'A New Kind of Play':

Theatre in the Digital Age

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Summary

This study explores two recent productions that attempted to find a theatrical language for the digital age. The first is *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, a 2013 co-production between the Royal Shakespeare Company and Google Creative Lab. This production was presented as 'a new kind of play': an interactive online event structured around a live performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was theatre shaped for the internet and speaking in the language of social media. *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* challenged many of the essential elements of live theatre, but in creating a communal interactive experience it adhered to the spirit of Shakespeare's play.

The second production examined is *wonder.land*, a musical that ran at the National Theatre, London between November 2015 and April 2016. Where *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* brought live theatre to the web, this production brought the digital world to the stage. Both might be read as attempts to find a theatrical language for a digital age, but *wonder.land* more critically explores the tension between the real and the virtual in the age of Web 2.0. Ironically, with the launch of NT Live in 2009, the National Theatre was arguably at the forefront of digital innovation in UK theatre. Screening its productions in cinemas offered a hybrid, mediatized experience of live theatre. Yet *wonder.land* presents an uneasy perspective on the kind of immersive, virtual world once associated with cinema, and now popularly represented by the internet. But while its story implies that virtual lives must be abandoned for presence and connection in the 'real' world, this study argues that *wonder.land*'s exuberant staging of a phantasmagoric digital world contradicts its heavy-handed moralism.

Both *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* and *wonder.land* betray the challenges of dramatizing the digital age. Yet in striving to adapt to a new media age, both the RSC and the National Theatre have kept faith with a key understanding of drama: as action taking place in the 'here and now'.

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Introduction: theatre in the digital age

The use of computers in the performing arts does not merely add a new tool to an old discipline. It challenges some of our most basic assumptions about performance. First, it blurs the boundaries between performance disciplines…. Second, it blurs the boundaries between scholarship and creative practice… Finally, digital technology is challenging the very distinction between "liveness" and media. (David Z. Saltz)[1]

This study explores two recent productions that attempt to find a theatrical language for the digital age. The use of digital technology in theatre over the past two decades has provoked as much controversy as it has enthusiasm. Commentary on digital innovation has tended to fall into two camps. Either the digital future would reinvigorate the theatre, or it would undermine traditional stage practice and live performance, further diminishing the importance of theatre in the cultural conversation.[2] For those suspicious of the use of digital media in theatre – whether on-stage projections, for example, or live streaming of performances – their suspicion is often related to a sense that the distinguishing feature of theatre is its 'liveness'. If live theatre is mediated to the audience, or augmented by digital technology, it might become something else: a form more related to cinema or television. This study does not attempt a definition of a new kind of digital theatre, and neither does it argue that live theatre can only be corrupted by new media. Instead, it examines two productions that navigate continuing tensions between interactive digital media and conventional theatre practice. In doing so it illustrates the challenges in dramatizing the digital age, whether on real or virtual stages.

A live, shared experience between performer and spectator has been cited many times as being the essence of theatre. The director Peter Brook, writing in 1968, emphasized above all a sense of presence: 'A man walks across this empty space, whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.'[3]

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[1] David Z. Saltz, 'Digital Literary Studies: Performance and Interaction,' in *A*
[2] Stephen A. Wade, 'The London Theatre Goes Digital: Divergent Responses to the New Media,' *Theatre Symposium* 19 (July 2011), p. 54.
[3] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), p. 9.

The theatre scholar, Hans-Thies Lehmann, has articulated this contract between performer and spectator in more exact terms:

> In contrast to other arts, which produce an object and/ or are communicated through media, here the aesthetic act itself (the performing) as well as the act of reception (the theatre going) take place as a real doing in the here and now… The emission and reception of signs and signals take place simultaneously. The theatre performance turns the behaviour onstage and in the auditorium into a *joint* text, a 'text' even if there is no spoken dialogue on stage or between actors and audience.[4]

What is essential here is that sense of the performance and its reception taking place instantaneously; it is an unmediated dialogue, an interaction 'in the here and now'. But Lehmann argues that the spread of media since the 1970s has caused a 'caesura' in the art form, and that this break has brought about 'a new multiform kind of theatrical discourse' which he calls 'postdramatic theatre'.[5]

Postdramatic theatre has moved away from the primacy of the text; it is multiform and shows many of the features of the historical avant-garde - fragmentation, heterogeneity, and self-reflexivity among them. But the media context in which the theatre now operates has effectively changed the meaning of these features, Lehmann argues; in this new media age they signify a 'response to changed social communication'.[6] This postdramatic theatre is hypertheatrical and self-reflexive; it no longer attempts to simulate the real world. In other words, the use of new media in theatre – such as digital projection and live video feeds - creates an 'immersive but estranging and disintegrative environment', according to Bill Blake.[7]

That estrangement is creatively exploited in the work of many multimedia theatre companies that combine live performance with new media, particularly The Wooster Group and The Builders Association in the US, and Blast Theory in the UK.

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[4] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 17.
[5] Ibid., pp. 22-23.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Bill Blake, *Theatre and the Digital* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 14.

However, this study focuses on the use of digital media in two recent productions by companies more associated with traditional theatre practice: the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre in London. It does so for a number of reasons. Firstly, the use of digital technology by major theatre companies marks an interesting shift towards an acceptance of digital technology in mainstream theatre practice. In employing new media in less experimental or disruptive ways than The Builders Association or Blast Theory, these productions more clearly betray the implicit conflicts and difficulties in reconciling the use of digital technology with live performance. They also suggest something of the precarious position of live theatre in a digital age. Major national institutions have a brief to engage and develop a wide audience, and this increased use of digital technology arguably shows these companies adapting to the expectations of audiences now attuned to more dominant media, such as television and internet. Finally, since live performance is ephemeral, a study of this kind depends on either attendance at a production or available records of a past performance. For that reason, while National Theatre Wales has shown possibly the most innovative use of digital technology among national institutions in Britain and Ireland, a lack of available archived material means that past productions such as *Bordergame* (2014) are not discussed here in depth.

The first section of this dissertation explores *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, a 2013 co-production between the Royal Shakespeare Company and Google Creative Lab. This innovative production was presented as 'a new kind of play', a three-day interactive online event structured around a live performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[8] In effect this was theatre shaped to the internet, and speaking in the language of social media. Its interactivity presented challenges both to its producers and its audience; the production abandoned traditional narrative structures to create a digital world in which performer and spectator could play together. In doing so it challenged many of the essential elements of live theatre, but in creating a communal interactive experience arguably it adhered to the spirit of Shakespeare's comedy.

The second section addresses *wonder.land*, a musical that ran at the National Theatre between November 2015 and April 2016. Where *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*

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[8] 'Midsummer Night's Dreaming, an online play – how it works,' *YouTube*. Royal Shakespeare Company, 24 May 2013. Web. 8 May 2016.

brought live theatre to the web, this production brought the digital world to the stage. Both productions might be read as attempts to find a theatrical language for a digital age, but *wonder.land* more critically explores the tension between the real and the virtual in the age of Web 2.0. With the creation of NT Live in 2009, in one sense the National Theatre was at the forefront of digital innovation in UK theatre. Screening its productions in cinemas offered a hybrid, mediatized experience of live theatre, one in which performer and spectator were separated from each other. Yet interestingly, *wonder.land* presents an uneasy perspective on the kind of immersive, virtual world once associated with cinema, and now popularly represented by the internet. But while its story implies that virtual lives must be abandoned for presence and connection in the 'real' world, its exuberant staging of a phantasmagoric digital world implicitly contradicts *wonder.land*'s heavy-handed moralism.

Ironically, as the VR theatre designer Mark Reaney has pointed out, theatre itself is 'the original virtual reality machine' where audiences can visit 'imaginary worlds which are interactive and immersive'.[9] Nevertheless, proponents of digital theatre can still be defensive about its merits. In promoting *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, Google's Tom Uglow argued that since modern theatre was often immersive and interactive, the only difference in this production was the nature of the stage used:

> Modern theatre makes the audience walk, or puts them in a car, or makes them the actor; our stage is online, it is fragmented, glimpsed, experienced and amplified through sharing - the narrative exists around us and immerses us.[10]

Unfamiliar as this kind of online production was, arguably this immersion in a digital world was not substantively different to other theatrical experiences. But there is another perspective to take on this: a production like *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* or *wonder.land* – which combine live and media elements - could be read less as a natural development of theatre in a digital age than as entirely destructive of the live

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[9] Qted in Steven Dixon, *Digital Performance* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2007), p. 363.
[10] Tom Uglow, 'RSC's Midsummer Night's Dreaming [#Dream40] and Google+ : Why we're doing it,' *Tomu.co*. 24 May 2013. Web. 26 April 2016.

experience. In *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan influentially argued for the uniqueness of live performance in a media age:

> Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.[11]

Similarly, if the performer or spectator is not physically present – if Peter Brook has no audience watching the man stride across the space – then the nature of theatre is inherently changed.

Published six years after Phelan's paean to live performance, Philip Auslander's *Liveness* sounded a death knell for live theatre - as understood in a purist sense. In a mass media age, all performance was mediatized, he argued; even if media technology was not co-opted to a live production, the influence of media culture on it was inescapable. Auslander's rejoinder to Phelan's defence of 'liveness' in performance is that in this age of cultural reproduction there are no longer any 'clear-cut ontological distinctions between live forms and mediatized ones.'[12] Both are equal in a cultural economy that is saturated with mass reproduction: live performance is 'just one more representation of a given text or one more reproducible text.' So in effect there is no secure opposition between them, however much theorists may try to assert the integrity of live performance against the corrupted nature of the mediatized theatre.[13] The audience that watches that live performance, for instance, is watching it through a televisual lens, Auslander argues. Television, as the more dominant cultural form, has inescapably shaped viewing patterns. Nearly two decades on, the dominance of television has been swapped for the dominance of the internet but the same point applies.

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[11] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.
[12] Philip Auslander, *Liveness*, 2nd ed. (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 7.
[13] Ibid., p. 50, p. 39.

Auslander's jeremiad has been deeply influential in discussions of theatre and digital technology. For David Z. Saltz, theatre and performing arts are 'relics of liveness in a media-saturated world' but he argues that there is a natural kinship between computer technology and the performing arts: interactivity is a characteristic of both.[14] Where 'old media' such as television or print is endlessly reproducible, both theatre and interactive digital technology operate in 'real time', their transaction with the spectator or user making each event unique. In a cultural conversation in which live theatre and performance are often presented as victims of media technologies – the cultural and economic dominance of the theatre long being lost to cinema, television and now the web - pointing to the natural sympathies between live performance and digital technologies offers theatre practitioners a more generous view of their future. In that respect, it might be said that *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* and *wonder.land* show major companies optimistically developing a new language for theatre in a digital age.

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[14] Saltz, 'Digital Literary Studies: Performance and Interaction.'

A Play for the Internet: *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* (RSC/ Google)

> The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
>
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven.
>
> And as imagination bodies forth
>
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
>
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
>
> A local habitation and a name. (V.i.12-17)[15]

Theseus, the king of Athens, has little sympathy for poets, lovers and madmen: they are 'of imagination all compact' (V.i.8). But in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* it is this stern and rational character whom Shakespeare has articulate the power of imagination, and the powers of the poet. The writer has a peculiar skill to give shape to 'airy nothing' – a magical power of transformation - and even an unimaginative man like Theseus recognises this. The playwright's tribute to his kind comes near the end of a comedy that is preoccupied with imagination and transformation. And as such, it is also a play preoccupied with the nature of the theatre.

This perhaps made it a good choice for the 'digital theatre project' which Google and the Royal Shakespeare Company embarked on in 2013.[16] *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* was a three-day online event loosely structured around a real time performance of Shakespeare's comedy in Stratford-upon-Avon over midsummer's weekend, 21-24 June. All those involved stressed that this project was an experiment, and unpredictability was a key part of the experience it offered. Any live or online spectator of *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* could participate in this digital production by posting content to its online stage (hosted on Google+) with the hashtag #dream40. In place of Shakespeare's frenzied poet would be a whole army of content creators – some commissioned, some posting from the audience - who would collaboratively fashion the #dream40 world. An RSC promotional video explained that the intention

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[15] William Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*. All references are to *The Oxford Shakespeare: the Complete Works*, eds. John Jowett, et al. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). Print.

[16] *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*. Royal Shakespeare Company and Google Creative Lab, n.d. Web. April 2016.

was for participants 'to play with the play'. While Shakespeare's text would be performed by RSC actors in its original form, *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* would surround that live performance with 'noise': memes, gifs, blogs, songs – anything the public wanted to post. In effect, *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* would be 'a new kind of play'.[17]

If so, it was a peculiarly radical one. This 'new kind of play', or theatre project, was open-ended and lacked a dramatic structure; it had authors and contributors, but no guiding authorial voice; its 'performance' was largely textual or graphic (through posted content) and where it was not, it was most often pre-recorded; and the audience for *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* was not gathered together in one place, and nor was it temporally co-present. Given those factors, could *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* be considered a digital 'theatre' project at all? For *The Guardian*'s Robert McCrum, writing in advance of the performance, *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* seemed less an innovative piece of theatre than 'an online interactive event, linked to Shakespeare's play'.[18] But the live interactivity that would be essential to *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* is also a central quality of theatre. For the theatre artist Geoff Moore, a key aspect of live theatre is that it is 'sweaty and vulnerable, it is unedited and anything can happen'. It is also essentially a communal experience, even if that experience is only shared between a performer and a spectator. The stage and film director, Robert Lepage, has presented this interactive, live presence as the vital difference between the art forms in which he works: 'The audience in a theatre room is very different from the audience to a film, because they actually change everything on the stage by their energy.'[19] But these essential characteristics of theatre – its 'liveness' or unpredictability, its communality, and its interactivity – are also key elements of Web 2.0.

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[17] 'Midsummer Night's Dreaming, an online play – how it works,' *YouTube*. Royal Shakespeare Company, 24 May 2013. Web. 8 May 2016.
[18] Robert McCrum, 'Midsummer Night's Dreaming: the RSC takes a smattering of Google Fairy Dust,' *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 8 May 2013. Web. 8 May 2016.
[19] Lepage and Moore qted in Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2007), p. 131.

That correspondence between theatre and the interactive web was implicit in *Midsummer Night's Dreaming,* which split its stage between live performance spaces in Stratford and various social media platforms. This was a production that did not just exploit digital technology for dramatic ends: as the online stage was its primary platform, *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* was effectively shaped by what Philip Auslander calls 'a media-derived epistemology'.[20] In other words, this was a play – or a 'theatre project' – shaped by the internet. It was an exercise in creating digital narratives, in exploiting the performativity of social media to create fictional characters, and in exploring Shakespearean themes through the language of the net. Reflecting on the project after the production ended, Google's Tom Uglow regretted the freedom that this had given characters created for the online stage, who had quickly spun off into fractured and fragmented narratives. *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* had lacked any guiding narrative but it should have been more tightly controlled, he felt, requiring characters to feed into a 'topline story arc' - as in a television show.[21] The remark was telling. As midsummer's weekend drew to a close it was clear that *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* had been a decidedly mixed success, as might be expected of a radical experiment in re-imagining theatre for the internet. Yet in considering what dramatic forms might have given more shape to the project, curiously Uglow's point of reference was television narrative rather than stage tradition. The remark might have been designed to illustrate Auslander's contention that in the twenty-first century all live theatre is already mediatized. Not only is it always seen through the lens of more dominant cultural forms (first television, and now the internet), but increasingly it is being re-created in their image.

But in that sense, *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* was a very knowing creation: a performance of Shakespeare – or of Shakespearean material - as seen through the eyes of the internet on Google+. Clever as this concept was, it also suggests the precarious position of live theatre in the cultural economy. On the one hand, it underscores the rather marginal place of theatre in popular culture: if the use of new media forms enabled an RSC production to reach far wider audiences than ever before, it did so speaking in the language of television and social media. And while the RSC is a

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[20] Auslander, p. 37.
[21] Tom Uglow, 'An Epilogue: 21 Things I Learned From Midsummer Night's Dreaming with the RSC,' *Tomu.co*. 24 October 2013. Web. 22 April 2016.

major cultural institution that is relatively protected from the economic difficulties of most theatres, its collaboration with Google Creative Lab hints at the financial benefits of adapting to the new media age. The RSC's pact with Google was an astute piece of theatrical entrepreneurialism, but the artistic outcome was less successful. Even taking into account the inevitable pitfalls of producing 'a new kind of play' for the internet (or a play *of* the internet), as the production unfolded it would become clear that Google+ was a questionable choice for the main stage of *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*.

Midsummer Night's Dreaming: how it worked

The roots of *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* might be seen in two earlier digital projects developed by the RSC. The company's first attempt to produce a play on social media was *Such Tweet Sorrow*, developed in co-operation with Mudlark digital agency in 2010. This Twitter re-telling of *Romeo and Juliet* (with some activity on YouTube, Facebook and other platforms) took place over five weeks in April and May. Six actors improvised the drama of the Montagues and Capulets from a story grid which transposed the action to contemporary Britain. The live storytelling unfolded wherever the actors happened to be, and for those who encountered the story mid-stream the use of social media blurred the boundary between reality and drama. In that respect, *Such Tweet Sorrow* had a uniquely intimate relationship with its audience; its tweets infiltrated personal feeds at unpredictable times and the digital medium allowed for audience interaction. Yet for many who stayed with the drama over the five weeks, the performance was exhausting. One reviewer complained of the intrusive promotion of its sponsor, Three Mobile.[22] Another questioned the wisdom of using Twitter as its main platform: how could public tweets preserve the secrets and miscommunications on which the Shakespearean plot turns?[23] For *The Guardian*, a *Romeo and Juliet* stripped of Shakespeare's language and characterization made little sense: 'didn't the original have something to do with

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[22] Jake Orr, 'Such Tweet Sorrows: Such a Let Down,' *A Younger Theatre*. A Younger Theatre, 6 May 2010. Web. 27 April 2016.
[23] 'Review – Such Tweet Sorrow (RSC/ Mudlark),' *Sans Taste*. 28 April 2010. Web. 27 April 2016.

poetry? Does a tweet like "Goooooooooood morningggggg :):):):):):) It happened.....
with THE most beautiful boy alive.... IT happened :):):):):)" really cut it?'[24]

Such Tweet Sorrow belongs to a modern theatrical tradition which has long moved away from the primacy of the text, but its mixed reception showed that in relying on improvisation and audience interaction it missed one rather obvious point. Given the nature of Twitter, the project perhaps required six writers improvising material rather than six actors. Yet that would have exposed *Such Tweet Sorrow* as an interactive literary exercise rather than a piece of digital theatre. This problem of genre did not arise with the RSC's next major digital project - a 'creative space' in which to reflect on Shakespeare's place in the contemporary world. In 2012 it launched the website 'myShakespeare' ('measuring Shakespeare's digital heartbeat'), which tracked Shakespearean activity online and invited user participation to build a repository of related images, projects and blog posts.[25] A 'Banquo' feature provided a data aggregator which searched for references to Shakespeare and his plays across Twitter, Facebook and Ebay. This material displayed in a timeline showing the user, hour by hour, how the online world was engaging with (and trading) Shakespeare. According to the RSC's digital producer, Sarah Ellis, myShakespeare answered one of the company's central concerns: how to make Shakespeare relevant to a new generation.[26] Both projects suggest that the RSC's digital strategy to this point was largely focused on audience outreach and education, as well as critical reflection on Shakespeare as a cultural artefact.

Midsummer Night's Dreaming shows aspects of both: it combined the formal innovation of *Such Tweet Sorrow* with myShakespeare's interactive exploration of Shakespeare in the world. But unlike the derided *Such Tweet Sorrow*, this time the production preserved Shakespeare's text and created an online world around it in which the audience could participate. Furthermore, the two stages in *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* - live and online, real and virtual – had a logical underpinning in the structure of Shakespeare's comedy. At the centre of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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[24] Charlotte Higgins, 'A Plague on the Twitter Romeo and Juliet,' *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 27 April 2010. Web. 27 April 2016.

[25] *myShakespeare*. Royal Shakespeare Company, n.d. Web. 22 April 2016.

[26] Sarah Ellis, 'Shakespeare and Digital: the RSC's Perspective,' *The Literary Platform*. The Literary Platform, 30 November 2012. Web. 27 April 2016.

is a contrast between the strict law of Athens, which condemns Hermia to death or a nunnery if she does not marry according to her father's will, and the magical and licentious character of the forest to which Hermia and her lover escape. As Geraldine Collinge, the RSC's Director of Events and Exhibitions described it, the online stage corresponded to the fairies' forest where anything might happen: 'a space where we are all playing together doing lots of different things.'[27] Within the dualistic structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – a play balanced between reason and imagination, rational law and passion - there are also four distinct worlds: the court of Theseus and Hippolyta; the world of the young lovers (Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius); the fairy domain of Oberon and Titania; and the comedy of the mechanicals who are to perform the tragedy of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' at Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding.

The production opened on Friday, 21 June with Act 1 performed in the Ashcroft Room of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre as dream40.org launched to the public with a five-column storytelling board on Google+. As the live action was performed to correspond to the timing in the play, Acts 2 and 3 - which played to a small invited audience - began at 2.30am on Sunday 23rd June and ended at sunrise that morning. Act 4, in which Shakespeare's lovers are discovered in the forest after the adventures of the night, was played in the open to a larger audience at 4pm on Sunday. The final Act was performed at 11.30 that night, when the mechanicals played 'Pyramus and Thisbe' for the wedding party's entertainment. Over the entire weekend, short glimpses of these performances were streamed through the character feeds on Google+, making the live element of *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* a fragmented experience both for the audience in Stratford-upon-Avon and for the thousands more joining online.

Yet the drama was not the thing, but the gossip surrounding it. The idea was that the Shakespearean action would disseminate via social media in the way that news stories do.[28] The events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – the upcoming royal wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, the ultimatum delivered to young Hermia, the magical

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[27] Olivia Solon, 'Google and RSC's digital reinterpretation of a Midsummer Night's Dream,' *Wired.co.uk*. Condé Nast, 19 June 2013. Web. 22 April 2016.
[28] Ibid.

activity in the forest - would be spread on Google+ by secondary characters not involved in the action (see figure 1). Thirty such characters were given Google+ accounts - most not mentioned in Shakespeare's play but created for the production, such as the baker for the royal wedding, and the sister of Lysander, one of the blighted lovers. Narratives relating to these peripheral characters unravelled in parallel to the live performance. The storytelling board on dream40.org divided these online characters between four columns - the court, the lovers, the fairies and the mechanicals – with a fifth displaying content created by the public (see figure 2).

Figure 1. Responses from Antiope to the plight of Hermia and Lysander, including advice on how to pass time in a nunnery.
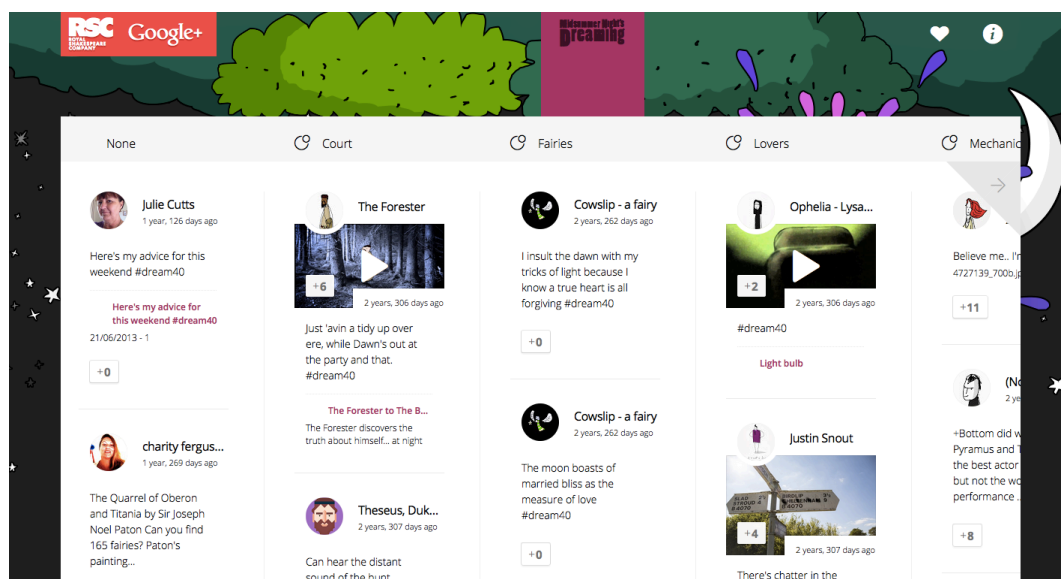

Figure 2. Screenshot of the storytelling board: http://dreaming.dream40.org/ [26 April 2016]

The only character in the live play to appear on the online stage was the fairy, Puck –
he is also the only character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* who moves between the
human and fairy world. He was intended to serve as a guide through the memes,
gossip, developing subplots and comments that appeared on Google+, selecting the
best material to display in his own stream. 3,000 pieces of commissioned and user-
generated content was posted over the weekend on Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Vine,
Storify and other social media sites, all shared or connected to Google+ .[29]

The result could not be judged in terms of any conventional dramatic narrative.
According to Geraldine Collinge, the purpose of the experiment was to 'take away the
narrative structures that we currently have in place' in drama by exploring fiction
through the ways news is reported and shared online.[30] For Tom Uglow, the aspiration
was that for three days *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* would blur the boundary
between the news agenda and Shakespeare's ancient forest. In effect, this production
would not only break the fourth wall, but like *Such Tweet Sorrow* it would confuse
the 'real' and the fictional. For all the various platforms used, its true medium was
conversation; the chorus of voices surrounding *Midsummer Night's Dream* would
provide the substance of *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* (or as Uglow put it, in this
production ' "rhubarb rhubarb" is the most audible part of the whole play, with only
glimpses of the original words. The loudest voices in our play are those without their
own lines (much like life)').[31] The project described seemed more an exploration of
how narratives develop in social media than a real engagement with a Shakespearean
text. And from Google's perspective, aside from tapping into the RSC's cultural
prestige, that was perhaps the object of the exercise. According to Uglow, *Midsummer
Night's Dreaming* was 'an experiment in online narrative for the digital creative
world from local theatre through to global agencies'.[32]

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[29] 'Google+: Midsummer Night's Dreaming,' *Think with Google*. Google, October
2013. Web. April 2016.
[30] Qted in Billy Barrett, 'A most rare vision: the RSC's A Midsummer Night's
Dreaming,' *A Younger Theatre*. A Younger Theatre, 6 July 2013. Web. 28 April
2016.
[31] Tom Uglow, 'RSC's Midsummer Night's Dreaming [#Dream40] and Google+ :
Why we're doing it,' *Tomu.co*. 24 May 2013. Web. 26 April 2016.
[32] Tom Uglow, 'An Epilogue: 21 Things I Learned From Midsummer Night's
Dreaming with the RSC,' *Tomu.co*. 24 October 2013. Web. 22 April 2016.

Digital Shakespeare: the roots of *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*

But if experimenting with digital storytelling was to the forefront of this project, the play at its heart certainly has particular resonance for a digital age. In the folk world, midsummer's eve was a night when the boundary between the physical and supernatural realms was most easily crossed. It was a portal between worlds, and that movement between different realities is mimicked in the structure of *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, divided as it is between real and virtual stages. Shakespeare's comedy is also concerned with shifting identity - with role-playing and transformation. Not only is Bottom the weaver magically given an ass's head by Puck, but many characters undergo fundamental changes. Oberon transforms his quarrelsome fairy queen, Titania, to a foolish and bewitched lover with the magic of a love-potion; the same spell causes discord among the four young lovers from Athens, who swiftly switch friendships and allegiances. In the forest on midsummer's eve, a common weaver might be loved by a fairy queen, and conventional roles and social hierarchies are playfully upended. It is a place where mischievous sprites can wreak havoc, and it is a lawless counterpoint to the world of city and court. Suggestively, the set of associations gathered around Shakespeare's forest is similar to those informing discussion of the internet today. Both have the promise and danger of seeming to be beyond the law; both are associated with a spirit that is playful, subversive and democratizing; and nowhere is identity more obviously performative than on social media.

The formal concerns of this digital theatre project – to create a play for the internet by exploring interactive storytelling on social media – are also anticipated in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play shows a self-reflexive interest in the processes of the theatre and in the contribution of the audience to it. The play within a play, '*THE MOST LAMENTABLE COMEDY AND MOST CRUEL DEATH OF PYRAMUS AND THISBE*' (I.i.11-12), makes the Shakespearean audience inescapably aware of its complicity in creating the dramatic illusion. In rehearsing the tragedy, the mechanicals – inept and inexperienced actors to a man – are concerned that the illusion they create may be a little too good. Bottom fears the ladies will take fright at seeing Pyramus draw his sword to kill himself, but advises Peter Quince how to remedy the matter:

Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed; and for the more better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am no Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear. (III.i.16-20)

The audience's imagination is so powerful, Bottom anticipates, that they will not tell the difference between the mechanicals' lamentable play-acting and an actual killing. So Snug must also play the lion with 'half his face… seen through the lion's neck, and he himself must speak through' to tell the audience that he is no lion, but Snug the joiner (III.i.33-35). But if the mechanicals fear that their theatrical illusion will be too convincing, absurdly they also fear that it will be too weak. For moonlight they must have either the actual moon or a man with a bush of thorns and a lantern 'say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine' (III.i.55-56), and the wall through whose cranny the frustrated lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe, whisper must be played by a man with 'plaster, or some loam, or some roughcast about him, to signify "wall"' (III.i.63-64). In effect, they will leave nothing to the imagination.

But that is the mechanicals' mistake. It is the appeal to the imagination – an ability to stimulate the audience's creative participation – that might bring the drama to life. 'Pyramus and Thisbe' achieves this in only a comic way by provoking its court audience to jokes and heckling. But the hapless performance finds a defender in Theseus:

Hippolyta: This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard.
Theseus: The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.
Hippolyta: It must be your imagination, then, and not theirs. (V.i.209-13)

Theseus is not complimentary to drama in general: it is all only shadows, whether good or bad. But he implies that the audience's imagination can repair the players' defects. In other words, the theatre calls for an active, not a passive, audience. A good play is a collaboration between author, player and spectator.

The RSC's live performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* emphasized this idea of the audience's role in creating the dramatic illusion. The performance began in an undressed rehearsal space, the RSC's Ashcroft Room, and the actors performed without costumes – and with little direction, according to the play's director, Gregory Doran: the purpose of doing so 'allows you [the audience] to superimpose your own imagination on that experience'.[33] It was a fitting prelude to the interactivity of the online stage, and even the small live audience for the RSC's performances were invited to use their smartphones to post as they watched. As if to mask the difference between these posts and those from the RSC itself, the official excerpts which went online were not taken with high quality video or audio, but in some cases filmed as if captured by the secondary characters on mobile phones. These recorded snippets were very short, giving little sense of the action beyond the characters' responses to it. In effect, the creative power of the audience – both real and fictional - was being placed centre stage in *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*.

Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* this innovative digital project demanded that its audience was active - and not simply in posting new content, but in making sense of the fragmented online stage. Yet its multiple characters and digressive narratives (or posts that never coalesced into narratives at all) asked a lot from its users. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the nighttime confusion in the forest finally ends with daylight and the restoration of order. Oberon's fairy magic is reversed (for the most part), and the warring couples are brought together in harmony. But there were no such resolutions in *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, and those who designed the production made few concessions to an audience's natural tendency to passivity. No guiding narrative emerged over the weekend, and there were few opportunities for latecomers to catch up with the developing Shakespearean plot. As some found, it was all too easy to get lost in the digital forest. But perhaps that was the point.

Narrative and interactivity on the digital stage

Interactivity of the kind invited by *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* can only disrupt narrative. But in looking at such a project retrospectively it is tempting to give

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[33] 'The Director Talks – A Glimpse into the Process,' *YouTube*. Royal Shakespeare Company, 19 June 2013. Web. 26 April 2016.

narrative shape to what was originally experienced in a disjointed and episodic way. For that reason, examining *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* as it unfolded over midsummer's weekend 2013 presents a problem: this project was designed to be a shared and interactive live experience. (In that respect, it did have some claim to be a digital *theatre* project.) Reading its digital afterlife is a very different experience to participating in the live event, and arguably it produces a very different kind of text. *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* was as ephemeral as any live performance, and the only clue to how the project was experienced is in the responses of those who participated over midsummer's weekend – some of which are noted towards the end of this analysis. However, a useful curated timeline of the weekend's activity is available at http://dreaming.dream40.org/timeline; at its centre is an audio recording of a rehearsal of the RSC's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which can be paused to explore the digital content appearing along the timeline. The Google+ storytelling board is also available at http://dreaming.dream40.org/ and provides some sense of how the digital narratives developed in real time.

But not only does a retrospective reading of the event have its limitations, there is also conflicting evidence of how it unfolded. Google reported an impressive level of engagement with the live project: 110,000 unique visitors over the weekend, a 742% increase in followers for the RSC's Google+ page, and 3,000 pieces of content posted – 50% of these created by the audience.[34] But an examination of the surviving content gives a very different impression of audience engagement, even if it is assumed that little audience content was preserved for the digital archive. Few character posts have comments from the audience, and these came from a very small number of individuals. The curated timeline also includes very little original content posted by users. In that respect, the archive suggests that most of those 110,000 visitors were largely passive in their engagement with *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* – watchers rather than actors.

That behaviour might be typical of much online activity, but it suggests a central difficulty in the project. Its lack of narrative direction would make sense if narrative was being sacrificed to interactivity; the chaos of *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* had

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[34] 'Google+: Midsummer Night's Dreaming,' *Think with Google*. Google, October 2013. Web. April 2016.

some point if it was a productive and creative chaos. But that outcome could not be predicted. Sarah Ellis, digital producer at the RSC, was both astute and cautious in her description of the experiment; rather than label it any kind of drama, she presented the project as an opportunity 'to look at the story around *Midsummer Night's Dream* and see how it can engage with the psychology of the internet.'[35] Patterns of internet use suggested that its audience might be voyeuristic as much as creative; the interaction with the experiment might be lengthy or short; the audience could appear or disappear at any time, and users would have to be entertained or intrigued enough to find a path through the apparent chaos of *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*. Arguably, the structure – or lack of structure – in the environment created for *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* betrayed a certain naïveté about audience behaviour. In attempting to follow the logic of the internet, the RSC and Google created a digital playground, but not a play.

The performance studies scholar, Pascale Aebischer, views this differently: she argues that the spectator who entered #dream40 was a co-producer of a hyperdrama which 'challenges the boundaries of the Shakespearean text along with its authority and implicit value systems.'[36] But in doing so, she focuses on the character subplots spun from the sidelines of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – in effect, focusing her critical reading on the conventional narratives running through this digital performance rather than the more dominant element of chaos and fragmentation. However, these minor narratives did have the potential to reflect in interesting ways on the Shakespearean text. A number of them engage with the gender politics of the play - already evident in the opening exchange between Theseus and Hippolyta, the Amazonian queen. He is impatient for their upcoming wedding. She remarks, consolingly or not, that the time will pass quickly:

> Hippolyta: And then the moon – like to a silver bow
>
> New-bent in heaven – shall behold the night
>
> Of our solemnities.

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[35] 'Midsummer Night's Dreaming: Behind the Scenes with the RSC and Google+,' *YouTube*. Google, 2 Sept. 2013. Web. 10 May 2016.

[36] Pascale Aebischer, 'Performing Shakespeare through Social Media' in *Shakespeare in Our Time*, eds. Dympna Callaghan and Suzanne Gossett (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 100.

Theseus: …Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,

And won thy love doing thee injuries;

But I will wed thee in another key:

With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling. (1.i.9-19)

Theseus will marry in pomp and triumph, but suggestively, for the defeated Hippolyta the upcoming ceremonies are 'solemnities'. The exchange acquires an ambivalent edge when read in the context of a play in which women are continually engaged in struggles for power. Hermia defies her father on pain of death or confinement to a nunnery; the fairy queen Titania outrages Oberon by withholding her 'changeling' boy from him and is punished with a charm that makes her infatuated with Bottom; Helena is not only scorned by her former lover, Demetrius, but threatened with rape. This is a comedy that has the potential for tragedy running throughout it. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* finally resolves these struggles with a restoration of the patriarchal order: Oberon wins his changeling boy, and with Demetrius dropping his claim to Hermia, Theseus overrules the sentence he imposed on her. Oberon provides a closing image of harmony between the sexes: 'So shall all the couples three/ Ever true in loving be' (V.ii.37-38). But *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* not only resists any such resolution, it also emphasizes the powerless position of women in Shakespeare's world.

Epheus, Hermia's father, is the voice of punitive male authority in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He invokes the strict law of Athens against his rebellious daughter and there is no mother's voice to speak against him. But this silent woman does appear on the online stage as Mrs Epheus. Sharply critical of her husband, in a series of articles in the *Knight's Herald* newspaper she complains of a woman's position in marriage:

I may wear the costume of the good little wife. But if he knew how much I want to scream "I eat your loaded guns, your hangman's laws, your stones that cut through flesh!" My husband has stretched my skin above his mantelpiece…

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Hermia's possible fate is also fleshed out online in the story of her lover's sister, Ophelia. The latter has been enclosed in a nunnery, and complains bitterly of Lysander's inattention and selfishness. Over the course of the weekend she plots her escape, sending videos to the outside world through a smuggled mobile phone. Her main adversary is the Abbess Volumnia, whose podcasts on the virtues of sexual repression give way to lesbian yearnings and - once she enters the forest in search of Ophelia - a rapturous sexual encounter with Hercules, Theseus' brother.

But if these twenty-first century elaborations on Shakespeare's plot challenge the values implicit in a sixteenth-century play, as Aebischer suggests, their superficiality makes that challenge a fairly weak one. Their comedy is self-conscious and knowing: Mrs Epheus is mildly hysterical, Ophelia is an over-sharing teenager, and the attempt to make Shakespeare contemporary can be jarringly unfunny. When the Changling 'Indian boy' (another notoriously silent figure in the play) posts a video showing Theseus pronouncing Hermia's sentence, Ophelia introduces her story by commenting on her own plight: 'The truth is, my parents dumped me here because it had an outstanding OFSTED report and they wanted me to save on the school fees.' Meanwhile Puck is plotting against Titania ('Anyone fancy going out this evening and kidnapping a changeling boy?') and 'The Hamster of Fate' – the first in a series of short videos – randomly chooses one of the options open to Hermia: death or the nunnery.

The tone is glib and throwaway: the register of much social media content. The stories of Ophelia and the Abbess are not the only narratives running parallel to the Shakespearean plot - the Forester continues the play's beast-man theme when it is finally revealed that he is not only a philosophical eccentric by day, but a dancing bear by night. The comic love poems podcasted by Justin Snout (presumably a brother of one of the mechanicals) brilliantly elaborate on the theme of unrequited love ('Helena – you smell of Daz Ultra'). But much more of the material seems random and disordered. The characters creating their material in live time seemed to wander from the injunction to gossip about the events of the play, or they did so only tangentially. Hercules runs a series on his plans for Theseus' stag night; the pub landlord updates on pickles, the Apothecary on herbs, and the Duke's Oak (the tree near which the mechanicals rehearse) comments on hedges.

This arbitrariness perhaps followed the natural logic of social media; whimsy and absurdity are certainly defining features of the online stage, with videos from the Fairy Flying School, forest security camera footage of fairies and sprites, a recipe for donkey cakes, memes, Pinterest pages of knitted beards and armour, links to Michael Bolton and The Smiths videos, the nunnery's top five movie nuns, Bottom's Mum's podcasts on acting, wedding preparations by Hippolyta's lonely sister, Antiope (including a Spotify wedding playlist), and more (see figure 3).
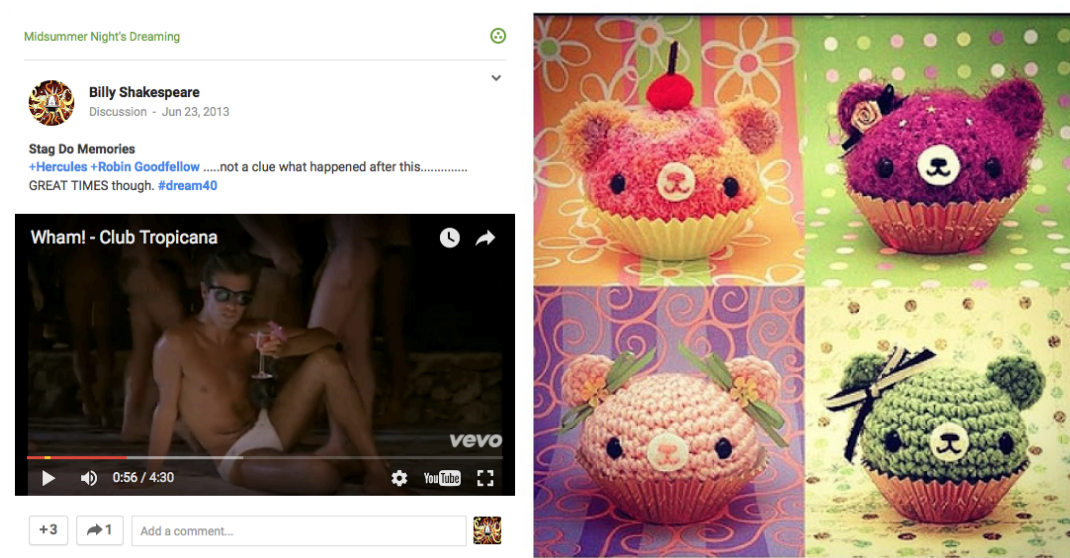

Figure 3. Preparing for the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta: Google+ posts from Hercules and Robin Goodfellow (Puck)

This produced little recognisable narrative. Nevertheless as the online Puck, Dan Rebellato pointed out, there was a richness to this online world which was missing from *Such Tweet Sorrow*. However this richness became a problem. Puck's role was to guide users through the digital wilderness, but the format of Google+ - which lacks the kind of timeline used by Twitter or Facebook - made this difficult:

It isn't very linear and indeed, people can repost things into your timeline so easily that sequence breaks down; well, sequence isn't the point...

This is where it becomes difficult to guide someone through it. First, because it's not clear that there really was a clear path through the

material; it was very hard to present material in any kind of order, so it couldn't easily be connected to the live performance, so time wasn't a principle of organisation; but to start simply curating my own subgroup of the material and selecting what I happended to find interesting seemed peculiar too; why would Puck, our guide through the material, ignore anything?[37]

But if neither time nor sequential narrative was a principle of organisation, how was the user to navigate thirty characters and 300,000 pieces of content – especially if even Puck, the virtual guide, could not do it? The virtue of the project, Rebellato decided, lay in its chaos: 'it created a deep forest of story that you entered and could play in, be transformed by.'

Some users felt differently. In his *Bardathon* blog, the Shakespeare scholar Peter Kirwan also identified the project's lack of 'narrative thread' as a consequence of the platform used, but he was less forgiving of his experience in *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*. There was little sense of how these peripheral characters reacted to events in real time, he noted, which missed the point of holding a three-day event. The virtual stage was inward-looking and little connected with the live performance; it needed 'moments of cohesion' to bring the audience together for 'a collective experience'.[38] Other users pointed to fundamental issues in the UX design which generated yet more confusion: the main Google+ stage was easily lost as the user navigated away - sometimes required to open three windows to access a single piece of content (see figure 4).[39]

[37] Dan Rebellato, 'Playing Puck,' *Dan Rebellato*. 25 June 2013. Web. 22 April 2016.
[38] Peter Kirwan, 'Midsummer Night's Dreaming (RSC/ Google+),' *The Bardathon*. University of Nottingham, 22 June 2013. Web. 26 April 2016.
[39] John Wyver, 'Fragments of the #Dream40,' *Illuminations*. Illuminations Media, 23 June 2013. Web. 26 April 2016.
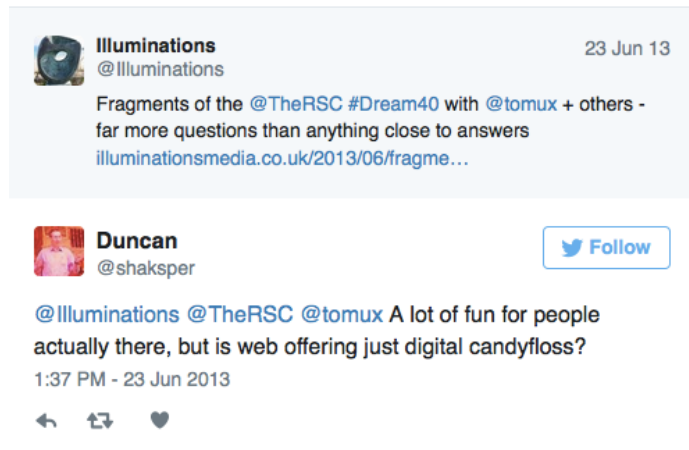
Figure 4. Screenshot from http://www.illuminationsmedia.co.uk/fragments-of-the-dream40/ [26 April 2016]

In feeling the lack of 'a collective experience', Peter Kirwan was perhaps expecting more of a theatrical than a digital experience from *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*. That expectation was surely not unusual: some users searched in vain for a live stream from the RSC performance, and the video snippets which appeared on different characters' pages provided little guidance for users who entered the project at different times. Often, *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* seemed too reliant on prior knowledge of the play, and yet oddly, it was also too removed from it. The interchangeably banal entries on social media sit strangely with a source so attuned to linguistic nuance (Shakespeare modulating his language from iambic pentameter in the court scenes, to the fairies' inverted iambic, the lovers' rhyming couplets, and the plain prose spoken by the mechanicals). Looking back on the experience, Tom Uglow echoed Kirwan's instinct that *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* had travelled too far from its dramatic roots. Not only did it suffer from the lack of an over-arching narrative, but he suggested that inviting the live audience to use smartphones had been a mistake:

> When we physically sit together as a collective audience (simultaneity) this [*sic*] we become part of that moment; the actors transport us as a whole (transformation) to another world. But operating a phone or ipad drags us out of that world into a solitary world connected to our

lives… Mediating a shared reality or fantasy through a screen removes the possibility of being present in the reality/ fantasy.[40]

Using smartphones during the performance had broken the theatrical illusion and fractured what should have been a communal experience. In attempting to reinvent live theatre for a digital age, *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* seemed to have highlighted the value of what it had left behind.

The *Telegraph*'s critic wondered 'how two companies, giants in their fields, could produce an experience at once so immense and trifling, if not almost wholly baffling.' The magic generated by the nighttime performance in Stratford gave the lie to the whole experiment, he felt: it was 'a case of "you had to be there" – which rather defeated the point.'[41] From one perspective, *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* might have been an ambitious experiment in metatheatre: a play within a play within a play - 'Pyramus and Thisbe' nested within *Midsummer Night's Dream*, nested within the digital stage. From another, it was simply an experiment in spreading digital narratives – and more involved with driving user engagement than real audience interaction. Either way, it was clear that the marriage of theatre and the digital in this production was tilted in favour of the latter. If *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* was conceived as a hyperdrama, it failed for lack of dramatic coherence. And such a high-profile experiment hardly went unnoticed. Tellingly, in 2015 the National Theatre's *wonder.land* would approach the marriage of theatre and the digital very differently.

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[40] Tom Uglow, 'An Epilogue: 21 Things I Learned From Midsummer Night's Dreaming with the RSC,' *Tomu.co*. 24 October 2013. Web. 22 April 2016.
[41] Dominic Cavendish, 'Midsummer Night's Dreaming, online and in Stratford,' *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 24 June 2013. Web. 3 May 2016.

Staging Virtual Reality: *wonder.land* (National Theatre)

In one sense, the National Theatre in London has been responsible for the most far-reaching digital innovation in UK theatre. In 2014 its Director of Digital, David Sabel, asserted that the NT was 'in the business of telling stories and providing content, and we're kind of agnostic about what platform we use'.[42] Five years earlier the theatre had made a bold move in launching NT Live, broadcasting its live productions to cinemas around the world. It did so despite fear that cinema broadcasts might reduce ticket sales, or suggest that the NT was further devaluing the live experience in a media-saturated culture. Digital innovation was already recognised to be a double-edged sword for the creative industries. A 2010 NESTA report on NT Live admitted the upheaval that had been caused by the digital revolution: it had enabled some in the creative industries to reach new audiences, but others had seen it cannibalise their revenue streams. 'In all cases,' its authors wrote, 'digital technologies have produced seismic changes in consumer expectations and behaviour…'.[43] But NT Live had been an unqualified success; NESTA's study showed that it had reached new audiences, generated interest in future visits to the theatre, and had driven demand for the NT's digital content. Yet David Sabel was perhaps heading off uneasiness about the project when he stressed the continuity between an experience of NT Live and a theatre visit: both were live experiences that were shared among an audience. There was a constitutive difference between live broadcast of their productions and a conventional film screening or home cinema, he implied.

But this was not quite live theatre. NT Live was a hybrid experience for the cinema audience, and it produced a hybrid on the theatre stage too. Making a stage production ready for broadcast necessitated the kind of collaboration between stage and film directors that produced a mediatized theatre. But any purist concerns for the integrity of theatre as a live form were outweighed by the interests that drove the NT's digital strategy. As Sabel neatly articulated it, this strategy had three aspects: access,

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[42] David Kettle, 'Three Nationals,' *Digital R&D Fund for the Arts*. 2 July 2014. Web. 3 May 2016.
[43] Hasan Bakhshi, et al. *Beyond Live: Digital Innovation in the Performing Arts* (London: NESTA, 2010), p. 2.

amplification and innovation. Digital could be used as a democratizing force, extending access to the theatre; online content could provide context for and insight into productions; and digital tools could be used to innovate in performance.[44] Yet if NT Live was radical in breaking a central tenet of live performance - its audiences were co-present in time but not in space (and in the case of recorded broadcasts, not even temporally connected) – digital technology was still being used in a less challenging way in main productions.

Nevertheless, the NT was a relatively early adopter of this technology in performance. Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia*, for example, directed in 2002 by Trevor Nunn, 'surrounded the performers on three sides with a curved projection surface filled with moving 3D imagery of the play's interior and exterior settings…'. The illusion was maintained with entrances and exits in the screens for the actors.[45] But in such productions digital technology was used to augment conventional staging rather than being structurally significant, as in *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*. More than a decade later a different approach might have been expected of *wonder.land*, a new musical commissioned for the Manchester International Festival, the NT and the Théâtre du Chatelet, Paris. Created by Damon Albarn, the National Theatre's artistic director, Rufus Norris and playwright Moira Buffini, it was first performed in Manchester in July 2015 before transferring to the National Theatre in a revised version in November. With this commission, which explores the intersection of online and offline worlds, the NT appeared to be searching for a theatrical language that could engage with the digital world. This was not using digital technology for outreach or entrepreneurialism, as with NT Live, or employing it as set dressing (the manner in which new technology had historically penetrated popular theatre). Instead, *wonder.land* promised a theatrical response to life as lived online and offline, exploring how digital technology was changing social experience in the twenty-first century.

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[44] Nancy Groves, 'Arts Head: David Sabel, head of digital, National Theatre,' *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 10 April 2012. Web. 4 May 2016.

[45] David Z. Saltz, 'Digital Literary Studies: Performance and Interaction,' in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, eds. Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007). Web. 4 May 2016.

Midsummer Night's Dreaming had been a very different attempt to find a theatrical language for the web. In experimenting with storytelling on social media, this was a production in which digital technology was more dominant than conventional theatre practice. In contrast, digital is not a constitutive element of *wonder.land*; instead, it incorporates digital technology into conventional dramatic storytelling. Yet in both its staging and subject, this production is still closer to 'mixed reality' performances ('hybrid forms that combine the real and virtual in multiple ways and through this, encourage multiple and shifting viewpoints') than productions which confine digital technology to stage dressing alone.[46] A nearly contemporaneous example of mixed reality performance is National Theatre Wales' *Bordergame* (2014), an immersive experience which cast the spectator/ participant as a refugee from the 'NewK' trying to cross the border to the 'Autonomous Republic of Cymru'. It took place both as a live experience (by rail from Bristol to Newport) and online, as 'Active Citizens' helped police to identify illegal migrants. With the 'refugees' receiving instructions by text, the real and the virtual were continuously intersecting with each other to produce an interactive experience. In comparison, *wonder.land* takes a more conservative approach to its subject: interactivity between physical and virtual worlds is explored in theme and staging only. Yet while this production maintains the fourth wall between performer and spectator, its guiding motif is the continually shifting intersection of the real and the virtual.

Interestingly, that motif begins to be explored even before the spectator enters the auditorium. Loosely inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, the central conceit of *wonder.land* is that its twenty-first century Alice falls down the rabbit hole by going online where she can reinvent herself in a role-playing game. The musical is accompanied by a digital exhibition with nine interactive installations inspired by the stage set. So even before the performance begins, the spectator can play with wonder.land by creating an avatar to share on social media, or experience a virtual reality tour, explore the psychedelic wonder.land garden with Kinect, or play with a face-tracking Cheshire Cat mirror, for example. In a sense, the audience is being seduced by wonder.land even before Alice (in this case, Aly) is. As the exhibition is hosted in the lobby of the National Theatre,

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[46] Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi, *Performing Mixed Reality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), p. 4.

wonder.land's story world is extended into the real world – perhaps in an attempt to create a more immersive theatrical experience. But the interactive exhibition also cleverly hints at the small remove between Aly's world and that of the spectator.

Aly's adventures in wonder.land: story and theme

Aly is a teenage girl who goes online to escape her problems, and in doing so she enters an absorbing fantasy world. So in the logic of *wonder.land*, the virtual is an escape from reality: it is not part of the real world, but opposed to it. The proposition seems outdated in the context of ubiquitous computing, and even more so given the target audience of this youth-oriented musical: a generation of digital natives for whom online and offline communication is almost seamlessly integrated. In that respect, the underlying premise of *wonder.land* seems the opposite of *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, as Tom Uglow described it: 'Where theatre conventionally seeks to bring the audience into their world, and create a reality around them – we are going the other way – taking the world of the stage and putting it into real life.'[47] In the RSC/ Google production, the channels of social media are 'real life' and the stage is the site of virtual reality. In contrast, *wonder.land* creates an involving (if hypertheatrical) illusion for its audience, and its story presents the online environment as a false world of fantasy and reinvention. Simply put, the online world is an escape from the real - an idea emphasized by the epigraph from T.S Eliot's *Four Quartets* which opens Moira Buffini's book: 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality'. By *wonder.land*'s own logic, it might be said that the online world shares that escapist quality with the theatre: both are platforms for performance, sites in which to play with alternate realities and new identities. But that parallel is never explored in this production.

The premise of the story is simple. Aly is a thirteen-year old who is struggling on many fronts: her parents have recently separated and she has moved to a new school where she has no friends, but a few enemies. Playing games on her smartphone is her escape from a nagging yet caring mother: 'No thoughts at all in here/ Relief from

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[47] Tom Uglow, 'RSC's Midsummer Night's Dreaming [#Dream40] and Google+ : Why we're doing it,' *Tomu.co*. 24 May 2013. Web. 26 April 2016.

every care/ I am marooned in space/ Floating like I'm made of air.'[48] The first site of conflict with her mother is the time she spends on the smartphone; the second is her feckless, charming father whose online gambling debts broke up the family. The internet is a solace but also a threat, as the chorus in 'Network' underlines:

> Let me into your life
> Follow trends
> Share your everything
> Find your friends
> Let me into your life
> Share your everything (*w*, 13)

When Aly shares her loneliness in a chatroom, she is harassed by the school bullies who gossip about her father's online gambling and deface her image:

> Girls: So you want in our life?
>   You think you can
>   Share our everything?
> Kitty: Get a grip
> Dinah: Get a life
> Mary Ann: Get some popularity
> Girls: Be someone else (*w*, 16-17)

It's that injunction to 'be someone else' which sends Aly to wonder.land, a role-playing game where she can create a new identity. Her avatar, Alice, is everything that mixed-race Aly imagines she is not ('Erase me, go on, chuck me in the waste… I'll be a different girl… The kind that people like' (*w*, 20-21)). Alice is blonde, thin, well-dressed and brave – a 'golden girl' – and wonder.land becomes the playground where Aly escapes from family and school.

Almost wholly absorbed in wonder.land, Aly finds a band of friends in the avatars of other teenagers who are similarly escaping their lives: the Mock Turtle who so

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[48] Moira Buffini, *wonder.land* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), p. 5. Further references will be cited in the body of the text.

dislikes even his online image that he appears in a trash can, the sexually awkward Mouse, the ghost-like Humpty from an abusive home. This online companionship gives Aly the courage to stand up to the bullies at school, where she finds another ally in the outsider Luke Laprel, but when her phone is confiscated by the head teacher Ms Manxome, her avatar is also stolen. The lonely, imperious Manxome turns Alice into a reflection of her own spitefulness ('This world is not real/ So it's morally free'), and as a 'Red Queen' Alice she abuses the other avatars (*w*, 93). When Alice is threatened with deletion from the game for her behaviour, Aly breaks into the school at night to challenge Manxome and save her online self. In a struggle for control of Alice's identity the avatar is corrupted and deleted, but with the support of her parents and Luke, Aly has Manxome arrested for theft. Reconciled with her family, her rebellion cheered online by the other students, Aly's online quest ends as she finds a new confidence in herself. The friendly avatars in wonder.land call her back:

> M.C.: So
>
> Who do you want to be?
>
> Aly: Nobody else but me
>
> I'm Alice unashamedly
>
> Feels wonderful in my own skin
>
> I don't want blond, I don't need thin.
>
> …
>
> I wanna be a girl
>
> …
>
> Cos I'm taking on the world
>
> …
>
> I want to be this girl (*w*, 117-19)

The concerns with identity in this coming-of-age story resonate with the source texts, but while in the *Alice* books unstable identity is tied to games of logic, philosophical deduction, metamorphosis and playful nonsense, here it serves a bland didacticism. Wonder.land is the playground that nominally allows Aly to explore her identity, but in fact it is where she learns how to defend herself, how to build alliances and to know her own mind. When she does this, the finale implies that she graduates from online fantasy to real world action.

Danger in the digital playground: the two sides of wonder.land

In a press interview to promote *wonder.land*, Damon Albarn and its director, Rufus Norris affected to be puzzled by the internet. Albarn pointed out that he did not use social media, and told an anecdote about once being baffled by the distinction between online newspaper articles and the comments below them; Norris ruefully repeated a story about failing to set a parental lock on his son's laptop.[49] The message was that these were not sophisticated users of technology, and had not thought deeply about the changing landscape of Web 2.0. Their starting-point for *wonder.land* was Lewis Carroll, the journey down the online rabbit-hole being an almost incidental update of the original premise for Alice's adventure in Wonderland. And the innocence - or naïveté - they affected might have been sincere. As Lisa Carroll pointed out in her online review of *wonder.land*, the theatre needed a language for speaking about the subjects this production raised: cyber-bullying, anonymity and privacy among them. But the result felt patronising and out of touch.[50] This musical had opened to weak reviews in Manchester in July 2015, and though the story and music was substantially re-worked for its November debut in the National Theatre, that critical response was not unusual. *wonder.land* was 'visually exciting', another reviewer wrote, but it was also confused, clichéd, didactic and predictable.[51] 59 Productions regularly won praise for its design and staging of *wonder.land*'s digital world, but the musical had failed to impress with its reading of digital life.

The attitude expressed by Albarn and Norris is echoed by the adults in *wonder.land* for whom the online world is a puzzle, a danger and even a threat – tellingly, teenage Aly navigates it more successfully than either her gambling addict father or the troll, Ms Manxome. She meets good and bad online, yet though her experience in wonder.land helps her to navigate her school life, that negative association with the online world is reinforced in the musical's finale. Aly's new assurance releases her

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[49] Andrzej Lukowski, 'Damon Albarn and Rufus Norris: down the wwwabbit hole,' *Time Out*. Time Out, 23 November 2015. Web. 3 May 2016.
[50] Lisa Carroll, 'Review: wonder.land, National Theatre,' *A Younger Theatre*. A Younger Theatre, 13 December 2015. Web. 3 May 2016.
[51] Aleks Sierz, 'Wonder.land, National Theatre,' *theartsdesk.com*. The Arts Desk, 11 December 2015. Web. 3 May 2016.

from the gaming environment and from her self-imposed isolation ('Just be with me, can't you?' her mother had asked, 'Be here' (*w*, 81)). The destructive behaviour of the other Alice, Ms Manxome, suggests what the digital world could one day become to Aly: a 'self-indulgent dream' where loneliness hardens into self-obsession:

> Alice: Me
>
> Ms Manxome: I'm no longer alone
> Me
>
> Alice: Like a pickled kidney stone
> You and me are one
> My future is the only one (*w*, 74-76)

In that respect, criticisms of *wonder.land*'s single-note moralism seem valid. The musical does not just play on a familiar trope of exasperated parents and disconnected, phone-obsessed teenagers, it almost unwittingly reinforces the narrative that 'real' is good and 'virtual' is bad. However, the musical's book intermittently offers a more considered understanding of the interconnection of 'real' and 'virtual' identities.

'Who do you want to be?', the M.C./ Cheshire Cat asks Aly as she first enters wonder.land (*w*, 18). By the time she meets the Caterpillar singing 'Who are You?', that question seems a direct inheritance of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

> 'Who are *you*?' said the Caterpillar.
>
> …Alice replied, rather shyly, 'I - I hardly know, Sir, just at present - at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.'
>
> 'What do you mean by that?' said the Caterpillar, sternly. 'Explain yourself!'

'I ca'n't explain *myself,* I'm afraid, Sir' said Alice, 'because I'm not myself, you see.'[52]

But the correspondence is relatively superficial. Insofar as the Alice books inform *wonder.land*, it is more as a collection of set pieces and visual tropes – the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the White Rabbit – than in a way that closely engages the original. Unlike Carroll's Alice, Aly does not ask these questions of herself ('I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: *was* I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, "Who in the world am I?"'[53]). Where Alice's confusion is emblematic of the frustrated search for meaning in Wonderland, Aly's identity games are more deliberate, reflecting a twenty-first century preoccupation with the fluidity of personal identity - online or offline.

Yet both Aly and Carroll's Alice find their identities questioned by others who offer different impressions of them. The original Alice is mistaken for the White Rabbit's housekeeper, Mary Ann, and various Wonderland and Looking-Glass creatures confuse her with a serpent, a volcano, and a flower. Alice objects to these absurdities, and they have less effect on her sense of identity than the sudden physical changes she undergoes in Wonderland. As this suggests, the confusions of identity in both wonderlands are partly to do with the challenges of growing up, but for twenty-first century Aly the impressions of other people have a much more powerful impact on her sense of self. The bullies' abuse literally puts words in her mouth. Harassed by her classmates, she turns that abuse on her own avatar, Alice: 'Shut up. Cry… Nobody likes you/ No wonder you haven't got any friends' (*w*, 34). The behaviour of the next avatars she meets - the mutually abusive twins, Dum and Dee - imply that those insults might easily be internalized and reflected back to herself. And predictably, that is what happens when Alice is next asked who she is:

Dodo: Who are you?
Alice: I'm a big fat bitch

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[52] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, ed. Hugh Haughton (London and New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 41.
[53] Ibid., pp. 17-18.

Aly: No I'm not

Alice: Yes I am

Aly: Alice

Alice: You said so (*w*, 43)

But this is only a game. Alice is mutable, momentarily taking on the qualities of her player. As the Caterpillar reminds her, 'These outer shells are only versions of ourselves' (*w*, 49). In wonder.land, Aly plays through her self-hatred, adopting and then mocking the words thrown against her. Wonder.land provides a playground as well as an escape, and the mutable identities in this environment suggest the changes that might be effected in the offline world too.

So wonder.land is beneficial to Aly, but the story implies that this is a place she has to escape from as well. In the online environment she is able to find a community of like-minded souls, but onstage she is often absent and distracted – isolating herself, and hiding physically or mentally from her bullies. The staging as she first enters wonder.land emphasizes that situation (figure 5): Aly is sitting in bed with her smartphone and entirely alone on the stage, dwarfed and isolated.

Figure 5. Production photo: *wonder.land*, National Theatre (2015)

Other elements of *wonder.land* touch briefly on similar fears around digital life. The school bullies torment Aly with the stories they have heard of her father online, and while wonder.land offers a place for teenagers to confide in each other anonymously,

Ms Manxome's Alice uses those confidences against them: 'Secrets are weapons…' (*w*, 92). But if problems of privacy and exposure are touched upon in *wonder.land*, however briefly, the musical also uses surveillance as a means for Aly and Luke to expose their bullies. When Luke is chased into the girls' toilets Aly easily heads off his aggressor by filming him with her phone: 'Get out now, or I'll put this online' (*w*, 59). Luke uses the same tactic on Ms Manxome: 'I've got her on film saying Aly should be flogged… You're trending, Miss Manxome. The local paper's following you now' (*w*, 112-13). Public shaming is unproblematic in the right hands, this implies, which muddles the musical's concerns around privacy and exposure.

A more nuanced response to the attractions and dangers of digital life was Enda Walsh's *Chatroom*, first produced for the National Theatre's youth theatre scheme in 2005. Its six characters are all fifteen or sixteen years old and meeting in chatrooms for conversation or support. But Jim, who is suicidal, is being manipulated by two others into taking his own life. His distress entertains them, protected as they are by the anonymity and distance of the internet. The detached intimacy which chatrooms can produce is underlined in the physical staging of the play: the characters are seated in six chairs facing the audience, a two-metre gap between each, addressing their words to the air. Interestingly, while *wonder.land* presents the online world as an escape from reality – and one that has its dangers - in *Chatroom* the danger comes from cynics who deride the kind of imaginative escape that a game like wonder.land offers. Jim's tormenters, William and Eva, complain about the lies that children's writers tell, and the betrayals of pop culture. 'They' want to keep everything fantasy, William complains; they are trying to keep children young. 'It's just escape,' another user replies, 'It's important that we dream of other things.'[54] Ultimately, what saves Jim is reliving his own childish fantasies - tapping into the instinct for imagination and play. (Indeed, the outlandish performance he stages near the end of the piece might suggest that Jim was playing all along.)

In one way *Chatroom* seems to present a counter-argument to *wonder.land*'s finale – presenting imaginative escape as an integral part of a healthy life rather than something which must be outgrown - but Enda Walsh's characteristic integration of

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[54] Enda Walsh. *Chatroom*. London: Nick Hern, 2013. n. pag. EPUB file.

fantasy and reality is present in *wonder.land* too. The confluence of reality and imagination, fantasy and escape, the physical and the virtual is more interestingly articulated in the musical's staging and design than in its rather literal and earnest script. The story might imply that Aly matures into the 'real' world and away from her online distractions - drawing a crude opposition between the real and the virtual – but the exuberant staging of *wonder.land*'s virtual world contradicts that flat moralism.

Crossing into cyberspace: visual and technical design

wonder.land is continually sliding between realities, the distinctions between its physical and online worlds blurring as Aly becomes more and more obsessed with her game. For the production's designers this presented a challenge in allowing the real and online worlds to exist simultaneously in one space. One decision that established a continuity and harmony between them was to present Aly's environment as 'a poetic world of the imagination', as set designer Rae Smith described it.[55] In keeping with the *Alice* books and their strong visual legacy, this was designed as a 'storybook world' - with particular influence from graphic novels. Aly's environment is desaturated and grey, a flat cityscape that is immediately distinguishable from the psychedelic, organic style of wonder.land (see figures 6 and 7). Though much of the everyday world is evoked with 3D projection, it was deliberately given an 'analogue' feel. Handmade small-scale models were filmed in 4K - to capture the detail of brushstrokes and thumbprints - and projected back on to the set, so that both the built and projected scenery in Aly's bleak environment created a world with a 'painterly finish'.[56]

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[55] Qted in Antonia Wilson, 'Designing wonder.land,' *Creative Review Blog*. Creative Review, 21 December 2015. Web. 3 May 2016.
[56] Ibid.

Figure 6. Production photo: *wonder.land*, Manchester International Festival (2015)

Figure 7. *wonder.land* projection, Lysander Ashton and 59 Productions

The online world, in contrast, was created entirely with 3D digital technology. As wonder.land has an exaggerated vividness, the movement from Aly's monochrome environment to the phantasmagoric online world is as distracting and absorbing for the spectator as it is for Aly. While much of her online activity is shown as video projected on the back stage wall during the live performance, when Aly is engrossed in the game its avatars and characters – such as the White Rabbit – appear in live form onstage (see figure 8). This fluid movement between two realities creates a hallucinatory atmosphere that particularly evokes modern cultural inscriptions of the *Alice* stories, and as one reviewer astutely noted, it 'manages to convey on stage

something of the simultaneously colliding and dissolving frontiers between the real world and cyber space in a way contemporary theatre rarely manages.'[57]

Figure 8. Production photo: *wonder.land*, National Theatre (2015)

That integration of live performance and digital technology is encapsulated in *wonder.land*'s Cheshire Cat. A visually dominant figure throughout the production, this omnipresent, shape-shifting character appears both as a 3D cat projection and live onstage as the M.C. As stop-motion capture of the actor's facial expressions was used to construct the Cheshire Cat's performance of a musical number, this character is effectively a combination of live performance, recorded action and 3D video projection. That methodology is characteristic of *wonder.land*, which allows both live performance and projected video (created by 59 Productions) to carry the narrative.

As the musical moves towards its climax, for example - with Aly and Ms Manxome battling for control of Alice - the distinction between the offline and online worlds is increasingly blurred. The live Alice struggles onstage as the projected wonder.land behind her threatens her deletion; the zombie hordes that Luke summons from his own game to defeat Ms Manxome fill that projected world and spill out onstage as live performers. In a story sense, this climactic scene is a little muddled. It unites the real and virtual rebellions, presenting them as being mutually supportive (Aly wrestling with Ms Manxome in the school office, Luke marshalling the zombies in wonder.land and online followers cheering her on), but its ultimate effect is to liberate

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[57] Claire Allfree, 'Wonder.land, National Theatre, review "daring",' *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 11 December 2015. Web. 3 May 2016.

Aly from the virtual to the real. As a visual spectacle, however, it is a natural climax to the dance between the physical and digital worlds throughout *wonder.land*.

The fusion of live and digital action in this production makes it an exuberant piece of mediatized theatre. Tellingly, *Variety*'s reviewer found it 'a rare piece of theater that stands up to the spectacle of pop concerts and televised events. It looks extraordinary, so transfixing that it holds your attention despite its shortcomings in the storyline and score.'[58] As that implies, *wonder.land* is not only a theatrical spectacle for the digital age, it is infused with the hectic aesthetic of multimedia concerts and major live events. (Tellingly its video designers, 59 Productions, provided design, animation and film production for the Olympic Games opening ceremony in 2012.) The digital spectacle aside, in its visual design *wonder.land* is also a postmodern bricolage of various media influences. Its most obvious visual inheritance is not from theatre but from film: the contrast between Aly's monochrome world and the technicolour wonder.land nods to the leap from depression-era Kansas to colorful Oz in the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), as does the doubling of characters (Ms Manxome/ Red Queen Alice, M.C./ Cheshire Cat, Bianca (Aly's mother)/ White Queen, Matt (Aly's father)/ the Mad Hatter). Its costume and set designers cited the influence of manga, game design, graphic novels, Shaun Tan's picture books, John Tenniel's *Alice* illustrations, and more, in the creation of Aly and Alice's worlds.[59] And that allusive visual language is echoed in Damon Albarn's score for *wonder.land*. Combining electronica with traces of music hall and Stephen Sondheim's musical theatre, the score underlines this production's hypertheatrical, allusive style.

Arguably, the weakest point in *wonder.land* is the dramatic narrative holding all this together. While its visual spectacle offered a new theatrical language for the dissolving frontiers between offline and online worlds, the story suggests an outdated and simplified understanding of digital lives. A very different direction for such media-aware theatre might be suggested by another 2015 production: *Elements of Oz* by The Builders Association. Like *wonder.land*, *Elements of Oz* is embedded in media

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[58] Matt Trueman, 'London Theatre Review: "Wonder.land" with music by Damon Albarn,' *Variety*. Variety Media, 11 December 2015. Web. 3 May 2016.
[59] Antonia Wilson, 'Designing wonder.land,' *Creative Review Blog*. Creative Review, 21 December 2015. Web. 3 May 2016.

and cultural history. But rather than draw its elements together into a cohesive dramatic narrative, it adopts a disintegrative approach. The inspiration for the piece is the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*, the *New York Times* describing the performance as a 'loose, loopy and enjoyable seminar on the making of the movie and its influence on pop culture…'.[60] During the production, three performers video themselves re-enacting scenes from the film, while a narrator tells stories about its making and screens show YouTube videos of fans speaking about their interpretations of *The Wizard of Oz*. The audience is also given an Oz app which uses augmented reality to flesh out the performance (for example, layering a tornado over Dorothy's flying house). When one performer sings 'Over the Rainbow', a chorus of home-made videos of others singing the iconic song appears on phones and tablets throughout the theatre. The effect is to present multiple interpretations of the film, both contextualising and deconstructing an 'incredibly rich cultural artefact'.[61] Combining live video and performance with augmented reality (which means that the performance cannot be fully appreciated without a smartphone), *Elements of Oz* points to the inescapable presence of digital and media culture in live theatre. And in doing so, it establishes a 'robust dialogue' between the analogue and the digital, according to The Builders Association: 'We aim to provoke an awareness of our dependence on these devices - necessary to enter the "Land of Oz"'.[62]

This points to a common thread between *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, *wonder.land* and *Elements of Oz*, three otherwise very different productions. At the heart of each is a passage between a 'real' world and one of heightened fantasy and imagination: the court of Athens and the magical forest, Aly's everyday world and wonder.land, Dorothy's Kansas and a technicolour Oz. Interestingly, in each of these productions the wonderland is situated in a media-saturated landscape. The world of creativity and imagination, they seem to imply, has shifted from the stage to the net. And each production assumes an audience that is watching through the lens of this dominant media. Yet each also creates a very different theatrical language in its attempt to respond to the digressive, multifarious nature of online culture.

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[60] Charles Isherwood, 'Review: in "Elements of Oz" smartphones enhance a celebration of "The Wizard of Oz" film,' *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 28 Sept. 2015. Web. 7 May 2016.
[61] 'Elements of Oz,' *The Builders Association*. n.d. Web. 7 May 2016.
[62] Ibid.

Conclusion

Midsummer Night's Dreaming and *wonder.land* illustrate some of the challenges which theatre companies face in responding to the digital age. In some respects, interactive digital media has a natural affinity with theatre: in its 'liveness' and its interactivity, in the communality and performativity of social media, for example. But both productions struggled to find a theatrical language for a digital world. *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* created a digital playground that largely failed dramatically, confusing and frustrating its audience; *wonder.land*, while a visually and technically stunning production, was far less sophisticated in its understanding of the integration of 'real' and 'virtual' worlds. And curiously, such mediatized theatre can still raise a telling uneasiness (or defensiveness) among theatre practitioners. In a live Google Hangout for *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, the RSC's artistic director Gregory Doran remarked that 'live to screen' productions would 'never replace the single act of a live human being standing up in front of another live human being and delivering those words so that it's live in one space…'.[63] Even at the epicentre of the RSC's digital production he was reinforcing the superiority of live performance - as it is traditionally understood. That lingering uneasiness arises, perhaps, from a concern that such productions are not examples of live theatre absorbing the digital world, but of the digital world absorbing live theatre. Yet in striving to innovate and adapt to a new media age, both the RSC and the National Theatre have kept faith with a key understanding of drama: as action that is taking place in the 'here and now'.[64]

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[63] 'The Director Talks – A Glimpse into the Process,' *YouTube*. Royal Shakespeare Company, 19 June 2013. Web. 26 April 2016.
[64] Lehmann, p. 17.

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