# Is Applied Drama and Theatre Ready to Embrace the 4IR?

## A Reflection on a Playback Performance at a Women's Shelter in the Western Cape during COVID-19, 2021

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### Introduction and context

Is applied drama and theatre in South Africa ready to embrace the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)? This question came from the sudden scramble for innovation and resourcefulness during the COVID-19 pandemic, when tight restrictions of social distancing were introduced in 2020. Since restrictions were lifted in 2022, the need for Zoom interventions – which were the main points of access for practitioners during the first waves of COVID-19 – have seen less urgency. Instead, online platforms are now used as a quick way of joining in meetings, while rehearsals are preferred in-person. As part of the conversation on how the arts participate in the 4IR, this paper aims to highlight some of the ways applied drama and theatre was able to keep up (or not) with the development of technology during the global pandemic. The paper reflects on a case example that formed part of a practice-led research project. The case example is of a hybrid playback theatre performance that took place in the Western Cape at a women's shelter for gender-based violence (GBV). The performance combined Zoom communication with in-person facilitation, and drew attention to matters related to space, embodiment,

and ethical practice. The key suggestion is that applied drama and theatre in a South African context is not ready to embrace the 4IR; however, with more effort, it can begin to develop the technological expertise required to incorporate more digital interfaces in its interventions.

## Applied Drama and Theatre

As this paper forms parts of a multidisciplinary conference on the role of the 4IR in the arts and education, I first define applied drama and theatre and playback theatre respectively. Applied drama and theatre is an umbrella term which refers to participatory drama practices in spaces outside of conventional theatre buildings (Balfour 2010; Nicholson 2005; Prendergast & Saxton 2013, 2009; Thompson 2003; Young-Jahangeer 2016). It encompasses a group of practices that are constantly transforming (Hartley 2012:xix). Its essential characteristic can be described as "a *performance*, to and with an audience" (Prendergast & Saxton 2013:xi). The participants "may or may not be skilled in theatre arts and [the performances are often directed] to audiences who have a vested interest in the issue taken up by the performance or are members of the community addressed by the performance" (Prendergast & Saxton 2009:6). Amongst many applied drama and theatre forms, playback theatre is one such form.

## Playback theatre

Inspired by the work of Jacob Moreno's psychodrama, playback theatre was initiated by Jonathan Fox in 1975 with the intention of having ordinary people come "together to celebrate, explore, or heal through ceremonial and artistic action and storytelling" (Salas 2009:445). A sense of community is built in response to personal and emotional elements of playback theatre which evoke a space for empathy, trust, and vulnerability (Fox & Leeder 2018:101). Catharsis can be generated from telling, witnessing, or "performing a difficult or traumatic personal story" (Fox & Leeder 2018:101). It is therefore considered a therapeutic form of applied

drama and theatre, but is not intended to be a therapy for its audiences and practitioners (Bird 2017:34).

Playback theatre "is equally at home in public theatres, in schools, hospitals, and institutions, corporate settings and conferences, and in forums for social change" (Salas 2009:445). Topics might explore a number of things such as diversity, gender-based violence, racial injustices, and death. The form invites audiences to tell their personal stories through a structured, improvisational process led by a conductor, players (or actors), and an accompanying musician. The conductor facilitates the performance and interlaces the stories of the community which are played back in dramatic form by the actors to the audience member who shared their story (Barolsky 2022:325; Fox 2007:91). This audience member is known as the "teller".

## Applied Drama and Theatre Online: A Practice-led Research Method

My use of "practice" in practice-led research refers to applied drama and theatre. Methods used to conduct interventions with community members in applied drama and theatre are often the same methods used to generate research data. "[T]he exchange between research and practice is immediate" (Schön 1983:308-309 cited by Gray 1996:22). This means that research and practice in applied drama and theatre often have an indistinct boundary (Hughes, Kidd & McNamara 2011). Similarly, in the case of other practitioner-scholars – Bjørn Rasmussen, Anada Breed (2016), Refiloe Lepere (2022), and Brad Haseman (2006) – the interventions *are* the research. There is a similarity here akin to the notion of praxis resisting the separation of theory and method, where one is not superior over the other (Hughes, Kidd & McNamara: 2011). To reiterate:

> *[t]he ambivalent position of applied drama and theatre has generated a diverse range of research projects, many of which combine these methodological approaches and also have multiple "uses". These include: embodied, intuitive, embedded processes that might not lead to any discursive outputs [...]*

> *"reflective conversations" and private journals of the reflective practitioner (Schön 1983; Taylor 1996:25–58); creative, visual, and discursive methods of participatory research, and action research. (Hughes, Kidd & McNamara 2011: 191-192)*

Hudges, Kidd and McNamara (2011) also speak of a blurry boundary that exists within a "messy", "unpredictable" and "complex" world of creative research and applied drama and theatre that offer an opportunity to interrogate research aims. In the case of this paper, playback theatre became an example of how technology interacted with the practitioners and the women at the shelter. By doing so, it illuminated issues such as embodiment, the use of space, and a necessary look at ethical practice.

**Playback Theatre Online During COVID-19 (2021)**

I briefly highlight how playback practitioners navigated an online performance during the COVID-19 pandemic at a women's shelter. The work took the form of a hybrid performance, meaning that all practitioners called into the women's shelter on Zoom, except for one (whom I have called Donna for the sake of anonymity). Donna was physically present with the women in the shelter and acted as a conductor for the performance. The other conductor was online. I was also present on the day as a performer, and I remember feeling as though I was a voyeur in the women's home because I was looking in from Zoom.

The women could only gather around one laptop for that session and their sound could not transmit to us, but they could hear us. This meant that Donna had to use her cellphone as a microphone. She would occasionally crouch in front of the tellers so that they could be visible and audible to the rest of the performers on screen. The image of who was in the room that day was not clear. Donna negotiated between the multiple spaces and her job was to keep the physical and the digital rooms engaged. Because of the women's experience with gender-based violence, we felt it was important for Donna to be physically present in the room with them in order to

determine what kind of atmosphere the playback performance was creating. Apart from juggling space, she was also juggling the women's sense of safety.

A few weeks later, I asked Donna about her experience mediating the performance that day. Below is her brief response from our interaction.

> **Donna:** *What made it difficult for me was in the moment – all the chaos beforehand, as in suddenly devices wouldn't work and trying to improvise around devices and then being in the same space with a group of women who were not a community yet, and all of them were still so clearly, clearly, still in crisis. Uhm, and they found it so difficult to hear each other's stories. And it was a very, very difficult space to hold.*

For Donna, the hybrid intervention complicated the playback performance by forcing everyone involved to navigate space differently. The digital experience played its part by paradoxically connecting and disconnecting the playback process. For Donna, the reality of being in the same room as the women, while maintaining contact with her fellow players on screen, presented unique tensions in that she had to juggle multiple spaces, i.e., the safehouse and the practitioners who were connected on the digital platform. Because of this, Donna admitted to how difficult it was to lead that intervention.

It was made especially challenging when Donna learned that the group of women were new to each other and that the bond between them was not yet strong. Because their sense of community had not yet formed, they found it difficult to hear each other's painful stories. In turn, Donna was left to absorb some of the awkwardness in the room.

> **Donna:** *[A]nd then she said the word rape. She was telling her story and she said the word rape and I could literally feel the group behind me because I was on the ground kneeling in front of her with a cellphone in my hand. [...] I could feel the response from the group behind me. It was like a shock. Uhm... and then*

*they started leaving the room. It was a small group to start off with. So, if two people left it was almost half of the participants.*

The word rape triggered a response from the group of women which brought about discomfort in the room. Amongst the performers, this sense of discomfort was readily perceived by Donna because she was present in the room. The rest of the performers on Zoom, however, could not fully access the emotional atmosphere. Reading the women's facial expressions was also compromised because, at times, the face masks interfered with the sound quality, therefore, hindering the overall communication. So, apart from juggling multiple contexts, Donna also needed to negotiate COVID-19 protocol, which required mask-wearing. With her cellphone, she also moved around the house. One moment she was in the kitchen and the next she was in the common area. At some point, there was even a crying baby which she managed to incorporate into the process. As co-conductor in the physical room, she had to make decisions for the benefit of everyone involved and help them transcend the chaos. Whether this was fully realised is still not clear.

The hybrid process was filled with various tensions and elicited feelings of sadness from some of the participants to an extent that, eventually, the playback performance had to end specifically because some of the participants were beginning to leave the physical room. After the performance, the practitioners shared that they had feelings of heaviness, lethargy, and nostalgia for face-to-face performances.

## Challenges to consider

The experience at the women's shelter demonstrated what O'Connor and Anderson (2015) call work in the post-normal world; a world which is confronted by many crises at one time and introduces complexity, chaos, and contradiction (2015:10). The work with the women online further complicated the practitioners' engagement in the space, and brought up the need to consider ethical responsibilities. COVID-19 exacerbated the state of chaos in many places around the world

and the issue of gender-based violence in South Africa became particularly visible during lockdowns (Dlamini 2021; Ndlovu et al. 2022; Roy et al. 2022). The government failed to consider gender-based violence response services as essential during that time period (Roy et al. 2022:113). Like most organisations, the playback theatre group was attempting to do its part.

The idea of viewing the playback theatre performance through the lens of the 4IR becomes an alternative site to explore the interaction between technology and playback theatre. I note this with a great awareness that my knowledge of 4IR barely scratches the surface of what is an emerging but dense field, and so I am careful when I assume that Zoom is not the most complex of technologies within the larger world of the 4IR. However, if we consider the ways in which this basic technology complicated how the performers interacted with the women at the shelter, we can perhaps see how it challenged the practice by raising concerns about space and place, embodiment, and ethics.

## Place

Although the use of digital technology in applied drama and theatre is not new (Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy 2020; Gallagher et al. 2020; Houlihan & Morris 2022; Tam 2020), the research on its connection to place appears to be underdeveloped (Mackey 2016:122). As I think through some of what I observed that day, I locate both technology and practice within what Bonnie Honig (1994) calls dilemmatic spaces. She describes it as circumstances that position people between two (or more) contradictions at any given moment. During the playback theatre performance, the 4IR positioned the practice at the centre of competing forces located in the complex matrix of South Africa's post-Apartheid realities, which include issues such as collective historical trauma, violence, unequal access to quality education, and poverty (amongst others). In other words, the intervention was already taking place in a context fraught with social challenges.

To quote Mckittrik and Woods' work on *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, they say:

> *[…] a broader, and ongoing, history of segregation, violence, and environmental racism, often concealed by partial perspectives and a disregard of the unknowable and unseeable, [come] clearly into view alongside the spatial and lived limits of democracy and citizenship (2007:3).*

What the authors are referring to is a racial injustice which continues to manifest in the lives of black people and their living conditions. As such, one may argue that the 4IR is perhaps not the most pressing issue facing South Africa (Musgrave 2022). The majority of the country either cannot afford technologies of the 4IR or have never heard of them (Moloi & Mhlanga 2021). Other researchers go as far as to say that South Africa is not able to "take advantage of the opportunities" as well as "respond to the challenges presented by the 4IR" (Yu 2022:92) because of poor infrastructure and the larger population not having adequate access to it. As it is, applied drama and theatre in South African contexts seems to lag behind the conversation on 4IR because a lot of its interventions rely on human contact and typically work with communities that do not readily have access to modern technology. The 4IR may allow us to do more and propel us to think creatively about how we solve the world's problems, but along the way, it too may widen the gap between those who can afford to access the technologies and those who cannot.

With regard to the playback theatre performance mentioned earlier, examples of poor quality and access to better technology in areas where that access is challenged due to socio-economic factors was demonstrated by the kinds of gadgets used as well as their efficiency – more specifically, the unclear image produced by Zoom that day, the interruptions to the sound, and improvising between devises for better connectivity. If we suspend the issue of access to communities via electronic devices and for a moment look at the ways Zoom opened up an opportunity to explore multiple spaces in the playback performance, then there is a possibility for thinking

about the 4IR as providing a wider audience reach. But, of course, this is still very much a challenge for applied drama and theatre practice because its work is situated within the very contexts that struggle to keep up with and participate in the development of technology.

## Combining technology and performance

When Fransson wrote *Manoeuvring in a digital dilemmatic space: making sense of a digitised society* (2016), the idea of a society dependent on digital technologies did not carry as much weight as it did in 2020 and 2021. Since March 2020, many organisations found themselves needing to make deliberate use of online conferencing platforms and not all systems were translatable online. Nonetheless, despite the many challenges COVID-19 presented to the world, the online space offered more opportunity for communication, learning, interaction, and a wider local and international network.

It seemed that online processes related to applied drama and theatre during COVID-19 took on an action research approach; an approach which "is an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work with practitioners" (Huang 2010:93). This way of working is useful when trying to build and improve on practice. Published research that considers online intervention reflects on places such as Toronto, Canada (Gallagher et al. 2020), Norway, and Hungary (Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy 2020). The Global North, although challenged by the same pandemic, did not seem to experience similar social and technological challenges as did communities in the Global South.

Practitioners at the women's shelter not only faced the difficulty of translating the playback performance online, but they also struggled with internet connectivity, as did their participants. The online space became, therefore, a new location; however, access to that location brought with it new kinds of limitations. For instance, practitioners were concerned about the obstruction to reaching communities that might benefit from experiencing the work. There was

also a fear that the applied drama and theatre sector might be annihilated due to the pandemic.

Despite that, however, working online engaged a kind of "digital dramaturgy" (Masura 2021:5) which enhanced the experience of what it meant to be a playback practitioner. Like virtual theatre, Zoom and MS Teams consisted of "a performative component" (Giannachi 2004:6). A practice-led research approach, in this case, invited an observation of how this component made up part of the experience of creating work. It was a unique requirement by practitioners to master technology and a unique opportunity for me as the researcher to inquire into that layer of experience. How practitioners "understand, relate to, and manoeuvre in the digital" world became important because it required different skills (Fransson 2016:2).

For instance, online, the role of the practitioner was blended with that of a technician; a rather new role they had to adopt (Masura 2021:4). It must be noted that the playback theatre process that occurred online was not the same as digital theatre. According to Masura (2021), digital theatre is live and incorporates digital technology as a fundamental element that shifts our understanding of theatre and the world (Masura 2021:6). On the other hand, Megan Alrutz's (2011) work on digital story telling in applied drama and theatre, is not as close to Masura's description of digital theatre, which aligns closely with what performing online means in the context of COVID-19. Alrutz instead focuses on physical spaces and places of performance, and incorporates digital media as part of her applied drama and theatre processes. Her work was written during a time when online work was not compulsory for community engagement.

Following Masura, the online playback theatre process could instead be understood as forming a larger conversation on digital performance and digital theatre which could be manipulated through space and time. The women did not necessarily experience the full production of the performance as they would have in person. Instead, they acted as secondary

participants, viewing images of live or, in some cases, pre-recorded performers on a screen. The computer screen was a portal for communication instead of an integral part of the performance experience. This drew attention to the differences in the use of digital technology with applied drama and theatre; not as digital theatre but as a portal. In this regard, Masura helps us to consider how space (as well as distance and disconnection) in online processes makes it clear how digital theatre's explicit use of digital technology facilitates continuity online.

## Embodiment

The emotional labour (Hochschild 2012) it required that day to be fully present as a performer can be attributed to Zoom fatigue, which has been extensively written about (Bullock et al. 2022; Elbogen et al. 2022; Riedl 2022; Salim et al. 2022; Toney et al. 2021; Wiederhold 2020; Williams 2021). But, essentially, Zoom has the potential to heighten a sense of burnout, precisely because the work of applied drama and theatre is fuelled by connection with practitioners and their participants. However, in the playback performance, the digital interface acted as a middleman and interrupted what is typically designed to frame and manage sensory experiences.

How then did practitioners experience their instrument (their body-presence) when mediated through the digital space? Because the computer was not "wearable", as it often is in digital theatre, symbolically speaking, the practitioner-in-role "bec[a]me a puppet, a clone, a magician" (Masura 2021:99) because the performance space had been altered and was mediated by technical instruments. The process then accommodated – even if not entirely – the digital experience as well. The practitioner was not necessarily wired for performing motion capture, motion triggering, nor motion tracking in Masura's literal sense, but was instead manipulated by the confines of the computer screen or a cellphone that restricted and/or liberated the drama process. They could be liberated creatively or restricted physically in space and time.

Moreover, online interventions are not as futuristic as the genre of digital theatre. The practitioner interacts with the audience in real time and relies on visual media to enhance the dialogue that is to be had with the participants. Masura, while reflecting on digital theatre, says:

> *When the living, biological body of the performer is seen alongside digital media, it is up to the audience to recognize their own human situation and determine the relative value of the contrasting entities on stage. In this didactic moment between digital and flesh, it is not essential whether the biological performer or the digital other is dominant. Whenever the human is viewed alongside the digital, the "live" body is resistant (Masura 2021:206).*

Embodiment then, shifted and became something other than what the performers had come to know. The body became distributed across space and time and was accessible to many; what Masura calls a "self-distribution" (2021:238):

> *Through digital media, settings can shift in a moment, and distant but real places are brought together on stage, prompting new ways of looking at place. By linking performers in distant places, not only is the group of performers potentially expanded, as their cumulative playing space grows, but it becomes place-rich or a multi-layered place. [...] When "community" is invoked, it can be a powerful organizing term, a call to action, used to rally participation around collective ideals, teach values or lessons, honor members and places valued by the community, or mark a specific event. When you add technology to the mix, the two determining components, place and interest, can merge. In addition to community based on place or interest, in the case of cyber-communities, community is formed in a third intersecting space where interest and location meet, when the ability to meet in a shared space composed of multiple places is itself the shared interest of the members of the group (Masura 2021:235-37).*

In light of this, Zoom conference calls, therefore, created multiple spaces from which the practitioners could extend their experience of the research through the playback theatre performance. The body became an important instrument for the performers of playback theatre to access theatrical presence and the presence of those who participated in the interaction. For instance, as the researcher, it became a required practice to attune myself to levels of affect that I would normally get in an in-person interaction. In addition to that, the performers' sensory apparatus was not only dis-located in space and connected via technology, but it too may have struggled to make sense of the information in the room(s).

## Ethics

The use of technology invited a pause in how practitioners occupied a space that was deeply engrossed by traumatic histories, where social justice work required a delicate negotiation. What did it mean for the participants to be confessing pain to people scattered across a screen and on a phone? Did the presence of the performers on screen do justice to the experience? How might practitioners and scholars of the fields make sense of the parts that get lost in the technical difficulties?

As far as the ethics surrounding personal boundaries is concerned, Klaus Schwab points out that:

> *[i]t is in the biological domain where [he sees] the greatest challenges for the development of both social norms and appropriate regulation. We are confronted with new questions around what it means to be human, what data and information about our bodies and health can or should be shared with others, and what rights and responsibilities we have when it comes to changing the very genetic code of future generations (2017:26).*

Being slightly behind the 4IR front, applied drama and theatre does not necessarily interact with the biological domain in

the way that Schwab outlines it. Rather, it invites speculation into how the space between practitioners and participants may need to be negotiated while working with, through, and despite the presence of technology. More than ever, it becomes the responsibility of the practitioner to ensure technological competence while carefully engaging with the physical, emotional, and psychological safety of the participants, especially in instances where interactions between people are physically disconnected.

Syed Jamil Ahmed (2022:93) suggests that ethics for applied drama and theatre "should come before efficacy, aesthetics, transformative agendas, theoretical underpinnings, and all else". This may be an important point to ponder in the face of how we integrate technology as part of a "transformative agenda" and an added "aesthetic" that concerns an embodied practice of social justice. This ethical consideration is important for playback theatre because of its potential to elicit intimacy, catharsis and a therapeutic outcome. What would a "4IR-informed playback theatre" mean, exactly? The ethical considerations for such an approach would need more attention. For example, the aesthetic of that kind of approach would need to be considered carefully, given that a large part of the demographic that benefits from the work is on the other side of the digital divide.

## Conclusion

The playback performance at the women's shelter presented an opportunity to tussle with dilemmas in practice and engage with what it might mean to introduce technology in a playback theatre performance. The Zoom performance became a strategic tool that bridged the gap between the participants and the performers during the national lockdowns. Although it served to connect bodies across spaces, the limitations of Zoom also contributed to moments of alienation in the process by making it difficult for the performers and the conductor (the facilitator of playback theatre) to respond to some of the narratives that the women were sharing. Ideas of embodiment and framing were challenged, further raising concerns

about ethical consideration for doing such work when using digital platforms.

Creatively speaking, practitioners were able to adapt their approaches online, however, the human connection was lost or difficult to decipher. Unlike digital performance – where productions are intended for the digital to meet human engagement – translating an artistic medium on a screen that is meant for in-person, human-to-human social transformation introduced challenges such as access to the very platforms that host the interaction, i.e., Zoom, WhatsApp, and the internet. A dilemma this might create in the field of applied drama and theatre is the choice between innovation and access.

So, is applied drama and theatre ready to embrace the 4IR? The paper only presented *one* case example from *one* applied drama and theatre approach. To use it as a measuring stick is perhaps not sufficient. This was a brief discussion of when technology hampered the work. It is possible that other practitioners either of playback theatre or other applied drama and theatre approaches were successful with their integration of technology and the artform. Another limitation is that what I presented was only *one* way of conducting a hybrid playback performance. It does not exhaust the other ways that other practitioners might have attempted to do so. That said, given the considerations I outlined earlier, no, perhaps the field is not ready to embrace the 4IR, but the 4IR does give the field an opportunity to engage in future possibilities. As Schwab (2017:8) might add: the 4IR is growing at an exponential pace and continues to deepen its co-existence with society and as such urges stakeholders of global society, i.e., businesses, the government, institutions of higher education, as well as civil society, to embrace the responsibility to work together to grasp the complexities that come along with the current 4IR.

## Notes

1. This study took place between June 2020 and December 2021 and mainly focused on applied drama and theatre practitioner experiences. It was approved by the Stellenbosch University's

Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Before the study, practitioners read and signed an informed consent statement consenting to participate in interviews and applied drama and theatre workshops concerning their experiences in practice. The consent form stated that their anonymity would be maintained, as the work would form part of further contribution to new knowledge production pertaining to lived experiences of applied drama and theatre practitioners; continued monitoring and evaluation of applied drama and theatre interventions; and scholarly debates on the use of applied drama and theatre for transformative education in post-conflict/transitioning contexts like South Africa. Verbal consent from the playback group (which was later confirmed via email) was also obtained concerning this dissemination of the research.

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