

Over half of UK theatres have now abandoned digital performances

Submitted by: University of Kent

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The headline finding

Research on UK theatres' recent and forthcoming digital productions suggests that over half of all publicly-subsidised UK theatres that pivoted online during the first 18-months of the pandemic have now returned to live performances only.

The data

The data emerges from a web-based survey of the past and forthcoming activities of all 227 UK theatres that receive public subsidies from the Arts Councils of England, Wales, or Northern Ireland, or from Creative Scotland.

The research was carried out by Arts and Humanities Research Council COVID-19 project on digital access (<https://www.kent.ac.uk/institute-cultural-creative-industries/projects/digital-access>) led by Richard Misek (University of Kent) and Adrian Leguina (Loughborough University). It was initially reported by Richard Misek last week as a part of a BBC Radio 4 Front Row (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m00107wb>) feature by BBC Disability Affairs Reporter Carolyn Atkinson.

It found that of these 224 theatres, 126 had at least one online production in the first 18-months of the pandemic and 98 did not; for the current autumn season, 60 have at least one production available online and 164 do not. 71 (56%) of the 126 theatres that had at least one online production in the first 18-months of the pandemic have none scheduled for the autumn season (September – December). 5 theatres that did not have digital productions in the first 18-months of lockdown have their first digital production this autumn.

The reasons

Misek and Leguina also been conducting interviews with staff at almost 40 arts venues across the UK. Through interviews carried out over the last six weeks, and through the results of follow-up surveys with these organisations, various reasons have been identified. These include:

- Not enough time and energy to initiate digital projects
- A tendency to default back to their traditional work of filling venues
- A lack of clarity about how to best to engage with digital
- A residual sense that digital is an optional extra (and an inferior alternative) to live activities.

However, the one obstacle identified by all interviewees is money. Digital performances cannot yet be relied on to make a profit; at the same time, funding to initiate them is piecemeal and erratic. So theatres often lack any an economic motivation to put work online and invest in digital capacity-building.

Why this matters

Recent research shows that digital programming has had significant access benefits – especially for geographically remote and disabled audiences. The suddenness and extent of this snap back to in-person-only performance raises an important question: what are the implications for disabled, deaf, and neurodivergent audience members, vulnerable, elderly, and housebound audience members, carers, night workers, those who can't afford physical attendance, those who feel that going to theatre is 'not for them', and many other potential audience members for whom physical attendance may be difficult or impossible?

The good news

Many organisations (including the National Theatre, the Young Vic, Pitlochry Festival Theatre, the RSC, and Sheffield Theatres) are continuing to develop their digital programmes, and working to develop sustainable models for digital theatre. But there is currently a 'digital divide' between large, well-resourced organisations and small and mid-sized ones; unless all scales of theatre company have the support to experiment and develop their digital expertise, the current digital divide will only get bigger.

The take-home

Over the last 19 months, digital theatre has demonstrated its potential to improve access and inclusion for audiences across the UK. But the use of digital methods to facilitate equal access to arts and culture is still at an early stage. In order to capitalise on the advances of the last 19 months, it's important that funders earmark money for digital development and arts organisations continue experimenting with new forms of digital programming.

For more details, contact Richard Misek:
r.e.misek@kent.ac.uk
07986 736652