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Performance in a Pandemic!

Recorded Performance as Digital Content: Perspectives from Fringe 2020

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Abstract
Within days of performance venues being forced to close their doors in 2020, the National Theatre began broadcasting high-quality recordings of the best of London's West End. Few other companies could dream of having such rich recorded archives to draw upon. Indeed, for many artists there is a clear tension in the very idea of recording work that is intended to be experienced live.

This essay reports on 20 in-depth interviews with performers and theatre-makers who had planned to bring shows to the 2020 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. This article reports on how performers responded to the prolonged closure of venues, and developed a series of strategies to generate value from recordings, even with limited production budgets. Crucially, very few opted to record whole live shows in empty theatres – instead they found specific uses and rationales for recording performance, while developing new expertise with sharing recorded media on digital platforms.

We argue that these digitally mediated performances are distinct from other forms of film or 'live-to-digital' theatre. Indeed, we suggest that this emerging genre of record will persist beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, and points to new opportunities in recording, broadcasting, and archiving performing arts as digital content.

Introduction

As live venues closed throughout 2020, performers rushed to find ways to work remotely. From musicians and comedians, through to clowns and theatre-makers – live performance became digitally mediated, and by consequence, easily recorded and circulated online. As researchers, in 'Creative Informatics' we were curious about the emergence of recorded performance as online 'content' in a digital economy, and performers as 'content creators' (Brake, 2014). What did performers choose to record? How have they decided to distribute and control these recordings? What is their relationship to 'live' performances how could they record their work, without devaluing a live show (Bahkshi et al, 2010)? What, if any, are the 'creative transactions' (Elsden et al, 2021) and business models that can be built around this content?

To answer these questions, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with participants who had planned to bring shows to the 2020 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and spoke to them about their approaches to performing online. We identified ways in which artists experimented, innovated and most of all were *strategic* in the way they sought to use recordings of, and related to, their performances. Crucially, in the absence of live shows taking place, we describe innovations in recording that go beyond what is typically understood as 'live-to-digital' (Arts Council, 2016; Arts Council 2018) and illustrate how performance is rendered and transformed into digital content.

Research Context and Method

Our research took place in the absence of in-person performances at the Edinburgh Festivals in 2020, following this announcement on behalf of the five August festivals:

> For the first time in over 70 years, the five festivals that transform Edinburgh into the world's leading cultural destination every August are not going ahead this year due to concerns around the COVID-19 pandemic (*Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society News, April 2020)*[1].

Building on existing partnerships, our research focused on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (or simply 'the Fringe'). As an open access and unjuried festival, shows were not formally cancelled or prevented from happening, although any purchased tickets and performers participation fees were refunded. Without specific direction from the Fringe Society, performers and audiences remained open to the possibility that some form of festivity may be possible in August. The diversity of the Edinburgh Fringe, in terms of genre, quality, professionalism, scale, audience and internationalism, offered a unique opportunity to understand how those working across the performing arts have responded to the pandemic (Frew & Ali-Knight, 2010; McCrone, 2019) and pivoted to work online.

Participant Recruitment

We aimed to speak to people who had intended to participate in Fringe 2020 with a range of experience and roles, across genres. With support from the Fringe Society's Participant Services team to promote the study, we had more than 30 participants express interest in taking part and selected 20 of these, based on their background and availability. Participants are referred to pseudonymously throughout; most (15/20) were involved in some form of theatre, however we also spoke to artists working in children's shows, improv, stand-up comedy, dance, puppetry and performance art reflecting the breadth of work performed at the Fringe. Our participants also spanned and had experience of many different roles in bringing a show

[1] https://www.edfringe.com/learn/news-and-events/edinburghs-august-festivals-will-not-take-place-in-2020

to the Fringe (writer, director, performer, producer, marketer, stage manager, curator). For some, 2020 would have been their first Fringe performance; others had brought work to the Fringe for more than 30 years.

Study Protocol

Interviews took place over Zoom across August and September 2020. As semi-structured conversations, lasting around an hour, we probed participants on their practice, their shows, and how they had adapted (or not) to working in digital format. In concluding the interview, we also shared a series of 'Questionable Concepts' (Vines et al., 2012) about the future online landscape of the Fringe. For example, we asked about taking part in online competitions with other performers, an 'all-in ticket' that functioned as a festival pass for multiple shows, and geo-located digital content that could only be unlocked at certain locations in Edinburgh. During the interviews and through our analysis, the various roles of recorded content emerged as a core topic of discussion. In particular, we identified various strategies that performers described as they sought to generate value from recorded performance in new ways, within the limits of the resources, time and capabilities they had.

Recordings in Progress

Initial concerns, barriers and motivations to record

Our participants described several initial concerns and barriers to recording their work. Firstly, many participants identified the need for high quality recording equipment and technical expertise, which could immediately distinguish or tarnish a piece of work.

> *I spent… a good half an hour on [Fringe] Pick N Mix this morning and it is really obvious who has the decent recording equipment and who doesn't, and it instantly marks the quality of a piece and it may not be reflected in the content, but you instantly judge a piece when the recording is not of a good quality. (Kelly, Theatre Director)*

This technical challenge is directly related to a production budget, and is exacerbated when recorded content was positioned in the context of home entertainment, as competing with easily accessible streaming platforms, such as Netflix[2] or BBC iPlayer[3].

> *It's a constant struggle, like, how do we as Fringe artists and Fringe creators produce something that is as the same standard as a Netflix special with 1,000 times less the budget? (Anton, Comic)*

Similarly, a number of theatre-makers directly referenced the free distribution of *NT Live at Home* as setting a benchmark, especially for the recording of a whole play, which was out of reach for most productions, and raised unrealistic expectations about the quality and cost of digital theatre. Beyond technical quality, some performers had more fundamental concerns about the value of digitally mediated and recorded performance, especially where their work relied heavily on audience engagement, such as improv comedy:

> *We've recorded little bits to try and get promo videos together, but we have always found it's something that translates with difficulty. It just doesn't seem as funny when you're not in the room and out of all context and the full kind of vibe around it. It is hard to capture it (Caroline, Improv Performer).*

[2] https://www.netflix.com
[3] https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer

Other artists had a more fundamental opposition to recording where it seemed antithetical to their craft as performers. These comments reflected a common understanding around the unique experience of live performance in a shared time and space, but they also highlight how the subtleties of a particular performer's work, may not be easily translated for digital distribution.

> *I've never recorded any of [my shows], and you have to watch them live, because I feel like our job as artists is to bring audiences together in real time (Paul, Performance Artist).*

> *What I have spent an entire career building up is an hour in my presence and I can't put that online in 60 seconds (Anton, Stand Up Comic).*

For these artists especially, this time has been challenging, and their responses to the closure of venues have included stepping back entirely, taking part only in *live* online performances, taking on other events or performance roles, or trying to develop new work for the future.

> *"…really it has been a hibernation year for us to kind of work out what do we do next. In some ways that's been amazing, because getting to stop and go how can we make our work more radical, how can we make our work more accessible? In other ways it's a loss of income, it's a loss of identity […] It's been a challenge (Emma, Theatre-Maker & Performer).*

However, many participants were able to overcome these profound technical and creative challenges. Very few within the performing arts have the resources or opportunities to simply record a whole performance as 'Live-to-digital' (Arts Council England, 2016), especially at a time without live audiences. So, what could they do? Undoubtedly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, there was a strong motivation to be able to share and produce some kind of work to remain present and engaged with audiences and peers.

> *Both as individual artists and also as producers of the company feeling like, because we've lost all of our outputs really and all of our performances basically overnight, that we lost ourselves and that we are basically nothing without that. And so, it was overcoming that and being, no, we're still here, we've still got our identity, we're still artists, we're still people (Simone, Producer).*

> *We've had to work fulltime through lockdown because we've got to pay the bills [...] we can't afford to sort of sit and do a lot of online free stuff, it's just a bit tricky. So yeah, it was… sort of wanting to be able to still create stuff but in the timeframe that we had (Arthur, Producer / Director).*

At first, many venues and artists turned to archival content. Several participants regretted that they had not invested previously in recording their work, and "*realised how important it was" (Anton, Comic)*. Furthermore, many of those who had recorded some elements of their work before – for example to share with others in the industry – felt these recordings were rarely intended or suitable for wider audience consumption directly.

> *"...obviously, anytime you make a show you make a film of it, like you just, you know, video the thing so that if a presenter can't come and see it… you can at least send them*

something […] they're a good representation for somebody who really knows the artform, or they know what else they're missing and they can sort of make that leap. But for an ordinary audience member it's not great." (Yvette, Producer)

Our participants hence described a variety of innovative responses to make the most of existing recordings, or to create new recorded work that they could share with audiences.

Seeking new forms of recorded performance

Throughout our interviews, participants were explicit about creating distinctive formats for recording, for example that could be more comfortably watched on a screen, and perhaps even as an accompaniment to viewing a live show. As one experienced theatre producer explained:

"*The one thing we didn't want to do was just take the [film of a live show]. […] What we wanted to do was to make something that really spoke (Yvette, Producer)".*

Likewise, several participants steered away from recording what might be understood as short films, and to try to find ways that highlight the unique aspects of a live performance, in new ways.

"…if you want something that's beautifully cut and looks stunning, you might as well watch a film. I love film, and that's brilliant, but it's not…it's…you're not trying to recreate that medium, I think is the key" (Kat, Marketer & Producer).

Examples of this *"third way (Yvette, Producer)";* not quite film, nor theatre, involved recasting a dancer in a lead role, alongside a voice-over monologue; or re-staging a piece for a recording, then mixed with the audio from a live performance. Participants also felt that audiences could recognise and appreciate their efforts to innovate:

"I think it's when you are aware of the constraints on everyone you start to really appreciate how clever, for example, people recording music videos in their home and making quite a lot of stop motion comedy, just good fun. It is all, kind of, quite homemade, but I think that is the charm of it (Holly, Performer / Production Assistant).

In this way, by "*seeing people be creative with a new medium"*, performers were inspired to go beyond "*let's record it and stick it online" (Kelly, Writer / Director),* in distributing recorded content.

Sharing the process, works in progress, and building online audiences

Considering how to make the most of recordings they did have, or could produce under the circumstances, several participants described ways to share their process and work-in-progress.

We can't pull out of the vault that professional grade ready for distribution content, but what we do have is trailers, what we do have is fly on the wall bits and bobs of behind the scenes that we might have captured (Simone, Producer).

Participants also clearly had in mind the online contexts and social media through which their work could circulate. In Simone's case, her company were experimenting with Patreon[4], a paid

[4] https://www.patreon.com/

subscription or patronage service, to manage how they shared this material, which had been curated alongside new interviews and reflections from the creative team.

> *Why Patreon? … we found that this whole promise of it being content, you know, we'll put content up if you join as a member, and actually that meant there was a motivation for us to continue making that content, as well. And, it also felt more like an artist's community rather than, like, a crowdfunder or anything like that, (Simone, Producer).*

Their Patreon had been modestly successful so far, but would only be a small portion of the income required to sustain a small theatre company, especially in the wider precarious context of creative workers (Patrick & Elsden, 2020). However, beyond the opportunity to foster a core community of supporters around additional show material, this example illustrates how recordings of, through and around a performance could become meaningful and valuable 'content' for an online audience.

Other theatre-makers also described strategically releasing a series of evocative clips, from rehearsals through to original 'backstage' content filmed to supplement the 'on-stage' storyline.

> *"On every day the show was meant to be on in [UK city], we posted out a different clip at that time, …the longest was about five minutes, the shortest was about one minute… we saw that as a way of kind of getting interest." (Aiden, Writer)*

Importantly, while this was a response to being unable to perform, it has now become a strategy for building interest in future shows.

> *"Although it was borne out of necessity, it's been quite an interesting process […]and it's given us a lot more different things, social media wise, that you realise can kind of add to the pre-show world. (Aiden, Writer)*

Another theatre company who had prepared behind the scenes style content to release through social media over the course of the Fringe festival described the approach "*as a kind of 50/50 of celebration, but also cheeky marketing" (Arthur, Theatre Producer)*. These approaches go beyond producing trailers, to expose the *"evolution"* of a show, and mobilise all manner of existing and original recordings as a package of material to supplement a live theatre performance. As one comic suggested, a new part of his work as a performer will not only be *"trying to book spots, but trying to build content" (Anton, Comic).*

Turning Recordings into an Event, and Events into a Recording

Besides developing and sharing shorter form and supplementary content for social media, performers and producers discussed several ways in which recorded material could be embedded into live events. In the first instance, several participants sought ways to embed a sense of liveness into any online context.

> *Look, if I'm going to show you my 45-minute video of my show, […] I should be there live to introduce it, and then I should be there live at the end of it, to have some kind of something going on. (Paul, Performance Artist)*

In this way, even shows that were mostly or almost entirely made up of recorded content, could generate a sense of an event. Perhaps analogous to an artist preview or opening night, one

company described running several 'watch parties'[5] via video-conferencing platform Zoom, where an event would be built around watching a recording of a show together, with the opportunity to chat and discuss the show with the artists and performers. Acknowledging the recording itself is not comparable to the live show, this approach nonetheless creates a unique and live event, centred around the recording.

> *We don't feel like it in any way replaces or really is a good substitute for live theatre …but it's better than nothing, that was the attitude. Though we felt it was really important to still have a live element, especially as we weren't doing it free. (Kat, Marketer and Producer).*

Alternatively, we also heard from performers who were strategic in how they would generate recorded content from live events to subsequently distribute, closer to a traditional 'live-to-digital' model. Kyle, a puppeteer with a longstanding Fringe audience, managed to develop a live version of his stage show that he could perform relatively successfully over Zoom, charging a ticket price for access to the stream. Although he doesn't "*want to give too much of it away",* as predominantly a sketch show he is able to clip material and post it to his YouTube channel. In addition, he shares an unlisted private YouTube link to the whole show for those who bought tickets.

> *Meaning that only the people who have bought tickets for it are sent the link to watch the whole hour again. So they can share it with their friends, but they've bought that privilege. It would, I think, be self-defeating for me to, a couple of days later, put the whole thing out there online because they would just wait for that and feel a little robbed. (Kyle, Performer / Puppeteer)*

Longer term value of recording alongside live performance

Beyond understanding their practical and strategic approaches to engaging audiences with recorded performance, our participants discussed how they viewed the future role of recording. Recording can clearly give a show longevity, which it might not otherwise have, and shape one's portfolio.

> *You'd have to have kind of the agreements with everyone of… how long it stays online, when it can get asked to take down, but yeah, again, I mean, it's that record, it's that history which helps for advertising yourself, for what you can add on your CV from it. (Aiden, Writer)*

Alternately, recordings can clearly also hold an educational value, or an opportunity to learn from peers, even in the context of improv, which was felt to translate poorly to a recording.

> *For my students, I usually make them watch online shows, or shows that have been filmed and put online, I mean, from back in, like, 2013… And I have them watch that for their homework. (Jake, Improv Performer)*

In the specific context of the Fringe, we floated the idea of a 'highlights' package that could be generated from the increasing volume of recordings that could be made. Intriguingly, one producer argued: *"rather than it being a highlight of the Fringe, a better solution would be to*

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[5] For further examples: https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/twitter-provides-insights-into-the-rise-of-twitter-watch-parties-during-cov/582565/

commission it for February/March and, it is in development of what you will see at the Fringe. So, it's a taster. (Yvette, Producer)". This framing speaks to the role that strategically recorded content can play in building anticipation and appreciation towards a live performance, rather than replacing or challenging it. Likewise, for Arthur, an emerging producer, it was important to make a distinction between a live and recorded run of a show.

> *If I had a show filmed, I wouldn't release it until after it had finished. I think there's this nice element that if the show happens and then it goes on to screen, there's sort of this second wave or buzz, that people go, oh my gosh, I missed this show, or I need to see it (Arthur, Producer).*

While film adaptations and digital broadcasts of performance are hardly new concepts (Erskine & Welsh (2000); Knapp & Morris (2018)), these examples highlight how the ubiquity and ease of recording video makes it possible, or even expected, that smaller independent shows produce some form of recording. What our participants emphasised however is the importance of being able to manage how recordings of their work are made available, to particular audiences, at particular times. Clearly, the business models for such recorded content may be rather different to traditional distribution of 'live to digital' shows.

Future Recordings

Recording in service to live performance

Participants frequently highlighted to us fundamental differences between live and recorded performances, with the essence of live work at the heart of their craft, and something to be cherished and protected. This resonates with earlier research looking 'Beyond Live' (Bahkshi et al., 2010). For some, this was a reason to avoid recording; for others it was an opportunity to make their art more accessible, shareable and durable through recording, without undermining the integrity of a live performance. Clearly throughout the pandemic, the desire to continue creating new work despite constraints has led to exploration of new mediums and formats for recording performance that extend both film and digital theatre.

We suggest the sector should explore what role venues and festivals can and should play in supporting artists in recording their work in these innovative ways, through the evolution of a piece, from conception, to rehearsal and through to performance on stage. Beyond simply recording whole shows directly in a venue – which is often expensive, and still a diminished product (Meuser & Vlachos, 2018) – venues might consider how to support artists in producing innovative, shorter form content, which can be used more flexibly throughout the lifetime of a show. Similarly, venues might consider innovative ways to distribute and share this content with their audiences, beyond trailers and social media clips. What if ticket-holders could receive behind the scenes footage, or clues to a mystery on the day of an event? Or highlights of a monologue or song to relive on the journey home? Of course, this collaboration between artists, venues and festivals raises questions around who owns, licences and profits from these recordings, especially where significant investments or resources are provided by venues and festivals themselves (see also Berthold et al., 2018).

Opportunities, labour and value in building online audiences

Our participants showed a keen awareness to how recorded content could circulate through online platforms, and sought to be strategic in the way they released and presented their work. It was important to use recordings to build and engage audiences at the right moment, and over a sustained period. By tying in releases with planned festival activity, or packaging recordings as a monthly product for paying subscribers, participants sought to manage attention in an over-

saturated media environment, as well as shining a focus on the core work of live performance that would take place on stage. While the use of social media marketing is commonplace (e.g. Hausmann & Poellman 2011; Miles, 2018) we have seen examples of particular forms of recording, exposing the workings and progress of a show, as ways to build online communities and support.

This implies a significant degree of platform labour to effectively distribute performance content through a range of social media and online communities. In a broader context of entrepreneurial and cultural work through social media, Duffy (2017) describes this often unpaid and overlooked work as '*aspirational labour'*. Increasingly common across the cultural industries, what is striking from our study is the way that various kinds of traditional work in the performing arts can be creatively repurposed and rendered as valuable online *content* (Brake, 2014). Especially when apps such as TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat place powerful film-making tools into consumers hands, these clearly challenge more traditional approaches to recording performance. The examples described by our participants show creative work to negotiate this, developing distinctive and engaging content, with the resources they have, appropriate for shorter form media, which respect the artistic intentions of the original performance.

This ongoing translation of live performing arts into online content has wider implications than can be discussed here, in particular considering how performing arts become subject to algorithmic curation and power (Beer, 2016; Duffy, 2020). However, one specific concern that our participants sought to address was the value and 'creative transactions' (Elsden et al., 2021) that exist around this new work. On the one hand, much content was provided for free, or simply seen as promotional. Especially where content is repurposed, or work-in-progress, some felt it would unfair or even '*dishonest'* to expect fans to pay for it. Others however found ways to bind recordings to paid, live experiences, or curate them as a product for paying subscribers. Looking forward, as performers have invested in recording their work in these new ways, we should explore the business models, practices and platforms required to make this work a sustainable and rewarding part of producing a live show.

Conclusions

Speaking to participants in Fringe 2020 about their experiences of pivoting online, what emerged was first: a realisation around the need and value for recorded content in engaging online audiences, and second; strategies for producing manageable and valuable forms of recording. We have highlighted various ways performers sought to preserve the value of 'liveness' and social events, and, especially in the hands of independent and smaller-budget productions, we distinguish these tactics from prior 'live-to-digital' approaches. Instead, we argue that in order to first engage, and then maintain digital audiences, performers have found themselves recast as 'content creators', navigating new digital economies. There are pragmatic lessons to be learned from our participants successes and failures in making the most from recording their work. However, more fundamentally, this work illuminates the need for further critical research on how live performance is rendered and understood as digital 'content', and the implications for those working in the performing arts as they become digital economies.

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