

Video essay

Hijacking the Familiar: The Work of Big Telly Theatre Company

ZOË SEATON, INTERVIEWED BY HEIDI LUCJA LIEDKE

The following is a transcript of the Q&A with Zoë Seaton on 2 August 2022.

Heidi Liedke 0:02

Hi, Zoë, it's really great to have you here as part of this Q&A, and as part of our special issue. How are you? How are things with your work?

Zoë Seaton 0:14

Now I'm great, thank you. Yeah. And delighted to talk to you again. We've made so many interesting connections over the pandemic, and we had some great conversations. So, no, delighted to be talking to you again.

Heidi Liedke 0:25

Yeah, that's lovely. And in a way, it's picking up on our conversation from last year, as you presented one of the keynotes at our conference digitally in Hanover. So, let's think about a couple of concepts and questions that we are all thinking about somehow. So, looking back on the past two years, what are for you the key concepts that have shifted in the context of theatre and performance?

Zoë Seaton 0:53

I mean, I think everything has shifted. I think location is one of the biggest ones, the kind of ... where we presumed an audience had to be. Where we presumed a play had to happen. What you know, we all presumed, and we were already doing a lot of site-specific work, but we presumed all the actors had to be together. We didn't, you know ... although we were doing shows where there might be a character on the phone or other people remote, but mainly, we assumed that. So, I think it's about ... about location is a massive thing. Where the audience needs to be where the actors needed to be, where the critical appraisal of the work could come from.

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And that was, you know, it was very ... it was ... we've always been based, you know, outside. You know, we're based in Northern Ireland, which is kind of quite distant in a way. And also, then we are outside the main urban centres in Northern Ireland. So, it was interesting to us to suddenly get a lot more attention in the pandemic for our work than we have had prior to that. So, I think location was a massive thing that changed about it – geography.

And I think ... access about ... you know, we ... we also thought we were really accessible, before. We were already working in rural locations, and in non-theatre locations. But we were getting so many emails from people across the world saying, you know, pre-pandemic, I didn't leave my home, I wasn't able to access theatre, and now I can. And ... and that was very, very common and made us realize that our definitions of accessibility were actually quite old.

And ... and the third thing, I think, is agency. The agency of the audience, the role of the audience within a work.

The kind of privilege of being invited into people's homes, and the privilege of seeing actors work in their own homes, and dismantle green screens and reveal their domestic environment. The kind of baring of soul in both ways that and again ... and also the fact that an audience could turn their cameras off at any time.

So, I would allow myself to be spotlit in ... in a piece of Zoom theatre in a way that, you know, if I was in an ... an ordinary theatre, and somebody put a spotlight on me, I would leave immediately, I would be livid.

But the way the audience could make a choice about their spectrum of engagement ...

I liked that and I felt it was really dynamic and made the actual dialogue between ... between the performance and the audience much more vibrant, and much more energetic.

Heidi Liedke 3:34

'Spectrum of engagement' – I really liked that phrase. Perhaps we can come back to that in a few minutes, when also talking about agency. Now you've mentioned location and geography and access as some of the first things that came to your mind when thinking about recent shifts. Presence. The word 'presence' is such a strong ... such a strong presence – pun intended – in theatre and performance studies. And I wonder, what would you say? Do we still need it at all as a defining criterion of performance?

Zoë Seaton 4:08

When you say 'Do we still need it?' do you mean do we still need in ... in the real world live presence?

Heidi Liedke 4:13

Yes, both. So, in the real world live presence, but also simply, when ... when thinking about what does theatre of performance mean to you, to me? Does this need to be something that is necessarily there? Or does it not have to be there at all?

Zoë Seaton 4:30

Yeah, I mean, I suppose I can only talk about, you know, our own work. And we were very, very clear very early on in the pandemic, that we weren't interested in recording and streaming anything. You know, that that wasn't something and some people have done that brilliantly. And I'm not criticizing that whole genre of work. But that wasn't where the ... where the interest was for us. And ... and therefore, the, you know, some of the live ... the sense of presence, I think, from a digital audience was just as visceral and affecting as that in the real world. And I've been to plays in theatres where I might as well not have been there. And I've been in the blackout and not acknowledged. And that doesn't feel like I'm present. So for me, presence, it's about acknowledgement, and lightness, rather than necessarily whether people are remote or in real space.

Heidi Liedke 5:24

Hm, and so acknowledgement of the spectators and what they bring to the performance? Or what kind of acknowledgement?

Zoë Seaton 5:32

Yeah, I mean, I suppose, you know, like the digital shows that I've seen where, you know, the audience might as well not be there. 'Don't interrupt me'. And we experimented with it, I think in ... in *Department Story*, which was our first kind of, you know, hybrid ... proper hybrid piece, in that we had a live audience in a site-specific theatre event. It was very ... very physical for the audience. They were on journeys. But also, the remote audience watched via six live feeds, which they could choose which perspective they were watching. And they could also affect the physical environment. So, they had smart plugs that they could trigger things to happen in the real space. So even though we ... we in the real space couldn't see the remote audience, they could make their presence felt. And so yeah, so for me, there's a sense that those ... that people are ... are a part of it. The community of it is important to me, I think.

Heidi Liedke 6:32

That's really interesting. Now, several contributions to our issue argue that the present moment has effects on how we think about resistance. So, resistance to institutions, to anglocentrism, to productivity and capitalism, to hierarchies. What is your take on that? What can performance resist to? Now, what does your work perhaps resist to do?

Zoë Seaton 6:56

I mean, I think it's about agency. Again, I think it's about an audience feeling like they're, they can influence things.

And I think I suppose, you know, when you look at, you know, the most extreme version of, you know, is Augusto Boal and the forum theatre, which allows experiments with spect-actors and the extent to which they could influence things.

And I think, although, you know, again, there was a spectrum of engagement and spectrum of agency, I think that sense that you are a player in this world, absolutely contributes to activism more than passivity.

So ... and I think that becomes interesting. And I think it becomes particularly interesting – I know, we're going to go on to talk about this – when you make that happen in non-theatrical spaces and unfamiliar spaces.

Heidi Liedke 7:47

So, not ... not only spect-acting, but also the potential for spect-activism, to some extent?

Zoë Seaton 7:55

Yeah, I think it does. And I think when you're asked to make choices, when ... when you're asked to be in the moment, and be fully present, I think that can have an enormous impact and has an enormous kind of potential power, which is, you know, to be realized.

Heidi Liedke 8:12

Hm, the ... the title of your keynote last year, and also, I believe the motto of your work is that you 'hijack the familiar'. What do you mean by that? And what comes next, once the familiar has been hijacked?

Zoë Seaton 8:28

Yeah, I mean, I think I've always been more interested in ... in ... in imagination. In like, suddenly, you're walking down the street, and the phone box moves.

Heidi Liedke 8:38

Right.

Zoë Seaton 8:38

You know, in things that disturb your normal day-to-day life. And in the way that you can kind of add magic to a space and you can charm a space by making something happen in it, which is surprising. So, you know, like, what if when you went into the post office, they gave you an envelope with the secret code, and that went ... you know ... And I think what happens when you, I suppose, when I talk about hijacking the familiar, what I mean is, what happens when you ... if you take the kind of accepted behaviour and accepted kind of rules of other locations, like in a café, you're given the menu and you order things. So, what happens if you go to a café and you're given a menu and you order things, but those things might be stories. They might be things you can see, they might be things you can touch. They might be things you can hear, they might be intimate pieces of storytelling. You know, by doing that in an environment, it makes the audience very comfortable because they're familiar with going into a café and sitting down and ordering things. So, people feel that's not ... that structure is not challenging, but then you can bend it and you can order different

things. And then when you go back to that place, it is ... it is imbued with the magic that was there.

So, we did a show called *The Little Mermaid* in swimming pools years and years ago. And you would hear kids arguing after about what ... how we got the mermaids there? Was it in big lorries? Was it in water tanks?

What, you know, for them, it was real that there were mermaids in their local pool. And that means that that becomes a site where anything can happen.

And I think that when all of our normal ordinary spaces become spaces where anything can happen, we start to apply imagination to our worlds. We start to say, 'Well, why can't ... why does that building have to be empty? And maybe I can do this in this building and why don't we?' And I think it ... it's about ownership, and about ownership of the potential of space.

Heidi Liedke 10:34

That's lovely. Thank you very much, Zoë, for your statements. I think, to put to use our imagination, also in other spaces, is something that we could perhaps all try to do more. And I'm really happy to hear that your company is ... is touring again. So, you mentioned in the pre-conversation chat that you're up to several geographical locations?

Zoë Seaton 11:00

Yeah, that's right. We're doing a new show in the ... I mean, we've been all over the north of Ireland recently, but we're doing a new show in the autumn, which goes to Belfast, and then London and then, hopefully, New York after Christmas. So, that's exciting. And also we've made great friends in Europe. We've done a co-production with Alfred University in New York, where we had an actor based in Belfast, and we ... and ... and he was part of their live show in a disused Kmart in Aldridge. And so, we're going to kind of you know, consolidate those connections and build on those relationships. So yeah, it's really exciting.

Heidi Liedke 11:34

Thank you very much.

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Supplementary materials. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883322000438>