

What is theatre, anyway? Helen Varley Jamieson

A theater and digital media artist from New Zealand, Helen Varley Jamieson gave a presentation of her work - Cyberformance - a unique online theater where artists from remote parts of the world come together online to give live performances. When questioned whether such a performance can be called 'theater' or not, Helen embarked on a research and asked a counter question, 'What is Theater anyway?'. One result of the research is this talk, which, like her medium of performance, is very interactive and led by questions from the curious audience.

OK, so, I'm Helen; and as Jill said at the beginning of this session, one of the things that distinguishes the Magdalena Project is the diversity of work that exists within it. It's not about a particular style of work, it's not about a particular form, it's about work that women are doing, and my work is perhaps at one extreme point of that spectrum. I do what I call *cyberformance*, which is live online performance - there's a definition of it up there (*pointing to screen*) and I've been doing this for about 13 years now and it's still pretty experimental and lots of people when I say to them what I do, they say, "oh, I've never heard of that before." So I try and explain it, and sometimes I can and sometimes I can't. And I hope that tomorrow some of you will either be coming to the house in Auroville, where we're doing *make-shift*, we've also got a screening happening at 7.30 in the gallery in Pondicherry, so you can watch it there. And if you don't manage to see it tomorrow night, this is a performance that Paula and I - Paula is in the UK and we're doing it over the internet - and we're doing it many times so you can look on the web site and you can watch it online at another time. You can't watch a video, it's live and that's one of the fundamental things about my work. People are always saying, "I missed it, can I see the video, the recording - are you recording it?" Yes, we are, but we're not going to show it to you (*laughter*). Because it's all about being there, in the moment, for that experience.

The first time I presented this work in the Magdalena context was in 2001 at the Transit Festival, and I really just wanted to show people what I was doing, because I was excited by it and people were curious; and so I made a small presentation with two other people who were in California. And we were in Denmark, and at that time they had the internet at the theatre but only in the library and the office, and so Julia lent me her mobile phone and I have no idea what it cost but it was probably horrendously expensive. And I was sitting there on my computer facilitating this performance - which was part of the *Water[wars]* project that Jill was directing at the time, so it was using the material from that and exploring it in the online environment. And when I'd done this presentation, the room erupted into an argument, with people saying, "That's not theatre! You can't call that theatre! That's just not theatre!" and other people saying, like Jill said, "She can call it what she bloody well likes!" (*laughter*) And I was actually surprised by this, because I hadn't really thought about whether what I was doing was theatre, or not - it was just what I was doing. And so I was provoked by this discussion, I was challenged: is it theatre that you're doing? And if it's not, what is it? And what is theatre, anyway?

So then I carried on experimenting, and I'm just going to let some pictures roll rather than talk about them in detail, so hopefully you'll just see a slideshow of images from my work over the years. Everything that I was doing involved the internet, using the internet as the site for the performance. So we've seen Jill's work in a theatre, we've seen Geddy's work in the streets of Porsgrunn - you can see theatre in all kinds of places so why not on the internet? This is another place, it is a space even if it's not a physical space - it's a place where people come together - in a particular time; and that is what we do in theatre. I've used all kinds of software, I've done things that have happened in a space with an audience with other people coming in over the internet, I've done things that have happened purely on the internet with no physical thing happening in a space. I've done all kinds of different permutations of what I call cyberformance.

And then about 5 years ago I felt like I needed to stop and think and write all of this down, so I did a Masters and it was about cyberformance and what it is. And I tried to define it, and in the process of doing that I also had to come back to this question of what is theatre; and I came to this understanding that theatre - that it's possible for theatre to encompass all art forms, so I see theatre as something kind of fundamental, really. It's not just an art form, it's in many other life situations such as religion or ritual or celebration, different things that we do in our lives to mark events. And theatre is the original multimedia art form, it's the original virtual reality. I was really angry when I was writing my thesis and I came across a digital artist who had decided he had invented the term *virtual reality* in the nineties; in fact Artaud talked about *réalité virtuelle* in the 1930s.

So this is where the roots of our contemporary multimedia virtual reality artwork is - it's in theatre. Because theatre has always been a place of the imagination, and of giving a life to these kinds of rituals and things that we're now seeing emerging in digital forms. Theatre has always adapted to, and experimented with, new technologies - for example electric light and amplified sound. And if you look right back to the Greeks, they would make machinery and things to use in the theatre. So now the technology that we have is digital technology and the internet, and why shouldn't theatre adapt to and experiment with these kinds of technologies as well?

So I explored through all of these things in my research and I decided that, yeah, what I'm doing, it is theatre. It's live, it's always live, it's happening in a moment and there's a conversation between the artists who are making it and the audience or the participants who are helping to create it. A lot of what I do is quite interactive, so people are not just passively watching it, they're contributing to it in some way; it might be commenting in a text chat, or things like that, or actually making things, or being present in some way in the internet. And so it's not just about watching a movie or watching television - it's that conversation between the artist and the audience.

Another one of the ideas that I came to in this research for my thesis was the idea of the *intermedial audience*. Some of you might be familiar with the concept of *intermediality* in terms of theatre and art, and I thought well we can equally apply this concept of intermediality to the audience, because in my work the audience are often in a different place to where you are right now - seated in an auditorium and watching me. They might be sitting at a keyboard and interacting with their computer. They might be doing a million other things at the same time, like checking their email, and they can be all kinds of people in all kinds of places; and their presence in the performance is being mediated through the computer and through the internet. And so I proposed this idea of the *intermedial audience* as a way to start to explore the changing relationships that things like communications technologies are enabling between artists and audiences. Because it's not just the internet, it's mobile networks as well, and other forms of networks that are digitally enabled.

So it's all still experimenting with how people can come together in a moment for a performative event. When I'm not within my Magdalena family, I have many other families that I'm part of, which include networks of women that work with technology in the arts, but also total geeks, and then online communities of artists who are working in digital art and networked art. And most of these people in the online communities are not from a theatre background; they're usually coming from visual arts or music, and now there are starting to be people who are coming from a digital art background because there are enough courses now, there are people coming through with training in this area. As I've participated in these communities over the last ten or 13 years, at first I thought, "oh, god, I'm so stupid, I don't understand what they're talking about" until I realised that they were speaking in a different jargon, a different language, about their artform than what I understood. And as I've listened and discussed and talked with them, I've heard them use more and more theatre terminology. They talk more and more about *real time* and about *dialogue* and about *being in the moment*; and at the same time the technologies are becoming more and more live and theatrical. We have Skype, and we have things like Facebook which are not necessarily always live, but they're about performance of identity, really. So there's this sense of - more and more these digital art forms are becoming theatrical, and I sort of feel like, I like to think, that theatre is reasserting itself in this way, through this desire for the live, for the live connection that people have. Because we're so stuck in front of our computers or we're watching videos or we're doing different things and people are recognising the value of that shared creative experience - which I think was another thing that Jill said, that theatre is a place of live gatherings; and as the internet becomes more a place of live gatherings, my work is finding its place there.

Because it's so experimental, the content and the form are quite integrated, because we're trying things out, everything is an experiment, and so often the content is quite tied up in the form. Just to talk about *make-shift*, which is the show we're doing tomorrow, the by-line that we have for that is "a networked performance about connectivity and consequences" - so we're talking both about connectivity as in internet connectivity, but also connectivity in an ecosystem holistic sense. So what are the consequences of the connectivity between each of us individual people and the space that we live in, as well as the connectivity of the internet? So we're creating connections between a house in India and a house in the UK - or other distant places - and connections between the people who are watching online, that are quite tenuous, but that are bringing us into an interesting discussion. And the discussion is about the connections between some of the small domestic

actions that we do in our daily lives that have consequences on the other side of the world in places that we don't even know exist. But the content of my work has been about a lot of really different things; and pretty much almost everything I've done has been a collaboration with one or more other people, and so often the content will be quite influenced by other people or other contexts.

I think, if people have questions, it's probably - quite a good way, because, um, when I was looking at my title, "What is theatre anyway?", I thought coming at the end of this discussion when we've had quite a diverse lot of presentations it might be interesting if people want to respond to that question, or if there are also specific things about me and my work that you can ask ...

*Question: Is this the first time you are presenting your work in India?*

Yes - but it may not be the first time that people have seen it in India (*laughter*), because people can watch from anywhere. In fact I'm pretty sure, one year in UpStage - this is a platform that I work with - we had someone from India who was involved in making one of the shows, so yeah. But it's the first time that I've been here to present it.

*Question: Don't people miss the physical presence - just like when we read on kindle we miss the physical ...*

... we miss the turning of the page and the smell of the book. Yeah, well with *make-shift* it's a bit different because we have this format with the two houses, so there is a small group of participants in each house - I don't call them an audience because they're actually making the show with us. So they're in the house - a group with me here in India and a group with Paula in the UK; so they have a very different experience to what people are watching it online, it's very physical and they're involved in lots of activities - as Jill knows, from her experience. And then for people watching online - often people are not alone when they're watching online, we've found, they're often two or three people, or somebody has a child that's around in the room, so they're not necessarily alone, and people will talk about that in the chat. But also people will make comments in the chat, sometimes to each other as well, about where they are and what they're doing. And some of the people who come often will say, "oh is that so-and-so, hi, how are you" - you know, chat, which gives a sense of connection and a sense of being together in a group.

*Q: The other point, if you're doing something on stage and there are people commenting on you while you're doing it, it would probably affect the actor; but here the performers are ...?*

It can be really distracting, yeah, I mean I find it fairly easy to ignore what people are writing in the chat, but when you're in a house with people - in the last show I actually had someone who was sitting almost right next to me who said, during one bit she said really loudly, "Is this going anywhere?" (*laughter*) and I was completely thrown because I wanted to respond to her but I had to keep going with what I was doing. And I thought it was quite rude actually (*laughter*) - of course it's going somewhere! I wouldn't be doing it if it wasn't going somewhere! And some other people do find that comments in the chat can be really distracting, because every now and then you get someone who's just being silly and writing silly things. But the chat will keep scrolling up and other things will come, so I just ignore it.

*Q: Is that one thing you need to train your actors in (can't hear very well)*

Yeah, but it's also about training the audience, because the people that are watching - we do have some regulars, but we also do have people that are for the first time experiencing it, and so they don't know what they're "supposed" to do - you know when you go to the theatre you should sit down in your seat, and when the lights go down you should turn off your mobile phone and you should be quiet and you shouldn't talk loudly and eat in the middle of it.

*Audience: But everyone does all of those things (laughter)*

Well ok, if you're at the opera; but in cyberformance, these kind of conventions are not yet established, so at the moment some people remain completely silent because they are nervous to say the wrong thing in the chat; whereas other people will go, "oh I can type and it's coming up on the screen and everyone can see it - wow!" and they just go crazy. And the same in the house too - some people will be very shy because they

don't want to make a mistake or spoil something.

*Q: I have quite an un-artistic question, but how do you monitor the chat and the comments and spammers and that kind of thing?*

Um, UpStage is a platform that I've been involved in developing, it's a web-based venue which means it's in the browser, people just have to click on a link and they enter into the stage which has the chat and things happening; and in this environment we do not have any way to monitor it. If somebody is swearing or putting in spam links or something like that, at the moment the best that we can do is put a lot more chat in to make it move up off the screen. And amongst the people that I work with, there are some really diverse opinions about how much control we should have. Personally for me, I don't mind; I've never had a situation where I've found it so annoying. But I know that some other people have been really - not exactly upset by it, but really bothered by it.

*It's like having a drunk audience member, or a heckler ...*

Yeah, except with UpStage their words are silent, they're not making any noise, they're only putting in text. So it is possible to ignore it. And we have had situations where other audience members have been telling people to shut up or to stop it (*laughter*). So I think that's good, you know, they can sort it out themselves; I've never felt like I've had to do anything. In another show, years ago, using different software, it was a situation where everyone who was present in this chat-room was logged in and could do pretty much everything that we could do. And there was one person who was very experienced in this environment, and they actually destroyed our scenography; and we repainted it, and they destroyed it again. And we had this whispered discussion between the four of us making the performance, about whether or not to "kill" this person; because it was our chat-room, so we could "kill" somebody if we wanted to get rid of them. And we decided to "kill" them, and we did (*laughter*). And afterwards we all felt terrible (*more laughter*), and you know, we'd asked them to stop, we'd said "please would you stop doing that" and "please would you stop doing that", and no, it didn't work (*lots of laughter*). So we "killed" them. (*laughter*) It wasn't very messy, there was no blood, they were just gone. (*laughter*) So yeah; and this is part of what really interests me about it - because there are all these new situations that we have to discover, and then respond to, and find solutions for. And the spectrum of response is huge, some people would have said "that's terrible that you killed them" or "you should have killed them immediately" you know, everybody - and in UpStage we're just reaching a point now where we will have to think about whether or not we can moderate, and for me then I think, well, who is going to moderate? and on what basis are you making these decisions (*sounds of agreement*). Because part of it ... (*audience noise*) You'd have to have someone whose job it was to do that, who was not part of the performance -

*Audience: A policeman.*

A policeman, exactly. And you know, I kind of, I think it's about having a conversation, and if someone really feels the need to be an idiot and say stupid things, I don't really want to have to censor that. But then, you know, people could really upset other people.

*Q: There's no delay? It's totally in real time?*

Yes, it's all in real time. With the way that we're doing *make-shift*, we're using an audio-visual stream that has about a 5 second delay on it, but in UpStage everything is real time. And the stream is as real time as we can get it at the moment.

*Q: Helen, how do you expand your audience? How do you try and let more people know about it?*

Um, it's quite hard, actually. I'm always expecting that we are reaching - well, we email thousands of people through mailing lists, and through web sites and things like that. So, theoretically we should be getting lots of people coming. But for *make-shift* for example, the average online audience is about 20. And I don't really know why - partly it could be time zones, time differences, like on Thursday night it will be 2am in the morning in New Zealand, so I don't expect many people - although, you know, I get up at 4 o'clock in the morning sometimes to watch things - I don't see why other people shouldn't! (*laughter*) But um, yeah, it's

quite hard to explain it.

*Jill: It's a very, um, what's the word, um, it's very much a matter of taste as well, because it's kind of something you've got to learn to love, I think.*

Yeah - it's experimental; and it's not always easy to kind of get immediately.

*Jill: Exactly; so your audiences are going to be small until it becomes more commonplace ...*

Yeah; but for me that doesn't matter, I don't really have a need to have hundreds of people watching. For me, if there's one person watching and they love it then that's fine. But I mean this is something too, with my colleague Paula, that I'm making the performance with, she is much more ambitious than me, I guess, you know, she's like, we've got to have a marketing strategy and we've got to get the email list going and we've got to do this, and I'm going, ok, ok, ok - but to me, I think, it is like you say, it's an acquired taste and it's not even a taste that everyone would want to acquire; lots of people, like you say, will say no it's not for me, I want to see the real body there. And that's fine. It's not like I think it's going to replace theatre or anything like that, it's just another possibility in the spectrum. So, yeah ...

*Q: In a way, I mean, you know, when people use Skype and you have families Skyping each other, larger communities, offices, meetings - it's an extension of that?*

Definitely; and I think that as things like Skype have become much more universal, we've seen more people be interested and more people get it, quicker, because people are starting to be more in that mode of being able to connect in real time and to have some kind of creative experience; so often on Skype people are doing funny little things for each other, so they're getting this idea that you can use it, not just like a telephone with a picture, yeah, and even with business people conferencing, that kind of thing, yeah. There's been some interesting research done about art as a way of - what's the word - not conditioning but um helping people to understand or assimilate new technologies. For example, when trains were first invented, people had never actually travelled that fast; and so everybody got sick, everybody would be vomiting and having headaches and everything because they had never actually moved and seen the landscape go past so fast. And so then at fairgrounds, there started appearing these virtual train carriages, where people would sit in a little stationary train carriage, and - this was in about the 1820s or 1830's, when were trains first around?

*Jill: A bit later than that..*

1840s then. So they would sit in the carriage, and outside the window there were three canvasses; one was about this high, and then one that was about this high, here, and one about this high, here, that had the landscape painted on them. And they were revolving around at different speeds. So the one closest was going very fast, the one in the middle was going at a slower speed, and the one at the back was going even slower. And they were painted with the landscape, so they were created by the equivalent of today's set designers, I guess. And people would pay to go and sit in the carriage and see this landscape moving past at different speeds, and this helped people to overcome their motion sickness in the train. And so in some ways, what I'm doing, I think (*laughter*), could be helping people to think differently about how we communicate in the online environment; what we say and what we don't say, what we reveal and what we don't reveal, and you know, how long we sit at the computer without standing up even, things like that.

*Q: How do you think it compares to things like Second Life, you know, where people actually go and play another reality, which is quite theatrical if you like too?*

There's a lot of really interesting performance happening in Second Life, yeah, and in fact more interesting for me than the performances is installations there where your avatar can wander around in an environment where there are sounds and objects and things that you trigger as you go. For me it's not really about comparing, you know, this is another environment. With UpStage, we have a festival every year of performances, where we invite people to make 20 minute performances in UpStage, and we've been doing it for, since 2007, this year is the sixth. And this year we've decided to open it up to environments other than UpStage, so, anything that's online, so people could be doing things in Second Life; because there are lots of other places where people are making live performance.

*Q: How did it start for you - where did you get the idea of doing live performance on the internet?*

Well, my background is in theatre, so I was writing and directing and producing theatre in New Zealand. And in New Zealand, like many places, you need a day job as well because you can't earn a living from your theatre, so in the mid-90s I had a job making web sites, and I was learning how to build web sites and learning about the internet, and starting to make web sites for theatre groups, and we had a theatre festival, a Magdalena festival, in '99, and I made the web site for that, and then the one for the Magdalena Project. But at the same time

*Jill: two (referring to web sites for the Magdalena Project)*

Two? Three! - and at the same time I was discovering that people were, first of all, using the internet to promote their work, then I was finding people that were using the internet to put say photographs of visual art, have a gallery, that kind of thing. And then in '99 I discovered some people who were using chat-rooms for live performance, and that was what got me going, yeah. And that was the people that I worked with when I did the presentation at Transit, yeah. And they'd been doing it for - maybe four years. People are - there's been live events happening on the internet since the early 90s. The first documented one that I know about was 93.

*(Audience - muttering about time)*

We should finish then? You can look at the web sites to get more information, and come to see the performance. Thank you.

*(Applause)*