

Dr Tulp and the Theatre of Zoom

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“Participating in the real-time theatrical performance via the online video conference platform generates an unique experience of intimacy and immersion.”

ICIDS 2020 Jury

Dr Tulp and the Theatre of Zoom: virtual dramatic production

Abstract

On 16 and 17 July 2020, we produced and performed the short online theatre production *Dr Tulp and the Theatre of Zoom*. The piece was performed 16 times, online via Zoom, to audiences of 4 at a time, which we followed with a Q&A workshop for an audience of c. 80 people on the opening night, also on Zoom. The experience of making this piece raised challenges and questions that endure beyond the live performances, particularly against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns of 2020-2021, which relegated much, if not most personal and professional communication outside of narrow domestic groups to online spaces. Questions of embodiment and space, presence/absence and the role of framing and occlusion in the creation and experience of meaning insinuated themselves in the process of making the work and took centre stage in the writing as well as the production of *Dr Tulp and the Theatre of Zoom*. The processes of making the piece, including the perversity of connecting, in such a sterile environment, with a cast and production team that never met in person, became an exploration of a particular failure of representation that is most salient to theatre, but also relevant to the wider discourses of mediated performance and mediatiation.

Keywords

alienation, mediatiation, online, performance, theatre, zoom

Backstage

When we were commissioned to create an interactive media artwork during the first Covid-19 lockdown with Annja Neumann for Cambridge Digital Humanities, we found ourselves in a three-week laboratory for exploring the phenomenology of online spaces, in particular video conferencing platforms. Video conferencing platforms that were previously a secondary option had become the only way of continuing activities in key sectors, from education and the civil service to the creative industries. In comparison with pre-existing studies of virtual environments that have often been framed as novelty add-ons, even after decades of use, these technologies became critical infrastructure in a very short space of time. We decided to put them to test in a medium that traditionally depends on profoundly human, embodied practices and connections – theatre.

The production team not only had to make a new piece of theatre within three weeks from concept to performance, but also to navigate how to achieve collaboration without the opportunity to meet in person. In addition to the off-screen key creative team (including members of Cambridge Digital Humanities, sound designer Gary Hayton and production assistant Camille Gerstenhaber), we had to cast, devise, rehearse and present a performance with a cast (Martin Edwards, Reynah Rita Oppal and Paul Panting) who would never meet us or each other in physical person. Rather than building on any real-life encounters, the entire setting of the project and our collaboration was the digital platform on which the work would ultimately be presented. We had to learn how to interact and collaborate closely as we had to get to know each other, the work and the setting all at once. Collaborative creation depends so much on informal communication and the subtle signals

that circulate freely in physical interaction. On video conferencing platforms every interaction is a meeting, and serendipitous exchanges are rare. At the same time as devising a new piece of work, then, we also had to develop a new way of working.

A play of space and place

In order to meet this challenge head on, during these three weeks, we worked within key parameters. The poetics of the theatrical space afforded us (CDH's remit for the piece relied on us using Zoom as our method of delivery), drew more on that of commercial property, developed for hot-desking and empty of human support staff, than it did on spaces where actors and performers had trod and sweated in countless repetitions of dramatic productions. Using this format for theatre is not a novel idea, and over the summer of 2020 numerous readings, perfor-

mances and even television shows were devised to be either performed or created using this method, including the sitcom *Staged* by Simon Evans for BBC One (2020), *What Do We Need to Talk About? The Apple Family: Conversations on Zoom* by Richard Nelson for Public Theatre (2020) and *A Spell at Home with Hester*, written by Carrie Marx and directed by Chris Lince for Hermetic Arts (2020). However, extending the use of a format designed for limited face-to-face interaction to create a dramatic experience was still very much in its infancy, and extensive theoretical examinations on or reflections on this practice were not available to the creative team.

While the intimacy of space that is produced "by and for the body, taking form from the inside" (Bachelard, 1994, p.101) was absent, the medium of Zoom is not short on opportunities for fragmentary dialectics (1994, p.53) and lends itself to a script that would "move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times, and on dif-

ferent planes of dream and memory (p.53). We decided that the lack of tethered geographical location allowed us great flexibility within our piece and presented us with the opportunity to play with audience perception of where the action was taking place. Just as Zoom technology allows a conference caller to blur or play with their background, we were able to place and re-place our actors in different environments. In doing so we did not want to rely on visual cues, and instead used conceptual frame shifts, with action moving subtly between settings in ways cued by allusions in the script and subtle soundscape shifts. In this way our story location was “reduced [...] flattened out, confined to a surface, to a single plane” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 313) and in a quite literal sense asking “[...] what escape can there be from a space thus shattered into images, into signs, into connected-yet-disconnected data directed at a ‘subject’ itself doomed to abstraction?” (p.313).

We asked in turn whether this abstraction, taken to the ‘ou-topian’ (no-place) extent that Zoom did, could support a play of spaces and fragmentary dialectics, with a nod to Piscator’s timeless acknowledgement of the entanglement of writing for theatre and “the complexity, dividedness and incompleteness of our age” (Willett, 1979. p.108). Given the certainty of failing to produce a piece of theatre in the legacy of live performance, we embraced the opportunity to ‘fall away from exterior representation and replication of the so-called “real world” towards the ‘space produced from within itself” (Bailes, 2011, p.27). This demanded more of its audience than might be typical in traditional theatrical performance in which the audience is a more passive observer. In our piece, the audience is required to pick up on the contemporary references to which the script alludes in order that the space in which the action is taking place can be identified and so understood. For

example, in the first scene, Dr Tulp is delivering a lecture:

DR TULP

Good. What's the pathological process that gets us there?

MED STUDENT 1

The virus inflames the air sacs in the lung.

Tulp shoots them a look. 'Air sacs' - we're not at school...

Without visual cues, we then take the conversation about the process that the students are observing to one where the observation is being done in a professional environment:

DR TULP

Induced coma, organ failure, etc., etc.

Not much fun. But back to the beginning again, to the lungs.

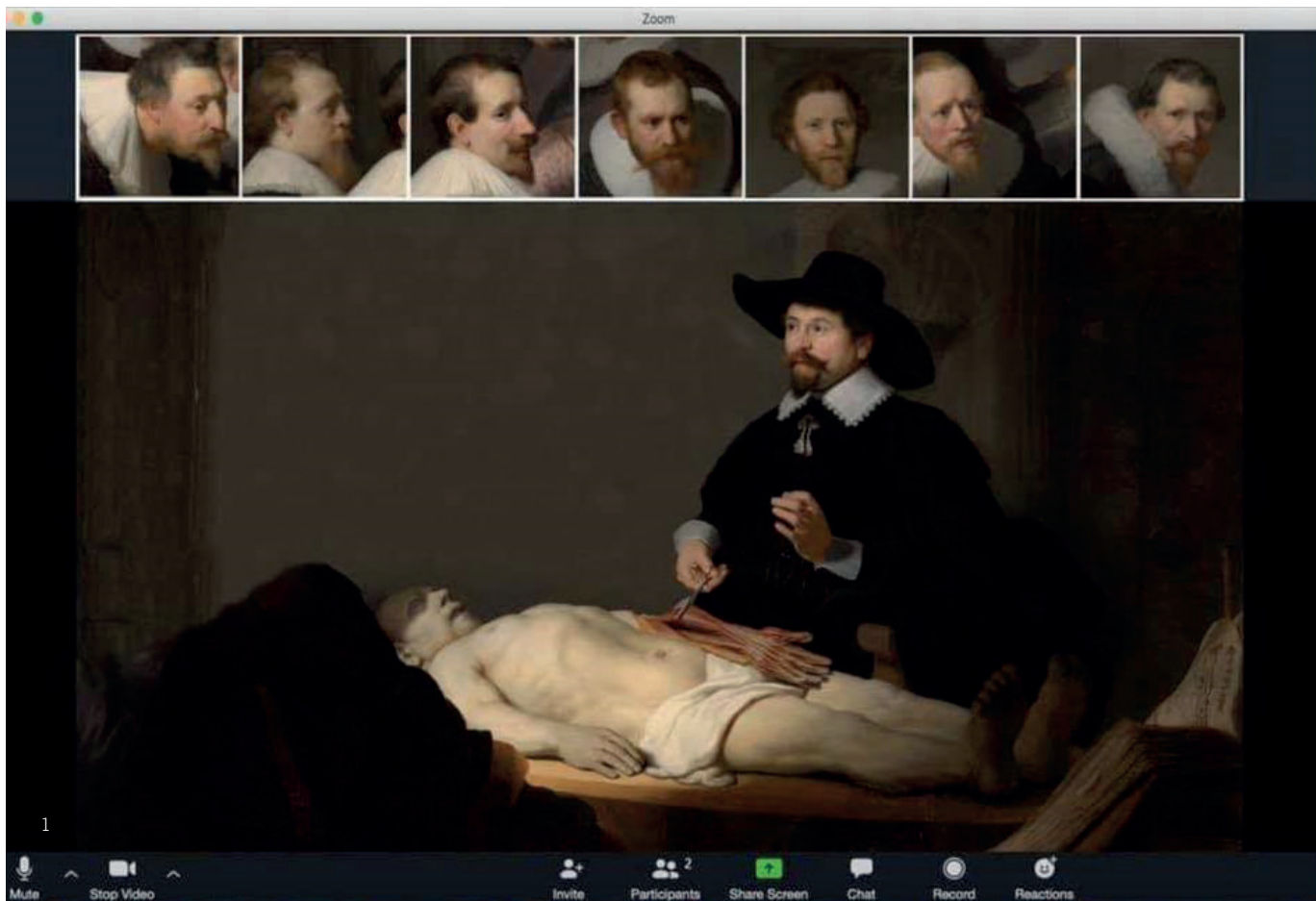
Shift: We're now in a Government facility in the US.

DR TULP (CONT'D)

The lungs. Clear evidence of trauma.

This is done mid conversation; but a shift of tone and background soundscape subtly alerts the audience to the fact that a change is taking place.

We worked with sound designer Gary Hayton to overlay the performance with a series of room tone sounds to help differentiate the different spaces in which our characters appeared. The first, clinical training room sound changed into a smaller space with outside traffic – American, if you listened carefully – and then back to a committee room in the 'native' UK setting of



the performance, with the dulled sound of a ticking clock carrying an institutional atmosphere between scenes. In the final scene, when the audience is directly addressed, we shifted from a tiled room sound with low ceiling to a less reverberating and more intimate space to enlist

auditory spatial perception to direct the experience of where the action was taking place.

A play of dramatic spaces on Zoom invited story itself as the central character in our drama, casting all human participants (audiences included) as bit players – not just the story

of the play, but story *as* play. The behaviours that we call play exist and emerge in relation to boundaries in time and/or space (Westling, 2020, p.155), and, as 'freeplay', in relation to the fixity of systems (Westling, 2020, pp. 82, 86). Our bounds, and the story-play that push against and away from them, were shared by the creative team and our prospective audience members, and the challenge that emerged 'from within' was how to rely on the story to both connect and hold us. We planned and rehearsed the event on Zoom without ever meeting in person and so shared

the same affordances as our audiences would. Referencing the meme of Rembrandt's famous painting that was created by Andrea Kastner and Colin Lyons (2020) in our publicity materials, we placed audience members alongside actors in 'the gods' or the upper row of Dr Tulp's operating theatre, as he conducts a series of autopsies (see figure 2).

This situation prompted a corresponding flattening of hierarchies within our team. The roles of scriptwriter, producer, director, sound designer and actor came to bleed into



each other, as we strove to establish the kinds of connections that make theatre and its many levels of dialogue ‘work’ as a live experience and which might be described as ‘circulating energies’ (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 59). Milieus that have developed or been adapted to support such work typically bear the multi-sensory, layered marks of those who went before you, with every structure carrying traces of previous plans, routines and material practices employed in the craft of make-believe. Even the space itself can be or feel charged with this craft, as suggested to Serge Férat by Guillaume Apollinaire when instructing him on the design for *Parade*: ‘The décor [...] will be the air in the theatre’ (Brandon 1999, p. 10). Theatre and other performance arts are deeply embodied, material practices with stages and venues that act as frames, into which audiences are invited and ‘abducted’ to complete the artwork (Chow, 2012, pp. 41-43). Even traditionally seated audiences play a role in the

totality of spectacle and the auditorium is part of, not separate from, the stage environment (Aronson, 2018, p. 10). For this production, our attempts to create Fischer-Lichte’s circulating energies were relegated by a global pandemic and the parameters of Zoom to the digital equivalent of a hot-desking warehouse in an industrial estate, designed to be impervious to touch so that temporary visitors make no mark, and no change, to the structure itself or its surfaces.

The staging, inspired by the meme in which the attending physicians to Dr Nicolaes Tulp’s anatomy lesson are relocated to the boxes reserved for audiences in Zoom’s speaker view, limited the number of attendants in the top row to six, two of which would be actors. We did not want audience members to be able to participate vicariously or unseen, and thus limited the number to four in each performance. The confrontational honesty of this boxed-in flatness in the face of the tacit perversity of creating ‘con-

nectedness' under these circumstances appealed, as did the inescapable reminder of boundaries and frames as the condition of possibility for play (Westling, 2020, p.146). Here, we understood play as the craft of storytelling which, in the words of de Certeau, creates space:

Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or conflictual proximities. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts (Certeau, 1988, p. 117).

The conventions that we were dependent on limited our capacity to unmediated, direct

interaction and included those that limited the immediacy of dialogue (spoken or gestural); those that confounded our attempts to control the position of participants in the upper row; those that restricted control over sound quality and the layering of simultaneous sound from two or more sources, all hard coded into the Zoom milieu to make it fit for its designed purpose, as well as those that allowed us to somehow connect and, after two weeks of working together in this fashion, 'feel' each other. While we achieved this in the creative team, the question of whether this would carry across to audiences remained unanswered until, and quite possibly beyond the two nights of tightly scheduled performances on the 16th and 17th of July 2020.

We relied on the staged theatricality of Rembrandt's painting with a tacit request that audiences understood the necessity of failure; not simply failure to produce a 'theatre play' but failure of representation and its entangle-

ment with the mythos of presence. The challenge of comprehending the reality of death at the subjective level is present in the original painting, as well as in the meme that we drew on. The historical moment in which we found ourselves made the question of how to make sense of death an inescapable subject matter, from the rapidly growing score of pandemic death to the concurrent, intensely mediated deaths that sparked a wave of Black Lives Matter protests. Just as news media, art and public autopsies did, we would, a priori, fail to represent death and in our play, the cadaver is never shown. Instead, death became a metaphorical frame for a shifting cast of actual and imagined instances of deaths; flattened along with the other hierarchies among our participants to deny ourselves and our audiences the opportunity to give it a stable location.

Death is a problem of the subject

[...] the dying man raises once again the question of the subject at the extreme frontier of inaction, at the very point where it is the most impertinent and the least bearable (Certeau, 1988, p. 191).

The first Covid-19 lockdown, which began and gradually tightened from late March 2020, had us all sequestered in our homes for many weeks and limited to very local movements within a global situation that we, as yet, didn't understand very well. The Covid-19 pandemic was narrated by a seemingly endless stream of mediated deaths and the exhausted and exasperated witness accounts of health care providers with bruised faces marked by the pressure of face masks, who held the front line against an invisible foe. The promise of a vaccine seemed nearly two years away and the ways in which the disease spread were debated. The sheer sca-

le of the pandemic and the numbers of mortalities around the world were sharply contrasted by our suddenly and significantly limited physical circumstances, which emphasised the abstraction and almost perverse theatricality of mediatised deaths. In addition, events around the death of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 triggered a sustained wave of Black Lives Matter protests around the world. In the UK, the public enquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy was also ongoing, bringing yet more lives, lost in the most desperate of circumstances, to widespread attention. Death and its attendant analyses of causes dominated our screens when we looked at the challenge of reimagining Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632) for Zoom.

The reversal of the terrain on which beliefs develop results from a mutation in the paradigms of knowledge: the ancient postulate of the invisibility of the real has been replaced by

the postulation of its visibility (and thus by its scientific or political representativeness); it articulates on this new postulate (the belief that the real is visible) the possibility of our knowledge, observations, proofs, and practices. On this new stage, and indefinitely extensible field of optical investigations and of a scopic drive, the strange collusion between believing and the question of the real still remains. But now it is a question of what is seen, observed, or shown (Certeau, 1988, p.187).

With a view of the painting as another screen; a window on the post-mortem as performance, the screenplay somehow needed to reflect these inescapable (in both the literal and psychological sense) circumstances. The mediatisation of death, while bringing events to our awareness, simultaneously creates layers of abstraction that removes and reduces their impact, rendering death yet another media product

in an ever-changing landscape of competing distractions and attractions (Jacobsen, 2020, p.7). The scaling effects and commodification of emotion by networked media dovetailed with the vastness of a global crisis and the groundswell of rage at the legacy of racism to create an extraordinary media tapestry that flattened the personal and the historical and enveloped us all in enforced isolation.

But in producing an image of the dying man, I proceed in the same way. I am participating in the illusion that localizes death elsewhere, in the hospital or in the last moments: I am transmuting it into an image of the other; by identifying this image with the dying person, I make it the place where I am not. Through the representation, I exorcise death, which is shut up next door, relegated to a moment that assume is not mine. I protect my place. The dying person whom I speak about remains ob-scene if he is not myself (Certeau, 1988, p.194).

Suffocation emerged as a theme that connected these critical contemporary events. It resonated with the Grenfell Tower tragedy in 2017, with which it shared the problematics of race and class, factors that were front and centre in the events surrounding George Floyd's death and also insinuated themselves, together with age and the comorbidities of obesity, diabetes and heart disease, in the search for what it was that made Covid-19 more deadly for some and not others. The reimagination of The Anatomy Theatre of Dr Nicolaes Tulp (1632) for Zoom had to honour the present, and these themes came together quickly in a screenplay that took the anatomy lesson of Dr Tulp and made it the autopsy first of a Covid victim, then of George Floyd, a moment in the enquiry into the Grenfell Fire and finally into the realm of the projected autopsy of the audience itself.

Questions of death and its realness at the subject level in a play drawing on these catacly-

smic events converged could not be addressed without keen awareness of race, class and, to a lesser extent, sex. We workshopped the script with our cast, and were fortunate to work with an actor (Martin Edwards) who had a deeply personal connection to the Grenfell Towers disaster, having spent some of his childhood in the surrounding area:

DR TULP (CONT'D)

I've seen some things. I mean you see some things in this job, but this is something else. It's almost as if... I'm sorry. I try to stay detached, it's the only way to do this job and do it well.. But my mum lived next door for twenty years, she's only just moved away. That was a good area. It IS a good area. There are so many families there. Old families. You know.

Ones that've been there for a really long time. Everyone knows each other, looks after each other. It sounds like a cliché but it's true.

He moves.

DR TULP (CONT'D)

I'm sorry.

The compressed timeframe did not allow us to benefit as much as we could have from the collaboration, but devising and co-creation emerged as immediately constructive approaches in remote theatre-making, particularly where it is possible to engage several dimensions of presence, as suggested by Riva et al. (Berger, 2020, p.609) – proto presence, core presence and extended presence.

Embodied processes in confinement

The decision to allow the piece to take place in an unstable in-between place or out-

pia came out of an initial conversation about embodiment. “Telecopresence is a distinct phenomenon, giving rise to peculiar kinds of interaction rituals, styles and knowledge” (Berger, p.2020), and the process of developing projected co-presence and ‘circulating energies’ was supported by repetition. It noticeably bound not just the characters, but the actors playing them, together. Through conversing, devising and rehearsing together, we could access the three dimensions of presence proposed by Riva et al. (Berger, 2020, p.609): ‘proto presence’ or awareness of ‘being there’ in an embodied sense; ‘core presence’ or a conscious experience of the here and now; and ‘extended presence’ or the sense of being present as a continuous identity that persists over time. A focus on devising, fluidity of production roles and inviting informality allowed us to establish a sense of ourselves and each other in a détournement of the ‘flattening’ described by Lefebvre (1991, p.313); not to escape, but to create elastic spatio-temporal bonds

within the present limitations; a story of space within place (Certeau, 1988, pp.115-117).

By contrast, we could only reliably access one of the three dimensions of presence of our audiences: core presence or a sensory focus on the present events. For a deeper sense of engagement via the other two dimensions of presence, proto- and extended presence, we relied on audiences to ‘self-capture’ (Chow, 2012, p.41-43), and we attempted to do so by way of frame shifts that drew on their imagination. We decided early on that we did not want the audience to interact with the actors as we didn’t have the time or scope to manage this. Instead, we emphasised containment and frames when scripting the role of audience members, visually and through instructions before, during and after the performance. We set up a separate Zoom room as a lobby or waiting room, in which we interrogated audiences about their health status and instructed them, in the spirit of the restricted movement imposed by the pandemic lock-

down, on safety precautions during the performance. Audience members were instructed in advance to arrive wearing masks as a MacGuffin device to limit interaction with the cast in the tight timeframe of each performance. Instead of attempting to conceal the frustration of containment and frames, we made it a feature, from the introduction in the waiting room, through the many shifts that left audiences with the challenge to identify and re-frame, for themselves, the different scenes, to the final shift in which it becomes apparent that the body on the table is no longer someone else's, but your own, making you a witness to your own autopsy.

In Tulp's final monologue, he invites the audience to consider themselves in the frame just out of frame; the cadaver:

DR TULP

So what do we have? There is trauma; that's definite. An extended period of trauma. That

wasn't just life, but life had a huge amount to do with it.

Judging by the lungs, I think there were things that took your breath away. You used your lungs, but maybe there were ways you could have used them more. Did you sing often enough? I don't know. You touched things. You made things, I'm presuming.

It's hard to judge a life by its body. Maybe it's a side effect of the job, but I quite like my bodies to have a bit more movement in them. You know, for dancing. You look like you could have done some dancing. Some slight tendon damage. Your knees were ok. You broke a bone as a child. You healed well; you were lucky - someone loved you. The mark

of the civilized society, that; isn't it: if you've got someone who'll keep you alive while you mend a broken bone. I can't remember who said that. It's good though, isn't it? Says a lot if there's someone who'll take care of you. Bring you things. That doesn't bring me to the end point though. I don't know, with you. It's still quite hard to tell how you went, in the end. What you came to. But look at the neck. Look at the lungs. At the end of it all you just couldn't breathe.

We wanted the play to reflect the re-ritualisation of death (Jacobsen, 2020, p.10) and acknowledge the memento mori, a gesture many relegated to irrelevance on the back of a decade of modernity, particularly in the Global North, which increasingly can be found with its counterpart within societies divided by class, rather than distance. With this device, we solicited the other two presences from our audiences; those

we could not reach, but which we might invite audiences into. The first, via the discomfort of imagining your own body as the cadaver, and the third, your experience of having a persistent identity, via the vertigo of displacing the subject positions of subject and object; in this case the 'you' that perceives, and the body on the slab.

During the performance our audience were asked to come with us on our journey and to accept the shifts in place that occur within the piece, and we risked losing them in order that they might catch up with us. In the audience workshop after the opening performances on 16 July 2020, we received feedback that 'lurching' between confusion and understanding what was going on was common, but effective. Our audiences were a self-selected group of scholars and practitioners who were interested to see how a new piece worked, and the setup of the script meant that throughout, our audience were learned people – students, lab technicians, committee members. Were we to have created the piece for general audiences, we may well

have made other choices at various stages of its development. Although much could be refined with more time to devise, rehearse and work with live audiences, we found that our audience not only coped but that the effect of the ending was enhanced by this journey.

Reflections

In looking back on the screenplay some months later it is clear that we expected a lot both of our cast and our audience. The restrictions of the rectangular boxes meant that our actors were limited in terms of their movement (Paul and Reynah's images were confined to matchbox sized boxes on a regular lap top screen) with even Martin's relative closeup limiting his movement within the room in which he was performing. He could not move more than one or two steps in either direction; Paul and Reynah could not move at all. Body language was therefore severely limited. Facial and vocal expression were our only real tools, and it was not a

coincidence that the actors we cast were all specialists in voice work. Even though we dedicated proportionally significant amounts of time to sound design and found the results more or less satisfying within the given parameters, it is an aspect of video conferencing platforms that requires further development. The quality of the sound is relatively poor, and the distortion that occurs when different channels cross, including when two or more people talk simultaneously, hamper the emergence of instinctive, informal communication.

Each of our cast brought a particular energy to their performance and to the room between readings. Balancing this was a crucial part of building a team that could work together in this irregular medium. After a few rehearsals, we noted that something like the a 'circulating energy' theorised by Fischer-Lichte did develop – but how this was done, and the mechanics of this process when the cast were not physically present requires further investigation. A possible focus of further research could be the impact

on this type of emergence by the narrowing of communication channels by technical limitations, including the compression of sound. After the third rehearsal, the cast began to generate and maintain a 'centre stage' that was not located in any of their physical spaces, but rather an ou-topia where the projected presence of the cast converged. Metaphorically, lines spoken became lines thrown and entangled in temporary co-presence, allowing the cast members to "share and feel things in common" (Dolan 2005, p.22).

Our cast needed this to support each other, as well as the audience experience. The timing of each performance had to be tight, as we could only accommodate four audience members at a time. We ran the performance eight times on both evenings in order to accommodate just over 60 bookings. The programming of the event was brutal for our actors, as back to back performances every 15 minutes meant that our actors had to go through the same tight cycle

of high energy levels on rapid turnaround as well as managing any arising technical issues in between performances. For Martin, who is in the central frame of every scene, this schedule was especially tough, and we were very aware of the demands that we were making of him.

The whole process, starting with ideas generation and concluding with a post-show debriefing meeting (also on Zoom) underscored the value of the very human need and desire to meet and create in person both in its absence, the desire to compensate for its absence, and the relative success of perseverance. Though as a creative team we came to trust each other and were aware of the bonding energy created by and during the performance, we very much missed the opportunity to be together as people. Arguably, this was the central experience, and not without a poetic dimension that resonated with the wider theme of the performance: our experience and comprehension of death, and thus life. The final performance came and went and though

we shared a drink at the end, the key celebration of the wrap party was missing in every sense. We missed the warmth and opportunity to share appreciation for the mutual generosity that remains core to acting and theatre, as a profession and cultural domain. What's more, the experience of creating the piece and yet not being able to be present when it is being performed is – while not unique to work on Zoom – alienating. It was strange for all of us to be in our kitchens or offices around the country knowing that this event was taking place, but at the same time not being there. None of us could not escape the poignancy of the gap between the virtual and what we wanted to experience and share.

The use of video conference platforms for performance work is in its infancy. The technology has many limitations, some of which may be ameliorated with further developments, and comparisons with the experience ingrained within the practitioner of in-body, in-person work will always be invited and relevant. Our expe-

rience of working with this format has shown its potential not for liberation from the physical space, but accentuating through real and poetic removal and absence the very human need for creating together. Questions of whether theatre will become a native in virtual spaces and what audience will make of attempts to explore their potential will unfold and be answered in practice, but it is unlikely to be practice as escape from the physical domain. The scenography of theatrical worlds includes the interpretative space that its audiences may, if minded to, contribute with, and in which stories take on a life of their own. Rather than an exercise in efficiency, virtual theatre must thus be an exploration of the effective.

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Images

1. The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp is on Zoom now, a meme created by Andrea Kastner & Colin Lyons (2020) based on *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* by Rembrandt, 1632;
2. Screenshot from *Dr Tulp and the Theatre of Zoom* (2020) with Martin Edwards as Dr Tulp, Reynah Rita Oppal (1st from left) and Paul Panting (4th from left), sharing the top row with four audience members.

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