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Theatre without theatres: Investigating access barriers to mediatized theatre and digital liveness during the covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In each stage of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have witnessed initiatives that, through digital technologies, have attempted to ensure the presence of theatre and to nurture the relationship with audiences. Our research asks which entry barriers to the artistic field have been strengthened or weakened by implementing theatre initiatives for online audiences and how these initiatives have affected the regional performing arts scene. The study consists of three parts. In the first part, analysis of Italian calls for digital performance projects was carried out to investigate the institutional construction of beneficiaries and imagined audiences. In the second part, we analysed the case of the digital-theatre season MPA - Marche Palcoscenico Aperto. The MPA project provided funding for artists from the Marche region in Italy to realize online performances between February and May 2021. Eleven focus groups were conducted with 41 of the 60 participating companies. In the third phase, four in-depth interviews were conducted with the project’s organisers. Findings show how the increased dependence of theatre artists on the artistic system imposed by Covid has simultaneously produced an increase in the collective awareness of the artistic class, but also a stronger distinction between professionalism and amateurism.

1. Introduction

On 9 March 2020, Italy was the first European country to go into total lockdown. Since then, venues dedicated to performing arts were partially reopened in the summer of 2020 and closed again from 26 October of the same year until the summer of 2021. In both phases, we have witnessed initiatives that, through digital technologies, have attempted to ensure the presence of theatre and to nurture the relationship with audiences. Artists and organisers initially moved tentatively and without any guarantee of success in the digital environment. They developed more structured interventions, thanks to the activation of calls for digital projects. Moreover, best practices and guidelines on the potential of digital for the performing arts also began to settle with the prolongation of the pandemic and the sequence of lockdowns (Aebischer & Nicholas, 2020).

The attempts to make theatre endure lockdowns expanded the debate on its relationship with digital cultures and technologies beyond the narrow group of digital performance scholars and enthusiasts. However, little work has empirically assessed the processes of the inclusion and exclusion of artists and audiences in the digital migration of the performing arts. On the one hand, the debate has

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focused on the relationship between the specificity of the theatre and online performance languages, sometimes with polarised positions clashing. For example, on the 28th of December 2020, Romeo Castellucci, perhaps the best-known Italian director active today, declared that ‘theatre on the Internet is ridiculous. It is nonsense, a small vulgarity’.1 On the other, many empirical studies have been undertaken with short-term objectives and methods, such as online questionnaires distributed by cultural organisations to assess the satisfaction with online performances of already-loyal audiences. Thus, the socio-political implications of the theatre field in the digital space were often overlooked. Our research asks which entry barriers to the artistic field have been reinforced or levelled when implementing theatre initiatives for online audiences. To this end, we analysed the case of the digital-theatre season MPA - Marche Palcoscenico Aperto. The MPA project provided funding for artists from the Marche region in Italy to realize online performances between February and May 2021.

The first part of this article will briefly introduce the literature on the topic digital theatre before and after the COVID-19 crisis. After describing the research methodology, we will present an examination of the calls for proposals supporting digital performance in Italy during the pandemic. The central part of the article will consist of an analysis of the MPA case and interviews conducted with artists and organisers. The case analysis is organised into three themes: an overview of the initiative, the artistic challenges faced by participants and an assessment of constraints and impacts of the digital-theatre season.

2. Digital theatre before and after Covid

The relationship between theatre and digital media has a history that long predates the pandemic crisis. The way other media is incorporated and adapted to by theatre, defined as hypermediality (Chapple & Kattenbelt, 2006) or medial mobility (Georgi, 2014), has made it possible for theatrical performances to work as sites to observe and reflect on the functioning of the media themselves and the coupling between media and society (Gemini, 2003).

Therefore, the dialogue between theatre and digital technologies is at the core of a vast literature. We can broadly categorise such literature around the axes of digital performance, digitisation of theatre and digital communication of theatre. The first branch of this literature is focused on the use of digital technologies inside performances and on how they enrich the theatrical aesthetic repertoire in the creation of intermedial (Masura, 2020), mixed-reality (Benform & Giannachi, 2011), or cyber-performances (Papagiannouli & Giannachi, 2016) using the internet and social media as their spaces. The second, that of the digitisation of theatre, has studied the use of digital channels for theatre dissemination, for example, in event cinema and livecasting. There is a considerable amount of empirical research in this area, in which both production and audience aspects have been analysed (AEA Consulting, 2016, Sullivan, 2020). The third area is related to the impact of digital media on the communication of the performing arts. In this area of research, it is explored how the relationship with audiences has been changed by social media (Hadley 2017). This shift involves new dynamics of interaction with spectators helpful in audience development processes (Walmsley 2019), but also a new significant amount of relational labour (Baym 2018). A fourth theme that cuts across these three areas is how digitisation affects theatre audiences’ experiences and attitudes. The “participatory condition” (Barney, et al., 2016), stimulated by social media platforms, seems to foster expectations of complicity, co-creation and prosumerism on the part of spectators (Australia Council for the Arts, 2021), which opens new potentials and drawbacks, such as the penetration of work responsibilities into leisure time (Harvie, 2013).

The relationship between theatre and the digital has also been studied as part of the mediatisation process of the performing arts (Gemini & Brilli, 2020). The mediatisation process regards how the social construction of the boundaries of the theatrical event is modified by media logics and imaginaries. This reshaping concerns the spatiotemporal boundaries of performance, a process at the heart of liveness studies (Auslander, 2012, Gemini, 2016), the boundaries between theatrical texts and paratexts (Conner, 2013), and the boundaries of theatrical dramaturgy, addressed by research on transmediality (Del Gaudio, 2021).

From the earliest stages of the pandemic, these dynamics of mediatisation have become visible to a broad and non-specialist audience (Gemini et al., 2020). During this time, the internet and social media became the only interface between the theatre sector and its audience for many months. Digital performance leapt from niche artistic consumption to the mainstream during that moment.

However, this transition has not occurred without friction or inequality. First and foremost, the digital divide relates both to audiences and disparities in digital skills among practitioners (Kulesz, 2020, Walmsley et al., 2022). Secondly, there are ways in which the ability of artists to re-adapt to the digital field have been indirectly affected by social disparities. For example, especially in the first lockdown phase, when home performances were more frequent, initial inequalities weighed on the possibility for dancers to continue rehearsing at home, given the limited available space (Tsitsou 2021). Performers and festivals had to quickly reinvent themselves as “content creators” (Elsden et al., 2021) to keep afloat in the new digital economy, but for the most part without experience in this type of creative industry. Also, among the performing artists most ready to adapt, the constant changes in the health and legislative situation have not allowed them to focus on a stable transition path, thus increasing the pre-existing precarious status (Jezińska & Lorek-Jezińska, 2021). A further source of inequality was dissimilar access to subsidy measures, which in some cases produced resentment between the subsidised and those who continued to work (Walmsley et al., 2022).

The cultural industries have been affected by the pandemic in unequal ways, with significant differences among cultural sectors, countries, social categories of artists (Salvador et al., 2021) and different pandemic phases. In each of these, different approaches and expectations towards the digital world have been seen (Hylland 2022). When studying the relocation of theatrical activities to online

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1 Iacopo Gardelli, “Il teatro su internet è una scenenza. L’immagine della pandemia? Il Papa in piazza”, Ravenna & Dintorni (2020), available on https://www.ravannaedintorni.it/rd-cult/teatro/intervista-romeo-castellucci/, 26.12.2021.
spaces, connecting the macroanalytical perspective with an in-depth look at context-specific problems and impacts is necessary.

3. Research outline and methodology

Our research examines (1) which entry barriers to the artistic field have been strengthened or weakened by implementing theatre initiatives for online audiences and (2) how these initiatives have affected the regional performing arts scene. The study comprises three sections, addressing institutional discourse, artistic work and organisational work respectively. The first part is based on a discourse analysis of Italian calls for digital performance projects; it aimed to explore the institutional construction of beneficiaries, outputs and imagined audiences. To this end, all the public calls supporting digital performance productions during the pandemic period in Italy were collected. Our source was Teatro e Crítica, an online magazine with one of the most up-to-date and inclusive sections on public calls and contests in the theatre sector. All calls supporting digital performances from March 2020 to February 2022 were included (n=20).

The second part concentrated on the digital-theatre season MPA – Marche Palcoscenico Aperto as a case study. MPA received public funding from the Department of Culture of the Marche Region in Italy and was directed by the Theatrical Activities Association of The Marche Region – AMAT. MPA is a useful case study in an examination of the prospect of digitally mediated theatre for many reasons: (1) it includes artists from multiple disciplines; (2) it belongs to a specific region, and therefore invokes the issue of artistic territory boundaries during the Covid crisis; (3) it was provided with funding to ensure the production of performances, and this represents an element of rarity; (4) it demanded that artists experiment with novel ways to produce, disseminate and experience live performances through digital languages. The study included eleven online focus groups in April 2021, with 41 of 60 performing artists and companies that partook in the MPA project. Each focus group featured a variety of multi-discipline artists who were frequently unknown to each other, therefore turning this research opportunity into an appreciated occasion for dialogue among artists from the same region.

The third part consisted of four in-depth interviews conducted between December 2021 and February 2022 with the project organisers: the artistic director, the theatrical promotion and communication officer, the planning and organisation officer, and the chief stage technician. These interviews concentrated on the management problems encountered during the project, the impact on the organisation and the regional scene (six months after the project’s closure) and the prospects for digital performance initiatives in the future.

4. Overview of calls for proposals supporting digital performance

In Italy, as elsewhere (Banks, 2020, Comunian & England, 2020), the pandemic brought to light the institutional marginality of the performing arts world and the endemic fragility of the sector in terms of labour and social security policies. Within the initial measures adopted by the Italian Ministry of Culture (MiC) in response to this, a lack of long-term planning and overall vision emerged, especially in the early phase of the pandemic. The controversial birth of ItsArt, a state-owned digital platform for the distribution of cultural content, is emblematic in this regard. Announced in April 2020 with the unfortunate designation of “the Netflix of Italian culture”, ItsArt has been widely criticised (Gemini, 2021) and interpreted as a sign of a misalignment between the needs of the art sector and the state’s response – especially in relation to digital developments in the performing arts.

Following the closure of theatres in the first year of the pandemic, the Italian Ministry of Culture acted through three lines of intervention: immediate relief actions, optimisation of the use of pre-existing resources and emergency funds for specific interventions. While, on the one hand, the measures adopted supported a sector that had lost 90% of spectators and 70% of consumer spending in 2020² (SWG, 2021), on the other, they primarily helped those with a stable working relationship – mostly the organisational, managerial and administrative staff. Those with intermittent employment relationships, i.e., actors, technicians, musicians and many other workers involved in the world of performing arts, were largely penalised.

Alongside subsidy packages, other types of support measures appeared during the pandemic, with intermediate objectives that varied between funding the creation of digital performances and incentivising the technological innovation of theatre companies and venues. The first step of our research, therefore, consisted in analysing all of the calls for proposals in Italy that supported the creation of digital performance projects. The aim was to understand how promoters conceived (1) the role of digital technology in combating the crisis, (2) the artistic products to be produced and (3) the target beneficiaries and audiences. Overall, 20 calls were found between March 2020 and February 2022 (Table 1), 9 published in 2020, 11 in 2021 and 1 in 2022.

The proponents of these calls were primarily performing arts associations (in ten cases), regional administrations (participating directly in five cases), art residency centres (in seven cases), and, to a lesser extent, foundations, private citizens and individual companies. The direct role of state institutions thus appears to be in the minority and only connected to the support of a regional cultural office.

An analysis of the text of the calls reveals how the field of digital performing arts is one in which production standards and policies have not been fully defined yet. The pandemic context, and the urgency that conditioned the sector, undoubtedly influence this vagueness. However, there is also an indeterminacy that is still inherent to the field of technological and digital art, the diversity and

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² SWG, Cultural consumption halved in 2020: https://www.confcommercio.it/-/consumi-culturali-italia last accessed 20.02.22]
The creation and development of MPA - Marche Palcoscenico Aperto took in the middle of the second lockdown of the Italian cultural venues, lasting from 26 October 2020 to the partial reopenings from 26 April 2021. This phase can be regarded as a period of “theatre of empty seats” (Gemini et al., 2022): compared to the first lockdown, theatres could be used in artists’ residencies, as spaces for rehearsals and as recording and streaming studios. Theatre performances, in this phase, returned to extra-domestic spaces but they were constrained seeking audiences from a distance.

The artistic director of AMAT – the multidisciplinary performing arts circuit in the Marche region – explains, “the opportunity arose from the Region commission, which preferred to support and promote creativity rather than pay compensation for work that had not been done”. In November 2020, the Department of Culture of the Marche Region presented the MPA call. The call was aimed at professional artists and companies in the region, who were invited to present performance projects through any means that would allow them to perform “without theatres”. The call purposely left the meaning of the latter expression open. The digital environment is a further area of conflict in the present institutional discourse is the temporal horizon of the projects’ impact. In one respect, several calls appear to overcome the emergency logic, linking funding opportunities to long-lasting benefits for the field: 4 of the 20 calls aim to bring together different professionals, such as performance artists, videomakers and coders; in some cases, objectives include encouraging the acquisition of skills and technological equipment that can also be used after the pandemic; more than half of the calls envisage training and support actions or the chance to do artistic residencies. They, therefore, show an implied forward-looking perspective for the beneficiary companies and the projects implemented. However, this clashes with the profiles of the beneficiaries and, apparently, also with the level of participation they received. Indeed, the number of candidates appeared much higher during the most acute phases of the pandemic and decreased during the months in which the restrictions were easing. The nationwide call Residenze Digitali (Digital Residencies), for example, was the first to be published in April 2020, and was then renewed for a second and third edition in the two following years. While the first edition received 400 applications, the subsequent ones received 178 and 108 respectively. Similarly, the call Live Streaming Theatre received 74 applications in September 2020, at a time when health measures were being relaxed; shortly afterwards, in November 2020 (during the second lockdown), MPA - Marche Palcoscenico Aperto gathered 360 applications, despite targeting a much smaller geographical and artistic area. Evidently, these are merely indications of a correlation. They nonetheless seem to point to what Hylland (2022) observed in the Norwegian context: the large-scale experimentation of performing artists with digital performance appears to be more a “temporary disruption” tied to the crisis than a lasting transformation of the live arts. If this is what the general picture looks like, it is, nevertheless, necessary to investigate more closely the direct impacts of participating in such projects, a task we will carry out through our case study of MPA.

5. MPA: a festival of theatre without theatres

The artistic director of AMAT – the multidisciplinary performing arts circuit in the Marche region – explains, “the opportunity arose from the Region commission, which preferred to support and promote creativity rather than pay compensation for work that had not been done”. In November 2020, the Department of Culture of the Marche Region presented the MPA call. The call was aimed at professional artists and companies in the region, who were invited to present performance projects through any means that would allow them to perform “without theatres”. The call purposely left the meaning of the latter expression open. The digital environment is suggested as the primary space of action, but the use of other physical spaces is not denied. Another important feature of this call is its hybrid nature, between financial aid and a stimulus for inventiveness on behalf of artists in the Marche region. AMAT artistic director again states:

For me, it combined both things and I can even estimate a percentage. I would say that 60% of participants looked at it as a creative stimulus and 40% as a financial aid. Clearly, it was a moment in which the world of theatre stood still, but in my opinion, this freedom to be challenged as artists to imagine something that did not previously exist puzzled them at first, and then fascinated them.

The call did indeed receive an unexpected level of success, receiving 360 proposals from an artistic territory that has both excellence and artistic dynamism, yet lacks major centres and has a fairly small population. In fact, the project even seems to have
Table 1
Summary of the Italian call for funding digital performances during the pandemic

| CALL FOR FUNDING | PROMOTING ENTITY | PROJECT OUTPUT | TARGET BENEFICIARIES | MAIN TARGET AUDIENCE | CONTRIBUTION | CALL DEADLINE | RECEIVED PROPOSALS |
|------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Digital Residencies 2020 | Five theatrical/dance association | 4 web-based interactive artistic projects | Performing artists | Online audiences | €2,500 for each approved project | 11 May 2020 | 400 |
| PLAY - Dictionary of Silence. A contest for new dramaturgies performed on the web | Theatre company + private | “New dramaturgy” monologues, up to five minutes in length | Italian theatre professionals | Followers of the company’s social media profiles | €800, €600, €400 for the first, second and third classified, respectively | 21 June 2020 | 100 |
| Let’s safeguard culture in Apulia 2020 | The Apulia Region | Cultural initiatives and live performances (theatre, concerts, dance, circus) aimed at enhancing the audience, also through digital means | Professional artists residing in Apulia | Online audiences / new audiences | - | 25 August 2020 | - |
| Phase X | Regional centre for artistic residencies | 11 training workshops on Zoom for performing artists | Italian or foreign performing artists residing in Italy | - | Enrolment in the training programme + €400 support + opportunity for an artistic residency | 10 September 2020 | - |
| Live Streaming Theatre | Multidisciplinary cultural association | 3 “crossmedial” projects to be livestreamed | Performing artists | Trans-regional audiences / immersive spectatorship | €2,000 per project + filming facilities | 30 September 2020 | 74 |
| Call for proposals for the digitisation of cultural enterprises | The Lazio Region | Projects promoting the adoption of digital solutions to improve the production, organisation and distribution of live cultural activities | SMEs based in the Lazio Region that realised at least 30 performances in 2019 | - | - | 22 October 2020 | - |
| Let’s safeguard culture in Apulia 2021 | The Apulia Region | Performing arts projects to be realised in Apulia that invest in digitalisation in the production, distribution, promotion and/or organisation phases | Private entities or associations carrying out professional activities related to cultural promotion or performing arts with their legal headquarters in Apulia | New audiences / disabled people | 80% refund of eligible costs | 15 November 2020 | - |
| MPA - Marche Open Stage | The Marche Region + Regional theatre association | Performing arts projects that can be implemented while “theatres are closed” | Companies or individual professional artists, established in the Marche region, who were not directly beneficiaries of the FUS (Unified Fund for the Performing Arts) in the year 2020 | Online audiences / artists followers | Up to €5,000 | 23 November 2020 | 360 |
| Call for five Apulian digital residencies | Regional centre for theatrical residencies (Apulia) | 5 artistic projects to be hosted as digital residencies | Companies or individual performers residing or working in Apulia | Online audiences | Remote tutoring + technical support + organisational support + production support of €1,500 + to be programmed in Apulian theatres | 10 December 2020 | 40 |
| Digital Residencies 2021 | 2 Regional centres for theatrical residencies + 5 dance/theatrical associations | 7 artistic projects which “have the web as ideal habitat” and which use interactive methods | Performing artists | Online audiences | €3,500 for each approved project | Spring 2021 | 178 |
| Still Digital | Dance organization | - | - | - | - | Over 50 (continued on next page) | - | - |
### Table 1 (continued)

| CALL FOR FUNDING                  | PROMOTING ENTITY                                                                 | PROJECT OUTPUT                                                                 | TARGET BENEFICIARIES                                                                                     | MAIN TARGET AUDIENCE                                   | CONTRIBUTION                                                      | CALL DEADLINE               | RECEIVED PROPOSALS |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Still digital OFF                 | Dance organization                                                               | Digital performances combining “choreography and video art” with a length of 30 to 40 min | Established choreographers and companies working in Italy                                            | Online audiences / Festival audiences                  | €4,000 for each approved project                                  | 28 February 2021          |                     |
| CIAK! Piemonte che Spettacolo      | Private foundation + regional foundation + regional film commission              | Still digital OFF: Screen-dance projects not exceeding 15 min in length         | Emerging choreographers or dance companies, aged between 18 and 30, resident in Piedmont               | Online audiences / Festival audiences                  | €1,000 for each approved project                                  | 28 February 2021          |                     |
| Heritage on stage                 | The Marche Region + Regional consortium of performing arts associations           | CIAK! Piemonte che Spettacolo: 10 video pieces of performances in three formats (short film, 2 min, 59 s) realised in prominent heritage sites of the Piedmont region | Collaborations between performing artists and videomakers                                            | National and international cinema, television and festival audiences | -                                                               | 24 March 2021            |                     |
| BUGS - Digital Habitats for Young People’s Theatre | Regional centre for artistic residencies | CIAK! Piemonte che Spettacolo: 5 performing arts video projects set in key prominent heritage sites of the Marche region | Members of the regional consortium of performing arts associations                                  | Regional and national audiences                       | €5,000 for each project + funding for video production, promotion and distribution | 16 April 2021            | 20                  |
| Let the show (once again) begin!  | Private foundation                                                               | Heritage on stage: 1 youth theatre production designed for the digital environment through a series of “hybrid residencies” | Performing artists                                                                                  | Online audiences between 6 and 14 years of age         | €10,000 + artistic residency, which includes the use of theatre, technical support, artistic mentoring by an expert | 5 May 2021                | 70                  |
| Digital Interface Award           | Dance association                                                                 | BUGS - Digital Habitats for Young People’s Theatre: videodance works lasting between 3 and 8 min | Cultural and performing arts associations, foundations, non-profit organisations                      | -                                                      | €250,000 split between two winning projects                      | 5 July 2021               |                     |
| Phase XL                          | Regional centre for artistic residencies                                           | Digital Interface Award: videodance works lasting between 3 and 8 min          | Choreographers, performers, visual artists and videomakers of any nationality                        | Festival audiences                                    | €1,500 for the production of a new videodance piece + one-week artistic residency | 15 July 2021              | 30                  |
| All round and inside              | Theatrical association                                                            | Digital Interface Award: 4 online training meetings on new technologies in the performing arts and 6 days of residency | 4 Italian or foreign performing artists residing in Italy + 4 “geeks”, i.e., computer scientists or technicians who have worked in the field of performing arts | -                                                      | €500 + 6 days of residency inclusive of space usage and accommodation | 28 October 2021           |                     |
| Digital Residencies 2022          | 2 Regional centres for theatrical residencies + 5 dance/theatrical associations  | All round and inside: 3 multimedia art projects involving the practical use of new technologies | Performing artists                                                                                  | Online audiences + young audiences in schools          | Two weeks' residency, including accommodation, use of spaces and support | 15 December 2021         |                     |
|                                  |                                                                                  | Digital Residencies 2022: 6 artistic projects which “have the web as ideal habitat” and which use interactive methods | Performing artists                                                                                  | Online audiences + young audiences in schools          | €3,500 for each approved project                                  | 24 February 2022          |                     |
succeeded in bringing “home” artists whose career orbit had long been outside the region:

We received a flood of applications, which left us stunned. Bear in mind that I kept telling the Region that since the number of certified groups of artists in theatre, circus, dance, and music was around 115/120, that would have been the horizon we were expecting. Instead, the call was so successful that all the talent on the run returned to work to the Marche.

The jury, comprising members of AMAT and experts in the field of technological performance, selected 60 projects, each of which received funding of up to 5,000 euros, as well as promotional support. Of the 60 projects by individual artists or companies, 24 were in the field of theatre, 13 were musical performances, 8 dance, 5 children’s theatre, 4 circus, 3 puppet theatre, 2 DJ sets, 2 contemporary performances, 2 musical-theatre and 1 live-visual. Promoted as a festival of theatre without theatres, these projects composed an online season, from 23rd January to 31st May 2021, with more than two hundred events that took place through social media, streaming services, messaging apps, video-chat or by mail. The events ranged from concerts or plays streamed on YouTube to one-to-one performances on WhatsApp, from theatrical documentaries to digital fables narrated on Telegram, from interactive performances on Zoom to video theatre series on Facebook, from theatre on the phone to theatre by mail.

6. Emergency experimenters: MPA artists in the face of digital liveness

A central issue in this study is how artists, most of whom had never worked on digital productions before, envisaged their artistic proposals for this domain. Of the 41 companies and individual artists who took part in the focus groups, only five had previously worked on projects designed specifically for digital spaces. Seven had only worked on multimedia productions which also circulated online, such as video dance works, webcasts, film productions or video performances.

A first point to note is how performance formats, even when they used the same platforms, generated very different outcomes. In contrast to the first phase of the pandemic, when – partly due to tighter restrictions – formats such as readings, home concerts or re-editions of the archival materials had crystallised (Gemini et al. 2020), here artists acted through a logic of invention and recombination rather than through translation. In very few cases there were concrete adaptations or transformations of plays in digital formats. Rather, a creative effervescence was observed, allowing innovative performance devices to emerge. This creative effervescence was concentrated around two main strains: the construction of interactive solutions and work on gradients of liveness.

A common feature of many of the projects is the attempt to develop concrete participatory habitats (Balzola & Rosa, 2011, Frieze, 2016) with audiences, in which active participation of the spectator, sometimes involving a performative aspect, played a central role. 21 of the 41 interviewees included some form of interactivity in their projects. Among these, we can distinguish different levels of audience participation. One group of projects worked on pre-show engagement, for example inviting the audience to perform certain actions – such as sending information or collecting clues – in the period before the performance. Another group of projects exploited the possibilities of digital platforms, either by stimulating interaction in a chat or by having viewers take actions to activate the performance’s content. At a higher level of interactional intensity, we find those projects that left the script partially open, thus varying the dramaturgy according to the audience’s intervention. With a still higher degree of interactivity, certain forms of participation implied a weakening of the boundaries between performer and spectator. For example, in the participatory dance project You are me by Michela Paolini, the audience participated in the very construction of the choreography.

The search for interaction in the performance by artists who had not generally worked in this key derives from the opportunity to exploit the characteristics of digital media and from the need to regain a sense of co-presence with distant audiences. However, the participants’ reflections reveal that this logic of “compensation” was not the only motive. In other words, it was not merely a question of recovering an absent relationship, but also of experimenting with new possibilities for that relationship. One type of experimentation in the relational dimension was connected to the spectator’s responsibility. Some projects entrusted small tasks to the audiences in order to establish a commitment that would resist the interchangeability of digital contents and stimuli. PPSS MOSAICO 020_Rito web by the company Collettivo Ønar is an example of a live performance on Zoom that was preceded by a long prologue of email exchanges. As the actor Giacomo Liliù recounts:

It was a series of seven emails, we called them “letters in a bottle”, sent to those who left us their address by signing a registration form. Not only did these emails describe the scope and tone of the project, they also introduced an element of interactivity because each of the letters, beyond their stylistic elements, also contained a small mission involving the collection of artefacts that would be reintegrated into the live performance.

Thus, it seems that one of the ways to mitigate distance from the audience and at the same time contrast its dispersion in the digital environment was to resort to a higher degree of spectatorial labour, as has also been reported in other analyses of mediatized performances during Covid-19 (Liedke & Pietrzak-Franger, 2021, Silberschatz, 2021). In this regard, Liliù states that it is essential to interrogate these shifts in spectatorship if we want to understand how theatre can approach digital platforms:

Perhaps the theatre is the most excluded from this digital system because it is not enough to replace the eye of a camera with that of the audience. The rules of engagement are very different, and the audience has a great deal of power in the digital world, no matter what. An artist whose training and poetics have habitually not allowed the audience all this power creates a product that satisfies no one, neither the audience nor the artist himself.

To invite remote audiences into roles that go beyond their usual positioning, but which are closer to the prosumer logic of online audiences, has provided a potential way for artists to establish a new spectatorial pact. While the canonical relationship with the audience in the theatrical space involves rules of engagement that are codified, shared and consolidated over time, dispersed audiences can approach digital performances through multiple modes of vision (a variety of devices, reception environments, spectator etiquettes and attention norms), which are less knowable and controllable by the artists.

A second conceptual and aesthetic knot on which the projects worked was the elaboration of different gradients of liveness. For over
thirty years in performance and media studies, overcoming the live/non-live binarization so as to recognize plural conditions and experiences of liveness has been widely debated (Auslander, 2008, Reason & Lindelof, 2016). The patterns of digital liveness (Auslander, 2012) observable in online spaces have shown even more powerfully the nuances of this concept, to the extent that it is possible to interpret ‘gradients’ of liveness (Gemini, 2016).

The artists participating in MPA experienced the re-articulation of the here and now in online spaces first-hand. Often this experimentation took place through a process of trial and error that began by aspiring to the highest degree of liveness and then was obliged to compromise with constraints that were encountered, ultimately opting for combinations of live and recorded elements. The artists who presented pre-recorded performances also sought to include sections that reconstructed the sense of co-presence. One method used was the modulation of the temporal scarcity of the event: 21 projects performed live; 9 chose the live streaming of recorded material; 3 opted for a non-ephemeral broadcast that nonetheless remained available online for a limited time only; just 4 cases made recordings that are still accessible. Another technique was to associate broadcasts with Zoom talks that could help to restore the dimension of the post-show gathering. A final strategy was instead a type of fully-mediated liveness, in the sense of a partial experience of liveness produced by the audience’s awareness of media formats. In these works, there was no attempt to overlap the time of performance and the time of reception, rather simultaneity is represented within the video itself, through the simulation of a real-time observer that is internal to the film. Examples of this type are Still Waiting by the Teatro Linguaggi company and Home Let by Asini Bardasci and Pietro Piva: in the former, the position of a real-time spectator is simulated through the use of the sequence shot, in the latter it is activated through the spy cam format.

The interviewees’ experiences demonstrate that they are involved in the shifting relationship between performing arts and media technologies. The mediatization of the performing arts (Gemini & Brilli, 2020) does not only relate to the use of digital media within performative work, instead it represents a more general material and discursive impact of the media on the entirety of the artistic activity. The pandemic situation seems to have made this process more explicit. The artists in question found themselves adopting the specific role of ‘emergency experimenters’ in mixed-media, despite the fact that, for most of them, the investigation of media was not part of their ordinary artistic routine. In this case, digital media were not simply surrogate solutions, but fields of artistic and relational research. In other words, the projects were able to construct new experiences and work with the very same tensions – participation, gradients of liveness, transmediality – on which more institutionalised digital performance research also works. In MPA, this investigation was carried out – with a couple of exceptions – by artists who do not tend to classify themselves or cannot be classified as “media artists” or “digital performers”. This does not mean that artistic research on digital media is accessible in the same way and with the same results for all performing artists; it should not be forgotten that the realized works all passed a selection process, and despite this, we cannot speak of a consistent level of quality. What it does mean, however, is that mediatization involves an embodiment of media imaginaries, formats and practices which cuts across institutionalised denominations and career paths.

7. What remains of a digital season: constraints and impacts of the MPA project

The MPA digital season was a notable success in several ways: the number of submissions received far exceeded expectations, the artists interviewed were generally satisfied with their outcomes and the audience flux, despite disparities between initiatives, was positive. The participants appreciated the opportunity to break their inactivity through a project that challenged them. As the AMAT organisation officer stated, “Anyhow, it was an opportunity to confront oneself with something that would not have happened otherwise”. For most artists, it was a chance to reflect on the mutual influences between theatre and digital media in a relatively protected context. The success of the initiative makes it even more relevant as a case to look at the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the digital sphere for performing arts and at the impacts of the digital season, even in the aftermath of the pandemic.

7.1. Socio-technical and organisational constraints

From the project analysis, we can identify two types of constraints to the creation and fruition of digital performances: socio-technical constraints, concerning the combination of technological barriers, attitudes of the users towards digital affordances and lack of digital skills; and organisational constraints, arising from the challenges posed by digital platforms to the production and distribution of performances.

Three significant socio-technical constraints are observed: obstacles posed by affordances of platforms to the creation process, problems related to the transmission and lack of digital competencies in the audience.

Among the first type of obstacles, artists mentioned the problem of having had to recalibrate their projects following a clash with the affordances of the environments they chose that they had not taken into account. Some media formats, for example, were unsuitable for online audiences.

Our error was proposing an experience that was perhaps better suited to a theatre or film festival. A one-and-a-half-hour viewing experience belonged more to those other contexts. In the context of social networks, which require intermittent attention from the audience, a work like ours was too long. This was a lesson: the medium can be used by meeting its prerogatives and not by forcing your own into it (A., theatre artist).

Constraints around transmission are related to delays and malfunctions of internet connections, and particularly to the sense of uncertainty arising from the likelihood of such occurrences: “You are a slave to the infrastructure. We had one cancelled date because the platform crashed. The biggest limitation was the powerlessness in the face of such incidents” (S., contemporary circus artist). These problems stem from considerable backwardness in Italian digital infrastructure and the short-sightedness with which technical facilities are acquired. An example of this myopia is what the chief stage technician from the AMAT said about the inadequacy of Italian
This was another thing I have learnt: when we buy an internet subscription, they tell you about the 50-megabit download. The truth is that if you want to stream, you do not care about the download: you care about the upload. Many theatres may have a good download contract, but the upload sucks. Therefore, you cannot do anything with that connection.

The third socio-technical constraint is the digital skill deficit of the audience. The organisers described how, for some of them, a large part of their work concentrated on looking after the spectators one by one, helping them recover platform passwords or links that had ended up in the spam box or had arrived at unused e-mail accounts. “The assistance we provided was almost carer-like, a moving thing, but also a very onerous task” (C., AMAT communication officer). However, this was also the consequence of the misalignment of expectations between ways of experiencing theatre and digital liveness. One theatre company, for example, transmitted a live-streamed video on YouTube. Many spectators automatically assumed that they would be able to watch the video when they wanted to but missed the scheduled broadcasting time of the event: “The problem with YouTube was that many people thought that once you put the film there, it would stay there forever. Therefore, we know that many people did not log on at the scheduled time” (I., theatre artist).

Among the access barriers deriving from organisational problems, there are ambiguities from the formulation of the call, the crowding of the offer and the lack of consistency in the attending procedures.

The fact that the call for proposals is halfway between an incentive for creativity and support for the sector in crisis has a double consequence. On the one hand, this allowed it to become a “widespread regional experiment”. On the other hand, it generated some misunderstandings regarding its objectives. Some interviewees interpreted the call mainly as an aid to the artists from the Marche region: “The Region seemed to support as many people as possible. On the other, there was an artistic selection. In my opinion, all this created a lot of confusion” (G., theatre artist). Others, on the contrary, interpreted it as an aid to investing in new research paths. “We did it because it was the only chance to make art at that moment [...] We made a choice not to make money but as an investment, and also to have a material ready for something else in the future” (R., musician).

The second organisational constraint, the digital events overcrowding, does not depend solely on the number of selected projects but on the digital access that made them equally available in the same time frame. The capacity to facilitate access to performances that would otherwise be limited in the physical space created – according to some – an attention deficit:

There were too many projects. This is good per se, but it makes it difficult to see other things from other people. Five to six events a day for an audience like the one in the Marche region made up of spectators who are mainly season subscribers, half of whom are over 70 and unfamiliar with digital, is too much (M., theatre artist).

The third organisational constraint lies in the lack of uniformity in the way performances are accessed. This problem stems from the conflict between allowing artists to experiment with digital performative devices and aggregating artistic offerings. If the project had provided a unique dedicated streaming platform, this would inevitably have levelled out any experimentation with the medium. However, giving artists complete freedom meant that they had to organise their ticketing if they wanted to have tickets for the performance. The MPA also left freedom on this point. Still, the ticket was the way for many participants to bind the audience to the event. This situation has led to technical problems with ticketing services in multiple cases. From being a means to engage the online audience, the ticket became an obstacle, although not a financial one:

A significant limitation to the access to the performance was the symbolic ticket of three euros because we had problems with the ticketing platform *****, so serious that, in our opinion, it affected by 40% the possibility of accessing the show. Still, it was essential to create such an engagement (C., theatre artist).

Overall, organisational constraints arose from a conflict between two characteristics, both typical of digital environments: modifiability and archivability (Philips & Milner, 2017). On the one hand, artists are allowed by modifiability to invent their own scenic devices. However, this variety increases the level of expertise and commitment required from organisers, artists and spectators to make the performance reachable. On the other hand, digital platforms can be exploited for their archivability, for the way they can gather in a single space a multiplicity of elements to which, however, may correspond to an overcrowded offer.

7.2. Impacts: skills, relationships, conflicts

Although it is impossible to discern the long-term impacts of the MPA project, we can draw some conclusions about the immediate and medium-term impacts. The most noticeable effects are related to three macro areas: acquired skills and knowledge, strengthening relationships and intensifying pre-existing conflicts.

The first set of impacts is related to the expertise that has been built up among organisers and artists by confronting the digital experience. Many interviewees agreed in recognising the laboratorial value of the initiative: “Taking part in a call also gives you skills. It is a training ground beyond the result, even to focus your project for a specific call is” (M., choreographer). As analysed in the previous paragraph, artists could measure themselves with an experimental perspective that was not always part of their working horizons. Many of them faced first-time issues, such as digital live streaming, the challenge of remote spectatorship and the contrast between the gaze of the camera and the gaze of the in-person spectator.

The acquisition of expertise is even more apparent from an organisational perspective. The artistic director of AMAT speaks of a “thickening of know-how” within the association, to the point of stating that “in six months we have made a 10-year leap”. The skills acquired are to be found both on the technical side and on the side of organisational skills. The chief stage technician of AMAT expressed strong enthusiasm for the practical experience he gained. This experience has changed the way of approaching also the technologies on the physical stage. In his words, there was a rethinking of the importance of delegating more tasks to technology and of
how to solve problems from remote efficiently:

This experience has helped me start doing my work on stage again [...]. All this work on MPA has taught me that presence is not essential for solving specific problems. Many things were used to be done with a hundred hands. Now, I think more about how to do them on the computer. I learnt all this during the lockdown, and it was fantastic.

In terms of organisational skills, there was also a reappraisal of professionalism, translated into a keener selection of necessary tasks and a stronger tendency towards delegation. A large number of initiatives to be followed, diverse in content and formats, meant that the communication officer of AMAT had to “learn to travel with light luggage”. Tasks that used to be carried out on the spur of the moment, by tradition, habit or passion, are now more carefully pondered. The load and complexity of organisational work were already increasing before the pandemic. Now, the complexity has increased even further. The organisation is required to capitalise more on the specific professionalism of the operators and to delegate peripheral tasks to the appropriate people. The organisation officer gives the example of how he was irreflexively inclined before the pandemic to take care of aspects, such as catering for artists. This extension of tasks was impeded in the health emergency. Still, the consciousness of the importance of delegation remained even afterwards:

Before, to save money or work ethics, we thought I would not delegate if I could do something. With the pandemic, we have discovered that others can do it. Indeed, for health reasons, others have to do it. We used to do it conventionally, for instance, preparing the charcuterie to be found in the dressing room. But last summer we had to turn to suppliers [...]. From there, we discovered that our work was becoming lighter and that it was fairer to involve local traders in activating the territory.

The increase in the complexity of tasks was therefore addressed in two phases. In the initial and emergency phases, the organisation sought expertise by recombining internal resources and expanding the scope of duties or self-training. When complexity proved to be greater and more durable than expected, an attitude of delegation seemed to have developed, which, at least for the time being, seemed to persist.

The enhancement of relationships is the area of impact that stands out most clearly from the interviews. For artists, relationships have increased both quantitatively and qualitatively. That is, the situation of uncertainty and vulnerability has produced an increase in connections and connections of different kinds. First, new relationships were created for the exchange of artistic expertise. Collaborations have been established between different disciplinary fields, between artists, video makers, engineers and designers, but also mutual mentoring relationships around technical and bureaucratic issues:

A community of MPA artists formed and followed each other. The first ones who started shared with the others what they had learnt from their own experience, with copyright, for example. It was similar to the old artistic residencies, where companies lived in the same space and talked to each other. This happened digitally (C., AMAT communication officer).

The need for bureaucratic recognition was a significant incentive to create new partnerships, often by looking at the immediate local community. The call for proposals required that the artist should at least be able to invoice. Other subjects were sought with whom to form a consortium where not everyone could meet this essential condition:

For the bureaucratic problem, we suggested activating collaborations. Invoicing will not be the only task we will ask you to do. We will also ask you to pay your suppliers and take care of any copyright paperwork you may have to report on the project. Therefore, you, dear freelancer, rely on local reality, an association, an agency, something local that allows you to carry out the project as a professional (M., AMAT organisation officer).

This empowerment of local relations resulted in a paradoxical effect: a digital project made the artistic territory more tangible and visible. Although it is usual to think of the digital through its deterritorialising affordances, which were indeed crucial in widening the audience of the project outside the region, in this case, many reported how the Marche’s artistic tissue stood out more than in “normal times”:

“I always had the idea that there was not all that much movement in this region, but I came back and was amazed by the activity that exists (E., theatre artist).

For me, it was also a journey through the Marche region, which I would not have done had it not been for the MPA call. I knew various proposals that I did not imagine existed (M., theatre artist).

Therefore, we can observe an increase in the reflexivity of the sector, not only in terms of the artistic territory visibility but also in terms of the awareness of the artists as a class. The strengthening of relations has also resulted in increased conversations and collaborations between artists to demand more rights and guarantees. For example, a Coordination of Artists in Marche (CAM) was created in the same period, asking for greater involvement of performing artists in managing local theatres and events.

This year, if there is anything to salvage, it is the awareness of our category gained. This call was also an opportunity to make a series of reflections on the part of the artists from the Marche region who have created coordination and networks to discuss a lot. There are very active chats that deal with what happened and discuss how to do better (A., theatre artist).

Connected to the discussion on rights of performing arts workers, the highly controversial issue of the boundaries between professionals and amateurs has risen. Although not specifically addressed in the interview outline, this problem surfaced at several moments during the conversations. According to a few artists, “too many amateurs” participated in the project. The term “amateur” was used by them with a double meaning, both in terms of artistic achievements and bureaucratic framework: there were too many artists who had “suddenly become” digital experts, and too many who were not professional artists but who nevertheless participated. These “intruders” dredged-up resources should have been allocated to people who make a living from performing art and who lost their only source of income with the pandemic:

Too many projects were presented. Perhaps it would have been better to select fewer, 20 for example, and give more liquidity to them. Five thousand euros for a theatrical production of this type was not enough. Sixty projects were a lot, and it was difficult for me to find so many good ones in the Marche. There must be some amateurs in the middle [...]. The problem in Marche is that many
amateurs believe they are professionals when they are not. If you do theatre at the church level, you are doing something else (F., choreographer).

Not all the interviewees shared this animosity. For many, the distinction between amateurs and professionals is not so much a question of the quality of the artistic output as a necessary distinction to improve the rights of workers. There was consensus that the impasse has made it essential to improve the regulation of workers in the performing arts field. However, the real “pandora’s box” is how to establish these criteria for inclusion. Not everyone agrees with creating a professional register, which may prove to be a too-rigid cage. Defining inclusion based on curriculum or training is discriminatory for self-taught artists and newcomers. Determining inclusion based on income from artistic job clashes with the endemic problem of undeclared work that plagues the industry and that, unfortunately, represents a livelihood that many could not give up overnight.

In conclusion, there has been an increase in awareness and solidarity within professionals. Nonetheless, it also seems that the conflict between professionalism and amateurism has been exacerbated. This boundary was already the focus of confrontation in the pre-pandemic period, but it could be tolerated to be defined more loosely. The degree of ambiguity manageable by the system was reduced by factors like the COVID-19 crisis, confrontation with digital barriers, reflections on the distribution of funds and the hardening of security and copyright regulations. However, this ambiguity was also a fundamental resource for the artistic system, particularly independent production. On the fringes of professionalism, in fact, there is not only illegality and dilettantism, but also a less formalised underworld which is vital to the local art scene. Such exclusionary tendency represents one of the main regrets for the future.

I am a bit sad because what we have lost is everything that comes from the bottom. Everything that is spontaneous, independent and perhaps not yet professionalised. Because if you want to do things under the current law – let’s say you are a small collective or an association – if you really want to respect everything that is now required for a live performance programme, you are ruined. It is really depressing (M., AMAT organisation officer).

8. Conclusions

In this article, we have analysed the impacts and access barriers of the digital migration of performing arts during the Covid-19 pandemic. Focusing on the case of the Marche region in Italy, we tried to understand the opportunities and constraints of using digital media in performing arts production. We addressed this issue to analyse how the performing arts sector survived the most acute phases of the pandemic and to observe whether, and under what conditions, online performance might be a supplementary field of action for artists, even after the return to regular programming in venues.

The analysis of all the calls for proposals supporting digital performance in Italy showed a general indeterminacy regarding the role digital performance should play during the pandemic and in the current artistic landscape. While the calls try to draw a profile of the beneficiaries typical of the subsistence measure, they also seem to invest those beneficiaries with the responsibility of innovation.

In this scenario, the case of MPA (Marche Palcoscenico Aperto) served to map the experiences and perspectives of artists with generally little expertise in digital performance and observe the consequences of this measure on a significant sample of the regional artistic fabric. The wide and varied participation in the initiative showed that the online environment is not, in itself, a limiting border. Artists did not just transfer their works online but took advantage of the opportunity to become emergency experimenters, capturing the same aesthetic tensions that digital artists are accustomed to confronting.

However, there are also several constraints for artists and organisers that must be considered and further studied to understand the access barriers to digital performance. Socio-technical constraints are due to the infrastructural backwardness of the Italian system but also to the fact that online spaces include affordances and resistances still invisible to many practitioners and spectators. The organisational constraints show that in the digital field, the balance between various performative devices and the need to aggregate the proposals must be managed. An excess on the first side leads to “jet lag” in the spectator, disoriented by the fragmentation of the access modalities. An excess of the second type risks equalising the offer, diminishing the effect of digital art’s experimentation with the medium.

The impacts we identified concern the acquisition of new artistic and organisational skills and the intensification of relations within the regional artistic field. The pandemic, and the MPA project especially, increased the reflexivity on the organisational culture of theatre operators and performing artists’ working conditions. The opportunities for development that can be derived from this awareness, however, are based on a hardening of the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion. For organisers, professionalisation and legislation adjustment enable them to manage complexity and unforeseen events more effectively. On the artistic side, more effective support measures require a clearer codification of professionalism. In both cases, this implies setting higher entry barriers, which could prove detrimental to independent production domains. It will thus be necessary to observe whether a reduction of the ambiguity that limits both undesirable effects (illegal labour and laxity in safety regulations) and informal creativity or whether new ways for the system to manage this ambiguity without eliminating it will prevail in the post-pandemic period.

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