

Hybrid Theatre: An Adaptation of Performing Techniques in the Efforts to Preserve the Art of Theatre Performance Post COVID-19

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Abstract

The pandemic of COVID-19 and the Movement Control Order (MCO) have opened up the minds of local theatre players to be more creative in applying the suitable medium in showcasing their creative performances. Thus, emerged various forms of virtual theatre known as 'online theatre'. No one ever imagined that theatre performances would be performed online but now, it is a practical approach in ensuring the sustainability of the theatre art itself. However, various questions arose about online theatre in Malaysia, such as, confusion with the understanding of the terms, forms and concepts of the performance. This study and writing is based on the online theatre performance—'Sel Akhir' by the Seni Ceritera Association and King Lear by the KL Shakespeare Players (KLSP). The authors used observation and comparison methods to explain the approach used by these two presentations and propose to our Malaysian theatre players an adaptation method of online performance that suits the current capabilities and requirements, known as hybrid theatre.

Keywords: adaptation, COVID-19, hybrid theatre, online theatre

Introduction

Since COVID-19 hit the world from late 2019 until now, it has made a huge impact on all walks of life. Among the most severely affected sectors are the entertainment and cultural sectors including employees, employers, cultural operators, event organizers, artists and spectators. Any form of meetings and activities involving close contact are no longer allowed. The gatherings, the performance hall and the office, all moved to our living room, and new technologies have shown us that we cannot live without them in the 21st century (Iacobuț, 2020, p. 134). We must embrace and use it as part of our daily lives. The same situations happened in Malaysia where the Movement Control Order (MCO) implemented by the Malaysian government has deprived us of freedom of association and the practice of social distancing has hindered the development of daily activities including theatre performances. This situation has opened the minds of local theatre players to be more creative in applying the suitable medium in showcasing their creative performances. No one ever imagined that theatre performances would be either recorded or performed online, but now, it is a practical approach in ensuring the sustainability of the theatre art itself. Theatrical performances began to be done in the form of small scale, made privately in the studio or from their respective residences and presented online.

Theatre and Technology: The Process of Adaptation

Online theatres have long been known and implemented among theatre activist in the West. According to a research done by Centre for Study of Media and Culture in Small Nations, University of South Wales Prifysgol De Cymru (2020), there are various forms of online theatres presentation such as virtual theatre, live streaming media, pay-per-view theatre, multimedia performances, digital theatre and hybrid theatre that have emerged long before the outbreak of COVID-19. The development of this online theatre during

COVID-19 lockdown can also be seen in the West where the National Theatre is among the centre of theatrical activities that successfully implement this new approach. It has successfully performed 17 performances with a total viewing that exceeded 15 million viewers in over 170 countries. This form of approach is considered a popular mass entertainment nowadays on a global scale, no longer focused on a particular group, in certain population areas (The Guardian, September 21st, 2020). The form of the performance still retains the original features of a theatre performance and is performed on stage. And they added the use of various camera projection techniques (MCP) to replace the absence of the audience and the show was broadcast live to the audience at their respective homes (National Theatre, 2020).

In Malaysia the situation is quite different. The MCO enforcement has curbed any rallies and meetings. We cannot simply replicate the approach implemented in the West as made by National Theatre Group in London. Theatrical performances cannot be made on stage but must be made from their respective residences. We need to understand that the conditions and situations that occur in the country are different. Furthermore, most of our theatre practitioners are unprofessional, amateur and not from well-established associations. In order to ensure the continuity and sustainability of theatre performances in Malaysia during the pandemic COVID-19, creative adaptations need to be implemented to the way theater is performed, as well as involving creativity in the technique of producing performances;

“Many theatres have moved their shows online, and actors and directors have tried to keep their spectators close, being very active on social networks. It is not enough, physical interaction is ultimately essential in the performing arts, but adaptability leads to continuity.” (Petronela, R. 2020, p. 134)

Historically, the development of the world’s theatres has faced many challenges and obstacles over the past 100 years and the theatre has survived and continues to thrive in many forms and means. One of the reasons for the power of theatre to survive for so long is because of its unique characteristic to adapt with any situation;

“The search for new forms, the innovation at all levels and the need to leave behind classical texts appeared, therefore, natural; abandoning sterile naturalism and excessive psychologization in favour of an awakening from the rigidity of words occurred naturally...” (Radulescu, 2018, p. 260)

Therefore, we need to make some modifications and adaptations to the approach, that applicable to the local conditions, current situation, environment, culture, financial factors and other constraints. The process will not involve major changes to the existing form, only need to include the use of appropriate new media technology elements, which can be implemented by local theatre practitioners. Adaptations need to be made creatively, especially on the way it is made, the way the theatre is presented and the medium used for public viewing. At the same time, there is confusion among theatre practitioners about the term ‘online theatre.’ Various terms are mentioned and introduced so that it raises questions among theatre practitioners especially the newcomers. According to Ola Ince, a theatre director; “These are much more like shorts films that are theatrical – they contain the essence of theatre via a different medium”(Arifa Akbar, 2020). To avoid more confusion, we suggest the name ‘hybrid theatre.’ ‘Hybrid’ refers to the Bilingual Dictionary (1997, p. 594) meaning ‘*kacukan*’ or mixed. ‘Hybrid’ according to The International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language refers to “derived from incongruous sources; mixed anything of heterogeneous origin or incongruous parts (1996, p. 617).

To make a performance considered theatrical is when it manages to meet the basic characteristics as outlined according to the dramatic elements as in Figure 1; the direct relationship between the audience and the actor, the story told about man and the nature of humanity in which the theatre is a sharing of life experience between the audience and the performer (plot), presented in a space devoted to the performance (space), has a performance structure; acting as the main form of presentation (drama), while the singing, dance moves and others are only support to build the mood of the performance as well as the spectacle elements.

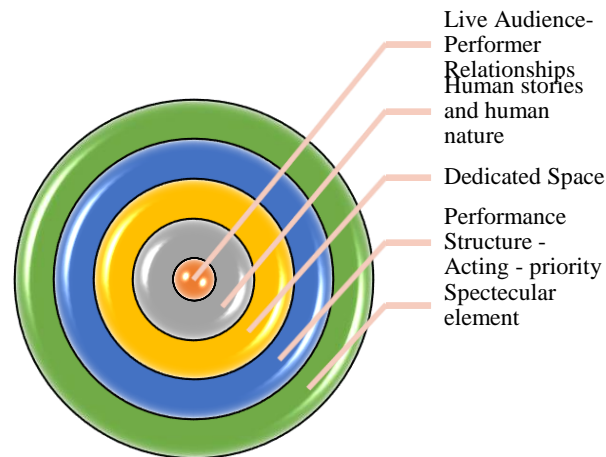


Figure 1: Basic characteristics in a theatre performance based on dramatic elements

This study is still at the basic stage and the findings of this study are still considered preliminary, so further analysis needs to be done before it can be introduced to the community as a guide in producing online theatre. However, the findings are still considered important and useful as a guide to continue this study at a higher level. A literature reviews was conducted first with reference to related articles, academic journals and video recordings to gain an initial understanding of the methods and procedures of online theatre performance practice. Based on two examples of online theatre performances, namely SEL AKHIR by Persatuan Seni Ceritera and KING LEAR by KL Shakespeare Players, the observation method was used to identify the methods used by these two theatre performances. Each performance was presented using different methods; Each performance was presented using different methods; SEL AKHIR used a recording method, meanwhile KING LEAR used a live broadcast streaming method. Once the method is identified, then it is adapted and improved according to local suitability and needs and eventually resulted in a form of performance known as hybrid theatre (Figure 2). All the basic requirements in a conventional theatrical performance will be retained, however, the contents in each element might have some alterations;

“...in terms of genre hybridity we are dealing with an explosion of genres – literary forms and genres that are outmoded from a literary point of view, but which are found in postmodern works.” (Radulescu, 2018, p. 262)

Audience-Performer Relationship

In hybrid theatre, the relationship between the audience and the actors could occurs directly and indirectly. The basic component of a theatre is the relationship between the three main components which is the actor, the audience and the performance space. The direct relationship between the audience and the performer is the most important element that must exist in theatre. The presence of the audience is a requirement needed to make a performance as a real theatre (Shiach, 1995, p. 91). The relationship between actors-audience involves visual, auditory, kinetic (VAK) experiences. Theatre performances are a process of giving and receiving (creative interchanges). It can be seen through the response given by the audience; laugh, ambience or applause. Audience and actors judged each other throughout the performance. The audience responded to the performance while the actor responded to the audience reactions. This is where the reciprocal quality of a theatre performance is located. It is strongly influenced by the level of acceptance and concentration given by the audience;

“In principle, any online platform that allows real-time interaction and participation can serve as a virtual stage for online theatre and performance; ‘their theatrical uses share a common raison d’etre: direct, real-time, communication between theatre and its remote, geographically distant audience.’” (Papagiannouli, 2016, p. 3)

The basis of the actor-audience relationship involving the VAK (Visual, Auditory & Kinetic) are still maintained, although they does not occur directly in the same space, but the process of adapting is done in such a way so that emotional awareness, sympathy and empathy continue to occur either directly or indirectly between the actor and the audience. For example, in King Lear’s theatre performance by the

Kuala Lumpur Shakespeare Players (KLSP) group (Refer to Figure 4), they performed it live using a streaming media platform. The actors acted in front of cameras or mobile phones from their respective residences and were supervised by the technical team from a control centre, while the audience witnessed the performance directly from homes using mobile phone or computer. The audience was also reminded by the ‘presenter’ (*i*) to always turn on their respective video cameras, focus and can interact with the performers during questions and answers sessions. This situation will create a ‘collective response’ situation between the audience and the actor and among the audiences themselves (just as happened in conventional theatre performances).

Dedicated Space

In a theatre, actors and audience are separated by a distance ranging from a few feet to hundreds of feet depend on the size of the auditorium. Audience needs to see then action and hear the dialogue on stage, so stage actors must exaggerate their movements and speak loudly to bridge the gap. Screen acting, on the other hand, use a camera to eliminate the distance between actors and audience. The presence of the camera, lights, microphone, special effects and music will help enhancing the actor’s performance (Kantilaftis, p. 2015).

Human Stories and Human Nature

The plot of storytelling still retains the principles of the Freytag’s Pyramid, but the focus of the narration should be more directed towards the discussion of the thought (conflict).

“The hybridity of language...through intertextuality, citations and literary allusions – literary and linguistic elements, is an essential part of the effort of post-dramatic rewriting that includes the entire array of adaptations, from the mimetic to the parodic, from the sequential to the integrative.” (Radulescu, 2018, p. 265).

The plot no longer relies on a string of events but as a small set of fragment that forming a structure of storytelling (*iii*) which is episodic. Its storytelling structure differs from chronological plot. It contains a sub-narrative plot that supports the main plot. Each sub-narrative is created through flashback techniques and interconnected with each other either randomly or chronologically which eventually leads to the climax. The arrangement of storytelling that combines the ‘here and now’ with the flashback techniques as shown in the diagram below is intended to facilitate the relationship of the story in each scene. To further clarify the story, the ‘here and now’ segment uses a monologue, asides or narrative method, meanwhile the flashback segment could use either dialogues or monologues. Hopefully, this would help create the element of empathy and sympathy that could bridging the relationship between the audience and the actors (Figure 3). Hence, the maximum time period for a performance should also not exceed 30 minutes.

Performance Structure

Theatre and film are similar but not identical; both are visual arts forms, contain actors portraying characters, have scripts yet both are not meant for the same place or people;

“Theatre is familiar, larger than life, and lacking in special effects, whereas film has new material, less dramatic and obvious acting, and can be edited to show anything that is needed.” (Witka, 2016).

The difference between acting on stage and acting on camera is the ‘size’ of the performance required. In stage acting, the actors work intensively on the enunciation and diction, whereas with screen acting the actors are focusing on being subtle and as natural and real-to-life as possible;

“In the theatre an actor accommodates his or her gestures and voice projection to the size of the auditorium...Actors in a television studio... have a microphone poised a few inches from them, ready to take up their merest whisper...actors can afford to make their performances ‘smaller’ than in the theatre and this is why a naturalistic style of acting often proves the best on television.” (Shiach, 1995, p. 94).

The biggest difference between theatre acting and screen acting is the location of the audience. In theatre, the performers must act for the back row as the audience is far off and they must be able to see and hear the performance in order to enjoy it. This will create a larger-than-life performance. Whereas in screen, the camera and the microphone play major role, so the actor doing less than he should be. Voice projection is less needed as the microphone would pick it up. The structure or style of acting is more towards acting in the form of narrative play (*iv*) which is less physical action (due to space constraints and scope of camera lenses), but more focus on the inner strength of the acting; expressions and emotions are displayed through reassuring pronunciation and small actions.

Spectacular Elements

As for the spectacular (visual) elements, technicality is part of the main concern, not just actors and acting. Focus should be given to the important aspects of lighting, sound effect, camera and lens. The performance can be supported with the help of the use of other digital technologies such as green screens to replace three-dimensional set scenes, the use of various distinctive effects that are not extreme so as to immerse the aesthetics of the art of theatre performance itself. This is the meta-theatrical approach brought about by the development of film, television and view-mode technologies which have influenced the audience's visual culture (Radulescu, 2018, p. 264). For the purpose of presentation, it can be presented via online medium either live streaming media and Social Media like Skype, Zoom, Instagram or through digital mediums that are recorded, edited and re-aired such as Open Broadcaster Software (OBS), Zoom, Facebook, Youtube Channel and others, controlled by the broadcast team.

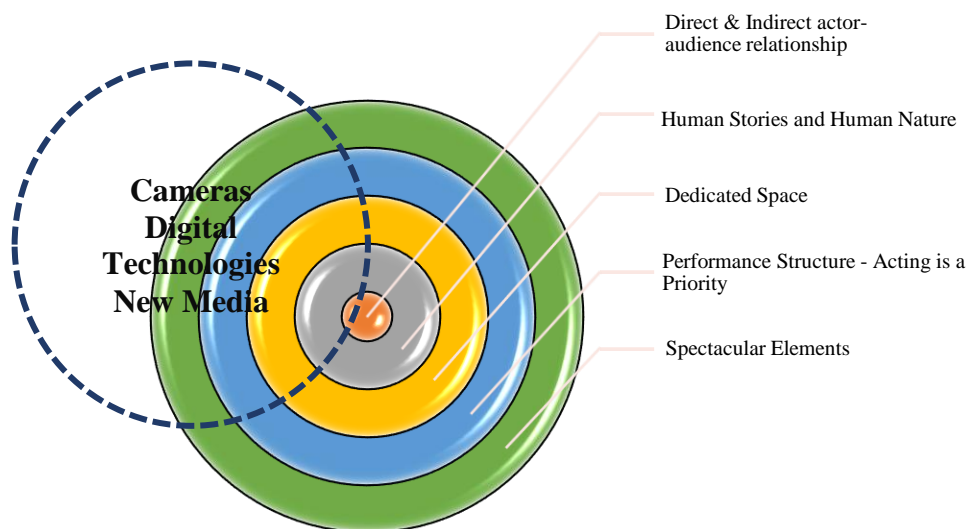


Figure 2: Hybrid theatre forms that have basic characteristics of theatre and combined with digital technology features, new media and cameras

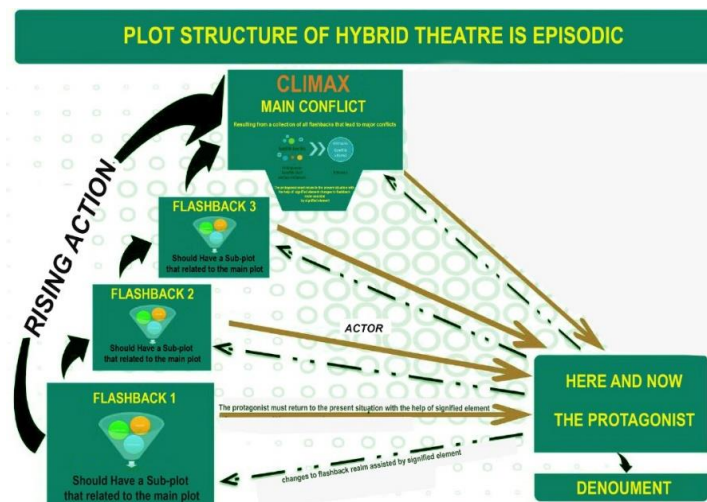


Figure 3: Episodic plot structure proposed in hybrid theatre



Figure 4: Acting presented directly in front of the audience through medium cameras creates a feeling of direct contact of the actor-audience. (Source: Courtesy by KL Shakespeare Players)

The relationship between actors and cameras does not exist in the conventional theatrical activities because the nature of the theatre is presented directly in front of the audience where the actor plays with the audience's eyes. Cameras are always associated with the activities of tv dramas or movies. The camera records what is seen through the lens. The actor will face the camera, the actor will have to act in the direction of the camera position, the movement of the actor is also more limited in order to appear to fit the frame position, focus and shot. Actors are given specific direction where it is necessary to stand, look and move. Each of these positions has been determined according to the position of the camera (taking your mark). Repetition of an action or scene (retake) is common. Acting in a TV drama or movie will usually not follow the sequence of scenes, instead it refers to storylines – for example they make the last scene first whereas the previous scene is no longer created – depending on the situation, budget and time. While actors who play in hybrid theatre do not have to follow the camera requirements as made in tv dramas instead cameras that need to according to the needs of the actor. The overall camera shot technique is also unlike shots in tv dramas or films. The shooting technique in hybrid theatre uses long shots to look like we're seeing the staging from the front. There is a use of close-up and flashback techniques in hybrid theatre but it is not very much and needs to have strong reasons such as explaining and expressing the character's expression or emotions. The concept of 'make-believe' in theatre where the action presented needs to be seen from one angle aesthetic distance (*v*). Hybrid theatre don't have to try to replicate the style of film makings. Making tv dramas or films techniques 'smash-cut (*vi*)' 'jump-cut transition (*vii*)' and others. The use of cameras as a medium representing the 'eyes' of the audience has undoubtedly affected the enjoyment

and satisfaction of watching a theatre play. However, it will not affect the quality of the show if it is well done and integrated. This is where the process of adaptation and creativity occurs in hybrid theatre performances.

Application And Role of Camera Work In Hybrid Theatre

There is a difference in camera usability between film genres and hybrid theatre. Through film we can manipulate space and time using a variety of techniques combined during filming and editing (Bordwell et al., 2017, p. 73). But in hybrid theatre, there are limitations in applying all these techniques due to conventional theatre elements that need to be maintained in their own class. Appropriate camera work will be able to ensure that information and messages delivered to the audience are accurate even though the audience experience differs in terms of space, environment and impact. The camera's motion application must be implemented after the blocking of the actor has been determined by the director. The working motion of the camera in hybrid theatre consists of three main components namely shot size, shot composition and shot position. The components are interconnected with each other to deliver effective information and messages to the audience.

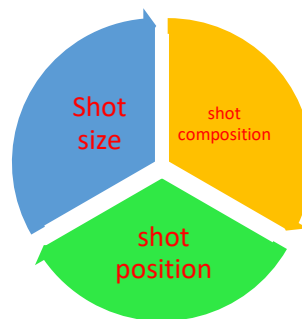


Figure 5: Camera working motion components in hybrid theatre

The size of the shot is the measurement of the shot. Each shot size will reveal different information, interpretations and effects to the audience. Therefore, the director should be wise to experiment and choose the appropriate size of the shot based on the theatrical needs presented. Thus, the combination of the quality of the text, followed by well-established acting and channelled through the medium of camera work, new media and suitable technology, a concept of hybrid theatre performance can be achieved. The size of the shot consists of three main fundamental components namely Long Shot, Medium Shot and Close Up.

Long Shot

Long Shot is a large shot size that can reveal the entire set. The use of this shot is able to provide four functions to hybrid theatre which is to show the time and place setting through the set and lighting, the events that occur and the number of characters involved. These information are important to interpret so that the audience can better understand the hybrid theatre performance.



Figure 6: Example of long shot application in hybrid theater (recording) Sel Akhir (Source: Courtesy by Persatuan Seni Ceritera)

Medium Shot

Medium Shot is taken from the waist level to the upper level of the actor's head. The medium shot function is to show the treatment and expression of the character more clearly. Through a medium shot in hybrid theatre, the audience is able to see the body language better and can even interpret the symbols expressed by the actor.



Figure 7: Example of medium shot application in hybrid theater (recording) Sel Akhir (Source: Courtesy by Persatuan Seni Ceritera)

Close-Up Shot

Close up shots are usually taken from the neck to the top of the actor's head. The purpose is to show the expression and emotions of the characters portrayed by the actor. In hybrid theatre, the additional of close-up shots is something that is 'unfamiliar' when the performance of a theatre is seen in large scale size such as long shot. Therefore the use of close up shots although necessary but must be minimized. The director must be wise to work on the size of this shot so that he does not reduce the charm of the theatre performance.



Figure 8; Example of close up shot application in hybrid theater (recording) Sel Akhir (Source: Courtesy by Persatuan Seni Ceritera)

Another function of close up shot in hybrid theater is insert shot. For example in figure 9, the character's legs are taken closely to give the symbolic meaning that they have been sentenced to death by hanging.



Figure 9: Example of close up shot application in hybrid theater (recording) Sel Akhir (Source: Courtesy by Persatuan Seni Ceritera)

Shot Composition

Composition is also a necessity in recording the hybrid theatre. Placing actors in front of a camera lens is also just as important as placing or blocking actors on stage. But directors need to be vigilant in this regard so as not to interfere with the characteristics of conventional theatre. The blocking arrangement of the actor on stage and shot compositions are able to provide effective messages and information to the audience. The use of the Rule of Third is encouraged in the composition of shots in the hybrid theatre. In the Rule of Third, the image will be divided into nine parts (Mercado, 2010, p. 7). Unlike movies, the middle section is the most dominant and important part of the hybrid theatre. However, the horizontal and vertical lines as well as the 4-point line can also be used as a measurement or placement centre of the actor according to the suitability of the script and the vision of the director.

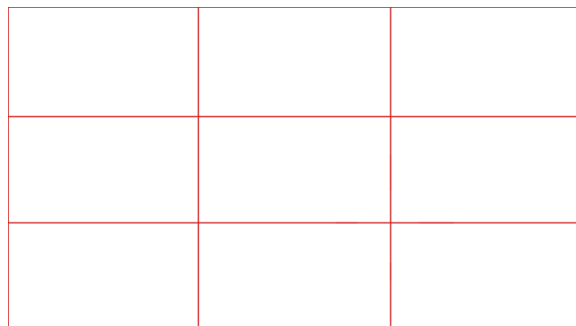


Figure 10: Composition in the *Rule of Third*

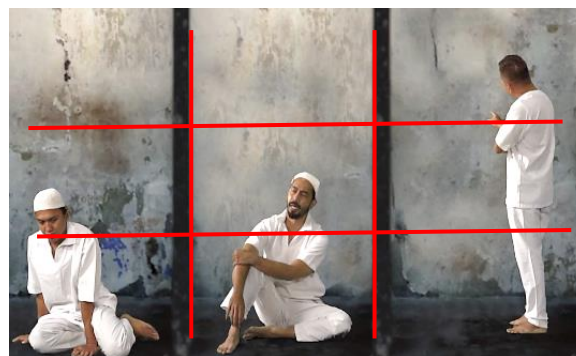


Figure 11: Example of the application of the *rule of third* in hybrid theatre (recorded) Sel Akhir (Source: Courtesy by Persatuan Seni Ceritera)

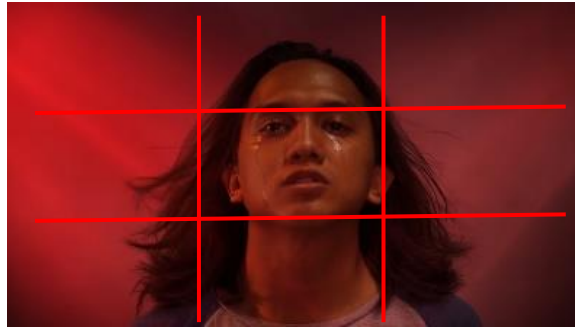


Figure 12: Example of the application of the *rule of third* in hybrid theatre (recorded) Sel Akhir (Source: Courtesy by Persatuan Seni Ceritera)

Angle Shot

Eye level shot is an equal video shot between the actor's head and the camera. It is an ideal video shoot in hybrid theatre to allow audiences to watch theatre performances on a digital medium. It is able to give an understanding of storytelling to the audience.

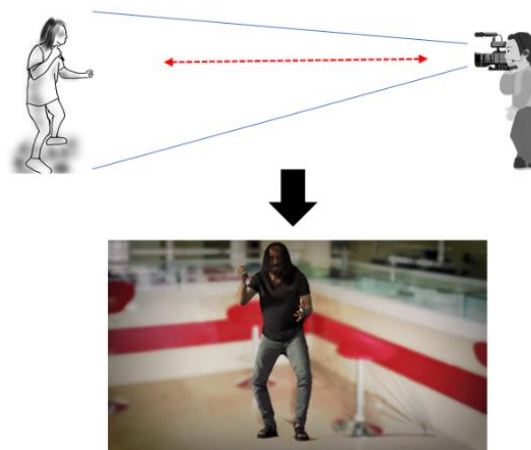


Figure 13: The application of eye level shot in hybrid theatre when actor stands up (Source: Courtesy by Persatuan Seni Ceritera)

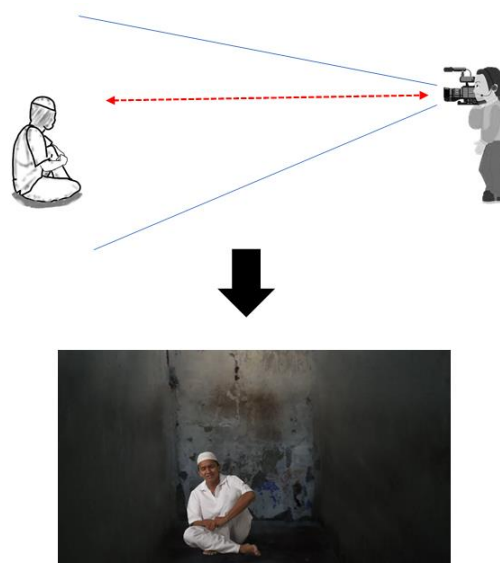


Figure 14: Eye level application in hybrid theater when actors sit. the position of the camera is maintained as when the actor stands. (Source: Courtesy by Persatuan Seni Ceritera)

Conclusions

“It is known that the theatre is an ephemeral art, shows are dying when they are not shown to the public and television theatre can save those which are remarkable.” (Cornici, 2021, p. 157)

The re-emergence of this form of online theatre performance whether it is performed on recording or live streaming, it needs to be seen from a positive angle. The development of technology and the era of digitalization have also influenced the change and development of this form of theatre. History has also proved the great contribution that has been made by this form of theatre like the example made by the television theatre. The hybrid forms of theatre should be accepted by all communities, especially the theatre community. During this pandemic situation, hybrid theatre is able to be the best platform to educate and teach the community, regardless of place and time. Even, online theatre performances have managed to reach national borders and are able to attract many theatre fans regardless of age to sit at home while watching theatre for free (with an option to donate) (Arifa Akbar, 2020). Theatre practitioners should start working with experts in the art of new media technologies to develop a more quality form of hybrid theatre. The art of live theatre performance will still return to its original state but with the addition of a more cheerful face. Digital media technology are merely a conveying tool and with the combination of the diversity of new media technologies in the art of theatre performance will provide added value to the aspect of artistic in theatre performances. Marcus Lilley in his article “Has 2020 Given Us a New Hybrid Model of Performance?” in *Theatre Art Life: The Global Media Site for Entertainment*, stated that;

This hybrid mode of performance utilising the social and broadcast technologies which have enabled us to stay connected with the vision and creative will of performers, directors and writers is not a permanent division from live performance. However it shows that the marriage between live and technology enables some exciting and still possibly untapped future possibilities not just for any future lockdowns but in terms of engaging and inspiring a future generation of theatre-makers. (Lilley, 2020)

So, the focus at this time is to produce a good quality hybrid theatre. It is not our purpose to make the theatre stand like a movie or a tv drama because theatre is special in its own field. I disagree with some conservative opinions seeing pre-recorded performances ‘streaming as enemies,’ fearing that they will replace or damage theatre and its audience. Rather, it will attract and create new types of audience;

“Online theatre and performance is not just about streaming theatre online. Online theatre is about building a sense of co-presence and co-existence in real time for remote audiences: ‘the notion of liveness in cyberperformances is directly connected to the interactive and participative character of the Internet, as without real-time engagement the notion of co-presence is weak and, thus, liveness is meaningless’.” (Papagiannouli, 2016, p. 10)

The COVID-19 pandemic situation has given theatre practitioner some awareness on the importance of media and technology as well as the need for them to enhance their knowledge and mastery of new knowledge, especially media knowledge and technology, methods of use and handling of video cameras, video editing techniques to ensure the sustainability and quality of the hybrid theatre. The conventional theatre performance will remain and will again dominate the live staging arena with the addition of a more attractive image. It has become the nature of theatre that is constantly adapting creatively to the needs of the times and circumstances. Let us not worry too much about the future and fate of the conventional theatre because history has proven that the live theatre will not be lost as long as human beings exist on the face of the earth. Our soul still needs this kind of form and the hybrid theatre too, will continue to develop along with the development of the digitalization era today, as Kwame Kwei-Armah mentioned in an interviewed;

“We will really understand where virtual theatre and new digital technology coexist in about three years’ time, when – hopefully – we’ve come through this part of Covid. It will be in the DNA, and the subconscious of, an emerging generation of theatre-makers who will remember this time when they couldn’t get into theatres and make their arts.” (Arifa Akbar, 2020)

Endnotes

- i. The role of this ‘presenter’ as a liaison between the production team and the audience who watched the performance online. He will introduce the production team as well as the background of the performances that will be presented. This method is also carried out by the National Theatre Group, United Kingdom.
- ii. In studying the plot of experimental dramas, the term storytelling structure is more suitable to replace the plot even though both have the same context (Fazilah Hussin, 2010, p. 169).
- iii. Narrative Play focuses more on the style of storytelling through pronunciation by characters, no major action moves, unlike regular dramas. A variety of pronunciation styles with the ability to play tones, intonations and articulations that reveal emotions as well as reassuring gestures and expressions.
- iv. Aesthetic distance refers to the appropriate position of vision to allow a person to judge and criticize a work of art.
- v. Smash-cut is a sudden cut from one scene to another or another. It happens at an unexpected moment, there when he cuts in the middle of the character dialogue.
- vi. Jump-cut transition is an effective film editing technique to visualize the skip in time. When used correctly, it can help explain the story you want to tell. It happens when shots on the same subject are taken from different camera positions

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