



theatre &
the digital

Bill Blake

Foreword by Matt Adams



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contents

<i>Series editors' preface</i>	vi
<i>Foreword by Matt Adams</i>	viii
The promise of something different	4
The idea of progress in the arts	6
The digital imperative	10
New mediaspeak	18
Digital unease	23
Online presence	29
What can theatre do without?	37
Theatre apps	44
Mission business	58
Conclusion	68
<i>Further reading</i>	71
<i>Index</i>	81
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	84



series editors' preface

The theatre is everywhere, from entertainment districts to the fringes, from the rituals of government to the ceremony of the courtroom, from the spectacle of the sporting arena to the theatres of war. Across these many forms stretches a theatrical continuum through which cultures both assert and question themselves.

Theatre has been around for thousands of years, and the ways we study it have changed decisively. It's no longer enough to limit our attention to the canon of Western dramatic literature. Theatre has taken its place within a broad spectrum of performance, connecting it with the wider forces of ritual and revolt that thread through so many spheres of human culture. In turn, this has helped make connections across disciplines; over the past fifty years, theatre and performance have been deployed as key metaphors and practices with which to rethink gender, economics, war, language, the fine arts, culture and one's sense of self.

Theatre & is a long series of short books which hopes to capture the restless interdisciplinary energy of theatre and performance. Each book explores connections between theatre and some aspect of the wider world, asking how the theatre might illuminate the world and how the world might illuminate the theatre. Each book is written by a leading theatre scholar and represents the cutting edge of critical thinking in the discipline.

We have been mindful, however, that the philosophical and theoretical complexity of much contemporary academic writing can act as a barrier to a wider readership. A key aim for these books is that they should all be readable in one sitting by anyone with a curiosity about the subject. The books are challenging, pugnacious, visionary sometimes and, above all, clear. We hope you enjoy them.

Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato



foreword

Discussing theatre and the digital is a bit like discussing theatre and electricity. Without qualification and explication it leaves us floundering in a sea of possibilities. Now that an average medium-scale production of *Oklahoma!* employs more computing power than sent a rocket to the Moon, it is fair to say that ‘the digital’ is so embedded as to become invisible. And yet to attempt to define the digital is a fruitless task – one that Bill Blake wisely sidesteps in this book.

This is a classic example of the problem Wittgenstein identified in *Philosophical Investigations*. When exploring the slipperiness of language he discusses the impossibility of arriving at a precise definition of games. Any attempt to produce a cast-iron rule – games must be fun, or have goals, or rules or a specified outcome – is immediately outwitted by the example of a game that is not fun, or does not have goals, or rules or a fixed outcome. Wittgenstein develops the idea of ‘family resemblance’ instead. No game

may meet all the conditions but each game will meet most of them and thus we can all readily understand what a game is despite the lack of a dependable definition that applies in all circumstances.

When we consider the digital in the context of theatre, it may be most productive to focus in on the most significant and disruptive elements that it brings to bear on the artform. Theatre has prized itself as an interactive artform, especially in opposition to the cinema and television as each technological upstart usurped the stage from which it sprang. However, the most significant characteristic of the ‘digital revolution’ is an explosive new amount of interaction and participation that is profoundly different in volume and character from what has gone before. It poses new challenges for theatre that are only beginning to be understood. It offers new audiences and new communities. And it demands new forms of performance and new spaces to show it in.

In *The Empty Space* Peter Brook writes that ‘a man walks across [a bare stage] whilst someone else is watching him, and that is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged’. Those four fundamental theatrical particles that Brook identifies – the performer, the audience member, at this particular place and in this particular time – are all challenged in a world that is networked.

In an online space such as a chat room or a virtual world, the line between audience and performer is blurred and may shift from one moment to the next. Even in a physical space a work like *Rider Spoke* by Blast Theory invites each ‘audience