

Theatrical Resilience Amidst Crisis: Exploring the Inclusivity of Bill Irwin's Zoom Play during the COVID Pandemic

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Received: 26/5/2024

Revised: 5/6/2024

Accepted: 4/7/2024

Published online: 1/6/2025

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Citation: Khalil, H. M. S. M. (2025). Theatrical Resilience Amidst Crisis: Exploring the Inclusivity of Bill Irwin's Zoom Play during the COVID Pandemic. *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 52(6), 7535. <https://doi.org/10.35516/hum.v52i6.7535>



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Abstract

Objectives: This study examines the potential of electronic literature during the coronavirus pandemic. In a digitally driven world where technology is progressing exponentially and leveraging the computing world, **Zoom**, a digital communication platform, is examined to showcase how it has embraced theatrical performances and resulted in new digital performances that challenge traditional performance concepts.

Methods: This paper examines Bill Irwin's Zoom play, titled *In-Zoom: A World Premiere Play* (2020) through the lens of performance theories. To provide a thorough analysis of the work in the study, the researcher draws upon the principal performance theories of Richard Schechner. The researcher attempts the following questions: Can Zoom plays be considered a manifestation of electronic literature that demonstrates resilience and challenges the limitations of the virtual realm? In what ways do Zoom plays exhibit novel characteristics of electronic literature?

Results: The Zoom platform has demonstrated remarkable resilience through the inclusivity of theatrical performances during the tumultuous time of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Zoom plays are considered a new form of electronic literature. They have transformed the theatrical landscape by introducing innovative features to electronic literature, particularly in setting, design, accessibility, and audience experience.

Conclusion: The resilience of the Zoom platform has given rise to Zoom plays which have significantly contributed to electronic literature. This digital shift provides an innovative solution to the limitations imposed by social distancing and foreshadows a paradigm shift in the performing arts. The integration of technology in the theater indicates a long-lasting impact on how theatrical works are created and experienced.

Keywords: Electronic Literature; Zoom Plays; Zoom Theatre; Digital Inclusion; Inclusivity.

صمود المسرح وقت الأزمة: دراسة شمولية لعروض زووم خلال جائحة كوفيد

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ملخص

الأهداف: تبحث هذه الدراسة في إمكانات الأدب الإلكتروني خلال جائحة فيروس كورونا. في عالم يدفعه الرقمنة حيث التكنولوجيا تتقدم بشكل متسارع وتستغل عالم الحوسبة، يتم فحص منصة الاتصال الرقمية، وهي زووم، لإظهار كيف استقبلت العروض المسرحية، وأسفرت عن عروض رقمية جديدة تتحدى مفاهيم الأداء التقليدية.

المنهجية: يفحص هذا البحث مسرحية بيل إروين على منصة زووم، بعنوان "داخل-زووم: عرض عالمي أول" (2020) من خلال عدسة نظريات الأداء. لتقديم تحليل شامل للعمل في الدراسة، يستعين الباحث بنظريات الأداء الرئيسة لريتشارد شيشنر. يحاول الباحث الإجابة عن الأسئلة الآتية: هل يمكن اعتبار مسرحيات زووم تجلياً للأدب الإلكتروني يظهر المرونة، ويتحدى قيود العالم الافتراضي؟ بأي طرائق تظهر مسرحيات زووم خصائص جديدة للأدب الإلكتروني؟

النتائج: أظهرت منصة زووم مرونة ملحوظة من خلال شمولية العروض المسرحية خلال الفترة العصيبة لوباء COVID-19. وبالتالي تعتبر العروض المسرحية على زووم شكلاً جديداً من الأدب الإلكتروني. لقد حولت العروض المسرحية على زووم المشهد المسرحي من خلال تقديم ميزات مبتكرة للأدب الإلكتروني، لا سيما فيما يتعلق بالإعداد والتصميم وسهولة الوصول وتجربة الجمهور.

الخاتمة: إن مرونة منصة زووم أدت إلى ظهور العروض المسرحية على زووم وقد ساهمت بشكل كبير في الأدب الإلكتروني. هذا التحول الرقمي لا يوفر فقط حلاً مبتكراً للقيود التي فرضها التباعد الاجتماعي. ولكنه أيضاً يبشر بتغيير جذري في الفنون المسرحية. كما أن دمج التكنولوجيا في المسرح يشير إلى تأثير طويل الأمد على كيفية إنشاء الأعمال المسرحية وتجربتها.

الكلمات الدالة: الأدب الإلكتروني، مسرحيات زووم، مسرح زووم، الشمول الرقمي، الشمولية المسرحية

Introduction

The coronavirus has altered the features of the globe, and a bleak picture was sketched. Turmoil, anxiety, and gloominess were the characteristic features of a rambunctious crowd that could neither fathom nor accept the surging virus that caused a significant death toll across the universe. As a result, every aspect of life has been substantially reshaped and the new normal was born. It constituted unprecedented challenges for the performing arts around the globe. Therefore, new platforms came to the fore, such as Zoom, to act as a stage for practitioners who had to adjust to the restrictions brought about by social distancing policies to adopt an innovative shift towards virtual theater and perform their plays on Zoom during the pandemic. The paper consists of three parts. The first part relates an overview of electronic literature, whereas the second part provides an introduction to Zoom plays, delineating how they reimagine space and showcase features of accessibility and inclusivity, in addition to the interaction and immersion of the audience. In the third part, Bill Irwin's Zoom play, titled *In-Zoom: A World Premiere Play* (2020) is examined through the perspective of performance theories.

I. Electronic Literature: Overview

New literary forms are continuously developing owing to ongoing technological advances. Not new, "Electronic Literature" (also referred to as "e-literature" or shortened as "e-lit") is the outcome of the Age of Technology which is growing at an exponential rate. The insurgence of digital technologies has revolutionized the way literature is created and fathomed. Electronic or digital literature has gained popularity and is burgeoning over the years. Electronic Literature has been incessantly evolving from one form to the other. From a simple transfer of print words to electronic format which can be read online and thus called electronic, to a hypertextual format that has changed the reader to a user and/ or a navigator who can move from one hyperlink to the other which amounts to an interactive experience.

Electronic literature refers to literary works that are created in digital formats, such as electronic books, web-based literature, and interactive fiction. According to N. Katherine Hayles (2008), electronic literature is characterized as a digital creation that originates from a computer and is primarily intended to be viewed on a computer (p.3). It often incorporates components of multimedia: images, videos, and sound, and may also feature interactive elements that enable the reader to actively interact with the text in new ways. Literary works specifically created for different gadgets, such as computers and mobile devices, are categorized under the genre of electronic literature or e-literature.

As a result, the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) was founded in 1999 to "foster and promote the reading, writing, teaching, and understanding of literature as it develops and persists in a changing digital environment" (**"About the ELO"**). The ELO defines the term as "[It] refers to **works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer**" (**"About the ELO"**). **One of the ELO founders, Scott Rettberg (2019) defines Electronic Literature:** "...as new forms and genres of writing that explore the specific capabilities of the computer and network – literature that would not be possible without the contemporary digital context" (p. 2). Therefore, Electronic Literature emerged as the progeny of digital gadgets.

Electronic literature is categorized into two generations by N. Katherine Hayles (2008). In her keynote speech at the 2002 Electronic Literature Symposium at UCLA, Hayles points out that the first generation was before the advent of the Internet and includes the incorporation of textual elements and hyperlinks. Works that originated between 1952 and 1995 have been classified as first-generation electronic literature. The second generation of electronic literature explores the visual and auditory capabilities of personal computers and leverages the opportunities offered by the World Wide Web. These works prominently feature moving images, sound, and dynamic typography (Bluijs, 2021). Starting from 1995 and beyond, the second generation is characterized "as web-based and incorporating multimedia and interactivity" (Grigar and O'Sullivan, 2021, p. 28). In addition, a third generation began around 2005 and continues to the present. It utilizes popular platforms with large user communities, including social media networks, mobile apps, touchscreen devices, and web API services (Grigar and O'Sullivan, 2012, p. 29). Thus, electronic literature offers new possibilities for the production of literary forms.

Therefore, the development of Electronic Literature has been elaborately summed up in "Toward a History of Electronic Literature" by Urszula Pawlicka (2014) as follows:

... we can see that electronic literature moved from text to technotext, from text as decoding meaning to text as a process of information and information system, from an interpretation to experience, from visual perception to performativity, from close reading to hyperreading, and several others. The most relevant aspect of the development of electronic literature to date is the attention paid to both theoretical and applied aspects of the background technical base of digitality, namely coding and its importance just the same as the content of electronic literature. (p.7)

Accordingly, the literary and computational aspects come hand in hand to sketch and describe electronic literature.

Electronic Literature has different forms, such as Hypertext Fiction, Hyperdrama*, Interactive Fiction, Digital Poetry, Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) Literature and Collaborative and Social Media Literature are illustrations of literature created for the digital platform. Hypertext fiction is an illustration of Electronic Literature that showcases a style of storytelling that is not linear. It comprises interconnected text nodes, accessible through hyperlinks that readers can click. It allows readers to exercise their free will and make choices that determine the direction of the story. The progression and outcome of the story are directly influenced by reader choices, resulting in a distinctive and personalized reading experience. This is achieved through hyperlinks, which lead readers to different nodes and outcomes based on readers' decisions. (Hayles and Montfort, 2012, p. 452).

The reader is the pivotal axis in this form of literature as highlighted in Serge Bouchardon's definition of electronic literature: It involves the conversion of printed material into a format suitable for optimal presentation in a portable computational environment. Digital literature is characterized by its algorithmic nature, meaning it dynamically transforms and adapts as the reader interacts with it (p.3). Consequently, the reader comes to the fore and becomes the most notable side in the author-text-reader triad. Also referred to as text-based adventure games, interactive fiction encourages readers to actively engage in the narrative by offering choices and opportunities for interaction with the story through text commands (Montfort, 2003, p.63). Thus, digital literature has assumed diverse forms and expressions.

Another form of Electronic Literature is electronic poetry which encompasses multimedia components including images, animations, and audio. E-poems are interactive as users design/choose the text and images they want to create personalized poetic outputs. (Strickland and Murray, 2012, p. 429). The other form of e-literature includes digital storytelling. This is made into amazing stories that combine different kinds of media like texts, photos, audio, and video clips. Several elements constitute digital storytelling, namely, web stories, video clips, animation, voice-over, photographs, and so forth that make the whole story more appealing (Lambert, 2013, p.118). These developments gave rise to immersive storytelling comprising Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality among other related technologies. The literature of augmented reality (AR) consists of layering different types of digital components over the real environment wherein a user can undergo interactive interfaces being superimposed in the natural landscape. VR literature, however, allows readers for virtual exploration and interaction within the narrative itself (Bell & Ensslin, 2019, p. 22). Electronic literature exists in a multitude of shapes and forms.

Therefore, the evolution of collaborative e-literature, including social media literature, is made possible through digitally enabled platforms and social networking sites. Writers work with readers in collaboration to collectively weave stories, with multiple individuals contributing to the creation of a complete narrative. Writers have a chance to showcase their works on social media platforms, get feedback, and interact directly with readers. This has resulted in Twitterature – a platform where Twitter has been used as e-literature. An additional important social media that greatly contributed during the pandemic is ZOOM. As a result of this, Zoom plays and other forms of art have been developed and the storyline has been enriched.

This digital era allows smooth information and movement across different media forms in an easy manner. Electronic writing is one of these spaces where it is possible to explore different formats and modes

of narrative through invention and discovery. The inclusion of multimedia elements, interactive features, generative

* Khalil, Hend. (2011). *Text and Hypertext: William Shakespeare's Hamlet and Anton Chekhov's The Seagull*. Germany: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing GmbH & Co. KG

algorithms, and other digital tools allows writers to experiment with non-traditional structures, language, narratives, etc. Such experimentation normally undermines conventional linear storytelling creating novel grounds for creativity. It has paved the way for the advent of new forms of digital art.

II. Zoom Plays: A Paradigm Shift in the World of Drama

Strikingly enough, new forms are still evolving. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world, lockdowns were imposed to curb the spread of the virus. Zoom plays came to the fore as a replacement for the physical theater-going experience. Thus, it is considered a form of electronic literature which is defined as "a construction whose literary aesthetics emerge from computation"... "work that could only exist in the space for which it was developed/written/coded—the digital space" (Heckman and O'Sullivan, 2018). Zoom platform was employed as a stage for dramatists who had no other place to go during the pandemic. Therefore, it could be labeled as a form of electronic literature. Performing plays via the Zoom platform has been one of the modalities that has gained a lot of attention and popularity in 2020. A radical shift in the world of drama has been witnessed and enjoyed by many writers, practitioners, and viewers/ users. It has revolutionized the pre-established elements of drama, initiating a new era of innovation and artistic expression.

II.1. Reimagining Space and Set Design

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle (384-322 BC) unveiled the 'spectacle' as one of the elements of drama. He declared: "The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. The power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet" (1961, p. 9). A spectacle is everything that the audience sees which incorporates all visual components of a play, namely, the set (also known as scenery), special effects, and costumes. It is also known as the setting or space where the performance takes place. Space has changed over time, from the traditional theater to social media platforms. An illustration of this is Twitter in *Twit Plays/Twitter Plays** and the Zoom Platform in Zoom Plays which was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2002, the scenery has been redesigned as Zoom has become a medium for performance during the pandemic. The principal function of a scenic design is to form a background for the action; accordingly, the scenic designer employs different tools to portray the director's vision. Therefore, scenic design has witnessed great transformation in Zoom theatre. Hailing the potential of Zoom, Karam and Naguib (2022) remark: "The technological and dramaturgical aspects of Zoom theatre reflect its ability to host a live performance including all the prerequisites of real theatre" (p.156). Zoom program has the "background" option which has set the stage for online productions. Web-based conferencing software, Zoom, has provided actors, directors, and practitioners with room for creativity during the pandemic's social distancing period.

II.2. Accessibility and Inclusivity

During the pandemic, the integration of digital technologies into people's lives has become commonplace and resulted in increased flexibility. Zoom made its way to everyone through its effortless accessibility. Zoom platform has prompted artists, writers, and practitioners to explore new ways of theatrical expression. Besides its accessibility, Zoom's inclusivity was another feature that rendered it a stage for writers to vent their feelings and perform their works of art. According to German social theorist Niklas Luhmann (1927–1997), the concept of inclusion is the relationship between human beings and society. Luhmann expounds that "inclusion means that human beings are held relevant in communication... They are considered communicative addresses, persons, bearers of roles, and accountable actors (qtd. in Schirmer and Michailakis, 2015, p. 53). As a result, "digital inclusion achieved through Zoom is a viable solution to the problem of maintaining the social integration and communication desperately required during the stressful period of lockdown" (Karam and Naguib, 2022, p. 152). On that account, human beings are rendered relevant and/or irrelevant to communication owing to the society structure. In this case, the pandemic has sketched the relationship between people and society.

Hence, the connection between human beings and society changes over time. Luhmann elaborates: "The transition to

* Khalil, H. (2016). *Twitter Plays: The Positivity of Simulacrum*. *Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Helwan University*, 40, April

modern, functionally differentiated society has significantly changed the relationship between society and individuals... functional differentiation implies that society is the (unity of the) difference between many incommensurable function systems, each fulfilling its own function and observing with each its own code" (Schirmer and Michailakis, 2015, p. 54). Hence, human beings do not engage in function systems as a unified entity, but rather as individuals fulfilling functionally significant roles. To be integrated into function systems, the roles of people are categorized into performance roles and layman roles (Schirmer and Michailakis, 2015, p. 54). The performance role of persons is to carry out services, such as teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc. In contrast, layman roles are the persons who receive or benefit from the performance roles, for example, students, patients, and convicts respectively (Schirmer and Michailakis, 2015, p. 54). Therefore, electronic literature has reshaped the relationship between individuals and society.

Digital inclusion is thus achieved through the Zoom platform. "Zoom theatre mostly fulfills this social function as it tackles universal issues which involve and concern all people who suffer from the inevitable effects of the pandemic, engaging them as active participants in live performance" (Karam and Naguib, 2022, p. 152). Zoom theatre demonstrates the two types of inclusion: performance roles and layman roles. The performance role is manifested via actors, artists, and practitioners who had to move their performances from stage to zoom during lockdown. On the other hand, layman roles are depicted through viewers who interacted with actors during Zoom live performances (Karam and Naguib, 2022, p. 153). Therefore, digital inclusion has been a haven for people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

II.3. Audience Interaction and Immersion

The advent of digital technology into the world of drama has had a notable impact on the audience. New forms of human-computer interaction appear. Zoom theater can include interactive components that enable the audience to actively participate in the performance. This can be achieved through features like chat options, polls, or even virtual invitations for audience members to join the stage. According to Bennett (1995), the reader-response theory refers to the "reader as an active agent who imparts "real existence" to the work and completes its meaning through interpretation... each reader creates their own, possibly unique, text-related performance (p. 32). Similarly, this theory can be applied to Zoom theater which provides viewers/audience with an immersive, interactive experience. Zoom's chat function and Zoom breakout rooms allow audiences to interact with each other and with performers defying the social distancing psychological repercussions. Therefore, Zoom has been utilized to create a virtual space where audiences can interact with one another, participate in pre-show events, or share their thoughts on the play. Thus, it improves the audiences' overall engagement for a more immersive experience.

Despite the limitations of the Zoom platform, it has proved successful and a true savior during the pandemic in all walks of life; the most surprising of which is for the performing arts which was manifested through its accessibility. Zoom theater allows people from different parts of the world to connect and take part in online performances. "Zoom offers the ability to communicate in real-time with geographically dispersed individuals via computer, tablet, or mobile device" (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 2). A great advantage of Zoom Theater is its flexibility concerning scheduling and rehearsals. Actors and directors could collaborate remotely, and viewers/audiences could watch the show from the comfort of their homes. Additionally, it offered both performers and the audience an intimate experience amidst the lockdown gloomy period. This was achieved through the close-up camera view feature, live chats, and ask questions or interaction option via the raise hand option offered by Zoom, fostering a sense of togetherness which was highly appreciated during that difficult time.

III. Performance Reading of *In-Zoom: A World Premiere Play* by Bill Irwin

III.1. Theoretical Framework: Performance Theories

Performance theories introduce a multifarious range of perspectives that delve deep into the meanings, functions, and aesthetics of performance in varied social and cultural contexts. Performance theory intersects with various disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and cultural studies. There are numerous performance theorists, such as Richard Schechner, Erving Goffman, and Judith Butler. Schechner, a guru in performance studies, scribbles a definition of performance that entails both everyday life activities and theatrical performances. Schechner's theory is depicted through the notion of the "broad spectrum" of performance which means that performance is not limited to the arts but is a principal

part of all human activities. (2006, p. 39). Therefore, Schechner's inclusive approach to performance acknowledges performance as a fundamental aspect of human behavior.

Schechner's notion of the "broad spectrum" is influenced by Victor Turner's anthropological perception of social drama and liminality. Turner examines the sociocultural dynamics that encompass social change and conflict in the Zambian tribe of Ndembu emphasizing the significant and transformative impact of performance within society (Turner, 1982, pp. 74-75). Schechner expands on Turner's concept to propound that performance does not merely reflect social order, but is a proactive process that can transform and challenge that order (Turner, 1982, p. 74-75). At the core of Schechner's performance theory, is the concept of "restored behavior" or "twice-behaved behavior," which delineates performance as a repeated action (Schechner, 1985, p.36). He examines the construction and the roles of performances within a cultural framework. The term "restored behavior" suggests that behaviors are rehearsed to achieve a certain effect and/or to disseminate a particular idea.

Schechner perceives performance as a positive and influential force in society (Schechner, 2006, p. 112). He suggests that the function of performance is not limited to reflecting real-life values but to challenge and eventually change them. Schechner perceives performance as an arena for possible transformation (Schechner, 2006, p.112). Therefore, Schechner's performance theory offers a distinctive perspective on human behavior. His work highlights the significance of daily performances, providing a profound insight into human expressions and cultural interactions.

III.2. Bill Irwin's *In-Zoom: A World Premiere Play: A Zoom Performance*

A 10-minute Zoom play created by playwright-cum-actor, Bill Irwin who is a two-time Tony award winner. The play casts two actors: Bill Irwin and Christopher Fitzgerald, three-time Tony Award nominee. Leila Knox was the production stage manager and Kevin Anthenill was the digital platform director. Two actors start a meeting on Zoom to reflect on the psycho-socio status of people during the pandemic. The play is an innovative demonstration of a digital communication platform, namely Zoom, which embraces theatrical performances to delineate the new normal of social distancing that appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Two comic minds convene a meeting on Zoom and surprise themselves as they look at our particular pandemic moment and the virtual way we're living it." (Irwin, 2020) The play starts with an introduction by Barry Edelstein, Artistic Director of The Old Globe in San Diego, California. He welcomes viewers and thanks them for joining through the Zoom platform. He adds: "The Old Globe believes that theatre matters and our commitment is to make it matter to more people. The theatre's special magic is to gather strangers at an appointed time and place and make them together into an audience of a single community." (Introduction to the play) The Zoom play eloquently showcases the people's resilience amidst crises. It strives to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic and gives them hope.

The screen is divided into two panes: the left pane shows Bill and the right one shows Chris. The digital platform challenges the traditional notion of space. It reshapes the dynamics of performance, resulting in innovative methods of storytelling, actor-audience relationships, and interpretation of meaning. In his seminal book, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, Marvin Carlson (1989) expounds that "space does not simply refer to a physical location but defines the "complex relationship between the performance and the audience and how the performance space shapes and is shaped by the theatrical event" (p.70). This new approach to the dynamic nature of digital space through the Zoom platform offers both performers and audience a different experience that prompts perceiving the performance dynamics from a new vantage point.

From the comfort of their homes, as they were compelled to turn to the social media platform as a substitute for the traditional theatre experience, the audience watched a Zoom play, starring two actors only. Chris starts by asking "How have you been? a warm note which is interrupted by "You are frozen" and "Can you hear me?" which sets the tone for the play and reflects the social distancing cold atmosphere created by the pandemic. Chris responds that "he had a scratchy throat for a while." When asked about his wife, he explains to Chris that she is in the living room doing Zoom yoga. She also wants him to play Zoom Zumba with her, but, ironically enough, he tells her that he is so busy. "You are frozen" is a recurrent phrase throughout, which acts as a reminder of the psychological impact of the pandemic.

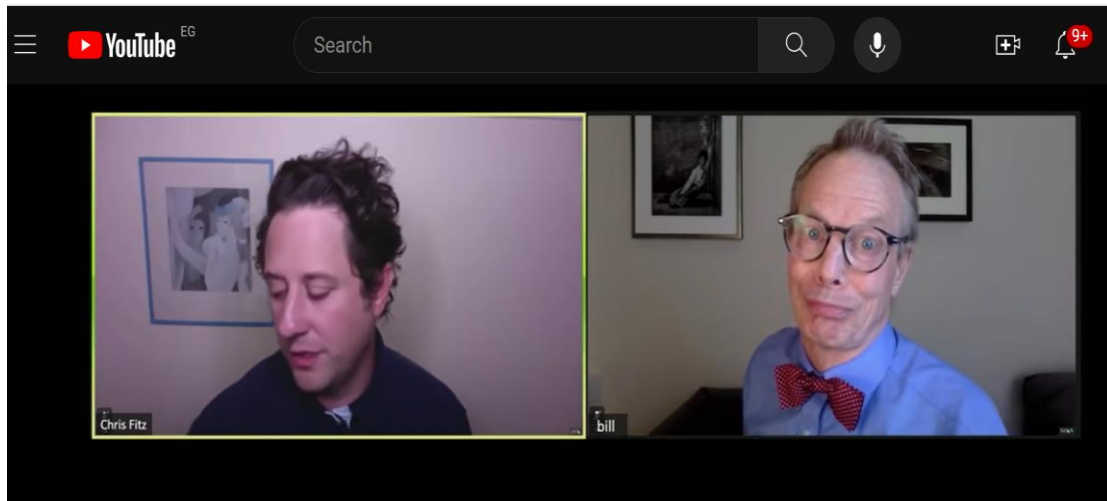


Figure 1 *In-Zoom: A World Premiere Play*- YouTube

The frozen state with which the play starts is one of the technical challenges of the Zoom platform. The internet speed, mics, and camera can result in this awkward pause and disruption of the scene's flow. To address this problem, Zoom digital platform directors and production stage managers employ live streaming software to enhance virtual performance. This kind of software enables the Zoom play director to add different media into Zoom video panes or Zoom video boxes which are windows or frames displaying each participant's/actor's video feed on Zoom, to eliminate the rigidity of the panes/ frames (Karam and Naguib, 2022, p. 156). "It composes a variety of scenes and enables the scenic designer and stage manager to switch between real-time video/audio capturing, different camera angles, multiple inputs, backgrounds, and foregrounds, seamlessly mixing with unlimited scenes" (Karam and Naguib, 2022, p. 156; Stewart, 2018). The Zoom platform has demonstrated its ability to embrace theatrical performance and defy its limitations.

Challenging the limitations of the Zoom platform in terms of space to blur the boundaries between virtuality and reality, Bill turns left to face Chris and asks him to look right into his eyes: "Now cause what I imagined is we just speak them directly to each other. Just looking right into each other's eyes." Although he knows that they can't do that via Zoom, "Yeah no it's a fact of the medium. you can't really look into another person's eyes on this. You can look into the lens." (Fig. 2) It is another attempt to push the boundaries of an already existing virtual space limitation of body language which is one of the most important aspects of a theatrical performance. Barton (1994) asserts that "...utilizing body language can significantly enhance an actor's performance and audience connection in theatre" (p.112). Therefore, Bill and Chris pretend to maintain eye contact which is not feasible on the Zoom platform.

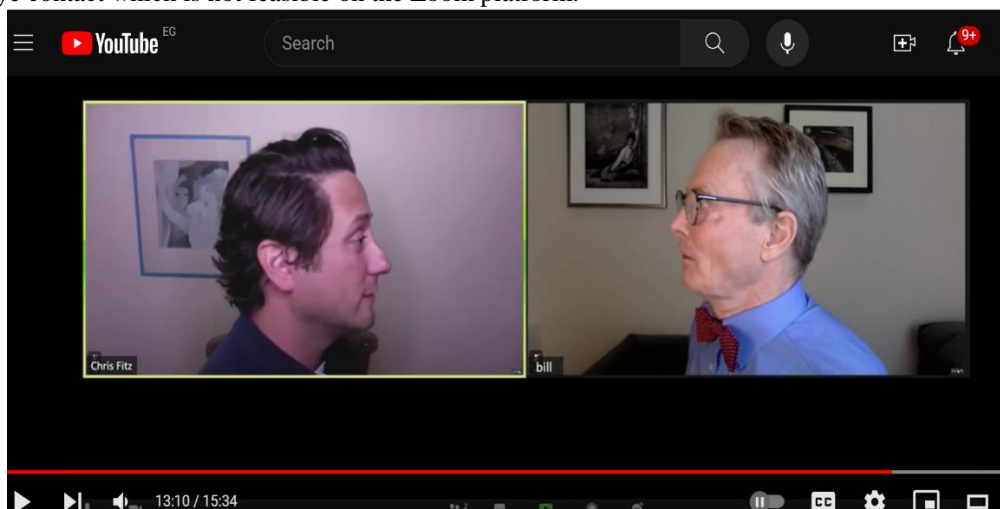


Figure 2 *In-Zoom: A World Premiere Play* – YouTube

Bill says: "Yes you are! I can see, oh, I see." A moment of resilience amidst the status quo imposed by the pandemic. He believes that it is "maybe kind of powerful." Similarly, Chris tries to defy the barriers imposed by the web-based video conferencing platform by asking Bill to come and see his wife and kids. Bill also tries to insert his hand into Chris' pane to challenge the moment and demonstrate that the theatre can go beyond the boundaries of a digital platform. (Fig. 3) Therefore, both actors attempt to bring down the shackles of the virtual platform and defy the limitations of online performance. Through this Zoom play, the writer demonstrates the potential of social interaction via the virtual walls of Zoom. A scene that has never been performed before, a striking defiance of the boundaries of the technicalities and limitations of Zoom.

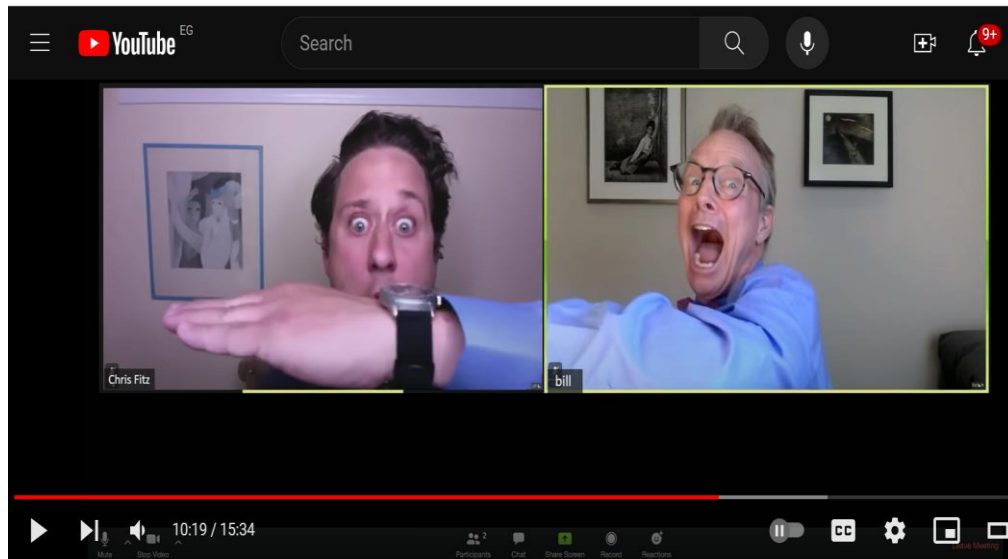


Figure 3 In-Zoom: a World Premiere Play – YouTube

Drawing on the theory of performance, it proposes that each individual engages in a form of performance within their social milieu. This can be observed through various aspects of our behavior, such as our choice of attire, and the dialogues we engage in... These actions collectively function as a system of signals, conveying information to both ourselves and others about our position within the societal framework (Goffman, 1969, p. 28). Bill tells Chris "You and me should post some little benedictions from the Bible. Just inspirational passages you know, to put out there while people are... and I think we just speak them sincerely to each other." Benedictions are blessings uttered at the end of a religious service; inspirational words. Bill suggests the exchange of benedictions sincerely at each other. Similarly, Goffman (1969) declares that when someone assumes a role, they inherently expect their audience to sincerely perceive the image being portrayed. They expect their observers to believe that the character being presented genuinely possesses the qualities they seem to possess, that the actions being performed will result in the implied outcomes, and that, overall, things are as they appear to be (p.17). Irwin attempts through Bill and Chris to provide the audience with emotional support manifested via words of divine blessings and well-wishes.

They start to recite benedictions. Bill says: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from love." On the other pane, Chris says: "May love dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may find the strength to comprehend what is the breadth and length, and depth and height, and to find that love which surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." Both Bill and Chris have been rehearsing to recite these benedictions. This lends itself to the notion of Richard Schechner (1985): "restored behavior or twice-behaved behavior" (p. 36); he asserts that performance cannot exist without the element of repetition thus asserting that performances are built upon behaviors previously exhibited, be it during rehearsals, earlier performances, or even in

everyday life situations. This concept expands the understanding of what constitutes performance and positions it as a core element of human behavior and interaction (Schechner, 2003, p.324). In addition, Chris asserts that they should read messages of love again “We should do this again” and Bill confirms, “Yeah, We should, regularly.” Through the Zoom platform, both Bill and Chris promote social solidarity and give solace to people during the pandemic as they send out messages invoking love and perseverance.

Conclusion

The performing arts have undergone an unprecedented change owing to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The inevitable shift towards social distancing measures has resulted in the rise of digital platforms as a savior and replacement for theatrical performance. This paper examined the insurgence of Zoom plays during the pandemic, showcasing their potential to act as a digital arena for theatrical performances during the world crisis. Zoom plays have become a new form of electronic literature that has changed the dynamics of the conventional parameters of theatrical performances and has tweaked new features. These features which have newly been introduced are pertinent to space, set design, accessibility, and inclusivity in addition to audience interaction and immersion. Bill Irwin’s Zoom play, *In-Zoom: A World Premiere Play* (2020), delineates the innovative potential of leveraging the digital platform for resilience and creativity through the lens of performance theories. It transcends the conventional physical space limitations, introducing a new dimension of accessibility and inclusivity where the audience and the performers demonstrate intimacy during the enforced social distancing period. To avoid the detrimental effects of social distancing enforced by the quarantine during the pandemic, the audience is offered a unique experience via the Zoom play. The resilience and inclusivity of digital platforms predict a salient evolution in the performing arts, thus unleashing the ample possibilities offered by electronic literature.

Recommendations

Researchers should further delve into the digital theater festivals and live-streamed performances that were held during the pandemic, not only in the West but also in the Arab World. The outcome of the Arab experimental theatrical experiences should have been well documented and uploaded on YouTube. Therefore, future research should be conducted to explore more Zoom plays and examine their long-term impact and potential to innovate theatrical performances, integrating them into the performing arts canon.

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