out of your control
- Have back up stage managers ready to jump in if the main one gets kicked out of the Zoom meeting

On Front of House relations with the audience:
- Know your bookers - the people who have been to many of your shows physically need to continue to be valued as they’ll help spread the word.
- Share, thank, retweet, post on social media every day.
- Widen your database with loads of new bookers and make sure that they get the option to be added to the mailing list
2. Guidelines for companies

These guidelines for companies are based on the project interviews with Creation Theatre and Big Telly’s staff and creative teams, and are drawn up with Stephen Duncan-Rice (South East Regional Organiser, Equity UK) and Dan Edge (Vice Chair of the D/deaf and Disabled Members Committee, Equity UK). They constitute a preliminary set of guidelines for digital theatre work that will in due course be superseded by Equity UK’s industry guidelines, which will be informed by this preliminary document.

Casting

Job descriptions should focus on the role and not on either the performer’s technical skills sets or their equipment.

• The only equipment that may be expected of the performer for the purposes of casting should be access to any device that makes video conferencing possible. This could be a smartphone, a tablet computer, or a laptop/PC with integrated or separate webcam.
• Technical support should be an integral part of the process of casting, to create an environment in which performers are confident about applying for a job even if they have no prior experience of digital performance.
• Casting should take account of individual performers’ access requirements. See the further guidelines on ‘accessibility’ below.
• Questions regarding the performer’s individual living arrangements, home space, sound insulation, and confidence with technology are inappropriate at the point of casting.
• It is not reasonable to expect performers to have access to an environment entirely free from background noise or a plain white background. It is the responsibility of companies to work with performers subsequent to casting to find solutions for such technical issues.

*The job is about acting, not technical ability or ownership of equipment.*

Contracts

Performers’ contracts need to set out the respective responsibilities of the company and the performer in a digital home-working setting. They should:

• Clearly state the total number hours of rehearsal time (per day and overall) and the working hours of the company.
• Be explicit about the fact that the safety of the home studio cannot be conclusively checked by the production manager/stage manager without the performer’s co-operation.
• Take account of the fact that a part of the performer’s home has to be converted into a studio set for the duration of the rehearsal and performance periods.
• Factor in the amount of time required for performers to set up and strike their studio sets inside their homes ahead and after each rehearsal and performance. This additional working time should be included in the contracted hours.
• Recognise the impact of home-working on other individuals within the performer’s households.
• Recognise the impact of home-working on performers’ utility bills. Company members should be reminded of their rights to claim for items of work-related expenditure such as mobile phone and internet costs, as well as the use of a home as an office in their tax self-assessment. For guidance, see https://www.equity.org.uk/media/4332/equity-tax-and-nics-guide-2019-20.pdf.
• Recognise that remote working for actors involves significant amounts of preparation time outside rehearsals with the director. This preparation time includes individual work on learning to use the technology (with online tutorials and additional support by the company), set up a studio in a suitable room, experiment with the technology and rehearse technical cues alone and with scene partners. This labour comes in addition to the normal expectations regarding learning lines and private rehearsals with scene partners. Half a day of working time should therefore be added for performers needing to set up a home studio, and another half day for personal development training on digital platforms and private rehearsals of technical cues.27
• Recognise that the job includes some elements of the work normally associated with the Stage Manager or Designer and that performers will have to be guided by those members of the creative team in setting up their own design and tech environments and equipment.
• Be explicit about whether rehearsals and performances will be recorded. Such recordings should only take place with the consent of the members of the company and should only happen in line with the terms of existing collective agreements (including ensuring the terms of future usage are clear and agreed upon at point of contract).

Tech support

Companies are responsible for supporting their workers with loans of hardware (where required: laptop, monitor, webcam, soft box lights, remote controls, microphones), acquisition of software and training required for digital performance. Equipment owned by a member of the creative team may be used in consultation with that individual performer. Any private expenditure on equipment that is purchased by a member of the creative team in order to facilitate a performance should be mutually agreed before the purchase and either directly paid for by the company or refunded upon submission of receipts. Equipment purchased in this way is owned by the company and must be returned to it in good working order at the end of the contract.

Training may include directing performers to online tutorials and step-by-step instructions in how to use the software required for a digital show; it should also include one-to-one support of individuals by the Stage Manager or other company technician.

Welfare support

Companies are responsible for supporting their workers in their home-working environments. Companies should designate a specific member of staff who acts as their Welfare Support Officer, who should receive the training necessary to be able to provide support.

Welfare support involves ensuring that there are clear rules of engagement and lines of communication set up at the start of employment, with staff informed about how to contact the Welfare Support Officer. The Welfare Support Officer should explicitly and individually check in with each performer to offer support if needed at regular points during rehearsal and performance periods.

Information about mental health resources for company members, including Equity’s 24-hour mental health helpline and Equity’s guide to staying safe online, is available on Equity’s website at https://www.equity.org.uk/at-work/bullying-harassment/mental-health-resources/.

27 Estimates of time required based on the experience of Creation Theatre performers on Zoom. Performers who have a home studio and have experience working with the digital platform of choice will only need appropriate time, depending on the complexity of the technical cues, to rehearse these in private.
Accessibility

When working digitally with D/deaf, Disabled or Neurodiverse talent accessibility must also be considered. Each individual artist will have their own set of access requirements. We recommend that a company, when inviting artists to audition for a piece, should send out an access requirements form to all artists, regardless of status. This enables the artist to tell the company what they require to make the audition process accessible to them and in turn allows the company to get that support into place for the artist.

Such support might include, for example:

- Not using the chat function in Zoom because it does not work well with screen readers for visually impaired artists.
- Making sure there is a qualified BSL interpreter if you are working with native BSL users.
- Sending script for audition in specific formats, so they may be accessed by screen readers or just be easier to read.
- Allowing extra time before audition where possible and in audition if certain support is needed etc.

This is not an exhaustive list, but an indication of the reasonable adjustments that might need to be put in place.

Once a job is offered to a D/deaf, Disabled or Neurodiverse artist, it is best practice to discuss with the artist what their reasonable adjustments are (for example more regular screen breaks may be needed), and to establish any access requirements that need to be met, so as to enable that artist to give their best work. Companies are also responsible for offering D/deaf, Disabled or Neurodiverse artists tech support that meets their individual needs.

*You need to create the environment in which you know the opportunity for raising an access problem is there.*

Empowering your artists to do so is not only best practice but also enables the artists you engage to do their best work.

For more information on working with talent or to answer any questions you may have please email the Equity D/deaf and Disabled Members Committee at disabilitycommittee@equity.org.uk.

Equity Deputy

At the start of the rehearsal period, all companies should have a Union meeting, either face-to-face or via video call, at which an Equity Deputy is elected who liaises with the Equity Representative throughout the rehearsal and production period. The meeting should set up clear lines of communication between actors, the company and the Union representative.

Rehearsals

Online rehearsals are more tiring than physical rehearsals; excessive screen time for performers can provoke eyestrain, reduced concentration and voice fatigue. They should therefore include frequent breaks and be limited in time, with a maximum of 5 hours per day for any one member of the cast, with no rehearsal session longer than 2.5 hours.
Rules of engagement for rehearsals, company policies and chains of communication need to be set up clearly at the start.

*You need to create the environment in which you know the opportunity for raising a problem is there.*

We recommend that:

- Performers who are not needed in a scene be allowed to virtually leave the rehearsal space, either by ending the video call, switching off their camera, or moving out of shot, so as to reduce the amount of screen time where possible.
- Rehearsals start and end with breakout group sessions at which members of the cast can communicate with one another informally before the start of the rehearsals.
- The Welfare Support Officer drop in on breakout group sessions to have informal conversations to establish performer welfare, needs for further technical support, and iron out potential misunderstandings that have arisen in rehearsals.
- Explicit procedures be agreed ahead of the first performance to deal with potential internet failures during a performance. Companies must not rely entirely on actors’ improvisational skills to cover outages but ought to have additional strategies in place (e.g. provision of ‘elastic content’ or member of the creative team ready to read in).

Risk assessment

All companies should carry out a risk assessment of their proposed activities in line with the statutory requirement under Regulation 3 of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. The purpose of a risk assessment is to identify the hazards that workers and other people may encounter in the workplace, assess the level of risk posed by each hazard and plan reasonable steps to minimise the level of risk. Companies should look at:

- Who might be harmed and how
- What is already being done to control the risk
- What further action can and should be taken to control the risk
- Who needs to carry out the further action
- When the action is needed by


In line with Equity UK’s guidance, we recommend that risk assessments be carried out even if a company has fewer than five employees and are therefore not legally required to record their findings, and that they be shared with those covered by the risk assessment. Risk assessments should be treated as living documents that are adapted as circumstances change; they should also be compiled in consultation with affected members of the company.

While digital performance minimises the risk of Covid-19 transmission because it eliminates physical contact between performers and audiences, effective risk assessment is particularly challenging in a digital environment because production managers and stage managers do not have physical access to the performers’ individual homes and technological set-ups. Risk assessment is also complicated by the fact that responsibility for the safety regulations within a workplace is divided between the company as employer and the owner of the property (the performer or their landlords).

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Risk assessment should be limited to the equipment and environment the company members use for work and need not cover the rest of a company member’s home environment.

Companies should therefore have a clear procedure in place whereby:

- The production manager leads a collective discussion about the risks of working online and how these can be minimised by the group.
- The production manager has individual meetings with performers to understand and work through the performers’ technological set-up and home working environment. Clear, consistent and regular communication in accessible formats is important to improve understanding among company members and to identify potential improvements.
- The company engages with company members to agree any changes to working patterns or practices.
- Members of the company are guided through the appropriate safety checks ahead of each rehearsal and performance (integrated into the half-hour call). This may involve performers working through a checklist or the production manager/stage manager performing a camera sweep of the performers’ home set-ups, to check through a list of potential hazards.

In its guidance (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/performing-arts), the UK Government furthermore recommends that companies make a copy of their risk assessment available on their website.

**Safeguarding**

Companies need explicitly to safeguard the privacy of their staff and, where applicable, their audiences in an online environment in which details of performers’ and audiences’ homes and private lives may be made visible through the use of webcams. This involves:

- Agreeing boundaries and clear expectations with performers regarding the visibility of their homes before, during and after the show (curtain calls, when green screens may be turned off and interiors be revealed).
- Giving clear information to audience members that alerts them to the potential dangers of unmuted video and audio before, during and after a performance.
- Obtaining explicit consent from both performers and audiences regarding any visual or audio access to their homes and private lives.
Zoom Theatre Technical Checklist
(Giles Stoakley, Production Manager, The Tempest)

Pre-rehearsal

Setting up Zoom:

- Zoom account: There are different levels, numbers of participants, branding options and time limits (see https://zoom.us/pricing). One option that is available are ‘webinars’, which allow participants to watch and which can dramatically increase the size of an audience. However, webinars do not enable interaction, with audiences visible to the performers and one another. Because webinars do not allow interaction, Creation Theatre did not choose this option and normally capped the number of participating devices at 120. Larger numbers are possible, but the more participants there are, the more difficult it is to move people around. (Remember that there each participating device might be viewed by more than one audience member: the number of ‘participants’ is not the same as audience numbers).
- Audit and check your company’s devices: Zoom appears and works differently on different operating systems and devices. For Zoom’s specifications for static or moving virtual backgrounds, https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/360043484511-System-requirements-for-Virtual-Background. Note that the way Zoom is set up for iPad tablets restricts gallery view in a way performers have found difficult to work with.
- Familiarise yourself with how to use Waiting Rooms and Breakout Rooms.
- Camera set-up: decide whether to use built-in or external cameras, and whether you will be using multiple cameras. Zoom good at switching between cameras quickly. Zoom-compatible software for altering and mixing camera feeds includes ManyCam (used for filters and making it look different; see https://manycam.com/), OBS (open-source software for video recording and live streaming; see https://obsproject.com/) or vMix (vision mixing live production and streaming software that enables transitioning between video feeds and cameras; see https://www.vmix.com/)
- Audio set-up: decide whether to use built-in and/or external microphones and set up the sound settings in Zoom. Built-in and webcam microphones have a tendency to be very directional, which can lead to uneven sound if performers are facing away from the device or are performing in a large room, at a distance from the microphone.

If using music to underscore a scene, be aware that playing music through the Zoom settings can make it difficult to hear the actors, especially if they are not speaking directly into their microphone.
To improve audibility, Zoom’s audio settings can be adjusted by disabling the suppression of intermittent background noise, moderating the suppression of persistent background noise, enabling original sound and turning on original sound.
- Playing music and SFX through Zoom: Zoom has excellent compatibility with QLab (https://QLab.app/), through which music and other effects can be added in. QLab recognises that you have Zoom, and you can assign Zoom as the output for QLab.
- Playing video through Zoom or QLab: Playing video can be difficult. It is possible to screenshare from within Zoom. An alternative is or have a stage manager’s computer in the call and play a video on their second screen, which their computer is looking at, and then spotlight that screen.
- Additional monitors and multiple Zoom windows: If a device is connected to two monitors, it is possible to enable a split-screen setting on Zoom that has ‘Speaker View’ on one monitor and ‘Gallery View’ on the other. The split-screen setting allows the Stage Manager to monitor what the audience is doing and spotlight audience devices at moments of interactive participation; it also enables performers to see each other and/or their audience.
- Green screen/virtual backgrounds: select backgrounds through video settings > virtual background. For more guidance, see https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/210707503-Virtual-Background.
Other pre-rehearsal preparation:
- Internet Connection: Make contingency plans for connectivity problems. This may involve broadband upgrades and use of mobile telephone data.
- Data Protection and Safeguarding: Protect your audience and actors with passwords and security, in line with GDPR. Be mindful of your audience's privacy if you are asking them to watch a show with their cameras unmuted, especially if the show is being recorded. Inform your audience of potential risks, how to avoid them, and of their rights.
- Copyright and PRS (Performing Rights Society): Check you have all the necessary permissions. Allow extra time during the Covid-19 crisis because there are longer than usual response times and you might have to contact rights holders individually.
- Risk assessment: see ‘Guidelines for Companies’ for guidance.

Rehearsal
- Tutorial for Cast members: guide your company through the essentials of Zoom: muting/unmuting of audio and video; camera and audio settings; changing virtual backgrounds (see https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/210707503-Virtual-Background); Zoom hotkeys (see https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/205683899-Hot-Keys-and-Keyboard-Shortcuts-for-Zoom); health & safety in the home-working environment.
- Speaker View/Gallery View settings: it is easier to rehearse in ‘Gallery View’, which allows performers to see one another. In the course of rehearsals, there needs to be a transition from seeing and watching scene partners to seeing only speaker view, as that will be the setting used in performance. Having a two-monitor set-up makes it possible to split the screen into ‘Speaker View’ on one monitor and ‘Gallery View’ on the other. While this makes it possible for performers to continue seeing their scene partners, it can create problems in terms of eyelines if performers are looking at a screen instead of where their scene partner is located in the virtual blocking of the scene.
- Use of the camera and spotlighting: Zoom is set up to automatically spotlight whoever is speaking or producing a sound. Zoom’s automatic spotlighting of the speaker can take 1-3 seconds to switch automatically to the source of a sound, performers therefore need to make a noise (e.g. clear their throat) as they are getting ready so as to give the camera the time to switch and be showing the speaker at the start of a line. If all performers are designated as co-hosts of the Zoom call (see https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206330935-Enabling-and-adding-a-co-host), their names will appear at the top of the ‘Participants’ window. This makes it possible for the Stage Manager to select which camera the audience sees and to override Zoom’s automatic spotlighting of the speaker, so that reactions and silent actions can be shown.
- Closed captioning: Zoom makes it possible to include closed captioning, which can be either typed or cut-and-pasted from a script live by a designated person or provided by a third-party service (see https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/207279736-Getting-Started-with-Closed-Captioning).
- Eyelines: Agree and rehearse virtual blocking and eyelines for dialogues and larger scenes (performers can use masking tape or post-it note markers on the walls of their home studios to focus on during scenes with multiple scene partners.
- Remote muting and camera control: It is no longer possible to unmute participants on Zoom, but it is still possible to remotely mute participants (see https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/203435537-Mute-All-And-Unmute-All). If a show requires participants to be unmuted, a host can enable participants to unmute themselves. This requires some guidance for audiences that needs to be integrated into the performance.
• Singing/Dancing: synchronised live singing and dancing is currently impossible on Zoom because of the tiny lags on the internet that prevent synchronisation. Scenes that require singing and/or dancing either require actors to be performing in the same room, or for them to be pre-recorded individually, edited together, and then streamed as a pre-recorded sequence.
• Costume and props: allow sufficient time for costume and props to be sent out by mail, fitted virtually, and altered (again, with time allowed for transport/mail).
• Lighting: if using green screens, performers’ individual studio set-ups need to be deep enough to enable performers to maintain a 1m distance from the green screen. The green screen needs to be lit clearly and evenly without shadows (diffused ‘softbox’ light); performers need additional lighting on their face and body, ideally from two diagonal lights. See for example https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H413prVuG5E for guidance on matching the lighting on the performer to the background for a scene.
• Contingency: have a contingency plan worked out with the company in case of an internet connection going down, and set up a separate means of communication (e.g. WhatsApp group) that enables the company to communicate in the event of internet failure. Creation Theatre’s strategy has been to use improvisation in the first instance, and either another company member ‘reading in’ or pre-recorded ‘elastic content’ in the second instance. A show stop is the final option.

Performance
• Managing audience members: put the audience into a waiting room before admitting them; mute the audience, and make sure the audience are informed of how to mute/unmute their audio, video, and safeguard their privacy (see ‘Safeguarding’ in the Guidelines above).
• Half-hour call: use the half-hour call to check the cast’s individual studio set-up for safety hazards, in line with the procedures set up as part of your risk assessment. This also gives performers something to do while they wait for the performance to start.
• Offstage/backstage: ensure all company members are aware that unless their camera is muted, they and their studio sets are visible to audiences who have selected ‘Gallery View’ rather than ‘Speaker View’ to watch the performance.
• Contingency: ensure all company members are connected to one another and ready to follow your agreed contingency plan.
• Curtain call: the curtain call is an opportunity for the audience and the cast to experience a sense of communality, which can be facilitated by inviting everybody to unmute their audio and video and switch to ‘Gallery View.’ Ensure that safeguarding measures are in place if you are inviting your audience to reveal themselves and their homes to other audience members and the actors (see ‘Safeguarding’ in the Digital Toolkit’s ‘Guidelines’).
• Awards: bring the show to the attention of bodies such as the Off-West End Theatre OnComm Awards (https://www-scenesaver.co.uk/oncomm-awards/) or Theatre & Technology Awards (https://www.theatreandtechawards.com/) to ensure you are considered for digital theatre awards.
Appendix A: Creative Staff Questionnaire

Digital Theatre Transformation:
A Case Study and Digital Toolkit for Small to Mid-Scale Theatres in England

Researchers: Pascale Aebischer and Rachael Nicholas

Section 1
Project Funding, Review, Contact Details and Participant consent
1. I confirm that I have read the above information for this project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
   ○ yes

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the questionnaire and the subsequent interview at any time without giving any reason and without my legal rights being affected. After the interview, I will be able to withdraw up until the point of publication.
   ○ yes

3. I understand that relevant sections of the original data collected during the study, may be looked at by members of the research team, Pascale Aebischer and Rachael Nicholas, and Creation Theatre, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records.
   ○ yes

4. I understand that taking part involves identifiable video recordings to be used by the research team for the purposes of transcribing the interview.
   ○ yes

5. I understand that taking part involves identifiable interview transcripts and questionnaire responses to be used for the purposes of Reports published on the Creation Theatre website, the University of Exeter Open Research Repository, the Independent Theatre Council, UK Theatre, the Society of London Theatre and in future academic publications, conference papers and other outputs (online/in print) by the research team aimed at academic and general audiences.
   ○ yes

6. I would like a chance to review the transcript of the interview before it is used in publications and consent to my contact details being stored and used for this purpose.
   ○ yes
   ○ no

7. I agree to take part in the above project.
   ○ yes

8. Please give us your name and email address, which we will use to contact you to arrange the follow-up interview at a time within the next 10 days that is convenient for you. We will use your answers to this questionnaire as a starting point for our conversation with you.
Section 2

Part 1: moving a theatre company online
This is a set of questions that is aimed at working out how the move online has affected the everyday running of Creation Theatre and how it has affected working patterns and the relationships and skills sets of staff within the company. Please skip whatever questions you don’t feel apply to you, and give a full answer to the questions which touch on your contribution to the work done by the company. Please indicate in your answer if there is lots for you to say that you would rather discuss during the interview than type up; if that’s the case, it would be helpful if you could give us some bullet points about your particular area of expertise or the things you can tell us about more so that we know what to concentrate on when we talk to you.

9. Could you briefly describe your role within the company?

10. Has the move online changed your role within the company and your working relationships with other members of the company? If so, how?

11. What additional equipment have you needed in order to continue working effectively from home?
   - PC/laptop
   - webcam
   - microphone
   - lights
   - green screen
   - broadband upgrade
   - mobile phone
   - other

12. How has working online affected how and when you work?

13. How has working from home affected boundaries and expectations regarding the balance between work and life and what steps did you and/or Creation Theatre take to protect your own privacy and work/life boundaries?

14. How do you rate the change to your work patterns resulting from the move online? 1 = very difficult, very negative experience 2 = difficult, mostly negative experience 3 = not that different from my normal experience of work 4 = a mostly positive experience, with some challenges but also positive changes 5 = a highly positive experience, work has become easier
   1 2 3 4 5

15. How has working online affected your sense of wellbeing? In your answer, try to focus on the impact of the mode of working separate from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. If you feel that the two cannot be disentangled, please state this in your answer.

16. Within your role, what environmental benefits do you find have come from digital home working?

17. Within your role, what negative environmental impacts have come from digital home working?
Section 3
Creating a production for Zoom

In this part of the questionnaire, we ask you about creating a production for Zoom affected the work of creative staff. You need only answer questions that are relevant to your role. Please indicate if there is lots for you to say that you would rather discuss in interview than type up; if that’s the case, it would be helpful if you could give us some bullet points about the topics you have a lot to say about so that we know what to concentrate on when we talk to you.

22. How did your responsibilities change as a result of shifting from face-to-face theatre to Zoom?

23. What new skills did you have to develop in order to shift to Zoom?

24. What training did you need in order to shift to Zoom?

25. How did doing a Zoom production affect (a) scenic design (b) lighting design (c) sound design (d) props (e) costumes?

26. How did the shift to Zoom affect rehearsals in terms of (a) length, (b) frequency (c) content (d) relationships between performers (e) directorial style?

27. How did the shift to Zoom affect dramaturgy? How did it affect the role of the director?

28. How did the shift to Zoom affect your approach to performance and getting into character?

29. What can you do with Zoom that you can’t do on stage?

30. How important are the following aspects of Zoom performance

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31. What are the main artistic, personal, and commercial challenges that arise from Zoom performance?

32. What are the main technological challenges that arise from Zoom performance?
33. What were your solutions to the challenges you mentioned in your previous two answers?

34. What are the main opportunities (artistic, personal, commercial) that arise from Zoom performance?

35. What are the main things you learned from the shift to using Zoom as a performance medium?

36. Can you offer 3 key pieces of advice to other theatre companies and performers who are about to shift to Zoom performance and online modes of working?
Appendix B: Audience Questionnaire

Digital Theatre Transformation:
A Case Study and Digital Toolkit for Small to Mid-Scale Theatres in England

Researchers: Pascale Aebischer and Rachael Nicholas

Section 1
Project funding, Organisation, Research Team contact and Participant Consent
1. I confirm that I have read the above information sheet for this project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
   ○ yes

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I am free to withdraw from completing the questionnaire at any time without giving any reason and without my legal rights being affected.
   ○ yes

3. I understand that at the end of the questionnaire, I will be asked to provide my name and email address if I am willing to be contacted for an interview. I understand that if I have not provided these details, I will not be able to withdraw after the questionnaire has been completed, since my contributions will no longer be identifiable.
   ○ yes

4. I understand that relevant sections of the original data collected during the study may be looked at by members of the research team, Pascale Aebischer and Rachael Nicholas, and Creation Theatre, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records.
   ○ yes

5. I understand that taking part involves anonymised questionnaire responses to be used for the purposes of: Reports published on the websites of Creation Theatre, the Independent Theatre Council, UK Theatre, the Society of London Theatre, as well as in the University of Exeter Open Research Repository and in future publications, conference papers and other outputs (online/in print) by the research team aimed at academic and general audiences
   ○ yes

6. I agree that, if provided in the questionnaire, my contact details can be kept securely and used by researchers from the research team until November 2021 to contact me about taking part in future research.
   ○ yes

7. I agree to take part in the above project.
   ○ yes
Section 2
Context of watching

8. When did you watch Creation Theatre/Big Telly’s Zoom Tempest?

9. How did you find out about the Zoom Tempest?
   - Creation Theatre email
   - Twitter
   - Other social media
   - Newspaper review
   - Word of Mouth
   - Tickets were purchased for me
   - Other

10. Where in the world did you watch the performance? Please name the country and, if you are based in the UK, the first part of your postcode.

11. Where in your home did you watch the performance? If you moved around, please select all that apply.
   - Living area
   - Kitchen
   - Bedroom
   - Dining area
   - Study or office
   - Garden
   - Watched outside of my home
   - Other

12. What device did you watch the performance on? If this was a combination of devices (e.g. on a laptop but connected to a television), please specify.

13. Who did you watch the performance with? Please select all that apply.
   - alone in my home
   - with one other person in my home
   - with a group in my home
   - with family watching from a separate home
   - with a friend watching from a separate home
   - with friends/family watching from multiple separate homes

14. Why did you want to take part in the performance? Please select all that apply.
   - Something different to do
   - Interested in the format
   - Supporting Creation Theatre or Big Telly
   - I miss theatre in lockdown
   - I wanted to watch some Shakespeare
   - I wanted to support the arts scene in my local community
   - I was interested in seeing a new take on a story
   - Other
Section 3
How you watched

15. Did you prepare for the performance in any way? Please select all that apply.
   snacks/drink
   organised the viewing area
   organised my schedule
   read the play
   read up on the play
   read up on the company
   Other

16. Did you do any of the following whilst watching the performance? Please select all that apply.
   eat/drink
   move around
   watch something else
   post on social media
   look at social media
   message someone watching the show in a different location
   other

17. Did you do any of the following after watching the performance? Please select all that apply.
   Post on social media
   Follow the company on social media
   Book another Creation show
   Look for other online theatre experiences
   Discussed the show with the people I watched with at home
   Discussed the show with people who watched the show from separate locations
   Discussed the show with people who had not seen it
   Other

18. Whilst watching the show would you say you were:
   Completely focused on the show
   Mostly focused on the show
   Somewhat focused on the show but often distracted
   Distracted most of the time

19. If you felt distracted, tell us briefly about what distracted you.
Section 4

using Zoom’s videoconferencing technology

20. How easy did you find it to understand and use the technology (Zoom) e.g. muting and unmuting your audio and video?
   Very easy
   easy
   Neutral
   difficult
   very difficult

21. If you found the technology difficult to use, what further advance information or guidance could Creation have provided that you would have found helpful?

22. To what extent did watching the show help your confidence with videoconferencing more generally?
   did not help at all
   did not help much
   made no difference
   helped a bit
   helped a lot

23. If you had technical issues (e.g. poor connection), can you tell us about them?

24. If you watched a live performance, did you keep your camera switched on during the show?
   Yes
   No
   For parts of the show

25. If you appeared on screen during the show, how did this make you feel?

26. Please tell us briefly about what you did at the end of the show. Did you turn your camera off right away or did you leave it on for a while? If you left it on, what did you enjoy about the experience of seeing the cast and the other members of the audience?
Section 5
your experience of the show

27. Please select how strongly you feel about the following statements. If you watched the prerecorded version, please ignore the final statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I enjoyed the experience of watching the show</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I felt like I was an important part of the production</td>
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<tr>
<td>Watching the production made me feel part of a community</td>
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<tr>
<td>It was important to me that I could see other audience members</td>
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<tr>
<td>It was important to me that the production was ‘live’ and that I was watching as the actors performed</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

28. Research suggests that people who attend live theatre and other type of live performance can benefit in the following ways. Thinking about the Creation Theatre/Big Telly The Tempest, please indicate which of these apply to you and/or your family members. Select all that apply:
- More engaged with my local community
- More engaged with the arts
- Reduced feelings of isolation/loneliness
- Facilitates learning and development
- Helps maintain/improve mental wellbeing
- Helps maintain/improve physical wellbeing
- Opportunity to do something with friends/family
- Other

29. Thinking about the performance itself, please comment on what you thought about the ‘look’ of the production? (e.g. Did you enjoy how the production looked, would you have preferred a more ‘polished’ look, what did you think about any technical ‘glitches’?)

30. What was your favourite moment or aspect of the performance?

31. How important was it to you that the play was by Shakespeare?
   - Extremely important
   - Somewhat important
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat not important
   - Extremely not important
32. Please state how likely it is that you would want to watch the following content as a Zoom performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Very likely</th>
<th>Somewhat likely</th>
<th>Neither likely nor unlikely</th>
<th>Somewhat unlikely</th>
<th>Very unlikely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A new play</td>
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<tr>
<td>An adaptation of a well-known play or novel</td>
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<td>A musical</td>
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<td>A tragedy/‘serious’ drama</td>
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<td>A ballet/dance theatre</td>
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<tr>
<td>An opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>A concert</td>
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</table>

33. Did you think your experience was good value for money? If you participated in the research performances on 11 or 12 July and feel comfortable doing so, please comment here on how much you chose to pay and why.

34. Would you: (please select all that apply)
   - Pay to watch a live Zoom theatre production again during lockdown or whilst theatres are closed
   - Pay to watch a live Zoom theatre production again at any time even when theatres re-open
   - Pay to watch a recorded Zoom show during lockdown or whilst theatres are closed
   - Pay to watch a recorded Zoom show at any time
   - Only watch a Zoom theatre show again if it is free
   - Other
Section 6
About you

35. Before lockdown, how often did you attend live theatre performances?
   - Very frequently (once a week or more)
   - Quite Frequently (every fortnight or so)
   - Fairly frequently (once a month or every few months)
   - Rarely (once a year)
   - Never

36. Please select the most appropriate statement. Before watching this production I:
   - Had not heard of Creation Theatre
   - Had heard of Creation Theatre but had never seen a production
   - Had seen one Creation Theatre production
   - Had seen many Creation Theatre productions

37. Please select the most appropriate statement. Before watching this production I:
   - Had never watched theatre online, on television or in the cinema
   - Had seen theatre in the cinema or on television but never online
   - Had seen some theatre productions online
   - Had seen lots of theatre online

38. What is your age?
   - 16-25
   - 26-35
   - 36-45
   - 46-55
   - 56-65
   - 65-75
   - 75+
   - prefer not to say

39. How would you describe your gender?
   - Woman
   - Man
   - Prefer not to say
   - Other

40. How would you describe your race or ethnicity?

41. Please tell us here if you have any other comments about the experience of watching the Zoom Tempest and what it meant to you, or if there is a topic you would particularly like to talk about or avoid in a follow-up interview.

42. We would like to interview audience members over Zoom about their experiences. Please tell us whether you would be happy to be contacted with more information about taking part in these interviews. If you don’t wish to be contacted, just write ‘no interview’. If you are agreeing to an interview, which will take approximately thirty minutes, please leave your preferred name and email address in the space below. We will contact you shortly to arrange a convenient time for the interview and will use your answers to this questionnaire to guide our questions. In that email, there will be a link to a Participant Information and Consent form which we have to ask you to fill in before we can have the interview. If you do not leave your contact details, your questionnaire will automatically be anonymous and you won’t be able to withdraw your consent to its being used once you have submitted the questionnaire.
Acknowledgements

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