

Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study

Creation Theatre's Zoom production of *The Tempest* (2020)

Key Findings

The *Digital Theatre Transformation* project examined 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 document sets out the key findings of the project, which drew on interviews with the company and creative team, box office data, the results of an audience questionnaire, and interviews with audience members.

The full report and Digital Toolkit, which provides detailed practical advice about working with Zoom as well as guidelines for digital working developed with Equity, can be downloaded from the Creation Theatre website at <https://www.creationtheatre.co.uk/about/digital-theatre-transformation/>

Business model and company administration

- Adapting *The Tempest* (and subsequent productions) for Zoom, charging per-device for tickets, and significantly reducing overheads has allowed the company to pay freelancers Equity wages and even to make a modest surplus during Covid-19.
- Online work has resulted in reduced expenditure and increased productivity and has reduced the company's environmental impact.
- It has also presented opportunities for audience development, increased opportunities for more diverse casting practices, has created new professional networks and creative partnerships and has opened the company up to new sources of funding.

Working Digitally

- Working remotely has been mostly positive for company and creative staff with greater flexibility contributing to better work/life balance, increased concentration, productivity and sense of wellbeing.
- Working online facilitates multi-tasking and new ways of working creatively but working and rehearsing on Zoom is significantly different to in-person working and requires adaptations to working practices, with additional focus on welfare.
- It is imperative to be aware of the ethical and equality issues presented by working digitally. Companies should be mindful of potential issues and should ensure that technical training and/or equipment is provided.

The Audience

- The Zoom production of *The Tempest* reached an estimated audience of 2800 across 17 performances and attracted audiences from a wider geographical area than the 2019 analogue version of the production, both nationally within the UK, and internationally.
- 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.
- Existing audience networks were important for marketing the Zoom production, with email and social media the most common ways that audiences heard about the production. However, the Zoom production also attracted audiences who were new to Creation.

Value for money and willingness to pay

- Audiences felt that paying £20 per device for *The Tempest* represented good value for money and indicated a willingness to continue to engage with, and pay for, Zoom theatre experiences.
- Audiences who initially thought the ticket price expensive described changing their mind once they had seen the show. Audiences distinguished the Zoom experience from recorded theatre and placed extra value on the fact that the production was created specifically to be watched online, that it was live, and that they were able to actively participate.
- Audiences were not necessarily aware of the costs involved in producing online work, which influenced their perception of value. Greater transparency regarding the labour involved in producing online work may increase willingness to pay.
- There was a large amount of variation in terms of what audiences deemed as 'good value' (especially between international/US audiences and UK audiences). Tiered offerings and/or concessionary prices may increase willingness to pay for a wider audience.
- Covid-19 continues to influence the decisions audience make about theatre attendance, which influences their willingness to pay for Zoom theatre.

Audience Experience and Impact

- Audiences tended to watch in small groups but viewed the experience as a social rather than an individual experience. Liveness and audience participation were especially important in creating a sense of community and connection.
- Audiences described finding the experience engaging, uplifting and emotionally moving. Maintaining mental health and wellbeing, reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness and feeling more engaged with the arts were key impacts of the production on audiences.
- The production provided hope and inspiration about the future of the theatre industry, especially for those audience members with a professional interest in theatre.