

The Lives of NT Live

The terms ‘performance’ and ‘documentation’, individually and when placed side by side, are terms in flux. As with the field of Performance Studies, which alters according to theatrical exploration and subsequent theoretical writings, performance and documentation, or performance documentation, are states that are altering theoretically to mirror the practical innovations of the day.

Such a theatrical innovation can be identified in the case of NT Live.

Established in 2009 initially in order to increase access for theatregoers around the country, National Theatre performances are now broadcast across several continents, to cinemas worldwide. David Sabel, Head of Digital Media at the National, initiated the project, borne from a study interspersing cinema within live performance.

I sat in a plush Richmond cinema to watch *The Habit of Art* in April 2010. The successful Alan Bennett play proved inaccessible for a family member at the National’s Southbank location. Much more preferable was a short car journey to a local cinema to see in real time, the exact same performance as was being played at the National – live.

I remember waiting to see the broadcast and feeling distinctly odd. No other family members seemed to share this unease. Perhaps this was because I have been preoccupied with the notion of documenting performance for several years now and to me, this felt like a peculiar mix of document and performance. The term ‘live’ amongst other issues was certainly disconcerting in this new context.

My feelings are that documentation exists within every layer of performance, which alters the ontology of the two states and their relationship. Technical innovations such as NT Live mean that performances are relayed, sometimes simultaneously with the

performance, or replayed, subsequent to the performance itself. I wonder, ought these viewings to be termed NT Live or NT Archive?

Considering the ontology or essence of performance, Peggy Phelan claims boldly, 'Performance's only life is in the present' (Phelan, 1993: 146). That a performance may be documented, saved or recorded, forces it to become 'something other than performance' (Phelan, 1993: 146). Phelan states that a performance whose life is interrupted with recording or documenting lessens and betrays its own ontology (Phelan, 1993: 146).

Phelan's argument in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) is centred on a feminist debate. Considering that women are largely unrepresented within society, her study has an overriding political agenda. Suggesting that women must disappear in order to re-appear within society, or specifically that to regain our sight we must realise that it has been lost, Phelan studies performance, as an ephemeral, disappearing state.

Within Phelan's writing, a challenge is set: that writing may document performance without succumbing to representations of representations, to mirror the unique quality of performance (Phelan, 1993: 149). I am not sure how one could document something and allow it to disappear. A contradiction in terms, Phelan's greater conundrum may be her assumption that performance is the art of disappearance.

I was granted permission recently to observe the second camera rehearsal for the National's production of *The Comedy of Errors* (2012), prior to its NT Live premier. The main aim of this rehearsal, I gleaned, was to ensure that the best possible camera angles have been selected to represent the performance on stage at the National, to the viewers of NT Live in their local cinema.

Which to watch: the technology with its spotlights and buzzing sounds or in this case, the majestic man, Lenny Henry, spitting Shakespeare throughout. My attention was truly drawn to both performative elements. Philip Auslander cites Roberts Blossoms

however, who compares actors and films as fifty-watt bulbs versus a dazzling array respectively (Auslander, 2008: 41).

Auslander's *Liveness, Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (2008) engages with the question of ontology. Problematizing the apparent binary between the live and the mediatized, Auslander paves the way for a homogenized performative state. Disputing Blossoms, Auslander calls for a 'mutual dependence of the live and the mediatized' (Auslander, 2008: 11). This state is practically enhanced by the explorations of the NT Live project.

My second encounter with an NT Live performance was not at a cinema venue, but at the National itself. It ensued after a talk with the Head of Digital Media at the National Theatre Archives. Sabel's enthusiasm was engaging and with the slightest nudge of encouragement, I had bought a ticket for another NT Live production; not at a cinema venue, but at the National itself, to view the performance of *The Cherry Orchard* (2011), which was to be broadcast live across the nation.

The cameras, set in a semi-circle of sorts around the stage, swept along dolly tracks, pivoted on their axis and zoomed in and out to set and shoot their shot. As each camera prepared for its next shot, I experienced a thrill of anticipation, as I waited for the live red light to flick on beside its monitor. This performance was more than live: it was alive, a buzz I've felt at every live recording since.

Increasingly, videos and live feeds are incorporated in performance. Angelika Festa's work, cited in Phelan's text, used both elements. The videoed loop mentioned still exists in Festa's personal archive (Festa, 2012). In the case of NT Live, the live feed itself becomes a video document of the performance's existence, subsequently archived in the

National (Murray, 2013)¹. Technology has caused this merging of performance and document.

For a limited time, NT Live's *Frankenstein* (2012) was given an encore season, as was *One Man, Two Guvnors* (2011) and *Phedre* (2009), the first National production to undergo a 'Live' experience.² Cinemas can independently replay NT Lives, should the event sell out, for example (Sabel, 2012). How can a live performance be replayed? How does this change the ontology of both performance and documentation? Given their now, interweaving states, theory must alter also to mirror these practical developments.

Before I sat down in the Richmond cinema waiting to see an NT Live production, many stages of writing and rehearsals had taken place. Notes on blocking, a bible formed, rough and polished staging and costume designs, perhaps even an edited Bennett text. Programme notes, producer notes, scrawl surrounding cameras and their crews.

Documentation had merged within performance, even more significantly; the introduction of cameras and recordings of scenes into the theatre, pre-set lighting and sound cues, live links to cinemas and interviews from the National to countries across the world. The ontology of performance and documentation has altered: they changed to stay a-live.

¹ The performances are currently archived at the National Theatre, rather than at the National Theatre's Archives.

² The encore seasons vary in timing and availability depending on the country giving the screening. The dates cited are the initial broadcast of each performance.

Works cited

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Concerned with the disrupted ontology of performance and documentation bred from changes in media, her doctorate aims to analyse performance as performance/documentation, with NT Live as the central focus of her thesis.

Previous work includes an investigation into iCinema culminating in a paper given at JAM (2010). Dr Martin Welton oversaw a study into Katie Mitchell's media pieces with relation to performance documentation in 2010.

Claire is currently a member of TaPRA's Documenting Performance working group and presented an initial paper on NT Live at their interim symposium in 2012, presenting again at the Performing Documents conference in 2013.