

The Gathering – Podcast, Series 3

Introduction

Welcome to series three of the Gathering, a podcast for artists and creatives from Arts Lancashire. This series is all about exploration and features recorded conversations led by Lancashire based artists, discussing themes and ideas that are important to their practice and the future of their work. I'm Morven from imitating the dog, a company which has been making ground-breaking work for theatres and other spaces for over 20 years. The thing we are most interested in is telling stories. We create beautiful, memorable images for audiences, and the work fuses digital technology with live performance in order to serve the story in the best possible way. In this episode, we explore the future of theatre and live performance across a series of three conversations between experienced creatives, theatre makers and practitioners sharing their unique perspectives. In this first conversation about making live performance within a digital context, both before and during the pandemic, I'm joined by fellow actor and theatre maker Graeme Rose.

Part 1

Conversation Between Morven Macbeth And Graeme Rose

MORVEN MACBETH: Hello, my name is Morven Macbeth. I'm an actor and Theatre maker. I'm an associate practitioner with imitating the dog. I've been working with the company for 16 years, and this is my colleague Graeme Rose.

GRAEME ROSE: Yes, I'm Graham Rose, I'm a performer and a theatre maker. Founder of Stan's Cafe way back in the early 90s, and an associate artist with Bodies in Flight, and Theatre Absolute.

MORVEN: So, Graeme, as two people who over the course of our careers have made work that explores the relationship between live performance and digital technology, where those things meet, where they fail to meet. Where do you think we are now as a sector and also as, sort of, individuals? Where do you feel that we're up to 12 months after the start of the pandemic and theatres closing their doors?

GRAEME: I think we're in a really interesting space actually. I think whereas the majority of the theatre sector is really struggled over the last 12 months, I think there has been, through adversity, a great amount of, kind of, fleet footedness on the part of the independent sector, responding to the situation, the crisis, the issues, and the ideas that have, kind of, been precipitated as a result. But in a needs must, I think lots of companies are finding really interesting ways of tackling the problem of making live performance.

MORVEN: Yeah, so you've been working a lot with the company called Creation Theatre. Can you tell us a bit about the work that you've been making with them?

GRAEME: Well at the at the beginning of lockdown last March I was working on a site-specific adaptation of *The Time Machine* in the London Library with Creation, and we'd done about a week's performances when the show was cancelled, obviously. But the company really had to find a way of making work. They had no other means of income. They're not a revenue funded company and they immediately looked to adapting another of their promenade site-specific shows, an adaptation of *The Tempest* onto Zoom. So, within a month of lockdown they were performing.

MORVEN: Wow!

GRAEME: And actually that was a terrific experience, being in the audience, I have to say. I was really wowed by what I saw, and, you know, by today's standards it may seem quite primitive, in a way. There was quite, a kind of early use of green screens and they were, little did I realise it at the time, they were starting to play with an app called V-Mix. Starting to

experiment, but it was in the very early stages, and hard on the heels of that, they adapted *The Time Machine* to Zoom. So, by May/June I was performing on Zoom, a version of *The Time Machine*, and they managed to get funding through Innovate UK to kind of extend and expand on that program of work. So, I'm now part of the Digital Rep Company which is a six-month project designed to help to design a new platform for live performance online.

MORVEN: So an entirely new platform? So, we've been working on Zoom. You and I made *Airlock* together with imitating the dog using Skype. So, Creation are developing an entirely new platform. Is that right?

GRAEME: That's the ambition and I'm sure there are other people trying to do exactly the same at the moment, there's no kind of joined up thinking with this, it strikes me. But learning from the perils and the joys of Zoom, they're working with a company called Charisma AI, who work on gaming really, to try and design a completely new platform, which for an audience will be much more redolent of the theatre experience, with entrances and exits, and a foyer hopefully. Being able to see other members of the audience at certain times when you so choose, and being able to focus on certain aspects of the performance when you need.

MORVEN: There's something that Pitlochry Festival Theatre are doing at the moment, a thing called Soundstage, that has that, you have that ability as an audience member, you walk in and there is sort of a point of view shot of walking into PFT and The Lyceum. It's a joint venture between those two theatres. And you can sit in a virtual bar and have a drink with other members of the audience. But then interestingly, it's effectively a radio play that you listen to. So, it's all audio, there's, you know, no visual, but you can't pause it. You can't stop it. You have to sit and listen for that period of time. Then there's an interval and you can go back to the virtual bar and then you come back and listen to the rest of the play together. I think there's something really interesting about that.

GRAEME: I think some undeniably special about the live encounter, and you just don't get the same with streamed work, you just can't. I mean, I remember being really surprised when I saw my first live stream of a National Theatre production. I wasn't expecting to enjoy it, but actually it allowed you an intimacy into certain, you know, aspects of the performance, which really took me by surprise. But streaming a live performance, you know, we know that from our own experience of working in live performance, documentation always falls short. There is something special about the live event and that could be about the peril of your Internet dropping out. It's a terror for the performer, but actually there's something of the quality of that which as an audience member keeps you on your toes. It reminds you that this thing is happening now and can never be repeated.

MORVEN: Yes, absolutely. So, when you and I made *Airlock* together, imitating the dog made a live action graphic novel over three episodes, that we made over Skype, in May, early June of 2020.

GRAEME: Yeah.

MORVEN: As a performer, there's something I think from years and years of working with cameras in a live theatre space, working with imitating the dog, the absolute imperative of hitting your mark so that you're lit, so that the camera can pick you up, so that the audience can see you. So, we're always thinking about ourselves in terms of our relationship to the camera and as well as our relationship to the other performers in this space. Our relationship to the lighting, our relationship, to the technology, to the projections, as well as to the audience. As a performer, you've sort of got antennae everywhere sensing these different, these different elements that make up the mode in which we are telling a particular story. How do you feel that that work translates into us as performers, being in our spare rooms, performing into our laptops, for example?

GRAEME: I think it's directly comparable. If you're a TV actor or film actor. And that's not within the realm of my own experience. I don't think of it. You know you're used to being able to repeat your scenes, I suppose, or get the right edit or a

right, a correct shot. Do it a repeated number of times. Whereas a theatre performer you can look through the lens of recorded medium of film, use that language, but it's undeniably in the moment and you have to hit that mark every time. I think with *Airlock* it was an unusual experience, is very particular, and I learned an awful lot about that. Learning to be small in your performance, that's quite tricky if you're used to performing in a bigger environment, on a theatre stage. Constantly having to remind myself to keep it smaller, you know, I'm not used to doing that.

MORVEN: Yes, what I really missed, making *Airlock*, was not having other performers in the space next to me, giving me notes, because with imitating the dog we do that all the time. All the time we'll be, you know, I think back to making *Heart of Darkness*, in particular, where we would constantly be saying to each other, OK, you need to do maybe 10% less with your lower body, maybe about 20% more with your torso and arms in that walking section, and if you can just turn your nose, I think about 2 inches to your left, that should make your eye line read correctly for the camera. So, I have a lot of detail we're working with all the time in order to make something interesting for the audience who are in the space watching us, but also for it to read on camera. So that absolute precision, I think, is something that the performers who work regularly in this way, we're very used to that now.

GRAEME: A lot of that stuff is counter intuitive as well, and I found that doing *Airlock* as well. You know, Simon would be constantly saying, can you move a little bit to your left and it felt completely wrong. You had to kind of affect a very peculiar position, and now I look back at it and I think, oh yeah, I know, I know what he means.

MORVEN: Yes.

GRAEME: It's interesting. I've just finished a run of the *Duchess of Malfi* with Creation and I'm looking back at, you know, filmed runs of the show. And I think it's easy to be very self-critical, 'cause I just think I would have done that completely differently. You know, it's too big, constantly too big, think small, and that's unusual. I'm learning an awful lot by transferring the work onto a digital platform. It's very different, but at the same time I think we're used to being resilient, and I think we're, whether it's working in site-specific or constantly playing with form, that relationship between form and content, this feels perfectly natural to be, to be, relocating the live work in a different realm. In this case, the realm of digital, online.

MORVEN: Yeah, I totally agree. I think there's something interesting in that question of liveness. What is it? What qualities are we looking for in that live experience, as makers and as an audience? Going back to the example of *Airlock*, you could see in the bottom left of the screen as an audience member, little sort of porthole images, almost, of us all on the Skype call waiting to enter the performance space, if you like. So, the whole thing clearly, we hope it was made clear, was made in one take in real time, everything was performed live. It wasn't edited, it wasn't cut back into, the whole thing was recorded live. And there's something about recreating that live quality in the digital space now that seems to me to be key, I think.

GRAEME: I think that's something that we're used to, is demonstrating the mechanics of production and finding the virtue in that.

MORVEN: Yeah.

GRAEME: Not wanting to hide that all. Or, if you do hide it, then it making a real virtue of the trickery, surprising your audience. But always trying to make the very most of the technology, expanding the technical apparatus to its margins. I think if the technology is too, if you're too immersed in the technology, you can't, you can't understand what's going on. I mean, I think, you know, having seen a recent online production, which was very elaborate, I just don't know, I don't know what I'm getting out of the live encounter there that could so easily be just filmed.

MORVEN: Yes, exactly that, exactly that. When I go to the theatre, I want whatever that experience is to be communal, that's what's important to me. The sort of emotional immersiveness that I look for in going to the theatre. When I go to the cinema there are different things that I want in that space. If I watch a documentary on television, there's something different that I want in that space, and I think we're all still as makers and as audience members, speaking for myself, I'm still trying to work out what it is that I want when I buy a ticket for a show that's going to be performed to me on some digital platform. When I buy a ticket for, *Crave*, I loved Tinue Craig's production of *Crave* with the Chichester Festival Theatre in the Royal Court. I think it was a Co-production between those two. That for me is the most perfect example that I've seen over the last 12 months. It was just gorgeous. Absolutely brilliant. But I think we're still trying to work out what those qualities are that we want in this new space, that we are still, let's be honest, creating. We're still making it up, you know,

GRAEME: And I think one of those qualities is about being in the space with other people as well – other audience members – which is a tricky one to grasp. You want to be able to disappear into the bar, which isn't quite so easy. But if I may ask, what are the other pieces that you've seen that have inspired you over the last 12 months?

MORVEN: I loved the opportunity to watch the Wooster Group's back catalogue, 'cause I'd only ever seen I think about three of their performances live, so that was pretty good getting to delve into their back catalogue. And I'm really looking forward to seeing *Sadie* - David's Ireland's play that's on a new festival that's available on iPlayer, I think. So that's next on my list.

GRAEME: Very good, No, I did manage to see a couple of the Wooster Group pieces as well, which thrilled me because they've managed to elude me through all this time, and I'm going to put in a plug for the Tabletop Shakespeare as well, which I loved seeing live.

Part 2

MORVEN MACBETH: The focus of our second conversation between Andrew Crofts, associate practitioner with imitating the dog, and Paula Varjack, an artist working in performance, video and participation, on how the last 12 months has shaped the way they make work. And how new ways of thinking might change their practice going forward. Over to them both to introduce themselves.

Conversation Between Andrew Crofts And Paula Varjack

ANDREW CROFTS: Hello, my name's Andrew Crofts or Crofty. I work with imitating the dog as an associate practitioner, I'm a lighting designer, i'm also, I also do video design for different companies. Sometimes a production manager. Like a lot of people, I guess, I think I wear quite a lot of different hats at different times, depending what the job is. But yeah, I'm freelance with ITD, so I do other people as well, but today I'm here representing the dog.

PAULA VARJACK: I am Paula Varjack. I'm an artist working in performance, video and participation. Also like Andrew, I wear lot of different hats. When I'm not making my own work, I'm a facilitator. I also teach at Guildhall School of Music and Drama. I'm a creative producer, and one half of the company Varjack Lowry with my collaborator Chuck Blue Lowry.

ANDREW: So, I guess as a way in, I think we spoke together in, I'm not sure exactly, but it's probably January or February 2020, was it? I think, yeah.

PAULA: Yeah, let's say January, why not?

ANDREW: Let's say January 2020. It was obviously, I mean not pre-Covid, 'cause Covid was in some parts of the world, but it hadn't, it hadn't come to the UK yet, and we were talking about a project of yours called *I Melania*, and maybe a good starting place would be you talking about how, about how, about where that is now and how it's kind of developed, I guess.

PAULA: Yeah, so *I Melania* is the first, the first project of my company Varjack Lowry. Looking at what it means to be a foreign woman and how to be acceptably foreign and female. With Melania Trump being an avatar of someone who was acceptably foreign and female in the US. Looking at how anti-immigrant sentiment in the US was being mirrored, and actually has always been mirrored also in the UK, it was originally intended to be a stage piece that would have video and sound design elements. Also, working with a group of participants, but due to the early stages of R&D taking place during COVID-19 in the first of many lockdowns, it's evolved as a fully online piece that we are now thinking is going to be experienced on a phone.

ANDREW: Cool. Yeah, so I guess the, I suppose it's one thing, I mean. That's like a really clear, obvious example of how your work has adapted for these times. But I think, I guess, what may be interesting about it is that now as things are opening back up again and people are starting to go back into theatres, you're not considering that option for this piece. You, kind of, want to keep it, as well, I suppose some people would call digital. Is that fair to say?

PAULA: Yeah, I mean, I think it's funny, like with any project. Like, often I found with editing, for example, that sometimes you added something specifically for one soundtrack or music and then you just think, oh for fun, why not throw something else on it, that feels right. I think. Similarly, at the beginning, if you, if you said, oh, you're going to make an interactive piece, that's going to be for phone, potentially phone and also live stream. I would have been like, what? I wouldn't necessarily even be interested in that. But either because the work was always meant to live in this way, or because it is developed in this way, it just feels like the right home, whichever way it is we have, we have evolved with something where our practice feels like it makes sense. We've become really adept at working remotely, and in fact spending quite a long time also running workshops for other people on how to have a remote, collaborative practice. And working with participants we've actually found to be an even better fit for the project, we can work with a much more international pool of women, so that's been really exciting. It's much easier to have workshops fit within people's lives being online. So yeah, so I mean, I think our practice in general - I mean, we're very keen to get in rooms and do other kinds of work, but this specific project feels like it is best suited for being online. Also, because, as over the course of the year, so much of the discourse around anti-immigration sentiment, and also just the story of the rise and fall of Melania Trump with the White House has taken place online. So, it makes sense to use that form to tell the story.

ANDREW: Yeah, I think that's something that always really feels key in our work as well is that we always feel like the sort of, the work is good when the form or the technology, kind of, reflects the content, you know. Like when you're, it's not, that's the reason why it's there. It doesn't make sense without it, You couldn't, It wouldn't be right to tell Melania Trump's story without using that technology, because, that's like you say, that's where it played out. That's very much part of it. Yeah, I think I'm trying to think of, sort of, similarities with what I've been doing really. I think there's a kind of, something that I found quite interesting. Has been. I always sort of feel that when you approach making something you do it with the kind of tools that are in the room. It's certainly something that we talk about with imitating the dog quite a lot. And sometimes if there is something in the room, it often stays in the show. Even if you hadn't expected it to be there originally. And those tools can be projectors, or they can be the various bits of software that are available, or they can be, you know, whatever else it might be. And I feel a little bit like one of the things that's happened this year is my toolkit has changed, so that the kind of things that you're interested in talking about, or the work that you're interested in making, I don't really feel like that's what's different. I feel like what's different is the, yes, the sort of the toolkit, the things that are available to make it with in some ways it's got smaller because, you know, I haven't got a theatre to play in, but then in other ways it's got bigger because I've started exploring things that I wouldn't have looked at previously in terms of ways of sharing online and different digital things.

PAULA: But I also think, I sort of feel like it gets bigger by virtue of the fact that I'm, I'm hopeful that, you know, by the end of the summer, by the end of the year we will be able to make work in spaces again. And for that reason, I feel like the toolkit becomes bigger because if you have embraced this period then you have everything that you've learned when this is the only way you can work. Plus, you have what you were doing before. Plus, maybe some ideas now about how they could converge, which is an area I'm particularly interested in.

ANDREW: Yeah, absolutely, you take it with you, you know, we aren't going to forget everything that we've learned over the last year. There's been loads of good stuff that has come out, you know? So, it's not. I think we, you put them in the bag and take them to the take them once the next thing. Which is. Which is good. So, what's... Saying that you're really interested in that kind of convergence going forward? What do you feel might be next?

PAULA: Well, I guess for one thing, I suppose what I'm interested in is, you know, do I continue to have an option, if for example I've got a residency and I'm giving a workshop, do I have an online version of the workshop that you can book for, as well as places that you can book for face to face work? Do I, Next time, I'm presenting a theatrical work, figure out some way that there is another way of viewing the work where you're not in the room. Like I just gotta really cheap pair of binaural headphones and microphones and I'm thinking OK, for example, if there is a streamed version that is accompanying it, yeah, that might mean some people don't see the version in the theatre space, but then they'll also be people who would have seen in the theatre space anyways, who now might also be able to see the work. So, there's just generally new ways of thinking.

ANDREW: Yeah.

PAULA: Similar with meetings. It's like, do I have less face to face meetings? I really struggle with Zoom, so I've kind of been having many more phone calls, which I didn't actually have as much, ironically enough, when we spoke, but I still prefer as a way of talking to someone, one person, I just think it's a nicer, more humane way of like opening up connection with a person or a company. I'll definitely be doing more of that. Yeah, so those are some ways I can kind of see things coming together.

ANDREW: Yeah, I think something else as well, which, erm, you just sort of made me think of then talking about kind of expanding your work to have different, having digital versions running alongside, kind of, more traditional live versions is.. I think there's a big thing around access as well and just, not just in the, kind of, traditional sense of, I don't know, like people who physically might find a problem coming into a venue. But like people who are, you know, put off for other reasons. People who don't want to go to the theatre because, you know, it's a big, kind of, intimidating building full of old white people. And you know, for all the different things that make access difficult for some people. This is one good way of, you know, maybe broadening what it is that we do. Whether, for whatever reason, somebody isn't coming to see a show in a theatre, whether that's, yeah, it might be that you know the person that's listening to your binaural version online can experience something in a way that they just wouldn't get access to normally. You know part of that's geography, but it's often other reasons as well. You know?

PAULA: Yeah, for example, you know, maybe they're intimidated by the idea of it being our institution, or maybe they're scared they don't know what the other people are going to be like. I mean, I think there are also people who are put off by things happening on Zoom and so on. I think you're never, you're never going to cater to everybody, but I definitely think there's something interesting to me about being open to both as a way to cater to a broader range of people.

ANDREW: So, one other thing that I think has maybe changed or certainly feels like it's changed a bit to me, I guess, is that part of the creative process that is about how you actually make work with people, I suppose. And I know you were saying that it's, you, the way that you're talking on, you're having more phone calls, which you weren't doing before, but you're kind of

trying to avoid Zoom, and I think there's that side of it, but there's also that side of a kind of, the social way in which we make work, I suppose, and the.. I feel like that's what I probably miss the most, or have missed the most over the last year, that, you know. When making work with somebody, you know it's the, it's what you talk about when you're having dinner afterwards, or when you go to the pub after rehearsals. It's that kind of.. I haven't quite. That's the space online that I really haven't found yet. You know, like that's the digital space I think is missing the most, is the, and hopefully we might be getting that back to a certain extent now, but I suppose it still has the same... Those challenges are still there when you're working with people remotely because of geography as opposed to because of Covid, you know. So, all the women that you've worked with on *Melania* that you wouldn't be able to work with because they are a long, long way away. You know, working kind of internationally. I suppose that the challenges still exist there, I'm kind of interested to see how we bridge that gap because that's something that I do miss from, you know, like being in the space with somebody and the possibilities and the things that arise from that.

PAULA: The thing, that's interesting, because I've been thinking about that too. And the two areas that that leads me to is: A, it makes me think when we are back in spaces again I would like to think that we're going to have a greater appreciation and understanding for how all of that quote, unquote "peripheral stuff", all the in between, all the before and after, and the need for that and how that kind of incubates and like deepens, like a process in relation and so on. But I'm also hoping that becomes infused more in the way we think about presenting digital work, because I think, and I think Zoom is a problem, it's really at fault for a lot of this, because the thing about Zoom is an online meeting space is, you know, we're stuck in a grid and so you can't make breakout rooms and so on. But even breakout rooms are about someone deigning to create a breakout room, but you have to ask permission to get out of it, so they run counter to this idea of 'I'm talking to you, and now I might walk over to another area and talk to you while someone else is there.' Everything is really over structured and I think also a lot of the presentation of digital work in this time has been so focused on the product. Or the experience of the show or the work without any kind of thought about everything that comes before and after, which is also quite important, like it's quite important as a framing device that you know, the example I used to give is that you get your ticket, and then you pay for your overpriced glass of wine, and then you run into your friend and then you try to not step over the person. And all that is part of you preparing and settling into the thing, when the lights go down and so on, and then the after. Whereas most of the work, I mean almost all the work I've encountered online has been. OK, I'm doing something right up to last minute, 'cause that's how we watch television, and then suddenly it's the thing and I've not even landed yet and then I'm out. And so were missing, we're missing, but we're also, I believe, not enough thought and space is being created for all that, all that before and after which I think is actually equally vital, if not more so for the work.

ANDREW: Yeah, definitely. I think you're dead right.

Part 3

MORVEN: Finally, we moved to a fascinating discussion about reinvention, audience engagement, and digital burnout between co-artistic director of imitating the dog, Andrew Quick, and Liliane Rebelo, Arts Manager and Director of Culture for non-profit organization Cultura Inglesa in Brazil. Liliane recently launched a three-week-long online festival which reached over 70,000 people worldwide. In this conversation, she speaks about her experience of creating a digital edition of a festival for the very first time.

Conversation Between Andrew Quick And Liliane Rebelo

ANDREW QUICK: Welcome everybody to this podcast and it's lovely to be speaking to you, especially in conversation with my dear friend Lili from Brazil. And my name is Andrew Quick, and I'm one of the co-artistic directors of imitating the dog, and we'll be talking for the next 15 minutes or so.

LILIANE REBELO: Hello everyone, it's a pleasure to be connected with you all on this amazing podcast by imitating the dog, and to be able to talk to Andrew Quick. I hope you are all well and healthy. I am Liliane Rebelo, I'm an arts manager working in Sao Paulo in Brazil. My trajectory has been on managing international collaboration projects with UK and with imitating the dog and some of them, and also managing festivals. I am currently Director of Culture at Cultura Inglesa which is a non-profit institution. I Work in Brazil in the field of education and we promote a festival that has just happened in its first digital version. And yeah, that's it.

ANDREW: Lovely to speak to you, Lili. Well, it's been one hell of a year. We've had one hell of a year here, and of course in the UK we're hearing about what's going on in Brazil, so our best wishes to you and your country in this time. It's testing for all of us, but you've just come out of this incredible festival, which for you must have been an enormous change. Having, you know, like all of us, relied on working in front of audiences that are there with us, in communities and different kind of groupings. And now you've moved all online and I was wondering, we've got, we've had our own experience of that in the UK and I was wondering what it's been like for you? Organizing this festival, knowing, you know, the conditions that you've had to communicate to people with, what lessons you might have learned from this festival?

LILIANE: Well. Yeah, well, putting up this festival digitally was a huge challenge for me. First, in a digital, in a, in a personal perspective, because that was the first time I was dealing with technology to make a project and we were talking about that, right, Andrew? While we were setting up and testing things for this podcast recording, because we're not familiar, we were not familiar enough when the pandemic hit us in terms of digital work. So, for me it was a learning curve and and I'm sure this was the case for everyone who have been working on this first digital edition of the festival. For the audience, I suppose it was something new it was something completely different. But I have my, I have, I have actually a lot of questions regarding this logic and the future of festivals online. Because the thing is that after 14 months of being isolated and seeing no perspective, at least this is the case for Brazil, we have no perspective when this will be over. Now it's a question of how to deal with this digital exhaustion.

ANDREW: Yeah.

LILIANE: I can already. I can already see, I'm facing myself a digital exhaustion, I cannot handle anymore Zooms, Skype or screens or any artificial light, and this is something that will be a barrier in our way in terms of keeping up digital work. When the pandemic started, hit us 14 months ago and we had to reinvent ourselves, the scenario was completely different. First, we had no option, unless you keep working, and reinventing, and finding new ways of keeping art being created and an audience engaged with us, and imitating the dog has done that pretty well. So, everyone, or most of the companies have forced themselves into creating a new way of producing work. But after a long period of time, because we never thought that this pandemic would last for more than a year, right?

ANDREW: Yeah.

LILIANE: I didn't, at least. I thought this would be the digital festival, actually it would be the first and last one that it would be making and It's probably not the last one.

ANDREW: True.

LILIANE: But how to keep up now doing things digitally when there is a collective, kind of collective digital burnout? That's a question that I make to myself every day. How to believe in this model, if this model is so exhausting? And also, when thinking about theatre, the language that we both work and we are familiar with, how to, how to work with theatre only on digital screens? Is it possible, or is it something else that we are creating that is not, that we cannot call it theatre, because theatre suggests that there is a presence. There is an exchange of affection with the audience and the actors in the environment. So, when this does not exist and we cannot replace this experience online, what is left for us to create?

ANDREW: Very good questions. I think you're right. I think it's not theatre as we know it, is it? It is once, in a kind of really essential definition it probably isn't theatre, because you're, for me it's always about being in the same space, at the same time, in the same proximity of exchange. And, of course, a company like us works a lot with technology, and we use screens a lot in theatre, but the audience is always there with us. And, you know, we did a show in the middle of, well, kind of between our lockdowns in the UK, which was an outdoor performance using screens, and we made it very covid safe, with everyone being 2 meters apart and I think it was very different. It was, I really liked it and I'm very proud that we did that show. But even outside the audience of wearing masks and you couldn't talk to them afterwards, everyone had to disperse. You got the feedback digitally, you know, people wrote in, and like they do anyway normally, but it didn't, even though it was theatre, it still felt very different because there wasn't that immediate exchange that you get in the theatre when you do it in the old way, let's call it the old way, shall we? The pre-mask way. And masks are funny aren't they? They do alienate individuals, really. So, you know, we had this question before, like, would it go back to what it was before? And I, it's very hard now for me to think that there won't be masks in some way or another, so that already changes it a little bit, for me. Not to be able to see people's faces, really, or to be able to talk to them properly. Or even be in the same space in a bar afterwards to get the feel of what the audience might have, you know, responded to when they see a performance. There's an energy, isn't there, in the theatre?

LILIANE: That's the energy, the energy exchange that is so important.

ANDREW: Yeah.

LILIANE: And you are right. I think that if we assume that, that whatever we're doing, which is good, is not theatre, is already a first step, is something else, it's an adaptation of what theatre could be in this format, because there are limitations and we know what they are. But it seems, I was thinking Andrew while you were speaking about when we think about the future let's think that in six months time you, we, you in the UK may be able to do a performance, an outside performance with all the restrictions, but will still be able to do it, in eventually, in a couple of months, I hope next year, a live experience would be possible in a closed venue, in a theatre, in a tutorial, in a festival.

ANDREW: Yeah.

LILIANE: There will be an issue, I believe, of dealing with other feelings of the audience that we didn't have in the past, such as fear.

ANDREW: Yes.

LILIANE: We lost contact. We lost those connections, right? We will be for many months missing this affection, this encounter. So, I think it's quite as if we need a plan now to go back. Yeah?

ANDREW: Yeah.

LILIANE: We now need to think how the audience will react when they are able to go to a theatre, but they're actually, they quite forgot what this experience sounds like and why it's important for them. So, there will be a reconnection timing for us to work on, and this is important for us to know in advance, because what we have to do as theatre makers and cultural agents is looking at those signals and reactions and scenarios and try to plan and try to create something that is, erm, that is realistic, but is also is right in terms of timing. I have been thinking about what is relevant for now.

ANDREW: Yeah, I mean...

LILIANE: What is relevant? What is important? What we need to do? What do we need to prioritize over other things, and how we need to plan this because planning will be at the key of our, of our work?

ANDREW: Yeah.

LILIANE: Do you agree with me, Andrew, or am I..?

ANDREW: No, I do. I think it's a really great question. Because. It's not just, it's I'm, I'm slightly concerned because I'm working on the show at the moment about what people want when this is... this change that we're talking about. What I think when there's been crises before, the fall-back position is being that people want to get away from things that are too heavy or too political or too dark in themes because they want to celebrate, they want to rejoice. Something, just after the Second World War that you know in the UK theatre, the theatre did change in a way for a few years 'cause people didn't want to go to, didn't want to think about what had just happened to them, really. And you know, in my own, I'm not really a very celebratory creative person in the sense that, no that's not always true actually, but I think our company tends to sort of go into the dark, into history and into the challenging kind of ideas that are knocking around, and I wonder will that be what people want or have soon? That would be.. I think one of the things that's going to be interesting is. How? Will it be? Will we go back to the theatre, like, with the same attitudes and ways of interacting that we did before? Or has this all changed us in quite a profound way? I think you're right that we're burnt out by the digital exchange, but it's become the new real for us, so going back and sitting in a theatre with other people, it's going to feel a bit odd. You know, and how is theatre, how are theatre makers going to rise to that challenge? And, so for a company like ours, you see, which uses a lot of screens and that kind of digital technology, will it, will people go, oh my God, I don't want this because I've just lived this for a whole year? Or will they like it because actually they're now become very tuned to that way of negotiating information and entertainment. It's hard, you know?

LILIANE: Very much.

ANDREW: It's hard to know what will pull people in. And of course, I don't know if it's the same in Brazil, but we're at that stage now where venues are very risk adverse. They're very worried about what, whether audiences will come or how big they will be, and they're very, they're very worried about, well, we need something that the audience, that we can guarantee the audience is going to enjoy and want to come too. So, what kind of theatre then is going to is going to meet that market?

LILIANE: Yes, and it's quite and unpredictable, right?

ANDREW: Very, yeah.

LILIANE: And that's the challenge of it.

ANDREW: Yeah. I think that. That we, yeah, we're going to have to be, it's going to be quite careful negotiation here, culturally, to see, to see.. I think theatres are going to be really testing the water at first about... 'cause people, if you think about that, I don't know what the demographic is like in Brazil, but you know there's one demographic in the UK in a sort of middle scale theatre, which is really a lot of people in their 40s and 50s. And they're going to be slightly scared to go out, they're going to be... Not, you know, they've got access to other forms of entertainment which they can stay at home for, so it's going to be very interesting to see whether we can draw those people, or how quickly we can back into the theatre.

LILIANE: Well, I think there is an opportunity from what you are saying, Andrew, in terms of change of demographic, because I think there is, there is no way we will have to handle that. And on one, on one side people may be so excited to come back to this face-to-face experience that they will value more...

ANDREW: I think that's a really great point.

LILIANE: ...the theatre experience, right?

ANDREW: Yeah.

LILIANE: I would like to believe in that. My hope is that we want to go back and we want to be together collectively again, but the opportunity that we have from what you said is how to build a program to attract new audiences to attract people, members of community that were not going to the theatre ...

ANDREW: Yeah.

LILIANE: ... because you were right, I was quite, I was always impressed by the, by the age average of audiences in the UK, even in like cutting edge theatres, I usually would see like 40 plus audience members and this is absolutely, this is the risk group. This is the group that probably going to be less attending theatres from now on. But what about the younger generations?

ANDREW: Yeah.

LILIANE: Is it a chance for us to connect with them, not only on a digital mode but also on a presentational, on a face-to-face experience?

ANDREW: I think that's our challenge and you know we talk about the way that the hope about all this situation is one of the strengths has been that we've collectively responded together in groups and communities, and I think the arts community certainly in in the UK, has really reacted with a lot of dexterity and integrity. And, you know, younger audiences are our future, so we've got to somehow touch them and make contact with them. Without, you know, so, and I think you're right, after through this crisis, they'll be hopefully really ready for a different experience. I've got two children, they're, they are digitally burnt out, they're screened out, they wanna get back and be with friends and be with people.

LILIANE: Yeah, and maybe the future of the theatre has to deal with senses. And I also, with this element of presence is something that we cannot get, we cannot forget that how important it is to be face-to-face to someone, to smell someone, to hug someone, to see something through your own eyes. So, this this is something that we need to recover and maybe we'll have to go through a hybrid model for performances in, in between those times, right?

ANDREW: You're right and one of the things I love about going to the theatre. So, there's a little obsession of mine, is I'm always fascinated when performers spit. There's something very visceral that you feel and see. Or sweat if they're dancers. You see the sweat fly. Of course, in Covid situation it's a terrible thing, but I look forward to being able to go to the theatre and not fear the spit or the sweat.

LILIANE: Me too Andrew. I can't wait for that, and to be honest when sharing, quick sharing from the perspective of having just done this digital festival, many people that I have spoken to haven't, even though they were like invited to see the performances of the festival that was running for 23 days, with 70, more than 70 attractions, more than 70 events, and there are still friends of mine who just didn't see any of the festival events. And I just ask them why? They said, well first I can't handle, I just can't handle anything digitally, and 2nd I just, I'm waiting for the time when we, I can see it myself. I can go to the theatre and experience that. So, yeah, I think there is a beauty of that failing. While the numbers of the first we had 70,000 visitors in the festival. But to be honest I, I'm still questioning this number.

ANDREW: Don't question it!

LILIANE: Because I doubt that out of these 70,000 people, how many really saw the performances, right? It's hard to, it's hard to measure and I think those numbers, they are quite interesting when you think digitally – Oh, millions of people were impacted by it - was impacted! What kind of impact...

ANDREW: Yeah

LILIANE: ...are you talking about? Because there is one real impact that art can do, which is transforming people's perception, is by connecting us together, by bringing us a sense of belonging to a global humanity, to a global society, and sometimes that is hard. It's really hard to be feeling like that when you are isolated and with a screen, on, in front of you. The good thing about all of that is that more things can be done. Things that were expensive in terms of international cooperation, collaboration, and even access, access to people who don't have the opportunity to go to a theatre, and they can do it online. This is the positive aspects of the, of the crisis that we went through, and the reinvention that we also went through. But I am not, it's funny, but in a nutshell I am happy that I put up a digital festival, but I'm not sure if I believe in it enough.

ANDREW: Well, that seems like a great place to end. You know, happiness but always questioning what we do. Yeah, we, that's how we move forward. It's been lovely to talk to you.

Outro

MORVEN MACBETH: Thanks for listening to the Gathering. If you like this episode, let us know in the reviews and don't forget to share it with your friends and networks. For show notes, links to all the organisations and companies mentioned in this episode, and much more, head over to www.artslancashire.org.uk/thegathering. You can also follow The Gathering on Twitter @artslancashire to hear when each new episode goes live. Thanks again for listening.