

Drama Studio 2.0

A template for the performance learning space of the future

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The theatre, event, film, television and related industries are undergoing a period of profound and rapid change. Industry sectors that used to operate largely independently are now seeing the cross-over of technologies, skills and personnel. Even within industry sectors, the digital revolution continues to challenge and change everything. In this short paper, I reflect on what these changes mean for the training and education of performers, designers, technicians and others, and – specifically – what they mean for the spaces in which that training takes place. I also share some ideas we have been developing at Rose Bruford College on the spaces we need to support future training and education.

Origins

I want to start by thinking about the nature of the drama studio – its origins, and how it has shaped vocational theatre education. The traditional drama studio is a familiar type of space, found wherever drama teaching takes place, in schools, colleges, universities and drama schools. Its analogue is the 'black box' studio theatre, with which it shares several key characteristics: both are

nominally 'neutral' spaces, intended to provide a place for experimental work to take place, with a focus on process, development and challenging new experiences for learners, for performance makers and for audiences. Both grew out of 20th century concerns to move on from past traditions, seen as outmoded and fossilised.

At the beginning of the 20th century, one of the many manifestations of the German *Reform* movement was the building of [Hellerau](#), a small new town just outside Dresden. Motivated by the garden city concept originating in Britain, and other utopian ideas for new ways of living, the radicalism of Hellerau also included a bold new re-imagining of performance space: the [Festspielhaus](#). Intended primarily as a home for the rhythmic gymnastics movement led by Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, the Festspielhaus swept away the separation between auditorium and stage, and blurred the distinction between spectator and performer. It offered what is in some ways still the archetype of the studio, though its glowing white walls and ceiling were the antithesis of a black-box space.

At the Festspielhaus, the inhabitants of Hellerau were to be spectators, performers, teachers and learners all at once, building a new society based on a healthy union of body, mind and soul. A new kind of community was to be forged, based on shared experience and practices. Since then, training studios have been motivated by the same concerns – to pass on practical skills and techniques, certainly, but also to build the professional identity of the learners, as part of a community of practice. In the mid 1930s, Michel Saint-Denis created the [London Theatre Studio](#), which divided its courses between acting and technical (which included design). Although short-lived, the LTS set a pattern for drama training, both as a physical space and as a way to prepare for professional practice, that is traceable as the origins of current vocational education in the UK and elsewhere.

The performance space at the LTS, converted from a disused Methodist Chapel in 1936, was not a black box studio as we now think of it, but shared some of its characteristics. According to Sophie Jump,

Half of the available space was taken up by the stage, and the auditorium was small in comparison to it with only 190 seats ... the whole space including auditorium and stage was 42 foot by 32 foot (12.8m x 9.75m), and the proscenium opening was 32 foot (9.75m) wide whilst the stage extended 22 foot (6.7m) deep'.¹

Stackable chairs allowed the auditorium space to be used as additional rehearsal space, while the low, projecting forestage allowed for easy traffic between stage and auditorium.

Lighting control was advanced for the time. Although the dimmer count was relatively low at 24, the control was a 'premium' system with the best facilities of the time. A dedicated booth for the stage

manager to control lighting and sound was built at the back of the auditorium, possibly for the first time in the UK. This positioning was fundamental to the ethos of the LTS, as Jump points out:

The implications of this positioning of the controls are that the stage managers, by being able to react to the performance, were seen as having a contribution to make to the production. This reinforces the collaborative practice of the Studio, and that technicians were included as well as designers and directors ... Saint-Denis encouraged all of those working in the theatre to value and understand the work of everyone else.²

In the postwar era, the introduction of systematic public funding of the arts in the UK created a theatre building boom, and most of these new theatres were accompanied by small, black box studios, intended for experimental and small-scale work. As drama schools expanded the available training and education for theatre workers, ideas about the kind of space needed for learning followed suite. In 1950, the theatre and industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes suggested that “The proper theatre for an educational institution is one where the auditorium and stage are in one large empty room. The entire ceiling of this room is a gridiron. Consequently everything within the room can be moved about ... easily.”³ By 1964, the innovative stage director Stephen Joseph observed that, “teachers’ training colleges have already pioneered the idea of the shell structure in which almost any form of stage can easily be erected ... the influence of the new adaptable theatre at LAMDA [a UK drama school] is likely to be colossal.”⁴

Today, the radicalism of the Festspielhaus as a performance space, and the London Theatre Studio as a training institution, have been lost. In secondary schools and at universities that deliver generalist drama degrees, drama studios are for the most part only provided with basic levels of equipment. The simple lighting and sound equipment are a reminder that the priority here is the performer. For the purposes of training, technology is only needed in the most basic form. In drama schools and specialist training institutions, more sophisticated technology is of course to be found. However, it tends to be located either in the learning spaces used by specialist design and technology students, such as lighting labs, sound studios and video suites, or it is found in full-scale theatre spaces. Students learning to be performers will typically only collaborate with designers and technologists on productions that are themselves modelled on industry practice. These productions are typically seen as a point of synthesis – the bringing together of the skills and processes developed by learners who have learned largely in single-discipline groups up to this point.

The Challenge

There are good reasons why the collaborative learning promoted by Saint-Denis and others in the mid 20th century has now diminished. Such learning models are difficult to scale up to the much

larger student numbers of today. Training and education are expected to meet industry's need for more and more specialised staff, especially in technical disciplines where there has been an explosion of new roles and skillsets, created by technological change. The curriculums of three-year degree programmes already appear overcrowded with discipline-specific content, without adding cross-disciplinary collaborative learning. Nevertheless, the continuing changes to the theatre and related industries, driven by the digital revolution and accelerated by the Coronavirus pandemic, mean that those who design and deliver theatre training and education face a new challenge.

Performers, designers and technologists now move readily between the live and media industry sectors, while most live shows are also mediated in some form, whether for marketing and archive purposes, or to find additional audiences through showings in cinemas or via streaming services. Television drama blurs into cinema production, while intermedial performances mix pre-recorded and live video content with on-stage action, watched by audiences both in the room and online. Virtual environments create new spaces for performance, including online multiplayer games worlds such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Fortnight*.

These new ways of making performances and reaching audiences represent a fundamental shift. While theatre has, from its very beginnings, sought to use the available technologies to tell stories, create worlds and engage spectators, it has always been possible to take a 'minimum tech' approach, and for writers, directors and actors to largely ignore the technical infrastructure around them, should they choose to do so. Particularly in the British tradition, which has often prioritised the spoken text and the actor, scenography and the technologies that deliver it have tended to be seen as a container within which the performance takes place, rather than integral to the performance itself. Mediated and intermedial performance makes such an approach impossible, with profound consequences for educators preparing future professionals for this new environment.

Drama Studio 2.0

At Rose Bruford College, we are responding to this challenge with the creation of a new concept for the training space for performance makers of all kinds – what we might call Drama Studio 2.0. The College's digital studio, developed over the last four years, includes facilities for motion capture, green-screen and an XR stage that can model various industry working processes from virtual production for film, XR for broadcast, to mixed reality performance. While these technologies are becoming increasingly familiar in industry, as part of the development of new digital production processes, they are not yet widely used in vocational theatre education. As a training space, the concept of Drama Studio 2.0 seeks to reanimate some of the radicalism of its early 20th century

predecessors. It proposes once again that all the materials and technologies of performance have an equal role to play in creating worlds and telling stories.

The new space retains some of the characteristics of Drama Studio 1.0 – a blackout, neutral décor, a ‘kit of parts’, the technology can be controlled from within the space, it is modestly scaled and easy to move around in, and of course the primary focus is on teaching, learning and research, not performance to an audience. The new features in Drama Studio 2.0 include automated lighting, geared towards lighting for camera as much as for the eye. There are facilities for green screen which enables us to teleport remote performers, while the LED volume can display digital content, including three-dimensional digital models of virtual worlds. A motion capture system with Optitrack cameras and Motive software can capture the movement of performers in real time. A second tracking system, using Blacktrax technology, allows lighting to follow people and objects within the LED volume. A Mo-Sys tracking system tracks the position of the camera, so we can link the movement of the physical camera to a virtual camera in the digital model. The digital model runs in Unreal, and Disguise manages the content, allowing for effects such as set extension, where the virtual space can appear much bigger than the LED volume. With these systems, we can place performers in any kind of digital world. Our stock of d&b audiotechnik speakers and amplifiers can be used to create a 7.1.4 spatial audio system, according to the specific need. Together, these technologies and facilities, brought together in one space, provide a toolkit for creating many different kinds of performance. Diverse worlds can be created, and stories can be told, combining the live and the mediated, the real and the virtual.

Developing this new facility has been challenging. The equipment is expensive, and has been funded by bidding for capital grants to the UK’s Office for Students. There is a great deal of new technology for academic and technical staff to learn, as well as students. Just as there is a shortage of skilled technologists in the industry, so there is a shortage of specialists to teach the technology. We are learning workflows that are not only new to us, they are new to the industry – we are only a step or two behind. However, the greater challenge still lies ahead – the challenge of developing a new curriculum across performance, design and technology courses.

Adding classes and projects where students learn the aspects of digital production that are relevant to their discipline is straightforward. Our acting students now have an introduction to motion capture, so they have some familiarity with the process should they want to seek work as mocap artists. Our design and technology students are learning a range of software tools to enable them to create 3D virtual environments and operate the XR stage. More difficult is to create a learning model that brings students from all the disciplines together to experiment, create and discover very

different ways of working, that may lead to very different outcomes. This new model disrupts many of the things that are familiar, and that we have held as shared assumptions for a long time – workflows, timescales, and – most challenging – who holds responsibility for making creative decisions at each point in the process. We are only now beginning to understand how we can redesign our curriculum to accommodate this new model.

The Drama Studio 2.0 concept is also impacting our research work. We recently ran the first of a planned series of symposia to investigate how we can make digital performances fully inclusive and accessible. We are now asking performers, designers, technologists and audience members to interact with technology in new ways, including using wearable technologies such as VR headsets, motion capture suits, and a wide variety of tracking and sensing devices. How do we ensure the hardware and software we are using is accessible to – for example – a visually impaired person, or a wheelchair user? As we prepare a new generation of practitioners to make performances in new ways, we have an opportunity to embed inclusivity in our thinking from the beginning.

I have described the digital studio at Rose Bruford College as Drama Studio 2.0, and I have drawn parallels with the radical re-imagining of performance space demonstrated by the Festspielhaus, and the multi-discipline collaborative model of the London Theatre Studio. Like its predecessors, the Drama Studio 2.0 concept is both a physical space with its performance technologies, and a conceptual space that promotes a new way of working and learning together for *all* performance makers – a way of forging a new community of practice. It proposes that in the new world of hybrid performance forms, that mix the live and the mediated, the physical and the virtual, our spaces for training and experiment need a different approach to technology. Drama Studio 2.0 recognises that these new materials with which we make performances are integral to how we tell stories and make experiences for audiences. The technology is not just the means to deliver the performance, or a container for it - rather, the technology is a fundamental part of the performance itself. When we make the work, and when we learn to make the work, the technology cannot just be applied afterwards, it needs to be with all of us, in the room.

¹ Sophie Jump, [*The convergence of influences on and evolving praxis of mid-twentieth century British theatre design \(1935-1965\) through a close study of selected works by Motley and Jocelyn Herbert*](#) (PhD thesis, University of the Arts London, 2015), p.85

² Ibid., p.87.

³ Cited in Richard and Helen Leacroft, *Theatre and Playhouse: An Illustrated Survey of Theatre Building from Ancient Greece to the Present Day*. London: Methuen, 1984, p.209.

⁴ Stephen Joseph, *Actor and Architect*, ed. Stephen Joseph, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964, p.11.