Young Adults, Theatre, and the Digital Space

In a recent Twitter thread, theatre artist and multimedia designer Jared Mezzocchi recounted an interaction with two young members of a children's theatre who had told him that they had broken up with each other the night before, in a mansion in the middle of the woods. He goes on to state that they had initially failed to mention that they were referring to a location in the video game *Fortnite*, but in doing so highlighted "How consequential digital space was to each of them" (2023). While Mezzocchi's observations are anecdotal, they showcase not only the relationship that young people have with digital technology, but also the idea that theatre artists can utilize digital technology to engage with young people. This idea is also not unique, as many theatre professionals are exploring using theatre techniques, social media and technology to connect with young audiences and performers alike.

Moriah Flager, for example, conducted a residency with a middle school class that focused on using different methods of digital storytelling, a term representing a myriad of different means of digital self-expression, including things from podcasts to slide shows, as a way to disrupt traditional methods of teaching, with the goal of helping students connect themselves with other students, embracing their similarities and differences (2019). Elsewhere, theatre educators are being trained to use digital media in their classrooms as a means of enriching the learning experience and overall improving literacy in students (Jensen, 2012). As she says during her article, these educators are encouraged to work with 21st century learning techniques and "embrace theatre's natural quality – that of meaning-making" (2012).

Similarly, Sarah Tan's *Childhood in the age of digital culture* discusses not only the role that digital media can have on the classroom, but also the importance of online culture to youth. Youth engaging in social media, and other online spaces are described as being "members of another culture" and that it is, thus, important to both understand this culture, and find ways to improve literacy and promote safety in those spaces (Tan, 2021). Theatre professionals are working on incorporating social media culture, not only in educational settings, but also in professional performance settings. Danielle Le Saux-Farmer discussed collaborative projects that both utilize social media and were about social media. They noted that one such project involved developing improvised characters that used social media as a means to connect with others, struggling at the same time to form real-world connections with each other (Le Saux-Farmer, 2020). At the same time, the production created "real world" internet content, blog posts and videos, all created from the point of view of the characters from the show (Le Saux-Farmer, 2020).

Le Saux-Farmer's discussion highlights another thing to consider when incorporating digital technology – what stories are being told about technology and social media, and what do they mean to the young adults that engage with them. A thread throughout several articles was that certain plays and theatre practices tend to highlight the dangers of social media (Le Saux-Farmer, 2020; Tan, 2021). Tan, in particular, noted that several plays written about social media

bared similarity to biblical morality plays, comparing the "invisible dangers of social media" to the "voiced dialogue of the otherwise inaudible Christ and Devil" (2021). Similarly, some emerging theatre educators have struggled to understand why digital spaces and technology should be considered when creating learning plans for youth, even when they themselves would frequently use social media in their own personal lives (Jensen, 2012). Tan considers this to be an aspect of fear from adult playwrights, especially when theatrical works include adult characters who are afraid of, or otherwise angry with, social media (2021). It is thus important to remember that theatre being made to engage with young adults should also be created in such a way that it both sparks creativity, and allows its audience to think critically for themselves, instead of imposing specific dangers onto them (Tan, 2021).

The union of theatre and digital technology is still new and emerging. Digital media's importance to the art of theatre and, in particular, theatre education, is something that is still being developed and studied (Jensen, 2012; Flager, 2019). That being said, professionals who decide to embrace the digital space have managed to find a means to do so that both extends the ideas of creativity, highlights (and educates on) the unique cultures of social media, and connects with a wide range of younger audiences that may have otherwise been reluctant to engage with theatre in the first place (Jensen, 2012; Flager, 2019; Le Saux-Farmer, 2020; Tan, 2021). It is an encouraging idea to consider when working with young adult audiences. As Mezzocchi says, "When we begin to embrace this, we will begin to see how theater can inhabit such a space. It is there that we will build a theater for the next gen."

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