

Filming the stage: The impact of filming and live-streaming Shakespearean theatre.

Theatre can be traced back to Ancient Greece, with live performance retelling stories, and myths of the heroes and the Gods. Performance was “the main way in which Athenians absorbed myths” (Wiles, 2000, p.19). Artists have taken inspiration from the Greeks; hence new styles of performance have developed. In the UK Shakespeare is a huge influence on theatre and is continued to be enjoyed today. Yet, as technology has advanced, it has somewhat modified the way Shakespeare’s work is presented and consumed. Nevertheless, technology has become a way of showing artistic work to a much wider audience through recordings and live-streams. This essay aims to showcase the impact of recording live theatre and what this means for the future of live performances with particular reference to Shakespearean theatre.

Theatre performances have their own set of conventions such as no talking and applauding the actors at the end of the show. You watch a theatre performance in a performance space such as a theatre building with a stage. The audience is in the same space and building of the performance. The audience can physically see the actors on stage, compared to a live stream, where the viewer isn't seeing the actor live. Instead, they are watching a 2D projected image of the actor in their own home. Theatres have been made in a particular way to add to the experience and adds an element of spectacle; whereas watching a recording/live-stream somewhere else won't give you the same impact that is intended.

Ian McKellen has discussed his ideas on filmed recordings of stage productions. McKellen from 1990 to 1992 was touring King Richard III. One performance was recorded, using three different camera angles. The results were unedited to give the viewer the choice of which camera to watch. McKellen concluded that “the most obvious way of preserving a live performance is the least satisfactory” because it doesn't “capture much of the impact of the original occasion” (Osborne, 2006, p.50). During a theatre performance there is a certain

kind of atmosphere that is created from the sets and lighting which surrounds you in your seat. Everyone sits together to watch the performance and your focus is on what is happening in front of you, on the stage. With Shakespearean theatre the actors speak out to the audience and sometimes interact with them. This interaction adds to the spectacle of theatre because the spectator becomes part of the performance and feels personally involved. If there is no interaction involved with the audience, the actors can sense the audience are present with them. Peggy Phelan makes the point that “performance’s life is only in the present” (Osborne, 2006, p.49). Only if you are present in the literal room does the performance have any meaning or impact on you. Your presence, as the audience, adds to the performance. By watching a recording of a performance, the viewer will not generate the same feelings.

Immersive performances need the audience in the room with them, “the audience are integral to the experiential heart of the work and central to the form and aesthetic of the event” (Machon, 2013, p.72). Without the audience present with the actors, the desired outcome won’t be achieved. In 2019 an immersive performance of Shakespeare’s ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ was performed at the Bridge Theatre but also recorded and shown at cinemas through National Theatre Live. In this performance, the audience were part of the play, as the actors had to actually walk through and interact with them. In Act 2, the audience takes part in a dance with the actors in the space. For those involved this dance creates a unique experience, but by watching a recording of the performance, the viewer won’t have the same feelings or come away with the same experience because they are not directly involved and are detached from the action.

With that being said, recording and live streaming theatre presents the opportunity for more audiences across the world to have the chance to watch theatre performances. In 2003 in association with BBC 4, the Globe was the first company within the UK to broadcast a live and uncut performance of Shakespeare. This resulted in the National Theatre broadcasting

live and uncut performances too. Known as National Theatre Live. The Globe decided to live-stream to "contribute to the theatre's mission to make the Globe experience global in reach" (Aesischer, 2018, p.164). By live-streaming a professional performance, the globe and the National theatre can attract bigger audiences.

The National Theatre Live broadcasts into cinemas and has an audience of around "11 million people across 65 countries" (National Theatre Live, 2020). Performances such as Benedict Cumberbatch in Hamlet and Phoebe Waller-Bridge in Fleabag have been recorded and shown in cinemas. Thus, more people have access and can watch sold-out and highly rated performances. As Shakespeare is taught in schools, the live streams into cinemas means more pupils can watch Shakespeare across the UK. The live-streams open up the chance for a greater and more varied audience to watch the performance, especially those who may have been disadvantaged due to location or financially. However, streaming into cinemas helps out the cinemas themselves. These events are "attracting back to cinemas audiences who largely deserted them" (Barker, 2013, p.2). Online streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime is a cheaper option than going to the cinema. Therefore, showing something that won't be available on those platforms will entice audiences to go back to the cinema. These types of showings are considered a pretty certain of a "sell-out success" (Barker, 2013, p.2) as they are seen as an event not just a typical screening.

Other live events have been recorded and live-streamed before theatre got involved. Such events include sporting and music events. Yet similar points apply whether we are talking about sport or theatre. Whether you are watching a live performance in a cinema or at home, you will have a different experience compared to those in the theatre venue. Just as those watching football at home will have a different experience to those watching in the stadium. Depending on where you view the footage the atmosphere will be different.

In a theatre venue, you watch the performance from one angle. Yet with a recorded and live-streamed performance the angle you are watching at can change. Camera shots can change from a wide shot to a close up of an actor. The different camera shots and angles are something you only get with recorded or live-streamed performances. It is believed that “the live broadcast/filmed performances try to be cinematic” (Osborne, 2006, p.59). This is done to make the audience watching elsewhere feel just as involved and immersed in the performance. However, this raises the question of whether you are watching a theatre performance or a film. If the recording is trying to be cinematic that is making the performance different from what it is meant to be. A theatre performance isn't trying to be cinematic but to create an experience. By watching a recorded/live-streamed performance you get the chance to watch the action close up, which is an option you don't get with a traditional theatre performance. With traditional theatre performances, the audience stay in their seat, therefore their view is limited due to the location of the seat. Hence, the filmed/live-streamed performances offer the viewer a close-up performance where they won't miss anything because the camera knows where to look for them.

Theatre has been enjoyed live for years but as technology has advanced, the option to watch theatre performances in our own homes has been made available. This allows for a wider range people to experience theatre, while also the recordings help preserve performances for educational purposes. However, watching a performance on a screen doesn't have the same impact. Recording and live-streaming theatre performances might be the new way of making theatre accessible for more people but, it doesn't give the viewer the same feeling of being in the theatre physically. Alongside this if there is interaction, the viewer doesn't get to experience it if they are watching a recording. Shakespeare can be difficult to follow due to the language used, therefore a recording can be stopped to understand what has been said however watching the performance live will give a better

experience of a Shakespearean performance. Live-streams and recordings fails to capture the same atmosphere and you don't get to connect with the actors.

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