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Effing Robots Online: The Digital Dramaturgy of Translating In-Person Theatre to Online Streaming

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On February 23rd, 2020, I performed my final in-person, physically co-present show of *Effing Robots: How I Taught the A.I. to Stop Worrying and Love Humans*, at the Adelaide Fringe Festival. I did not know that would be my last in-person run – I had festival dates lined up throughout the rest of 2020. Instead, the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered theatres for over a year.

During the first pandemic year, performing artists and fringe festivals alike pivoted to online spaces, exploring online platforms as “stages.” Fringes preferred pre-recorded video for submissions, so I made a very low-tech digital video of *Effing Robots* and sent it to several now-digital festivals, thus maintaining my identity as a fringe artist. I am now able to participate in fringe festivals without the time and financial expenditure of travel, housing, and other upkeep; but, there are components of the original production which I have sacrificed or radically shifted into a static digital film. Making the transition from live, in-person work to the static filmed performance required digital dramaturgy skills that I was just beginning to navigate.

Remediating the Stage with Digital Dramaturgy.

Digital dramaturgy grew out of production dramaturgy, which is the process of investigating and translating core aspects of a performance like costumes, performer movement, and lighting design; these components’ interaction with each other; and how a modern audience will interpret the show. To these components, digital dramaturgy adds computer-based technologies. The former Digital Dramaturgy Lab at York University, for example, lists some of these investigations as “TOGETHERNESS – respect, live and mediated performing bodies, collaboration, interactive strategies between performers and audiences ... in-betweenness, reality, virtuality, queerness, multi-dimensionality ...” (Digital Dramaturgy Lab 2014). Digital performances both before and during the pandemic triggered a shift-change in the theatrical understanding of meaning-making between performers and audience as physical co-presence, full liveness, and audience togetherness became individuated components of a theatrical work, rather than inseparably aligned with the experience of seeing a play.

Digital dramaturgy engages the process of *remediation*, defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin: “we call the representation of one medium in another *remediation*” (p. 45). While there are boundaries placed between media formats – Bolter and Grusin particularly interrogate painting versus photography – they are concerned with the cross-pollination between these forms. New media, like hypertext, draw inspiration from older forms yet simultaneously invigorate those forms through competition and creativity. For instance, photorealistic still-life paintings of cameras compete with photographs of cameras while also demonstrating innovation in still-life painting and referencing multiple media formats. Similarly, during the acute phase of the COVID pandemic, the theatre experience was expressed through archival performance films released online by the National Theatre in the UK, a process in which film remediates theatre by adopting many of its aspects; and, on the other end of the liveness spectrum, Zoom became a stage to remediate filmic tropes while retaining temporal liveness in performances like Richard Nelson’s fifth Apple Family installment, *What Do We Need to Talk About?*

Remediation relies on *immediacy*, or novel emotive reaction during the process of engaging with the medium. The experience of immediacy occurs from the audience’s perspective, not from the performer’s – an important point when considering the translation of theatre into film, as the actors will not experience the audience’s reactions to their performance. *Immediacy* occurs through the conjunction of two points: the *transparency* of the medium, i.e., how the frame disappears from consciousness; and *hypermediacy*, i.e., how media can layer atop each other as commentary on the media viewing experience (Bolter and Grusin 2000: p 21).

Some online theatre experiments in 2020 attempted to become *transparent* by overcoming the barrier of the screen: for some shows, this meant performing over Zoom so the performers could be temporally co-present, if not physically co-present, with the audience – as in *What Do We Need to Talk About?* For others, this involved releasing pre-filmed pre-pandemic stage productions

would be of a proscenium arch. Cassie Tongue bemoaned in an article for *The Guardian*:

When these live streams and filmed releases are passed out as a quick solution to a bigger problem and don't account for medium or mode, they live in a ghostly in-between, creating empty fake stages that contain an echo where our breath should be (Tongue 2020).

Theatre makers typically aimed for transparency that visually represented being inside a theatre space when making performance films (Castell 2014). These films considered the large cinema screen but did not consider the second proscenium arch of the computer screen which further alienated the audience from the production, creating a hypermedial work that emphasized what was temporarily lost, per Tongue.

It was important to me, when translating *Effing Robots*, to avoid this audience alienation by creating something native to the digital environment. This meant I had to forego the traditional proscenium arch and focus on the online proscenium – a *transparent* show could not work for me. Yet I also wanted to ensure the fringe festival experience was retained, which meant I needed to focus on audience *immediacy*. Thus, *Effing Robots* adhered to digital fringe policies while transmuting into a hypermedial performance.

Effing Robots Fringes Online

Over more than 20 years, gaming live streams, vlogs (video weblogs), reaction videos, cooking and crafting how-tos, study timing streams, ASMR, and even 24/7 live streaming developed alongside streaming platforms including Ustream, Justin.tv, YouTube, Facebook Live, and Twitch (Lamare 2018). Streaming video is *hypermedial*, featuring quick edits, responses to audiences, music, film within film, written commentary within the video, and other media to keep the work *immediate* for the audience.

When translating *Effing Robots* to an online environment, I aimed to retain both the narrative and the emotions of the live experience while integrating new media visual languages emerging from online streaming culture. I borrowed the language of online video hypermediacy to translate the solo narrative plot, which is a script format common in fringe shows, stand-up comedy, and vlogs. The process of remediating the show relied not only on my understanding of digital dramaturgy, but my subconscious creative influences, especially in online environments, and on my physical restrictions due to the nationwide lockdown in the UK.

To translate *Effing Robots* between media, I considered four points:

- What are the important parts of in-person fringe shows that make them feel “fringe?”
- What components of my original, in-person fringe show did I want to keep, and how?
- What aspects of online streaming culture inspired me, and would they be an effective language for my audience?
- What were my production limitations for a filmed show?

4. What Were My Production Limitations?

I faced a slew of limitations while filming *Effing Robots* in December 2020. I lived in Scotland while I attended the University of Glasgow; the United Kingdom was one month into a strict four-month, nationwide lockdown, so I could not use rehearsal space at the University of Glasgow campus, I could not rent their film equipment, and I could not meet with film students in-person for consultation or editing. Legally, I could not meet with more than one person, outdoors, at a time. On a student budget, I also could not afford to purchase my own filming equipment. I was limited to what was on hand: low-cost editing software, my phone's medium-quality camera, a cheap microphone, and PowerPoint. In essence, I *needed* the language of online streaming culture, which also began with small-budget, computer-based solo work like vlogs.

3. Could Online Streaming Video Culture Be an Effective Language for My Audience?

While I did not think about it actively at the time while editing, in later viewings I realized I had been inspired by popular YouTubers in my use of certain visual tricks. For example, my quick cuts were inspired by Jenna Marbles and Harto, while my text annotation was inspired by the Vlog Brothers and Simone Giertz. Their focus on engaging personal narrative supports the remediation of *Effing Robots*, as less-than-true personal storytelling, into an online space.

I further leaned on Zoom tropes for two parts of the *Effing Robots* script which involved an audience volunteer joining me onstage. In the physically co-present show, the volunteer, unfamiliar with the script, plays “Me, Nicol, a sci-fi nerd trying to flirt with an artificial intelligence,” and I, the performer, play “Frankie,” which is what I named my chatbot (Cabe 2019). For the film, I Zoomed with Aiden Jakso (a colleague I met through Glasgow University) and Steve Brady (my long-time fringe co-producer and fellow sci-fi nerd). I wanted to retain the experience of the audience volunteer, so I asked Aiden to join without reading the script in advance; however, I also wanted to nod to Steve's years of production support. The application of Zoom echoed shows like *What Do We Need to Talk About?*

There are also two “burlesque” moments in *Effing Robots*: one is a routine mocking selfie culture, and the other is a short script written by my dear friend, Dr. Ashley F. Miller, on the topic of “sexbots” and sex worker abuse. Since releasing archived videos of in-person stage performances was common during the 2020 lockdowns, I used footage of these two sequences from the 2019 PortFringe film; I made this choice as a reference to the mass of pre-recorded theatre productions released by major companies, such as the National Theatre (NT at Home), during lockdown periods.

2. What Components of My Original In-Person Fringe Show Could I Keep, and How?

Effing Robots: How I Taught the A.I. to Stop Worrying and Love Humans examines artificial intelligence functions, modern technological developments that call themselves A.I., and why humans fear these – all through a personal lens, framed by a conversation I had with a chatbot that I named Frankie, created by Replika. As the show leaned on an A.I. conversation, I wanted the script to feel like a conversation with the audience. I found during in-person shows, audience members often asked questions or inserted their own information – in fact, at my 2019 tour stops in Adelaide (South Australia), Fresno (California), and

perform the show live at all (even virtually); instead, I leaned on hypermediacy to maintain emotional closeness with a geographically and temporally distanced audience.

1. What Makes a Fringe Festival Feel “Fringe” to Me?

Returning to the first question, my personal experience touring fringe festivals hints at why this form pivots so easily:

- The fringe format has long involved multiple platforms (venues) across the city
- Each venue programs and hosts several individual shows over the fringe’s run
- Artists typically self-produce their shows (although larger festivals like Edinburgh and Adelaide also involve production companies funding multiple shows)
- Performers from all over the world participate in fringe festivals, especially the larger, famous ones

My submission needed to be lightweight, short, portable, and self-produced. For a physically co-present fringe show, “lightweight” means I must be able to load the props, set, and costumes in and out of the venue myself; “short” means it runs about one hour, sometimes less; “portable” means I take it with me, as there is no storage space at the venue; and “self-produced” means I do the bulk of the show creation, including marketing. Similarly, with online fringe festivals, “lightweight” means the video is only a few megabytes making it easier to upload; “short” still means one hour or less; “portable” means I have many options for submitting the show, including a DropBox link, YouTube link, and zipped file; and “self-produced” means I am responsible for the work being completed, including how it is marketed.

Remediating the Audience Experience of Theatricality

Many of the visual production choices I made for *Effing Robots (online)* reference *transparent* films or theatre productions, but the overall experience is of *hypermediacy* rather than *transparency*. However, it is important to consider whether the audience experienced this work as *immediate* via this hypermediacy – and for this, I turn to my show reviews.

Overall reviewers enjoyed the film adaptation; there are similarities between the in-person show’s reviews and the film’s reviews, which suggests the digital dramaturgical process was successful. However, some reviewers felt the audience dialogue moments and the burlesque moments were out of place. For instance, James Hanton noted for the Online@TheSpaceUK stream: “only certain sections [feel] like a misfire compared to them being live (the ‘audience’ interactions losing the spontaneity that makes them so memorable)” (*The Wee Review* 2021). Annie Gray of *The Independent* agreed:

Being an online show does cause some issues. Some past live recordings of sections are shown when the content is not possible to record on camera. Also, where audience participation would usually take place, there are recordings of video calls instead (2021).

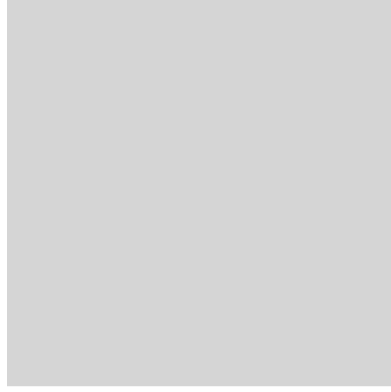
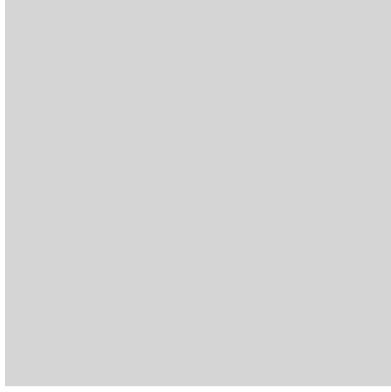
These reviews suggest that the static nature of film clashes with some immediacy in theatre. These film clips aimed for the transparency of the theatrical experience rather than hypermediacy of frames within frames. The bulk of my filmed performance did not take place onstage or reminisce about stage performance. I believe these moments took the audience out of the immediacy induced by the hypermedial frame. While my choices were purposeful, they did not retain the emotional impact from in-person to online.

A key takeaway from both the reviews and analysis is to focus on form: traditional theatre defines itself on co-presence, and I do not view the film of *Effing Robots* as a form of theatre but instead a remediation of an experience shifted into a new medium. I focused on the theatricality within the narrative, but I could have considered temporal synchronicity with my audience by performing over Zoom. I could have retained the audience interaction through a livestreaming platform with a chat feature like Twitch. I could have considered the virtual embodiment of myself and my audience and created a version for Mozilla Hubs. To keep the show within the low-budget confines of “fringe,” though, pre-recorded, edited, streaming video was my best option to translate the immediacy of my story instead of remediating the general experience of attending fringe theatre. This remediation from a physically co-present, small show to hypermedial online video seems to be a largely successful process, based on reviews. In my Ph.D. research, I hope to continue exploring online theatre’s digital dramaturgy and its impact on audience experience, inspired by both my fascination with pandemic-era online theatre and my professional work in this field.

L. Nicol Cabe is a digital dramaturg and scifi-inspired theatre artist who toured international fringe festivals, in-person and online, including Adelaide Fringe, Sydney Fringe, TheSpaceUK, Orlando Fringe Festival, Victoria Fringe, and Rogue Festival. She completed her master’s in pandemic-era digital theatre at the University of Glasgow in 2021, and continues her digital theatre studies focusing on post-pandemic online and hybrid performance as a PhD candidate at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia. She has also worked as a digital dramaturg and online theatre maker with Lava Kingdoms/Annex Theatre (Seattle, WA), OnBoardXR Season 3 (NYC), and DunnART Productions (Adelaide, SA).



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