Life is Serious;
ART SERENE

Biography

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APPLICATION OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THEATER FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

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Abstract

Since the end of the twentieth century new technologies play a significant role in the development of art, which is particularly visible in the domain of performing arts - theater, dance and performance.

Through a comparative analysis of the digital theater plays "Screenagers Vol. II" and " The Adventures of Bole the Comet", I explore two recent examples of the use of new technologies in theater for young audiences. In the selected performances, I analyze the aesthetic justification of the use of new technologies, as well as the relationship between new technologies and the live performer, dramaturgy, scenography, costumes, sound and light.

In addition to that, I pay special attention to the connection between the use of new technologies and the pedagogical and developmental function of theater for young audience, in the light of modern theories about the harmful impact of excessive exposure of young people to new media. I'm guided by the question: do artists who create for children have a special responsibility, since they, together with teachers and parents, have the opportunity to prepare the youngest generations for the *seriousness of life?*

Keywords: new technologies, digital theater, theater for young audiences, theater methodology, children and media

1. INTRODUCTION

At the World Conference of Assitej[1] held in 2023 in Belgrade and Novi Sad, one of the priority topics was the use of new technologies in theater for young audiences. At the *Day of Stage Design and New Technologies,* which was organized in cooperation with the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad, the experts from different disciplines discussed the questions: how to monitor the development of technology in the theater for young people, given that it has become an important, integral part of life? How to really integrate technology and not use it as a spectacle? What does technology allow us to talk about? What technological means have become so involved in everyday life that now authors necessarily integrate them into theatrical expression? Can technology help us get closer to children and young people? What are the challenges and advantages of the technological revolution, and how to talk about them? [2]

Educators, psychologists, and especially parents of the youngest audience might add one more question: aren't children and young people today too exposed to new technologies, which can have an unfavorable effect on them, in terms of the development of attention, concentration, socialization, exposure to uncensored information? Is it necessary to further spread that influence through the theater?   As a contribution to the research of this topic, in this paper I will make a comparative analysis of two theater plays for young audiences that are thoroughly based on the use of new technologies. I will especially take into account the functions and goals of the theater intended for this sensitive group, and the role of new technologies in the realization of those functions and goals.

2. DEFINITIONS OF THEATER FOR YOUNG AUDIENCE

The search for a scientific definition of theater for young audiences reveals the surprising fact that in several relevant theater dictionaries, this type of theater is not recognized as specific at all, and thus is not singled out or defined. With Raško Jovanović, we only come across the term children's theater, which he defines as a theater performed by children, and its purpose is to "have an instructive, but also entertaining, effect on the audience." (Jovanović, 1984, pp. 63). In the "Theater Terminology Dictionary" (Humar, Sušec Michieli, Podbevšek, Lokar, 2011, pp 254-256), a play for children is defined as "a play with simplified content that has an educational function, intended for children." In the same book, a distinction is made between theater for children, which is intended for children up to 12 years of age (children's theater), and youth theater, which is intended for young people.

In international practice, the term *theater for young audience* (TYA) is becoming more and more established. It combines theater performed *by* children and young people, as well as theater intended *for* them. This unification is not only formal: it is also a kind of reaction to an old ideological problem which consists in imposing on children the concept of childhood from the perspective of adults, which is (was?) a common practice in all kinds of art for children, and finally in the theater as well. An integral part of that concept, on the one hand, can be simplification, and on the other hand, didactic and moralistic points that do not come from an in-depth understanding of the child, but from the need to keep him under the control of adults. That is why it is significant that in recent decades the theory and even the practice of theater for children and young people has become more and more interdisciplinary. In addition to that, it includes important scientific branches such as pedagogy and psychology, and the development of participatory models, where performances, even if they are designed and performed by adults, yet they also open up space for the voice and experience of the young audience (Reason, Schuitema, 2021).

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1   ASSITEJ, the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, (French: *Association Internationale du Théâtre de l'Enfance et la Jeunesse*) was established in 1965 as an international alliance of professionals involved in theatre for children and young people. There are 83 national centres globally.

2   Retrieved from https://assitejsrbija.org.rs/scenski-dizajn-i-nove-tehnologije/ 15.08.2024.

3. NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND THEATER

In the last decade of the twentieth century, computer technologies played a significant role in the development of art. Some believe that this influence is particularly visible in the domain of performing arts - theater, dance and performance. "While digital film and optical-chemical film differ only in the type of technology that leads, roughly speaking, to a similar screen image effect, live theater and digital theater are based as incomparably different phenomenal-ontological systems of presentation of a living and mechanical event" (Šuvaković, 2004, pp. 9).

The term digital theater refers to performances "in which computer technologies play a key role, both in the domain of content and in the domain of technique, aesthetics and communication with the audience" (Dixon, 2007, pp. 3), and although the authors themselves did not use it in describing their works, I believe that it is applicable to two performances that I will analyze.

4. THE SELECTION OF PLAYS

The project "The Adventures of Bole Comet" is specified in the subtitle as *an animated fairy tale for children, youth and adults from three to 133 years old*. Marko Dukić is the author of the text, director, author and performer of music, animator, illustrator and designer. The premiere was held on March 25, 2016, at the City Theater Jazavac, Banja Luka, as a co-production of Nevid Theater and the City Theater Jazavac.[3] In Serbia we had the opportunity to see this play in August 2016, at the Ecological Theater Festival in Bačka Palanka, where it also won the award for the best play.

The authors define the play "Screenagers Vol.II" as a "reflexive DIY musical".

„In a firsthand, first-person approach to songwriting, the performer presents us with an intimate compendium of songs about obscure emotions that she can feel but cannot find a word for in her everyday life. Her mission is to capture through songs the aches, demons, vibes, joys and urges that roam the wilderness of her psychological interior – an interior that strangely resembles our online media landscape, materialising on stage in the form of haunting QR codes, prophetic chat-bots and deceptive green screens with which the spectators can interact via their smartphones."[4]

The play was directed by Giuseppe Chico and Barbara Matijević, produced by the OMNIBUS Art Organization (Zagreb) and Premier Stratagème (Paris). It premiered in June 2022, and Serbian audience had the opportunity to see it in the fall of 2023, at the Desiré Central Station festival in Subotica, and in Belgrade, at the Assitej festival. It is intended for teenagers.

These performances are relevant for the analysis, because the above-cited definition of digital theater, i.e. performance, can be applied to both of them (we will clarify the difference between these two terms in the rest of the text). They received positive reviews, participated in numerous festivals and won awards, which also proves that the professional public considers them relevant.

5. APPLICATION OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

5.1. The function and justification of the application of new technologies in the analyzed examples

Both of these performances could be called digital theater, if we take into account the definition according to which "digital theater is the artistic practice of realizing an image (hybrid media tableau) of a situation (relational in real or virtual space and time) or event, in the context of tradition, history, institution and discourse of the theater through digital technology" (Šuvaković, 2004, pp. 9). In the play "The Adventures of Bole Comet" we have the realization of a digitally animated image that, in the coaction with a live performer, and in the presence of a live audience, becomes a theatrical event. This coaction is continuous; minimal compositional changes occur at the moment when the screen turns off (short intermediate scenes in

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3 http://nevidteatar.com/predstave/pustolovine-boleta-komete/

4 https://www.premierstratageme.net/en/screenagers-vol-2/

which the actress is alone on stage, in the role of narrator), that is, when the screen completely takes over the primacy (the actress "hands over" the role to the avatar, and physically withdraws from the stage). The animation function otherwise does not change until the end of the play.

If we look for an analogy in classical theater, we would assign the screen the role of scenography. The technological aspect of the play is not visually accentuated (we do not see parts of the equipment, nor the technicians involved in the production), so it can be said that the aim is to preserve the theatrical illusion. Can we imagine that some other technology was used instead of digital animation? In the narration itself, the naming and description of the spaces where the action takes place is already present (for the imagination of the viewer of the Elizabethan theatre, this would be quite enough). If, however, one wanted to physically recreate the space on the stage, the set designer of this play would have a wide range of possibilities to do so, by devising the decor or painting the props. Even for a quick change of space, a solution could be found, in some process of analogue animation.[5] With the engagement of additional performers, other characters would be recreated; one can easily imagine a puppet version of the show.

The question of justification can also be asked the other way around: what would we lose if this play were realized without the use of digital animation? The answer is very simple: the association with video games, which are a very important part of the lives of today's children (whatever we think about it). I emphasize, however, that it would be good if this justification was practically validated by not only citing the motif of video games in the play, but also thematizing and problematizing it, but that does not happen in this case.

In the play "Screenagers Vol. II" the use of technology is much more varied. The screen is used to project photos, sequences of digital animation, live broadcasts, and as a large output device on which we monitor joint work with the audience (searching the Internet, playing video games, exchanging messages, Internet mimes). The laptop from which the actress conducts the performance, the microphone and the cables are intentionally visible, which is why it can be said that this event approaches the format of digital performance - "the artistic practice of the obviously presented concept, procedure and phenomenal performance using heterogeneous and hybrid digital technologies as dominant aspects of the artistic work."[6] Accordingly, we can also say that the function of new technologies is more complex here. In some moments it has a function of visual clarification and supplementing of the dramatic action (scenography effect), but the event often completely moves into virtual space (although the participants, including the audience, are in the same space all the time). As the play progresses, technology becomes less and less a tool and more and more the theme of the play, and therefore an inseparable part of it. In the context of this comparative analysis, it is worth mentioning that here the motif of video games is treated from a psychological aspect, from the point of view of the user, who is imposed a model of measuring success and efficiency, in all segments of life, including in the sphere of free time. This critical attitude towards new technologies is an important argument for their use in theater for young audiences. This is just one more proof that the play "Screenagers Vol II " is impossible to imagine without the application of new technologies, and those that have been used.

5.2. Used technologies and other elements of the performances

The play "The Adventures of Bole Comet" is described more by the authors as "an interweaving of live acting, digital animation projected on the screen, sound and light effects."[7] The play is performed on the proscenium stage, in the most common stage configuration, in which the "world of illusions is clearly separated from the real world of the spectators in which the and scenography looks like a flat projection in the open plane of the curtain."[8] This configuration is further emphasized by the light (the auditorium is always in the dark, and the stage is lit), as well as by the installation of the projection screen on the back wall of the stage, which gives us the impression that the actress is performing in front of a painted scenography.

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5   Kamishibaji is a theatrical form created in medieval Japan, which consists of the manual switching of a series of images, by a live performer-storyteller-actor, in close contact with the audience, which could be cited as an example of analog animation. The increasing popularity of this genre nowadays is explained by the fact that this old-fashioned theater style has an exciting and even therapeutic effect for the modern young audience.

6   Ibid.

7   http://nevidteatar.com/predstave/pustolovine-boleta-komete/ Retrieved on 15.8.2024.

8   The third, most common basic spatial form of stage events, as defined in his typology by Walter Gropius (Dinulović, 2005)

The connection between the physically unchanging space of the acting (an empty stage without scenography) and the different spaces that are projected on the screen is established primarily

- by connecting the image to the narrative (the performer, in the character of Bole, describes the spaces that are projected on the screen)
- by identifying a live performer with an avatar in animation
- through the interaction of the performer with the animation
- by connecting the image and acting to the sound effects.

For example, in one scene, the movement of a car (said to be driven by Bole Comet), as an integral part of the projection, is replaced by the movement of the performer who imitates the movement of the car on stage, in front of the screen, practically within the projected landscape, holding in her hand a prop. – steering wheel. In the earthquake scene, the sound, the image movement and the actress's reaction are coordinated. Recorded dialogue sequences are also part of the sound image - actually a combination of the actress' live spoken lines and the previously recorded lines of the characters that are part of the animation. It is important to emphasize that the interactivity is one-way, that is, that the actress has obviously thoroughly practiced the play with the animated image and sound - to the extent that sometimes it seems as if the image is actually reacting to her. This is especially noticeable in a situation of rapid changes, such as when the actress uses props - slingshots to eliminate enemies who spontaneously attack her from the screen (these are the moments when the play really acts like a theatrical version of a video game).

The costume is also in the function of connecting the live performer and the avatar (the image is compatible with the real costume).

The light follows the dynamics and the brightness of the image, so that the actress, again in relation to how close she is to the projection screen, plays in the light emitted by the projection, or is illuminated by theater light, or it is a combination, which is the worst solution, because it occasionally acts as a realization error

The interweaving of all the mentioned means throughout the performance is consistently subordinated to the goal of creating and maintaining the illusion and making the plot understandable. At some moments, however, it seems that this concern has gone too far, and produces illustration and redundancy: for example, when Bole describes the appearance of the giant's shoes, which are clearly visible in the projection, but are not essential to the story. Such duplication of information, which come, for example, from the visual and auditory code, is probably the result of the need to make everything clear to young audience. On the other hand, one gets the impression that in this way the audience is underestimated and put in a passive position, in which there is no the tendency to participate in designing, supplementing, interpreting the content that is received from the stage.

The show "Screenagers Vol. II " is described by the authors as a mixture of stand-up comedy, conference, concert and VJ-ing, which examines how (everything) the internet affects our lives, through phenomena such as e-learning, online communities, video games, internet culture mimes.

The play is performed on an empty stage, covered with a ballet floor, also in the proscenium theater configuration. There is a projection screen on the back wall. The only element od scenography is the pedestal on which the equipment is placed. In the post-dramatic manner (which is also the manner of digital performance), the elements of the stage technique are not hidden, on the contrary: all technological processes are deliberately "exposed" to the eye of the audience.

The play consists of short, relatively independent scenes. Already in the first one, which takes the form of VJ session (the actress performs a recitative, accompanying herself on a small mobile keyboard, which is coordinated with a series of projected photos), communication with the audience is established. It is first one-way. However, already in the second scene, conceived as a deliberately clumsy animation - a tutorial, which is partly shown and partly recounted (now not live, but through subtitles), audience is invited to access the Screenagers internet network via smartphones. This means that, in the further course of the play, they are enabled to participate directly in the play. The first challenge of is playing a video game, moderated by an actress. Later, the audience gets the opportunity to take and send selfies, which will be projected on the big screen with humorous comments, and the very end of the performance consists of a song that the actress improvises from sentences sent by the audience at that moment.

In one remarkable scene, the performer takes different positions in the space, filming herself with the help of a mobile phone, with the direct transmission of the image. She plays with mise-en-scène and perspectives: she turns her back to the audience, while addressing them face to face from the projection screen. Analogous to that is communication with the audience via chat, even though the performer is in the same room all the time. The constant change of the way of presence, the simultaneous coexistence in different media and levels of reality, are the leitmotif of the play, which humorously and easily, but on the other hand honestly and seriously, deals with the theme of simplicity, but also the superficiality of communication via the Internet, easy access into large online communities and knowledge bases, but also loneliness. Playing a video game, as already mentioned, thematizes the problem of competitiveness, constant measurement of success, taking a selfie talks about the need to fabricate a reality that does not exist.

The performer uses the keyboard not only to play the melodic background of the song she performs, but also to produce various effects, which are most often quotations of Windows sound effects or quotations of movie effects. Her voice is transmitted via a wireless microphone, and is often computer modeled, or overdubbed with someone else's voice. Sequences of video games, animations and other video materials are accompanied by a sound image characteristic of such content, dividing the screen into several fields often multiplies the sound image, to the point of intentional cacophony.

It is clear that the fabric of this play is very meticulously woven using different technologies (sound, light, various video material), which sovereignly reconstructs the atmosphere of the unlimited space of the Internet from which we are "attacked" by various stimuli and contents. In the precise composition of the play, moments of pause, stagnation, silence, which is sometimes accentuated through a white or black screen, the interruption of all sound, when the actress is only present live, are particularly important. Theatrical elements of the play are very carefully selected: it is interesting how the performer sometimes uses an instrument or parts of the equipment as a theatrical prop. For example, she manipulates the laptop so that the image on its screen becomes an extension of her body (hand, foot), thereby approaching the medium of object theater, even puppetry.

5.3. Effects of the use of new technologies

The effect of the use of new technologies, relevant to the goals of TYA	*„The Adventures of Bole Comet"*	*„Screenagers Vol.II"*
Popularization of the theater, using a vocabulary that is familiar to the young audience	Young people recognize the video game analogy, it makes it easier for them to follow the play	Young people recognize the analogies with the different media they use, the more they are invited to get directly involved in the play, using those media.
It makes theater fun	It imitates the way users are entertained by a video game.	It satirizes the technologies it uses, and produces laughter and fun in theatrical ways
Contributes to education	It has no pretensions to educate	Educates in the field of Internet history, animation technology; indirectly, without teaching, educates on the topic of the dangers of cyber violence
Contributes to psychological well-being and development	It remains within the stereotype of a fairy tale; does not problematize the usual treatment of violence in fairy tales/video games, does not deepen the motives that the original story contains, which may be relevant for children (the disappearance of one of the parents, loneliness, fear...)	It explores topics related to the life of young people: issues of identity, socialization, fear of disease, death, environmental disasters, etc. Develops a critical distance towards new technologies and media. Empowers the young viewer by opening space for participation.

It contributes to the development of taste and aesthetic sensitivity	It remains within the horizon of expectations of the average video game user	It combines different visual and musical styles; stimulates the imagination with the unexpected use of technical equipment, fantasizes the connections between the physical and virtual worlds; develops vocabulary through online language games

Fig. 1. Comparative analysis of the effects of new technologies in two plays

5.4. Justification of the use of new technologies in relation to the age of the young audience

One of the important reasons for the use of new technologies in the theater for young audiences is to help them to get to know those technologies better. The theater is an opportunity for adults and young people to understand together how new technologies work and how they can be used, but also what psychological and ideological challenges they bring us (Bakingem, 2004, pp. 276-297).

But when exactly is the moment for young people to start getting to know the world of computer animation, video games, the internet, and virtual reality better? Modern research increasingly shows a slowdown in the motor, neurological, psychological, cognitive, and social development of children because they are less and less exposed to unstructured play in the preschool period, which implies increased motor activity and getting to know the outside world with all their senses. Excessive watching of television, playing video games, lack of graphomotor activities and physical inactivity damage and reduce the development of certain biological potentials. "The fact is that this period (up to the age of 7), which represents the basis on which the future development of each child's intellectual abilities will depend, is still not enough researched area and that parents sometimes inadvertently do wrong things with children or do not know how to optimally way to stimulate their development" (Rajović, 2010, pp. 10)

Therefore, let's not forget the important fact that the theater for young audiences should be also a place of education and support for parents. If a play for the age of 3+ uses new technologies with the aim of getting closer to the audience, doesn't that mean that we assume, that is, promote the idea that three-year-old should know and recognize the world of cartoons, video games, social networks, virtual reality? If we take into account the opinions of experts, we will understand that more appropriate theater references for this age would be storytelling, puppetry, new circus, kamishibai (not to go further into the rich history of the theater), and that actually the theater, with its here and now, is an exemplary space in which the battle against the spectacle society can and must be fought.

6. CONCLUSION

Through a comparative analysis of the theater performances "Screenagers Vol. II" and "The Adventures of Bole Comet", I investigated two examples of the use of new technologies in contemporary stage design practices intended for young audiences. Much more material for analysis, and a greater richness and complexity of the relationship between new technology and other segments of the play, I discovered in the play "Screenagers vol II", while I experienced "The Adventure of Bole Comet" as a simpler attempt to approach the audience by imitating a form that is supposed to be close and recognizable even to very young viewers. I conclude that in choosing new technologies to be used in the work on a play, we should deal with the issue of the relationship between form and content, and pedagogical and artistic goals, with full awareness of the age and needs of the audience we are addressing. A serious methodological problem is the lack of insight into how the audience itself perceives and evaluates these performances (except, partially, in the case of "Screenagers Vol 2", where the reaction can be measured by the degree of audience involvement in the performance and the qualitative and quantitative share in content generation) which could also be the subject of new research endeavours.

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