

*PARtake: The Journal of Performance as Research*  
*Volume 3, Issue 2 – March 2021*  
ISSN: 2472-0860

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***Responding to Creation Theatre's Time Machine: a production  
moved to Zoom in light of COVID-19***

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Performance Review of Creation Theatre's *Time Machine*

Virtual, Zoom: Relocated from the London Library, England

Date Range of Performance's Run: 27<sup>th</sup> May – 21<sup>st</sup> June

Director: Natasha Rickman

Playwright: Jonathan Holloway

On Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> May 2020, in my back garden at 7pm, I attended Creation Theatre's *The Time Machine* with my husband. The production was entirely on Zoom. In the UK, we had been in a tight lock down for eight weeks due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Theatres are shut for the foreseeable future, unlikely to re-open until 2021 with many events and productions cancelled and postponed. This will mean (and has already meant) many independent, UK performance companies will not survive.<sup>1</sup> Playwright and performance polymath Jonathan Holloway wrote *The Time Machine* in October 2019 for live productions to take place from February 2020 in the London Library, England. The show, forced to close in its physical location, moved to the Zoom platform where the story, played out by actors in real time, provides a relief against the glut of pre-recorded live shows filmed from the back of auditoriums. What we participated in was something between the UK TV classics of Red Dwarf, Dr Who, the English Christmas Pantomime and something else.... After watching the performance, I was lucky enough to interview Jonathan Holloway.<sup>2</sup> In this interview, which is an edited version of a much longer conversation, Holloway explains some of the parallels and differences between the previously planned site specific live performance and the later Zoom performance.

The theatre-hybrid form, "Zoom performance," potentially creates new audience development and participation opportunities compared to traditional live theatre, which I argue extends the ideas found in 'relaxed' performances. Zoom performance allowed the audience, in this case my husband and I, to overcome barriers which usually stop us attending the theatre together. The barriers range from our different theatrical tastes, the way we think and process information, as well as wider financial limitations. In the Zoom performance, seventy five minutes could be enjoyed in the comfort of our own home with familiar objects surrounding us. This hybrid theatre form allowed us to participate and engage in ways which were not bound by the usual social rules of going to see a show. My husband and I talked, laughed and behaved like giddy school children without the fear of being told to stop. We could get another drink without pushing past people and were only mildly irritated when a bird started to chatter behind us. This Zoom performance allowed us to have autonomy over

where and how we watched in ways that traditional theatre is unable to do. I offer this observation as my husband is neuro diverse. He suffered a bleed on the brain caused by a near fatal accident. Whilst now you cannot tell he went through the ordeal, a curious side effect is that he falls asleep in cinemas due to sensory overload. In theatres, narcolepsy is paired with him experiencing embarrassment as he may fall asleep in front of others, including those performing. This in itself causes anxiety and has changed the frequency in which I have been able to go to the theatre with him. To keep himself alert he likes to talk about plot points, asks for clarification, laughs very loudly when it's not a funny moment and gets distracted easily. I enjoy theatre with interaction and audience participation whereas he can't think of anything worse. We work odd hours, with my husband working in care and I in theatre, 60 miles between our offices and a limited disposable income. It's rare I push twenty-pound theatre tickets on him. I argue that the hybrid form of Zoom performance offers a way for neuro-diverse adults to access performance, whilst also allowing us to overcome both geographic and financial barriers.

The term 'access,' within the wider literature, tends to fall into two categories within the UK. Firstly, around supporting families with children who have learning difficulties, or secondly, framing those who suffer sensory impairment (deaf, dumb blind) or physical disability.<sup>3</sup> Neuro-diversity in adults appears rarely discussed as a barrier for access. When it is mentioned, it is grouped with wider concepts of disability.<sup>4</sup> In this Zoom performance of *The Time Machine*, I mark our experience of 'access,' as audience members, as an extension of the ideas found in 'relaxed performances,'<sup>5</sup> which are, themselves, a relatively new initiative in British theatres.

Relaxed performances are designed to widen participation by catering 'for a diverse range of individual needs'.<sup>6</sup> This can be achieved in a number of ways across a theatre setting. Kempe (2015) observes how making adjustments to the 'organisation of front of house' helps reduce anxiety for young people with autism and by extension their family. Kempe offers a British pantomime at the Newbury Corn Exchange as a case study. The Newbury Corn Exchange is 'a medium-scale receiving house in a small town in the south of England'.<sup>7</sup> In the case study, Kempe explains how children were presented with multiple visual stories before attending the performance which used both pictures and words to demonstrate what the building might look like, and what experience the children might have when going to a theatre. Another visual story looked at the conventions of British pantomime explaining that in pantomime, the Dame 'is played by a man, dressed as a woman. This is supposed to be funny!'.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, the Newbury Exchange offers a structure where the

children can familiarise themselves with what they are about to encounter, allowing them to process what will occur. The stories could be adapted depending on the need of the individual child.

In a similar way, Creation's Theatre reimagining of *The Time Machine* for Zoom sent information and instructions ahead of performance. The day before the show we receive a cryptic email:

Time travel IS illegal, therefore, preparation is key. There are a few things you may find useful to have to hand before you travel across multiple dimensions.

Firstly, a timeless item; an item which doesn't age. A leather suitcase, a rolling pin or an umbrella perhaps?

Secondly, there may be moments where a glamorous disguise is required. Something fancy to blend in. Think fabulous hats, large sunglasses and a fake moustache.

Oh, and one more thing, keep your controller close to hand. You never know when an adventure into a parallel reality might come knocking...<sup>9</sup>

I read it to my husband and he groaned "We don't have moustaches". I enthusiastically suggested we wear the bright coloured sunglasses we got free at a festival and gathered together an assortment of hats. My husband chose our timeless object, a Charlie McCarthy ventriloquist doll which I had bought him years earlier and who usually sat on a child's chair in our front room, metres away.

We received a Zoom meeting login thirty minutes before the performance started which took us to a virtual lobby. We only needed one ticket, which meant that an entire family could experience this production for less than the price of an average UK theatre ticket.<sup>10</sup> The usual barriers of my husband and I watching a show caused by distance ironically overcome by the need for UK wide physical distancing rules imposed by COVID. In the Zoom lobby there was a notice which read:

In October 2019, the writer of this show, Jonathan Holloway, met with researchers from the Wellcome Centre for Ethics and Humanities. The show you have just watched was written incorporating their Research.

We have been astonished by the accuracy of the predictions. Nothing included here has been drawn down from the actual events of 2020. Not even the common use of the word Zoom.<sup>11</sup>

The laptop was set up in our garden. It had been an unusually hot spring and we poured ourselves a reasonably priced gin. Charlie (our timeless object) occupied his own chair without needing to buy another ticket. The selection of hats and sunglasses were positioned next to the laptop. The sun had begun to go behind the house and the shadow caused a slight chill. My husband opted for warm jogging bottoms, I a purple blanket my grandmother had bought us many Christmases ago. After all, there was no need to dress up.

At 7pm we were taken on a journey through time. Actors appear in front of us with beautifully designed virtual backgrounds, creating an assortment of locations from industrial steam-punk machinery to utopic virtual non-places. A disembodied head of an artificial intelligence (AI) appears, in the form of actor Graeme Rose, achieved through a later revealed green screen. Wearing spectacles, the AI moved the story on by narrating plot points and explaining how the Zoom world was to work. The AI's eyebrows, eyes and facial orientation added performative layers to this tele-present performance, rendered different to a face-to-face performance as the computer screen and zoom layout directed what we should look at, where and when. As audience, on the other hand, we had the choice to engage with the technology or not. As self-declared 'screenager's'<sup>12</sup> we are used to having laptop, phone, TV and tablet at our disposal for media consumption and we have autonomy on how we engage with them. The AI in the production explains to those in the Zoom audience that our timeless object would become our very own time machine where we, as audience, are invited to rub our hands together to generate enough energy so that we can time hop away from 'Morlocks,' who appear, through the urgency of our time traveller guide, to be hunting us. As we hop, or "zoom" from timescape to timescape, our guide changed physical appearance, a clearly articulated side effect of the time travelling process and a clever performance device which allowed a diverse cast to play the lead protagonist, the time travelling guide. At moments we are shown the gallery view of Zoom, where we could see other members of the audience watching, participating. The view had been filtered, with psychedelic colours and we instinctively looked for ourselves. The tiles were small on our laptops 18-inch screen but as we found ourselves and we waved with excitement. When we were asked to don a disguise, the AI gleefully showed us a couple wearing wigs, glasses and hats. My husband and I laughed. My husband wanted the camera to turn to us as we dress up in our assorted costumes but in this instance it doesn't, and he is disappointed. The process of zooming across time promoted a visceral response. As my name was required at point of ticket sale it was spoken aloud with others and we were further drawn us into the virtual world. Actors on screen performed as if travelling through a vortex and this was reinforced by both sound and moving background image. In our garden we flailed in our chairs with our puppet, pretending too to journey through time. My husband did so with enthusiasm, and we laughed.

This level of performance interaction allowed for complex ideas of climate change and large companies who dominate policy decisions to come to the fore. The show predicted a time in lockdown, where people hide away, albeit in underground caves, protected by the military; an Ebola type virus at large in populations above ground. We were told we have a

choice. We could take action: abandon unnecessary air travel, make billionaire status illegal and have kinship for all people. Or not.

Whilst this does not replace live theatre, this hybrid Zoom performance offers both a chance to tailor productions to virtual audiences across the globe and offers a unique opportunity for independent theatre companies to find and develop new audiences to weather the current pandemic. More interestingly perhaps, as it can take place in the comfort of your own home, neuro-diverse individuals who are perhaps afraid of stepping into a participatory theatre event are more able to be involved and included, something which I hope might extend beyond the current lockdown.

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<sup>1</sup> David Jubb, David. “Time to Change the Story,” *David Jubb’s Blog*, 2020. Available at: <https://davidjubb.blog/2020/05/22/time-to-change-the-story/> [Accessed: 27 May 2020].

<sup>2</sup> David Hockham, “10 minute interview with Playwright Jonathan Holloway on adapting to Zoom,” 2020. Available at <https://vimeo.com/504911124>

<sup>3</sup> Greater London Authority ‘Inclusive London - The Mayor’s equality, diversity and inclusion strategy’, London.Gov.Uk, 2018. Also: *Access London Theatre (2020) Official London Theatre*. Accessed 26 September 2020. Available at: <https://officiallondontheatre.com/access/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Andy Kempe, ‘Widening participation in theatre through “relaxed performances,”’ *New Theatre Quarterly* 31 no. 1, (2015): 59–69. doi: 10.1017/S0266464X15000068.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 59

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 63

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 64

<sup>9</sup> Creation-Theatre (2020b) ‘This is your Time-Travelling call’.

<sup>10</sup> Statista (2019) *Average price of theatre tickets in the United Kingdom from 2013-2018 (In GBP)*. Accessed 27 May 2020. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/515688/theater-ticket-prices-in-the-uk-united-kingdom/>

<sup>11</sup> Creation-Theatre (2020a) ‘In October 2019’. Zoom Meeting Room 7th June 2020.

<sup>12</sup> CushLa Kapitzke, ‘Information technology as cultural capital: Shifting the boundaries of power’, *Education and Information Technologies* 5 no. 1 (2000): 49–62. doi: 10.1023/A:1009640518635.