

Precarious Bodies: Locating Spectatorship in the National Theatre of Scotland's *Scenes for Survival* Series

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This article examines Scenes for Survival, a series of short digital artworks co-created by the National Theatre of Scotland, BBC Scotland and Screen Scotland, for its intersecting dimensions of precarity. On the one hand, the series shows how a pandemic's challenges are unevenly distributed. On the other hand, it addresses the expressly precarious position of (post-)pandemic theatre – precarious in that theatre presupposes the co-presence of an audience of some sort. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of embodied precarity, I explore how select monologues articulate a 'new bodily ontology', and what kind of audience is constructed in the process. As I suggest, Scenes for Survival proposes ways in which proximity and physical co-presence must be reconfigured, constructed across space and time. In doing so, the series adds to ongoing discussions of how to conceptualize digital spectatorship, especially in times when physical co-presence is impossible, and thus becomes an issue of vulnerability.

When large parts of the world went into lockdown in early 2020, filmed monologues quickly emerged as one of the dramatic forms of the moment. Notable examples from the United Kingdom and Ireland include Stephen Beresford's *Three Kings* (2020), livecast as part of the Old Vic: In Camera series; the revival of Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* (1988/2020) for the BBC; Papatango's *Isolated but Open: Voices from across the Shutdown* (2020); the *Popelei Seed Commission 2020: Women in Lockdown*; and the Abbey Theatre's *Dear Ireland* series (2020–1). In their 'Lockdown Culture' section, *The Guardian* even ran an article titled, 'Up Close and Sensational: The Best Monologues Made during Lockdown'.¹ In addition to meeting pandemic-related health and safety production requirements, this kind of introspection appeared as a timely creative response to the feelings of isolation that came with social distancing, travel restrictions and working from home. One remarkably rich collection of filmed monologues is *Scenes for Survival* (2020–1), a series of short digital artworks co-created by the National Theatre of Scotland, BBC Scotland and Screen Scotland. The collection showcases fifty-five short videos, most of them monologues but some also featuring two or three performers. They were written by Scottish writers, directed remotely by Scottish directors, and performed and filmed by Scottish actors in self-isolation. If watched in chronological order, the individual episodes trace the

pandemic's progression and its ever-growing impact on people's mental health. Several videos depict characters struggling with loneliness (e.g. Janey Godley's four-part *Alone*), mourning lost loves or dead relatives (e.g. Michael John O'Neill's *Sore Afraid*), or exhausted healthcare workers (Uma Nada-Rajah's *The Domestic*). Importantly, the digital artworks explore how challenges brought about by a pandemic – and, with it, coping strategies – are unevenly distributed, and predicated on categories such as gender, class, race, sexuality, age or disability. The series thus interrogates the intricate, and often intersecting, dimensions of precarity.

Considering Scotland's long-standing struggle against marginalization through English political and cultural hegemony, and particularly an ever-growing movement towards independence from the UK, it seems fitting that monologues contemplating various forms of isolation were produced by Scottish theatre-makers.² Concurrently, as the move online generated an audience well beyond Scotland, the project throws into sharp relief how, during a pandemic, identity categories based on national borders may sometimes become blurred.³ True to the company's nomadic self-conception as 'a theatre without walls',⁴ the videos are freely accessible via the National Theatre of Scotland's website as well as on YouTube. And yet, as I illustrate with reference to three select examples, the unwelcome presence of walls of isolation – protective measures that, to some extent, further increase conditions of vulnerability and precarity – looms large in these short dramas.

The precarity of spectatorship

In the course of the pandemic, the term 'precarity' has been claimed and contested by various societal groups and industries, not least because being recognized as such often provided access to at least some financial support. A large number of people employed in economically precarious sectors, including the arts, were hardly acknowledged by emergency funds and related political responses, or only began to be considered after several months. Elsewhere, notions of precarity were tied to being 'essential workers' and, according to the slightly bizarre German coinage, *systemrelevant*, which literally means 'relevant to the system'.⁵ In this case, precarity signified being both essential to a vulnerable critical infrastructure and, as in the case of healthcare or factory workers, at high risk of exposure to the virus. But even outside global states of emergency, precarity is a fuzzy concept. Emily Hogg reflects on the pitfalls of identifying precarity as a 'distinctively contemporary phenomenon for those in the Global North privileged enough to have become accustomed to the so-called standard employment relationship during the historically exceptional period of the post-war consensus'.⁶ Precarity should not be dismissed prematurely as a symptom of privilege, as the terms of 'standard employment' and of what was previously affordable by such standards have shifted dramatically. However, as Hogg continues, it is still worth thinking through the ideological drawbacks of too readily labelling conditions and lived experiences as 'precarious'. The assumption of a 'shared, universal vulnerability' elides the stark inequalities founded on centuries of colonialism, enslavement and other forms of strategic socio-economic exploitation of the global South.⁷

To acknowledge that crises exacerbate already existing states of hardship, I propose sharpening the above more quotidian usages of ‘precarity’ with Judith Butler’s distinctly political theorization. Butler’s work on the unequal foundations of precarity must be understood vis-à-vis their long-standing interest in notions of ‘grievability’ and ‘livability’, concepts chiefly developed in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009). They distinguish between two interrelated terms: ‘precariousness’ on the one hand and ‘precarity’ on the other. The former ‘implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other’.⁸ Defined in this way, precariousness is a social condition. Precarity, by contrast, is unevenly distributed, and mapped disproportionately onto disenfranchised groups. Such markers of vulnerability either may be inherent conditions, such as chronic illness or disability, that are aggravated by systemic discrimination and neglect; alternatively, they may be entirely socially constructed, as in the case of racism, poverty, homophobia and so on. Either way, Butler makes clear, precarity is an embodied condition. Rather than ‘a vehicle for the expression of a political view’, the body forms ‘the common corporeal predicament of those who need to be supported by proper infrastructure or social services, proper economic conditions and prospects’.⁹ From this conceptualization of precarity derives an obligation to carefully consider how to use these and related terms. Before being able to redress conditions of precarity, ‘we will first have to be supported by a new bodily ontology, one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependence, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work, and the claims of language and social belonging’.¹⁰ *Scenes for Survival* helps unpack these different categories, charting ways in which theatre and performance can add to a more sensitive and nuanced understanding of precarity’s social formations.

Butler’s understanding of precarity originates in highly political contexts of extreme violence and war. Clearly, the precarity of theatre – both economically and in its more metaphorical sense of depending on a highly circumscribed communicative situation – is hardly comparable to the threats faced by, say, women in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Still, I suggest that Butler’s concept lends itself to explore the multiple dimensions of precarity in pandemic theatre, not solely because it recognizes the centrifugal forces of crisis scenarios but also due to its emphasis on embodiment. Formations of precarity come to bear on the context of pandemic theatre in a number of ways. According to its mission statement, *Scenes for Survival* aimed to support the creative survival of Scottish playwrights, actors and directors, while also raising funds ‘for artists and theatre workers who have been hardest hit financially by the current crisis’.¹¹ Additionally, the series has to navigate the conundrum that its reliance on a digital and, crucially, non-live format raises wider questions regarding theatre as an art form. During a pandemic, theatre’s presumed communicative situation, involving the co-presence of an audience of some sort, proves precarious by endangering participants’ health. In *Scenes for Survival*, the audience shares neither the same physical nor the same virtual space with the performers. Several reviewers have commented on this curiously absent presence, trying to locate an audience somewhere in the dramatic cosmos. For Joyce McMillan, ‘it’s the plays staged in an outdoor setting ... that seem to come closest to evoking the energy of a real theatre

performance; not because there is an audience, but because the presence around the actors of city life, however subdued, at least suggests the possibility of one'.¹² In other words, though certainly not 'real theatre', the series' deployment of an implied audience enables viewers to consider it a form of theatre in the first place.

This article centres on the precarity of spectatorship, examining how *Scenes for Survival* articulates a digital co-presence that is resonant with a 'new bodily ontology', in Butler's terms.¹³ The three monologues I have selected each explore different facets of precarity: the nexus of race, class and economic adversity; the fragility of mental health; and the limits and potential of theatre as an inherently precarious art form. In conveying a noticeable yearning for co-presence between actors and audience as well as between audience members, the videos create a shared sense of community, and thus highlight theatre's capacity to reduce isolation. They explore how such proximity must be reconfigured if it is constructed across space and time, especially in times when physical co-presence is impossible. Simultaneously, all three monologues disavow the existence of universal precarity. Various drawing attention to the bodies of those involved, they highlight how precarity affects, or indeed constructs, different bodies in different ways.

Before moving on to the monologues at hand, I begin with a brief discussion of how extant critical debates on pandemic theatre often disregard dimensions of precarity – financial, physical, or otherwise – by imposing certain normative standards. Theatre and performance studies have extensively debated what constitutes a performance, and how to conceptualize liveness.¹⁴ In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Peggy Phelan argues, 'Performance's only life is in the present', which by definition precludes any form of archiving.¹⁵ In a similar vein, Erika Fischer-Lichte insists that 'a performance takes place in and through the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators', whose mutual interaction collaboratively creates the performance.¹⁶ She reiterated this view in the autumn of 2020, when major theatre companies had long been recording and livestreaming performances – many of them adapted to the screen – and had also begun experimenting with entirely digital formats. In an interview during Belgrade International Theatre Festival, Fischer-Lichte claimed, 'Something like digital theatre does not exist', because filmed and (live-)streamed performances do not meet her criterion of physical co-presence (of audiences and actors).¹⁷ Some theatre critics have raised similar concerns. Mark Brown, for instance, encourages his readers to 'applaud online theatre's role as, effectively, a lifeboat that is keeping live drama afloat until it can return to its natural habitats'.¹⁸ Although identifying online theatre as a much-needed source of revenue, Brown's dictum positions digital theatre as derivative and secondary, a 'shadow product' rather than a viable creative form in its own right.¹⁹

Even outside the context of the pandemic, arguments about online formats as, at best, a mediocre surrogate raise questions concerning live theatre's gatekeeping function. Though certainly an altogether different theatrical experience, streamed performances are accessible in ways that live theatre is not,²⁰ even though the technical barriers posed by streaming must not be overlooked. In the UK context, live theatre frequently normalizes expensive ticket prices and travel costs to a

London-centred theatre scene. And although increasingly accommodating wheelchair users and offering signed or relaxed performances, it still predominantly envisions audiences as able-bodied, mobile individuals. As Nicholas Potter bluntly puts it, those who ‘arrogantly call for theatres to stand as vacant temples of self-pitiful mourning during the current pandemic are too privileged to realise the benefits of streaming. They are luddites that history will not look favourably upon.’²¹ In addition to their implicit ableism and classism, views presupposing the existence of a physically co-present audience deploy a conceptual register that is ill-attuned to the state of physical and psychological isolation enforced by a pandemic. The filmed monologues in the *Scenes for Survival* series would not count as performances by Phelan’s and Fischer-Lichte’s standards, and neither are they live in the technical sense of the term. Nonetheless, they negotiate an intimate connection between actors and audiences that closely resembles the feeling of liveness forged by bodily co-presence. Philip Auslander, for whom live and mediatized performances exist in a ‘parallel’ rather than hierarchical relationship,²² has recalibrated some of his arguments in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999) with regard to digital formats. As he argues, ‘liveness’ should be understood as a ‘historically contingent term’ according to which the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators is a common, yet not a *sine qua non*, condition of performance.²³ Drawing on the work of Nick Couldry, Auslander proposes that ‘the experience of liveness is not limited to specific performer–audience interactions but refers to a ... continuous, technologically mediated temporal co-presence with others known and unknown’.²⁴ Auslander’s usage of liveness as an ‘experience’ rather than an ontological condition adequately speaks to the pandemic’s simultaneous separation and connection of human beings in isolation. As I will show in the following, this shared – but sometimes also precisely subverted – sense of community felt by the spectators produces a feeling of liveness that sidesteps, or substitutes, the need for temporal and physical co-presence.²⁵

‘We’re all in this together’: Kevin Gilday’s *Courier Culture* (2020)

My first case study, Kevin Gilday’s *Courier Culture* (dir. Graham Eatough), explores constructions of social non-belonging as generated by three intersecting markers of precarity: race, class and financial hardship. The monologue follows a fast-food delivery driver, played by Jatinder Singh Randhawa, cycling through the deserted streets of lockdown Glasgow. If he is too slow, he will be punished with a one-star rating, with the consequence of ‘orders ... drying up’.²⁶ The video’s setting seems post-apocalyptic, as closed shop fronts and big #SaveOurNHS signs come into view. Other displays applaud essential workers, proclaiming, ‘Let’s watch out for each other’. But the protagonist voices a disconnect from such public displays of solidarity. His status as ‘essential’ entirely relies on external attribution, on being recognized as such by anonymous others: ‘The key workers. That’s what I am, too, apparently; that’s what the man on the news says, what the Government says ... If I disappeared tomorrow, no one would notice. The app would just find someone else to carry my bag.’²⁷ On one level, then, his precarious existence is expressed through what Butler

terms ‘the claims of language’; that is, performatively created through language that dehumanizes and reduces him to a function within the system.

Throughout, the monologue marks the protagonist as dissimilar to the viewer. As McMillan puts it, his ‘plight perfectly reflects the odd and dangerous politics of a lockdown country that was happy to sentimentalize key workers for ten minutes every Thursday night, but persists in electing governments that will not protect them from grotesque neo-Victorian labour conditions’.²⁸ Lotty Holder makes a similar point, commenting that the scene makes ‘us as an audience question the little and large: how do we treat our delivery drivers, supermarket staff and other non-NHS keyworkers? Have we let our lives be ruled by technology and fast culture? Have we forgotten how to be kind?’²⁹ Her use of the terms ‘we’ and ‘us’ is telling, because it assumes the audience’s role to be that of detached observers. ‘We’ are the ones occupied with clapping rather than fixing the system, the ones ordering the take-out rather than delivering it. This emphasis on the audience’s removal from the protagonist’s lived experience touches on theatre’s supposed elitism and attendant status as luxury or entertainment – arguments that have been deployed to justify the relative neglect of the cultural sector since the outbreak of COVID-19 and that, in turn, have increased the economic precarity of those involved.

Whereas this financial dimension of precarity (though still far from universal) is more common, the delivery driver’s struggle is further exacerbated by intersectional marginalization. He feels like a disappointment to his parents, who fail to recognize that he takes on such a precarious job because of immense economic pressure. Although his parents ‘had a house and a family by the time [they were his] age’, he does not ‘even own this bike’.³⁰ A similar lack of understanding transpires when his mother calls him during his shift about some minor medical emergency, accusing him of being ‘cheeky’ when he tells her he cannot simply rush home right away.³¹ He breathlessly asks her to call NHS 24 instead because he simply cannot risk jeopardizing his employment. This class-based articulation of precarity is contingent on race. Randhawa is a non-white actor, which reflects the extent to which overworked and underpaid workers are disproportionately people of colour. His pronounced Scottish accent serves as an indicator of class, yet it concomitantly emphasizes his Scottishness. Nevertheless, he talks about experiencing racist abuse when a customer did not receive what they ordered. The precarity of his existence thus not only rests upon his precarious employment but also, and primarily, on ‘the claims of language and social belonging’, in Butler’s terms. It is suggested that he does not work hard enough, is not white enough, to belong.

Like the reference to habitual racist abuse, the camerawork, too, draws attention to the protagonist’s vulnerable body. The perspective alternates between a low-angle shot – here the camera is positioned on the bike’s handlebar – and a point-of-view angle, captured from the protagonist’s helmet. Viewers experience the situation as if they were sitting on the same bike. When cars cut in in front of him, they feel the delivery driver’s adrenaline rush. The notion of precarity mapped onto the protagonist thus extends to the viewers, forging identification and simulating a feeling of bodily co-presence or liveness. But, in all likelihood, they are watching this scene from their

homes. Etough's direction therefore opens up two separate spaces – one outside, and potentially dangerous; the other inside, the safe space of the observer – which again complicates the co-presence of an audience. The scene's continuous foregrounding of the body, the protagonist's as much as the audience's, is juxtaposed with an otherwise disembodied scenery. In fact, one of the few indications of an additional human presence is provided by the disembodied voice of the app that guides the driver and announces his next routes. This makes the protagonist's bodily presence stand out all the more, identifying him as Other in several ways. To borrow from Butler again, the precarity of his existence is communicated by a body rendered vulnerable, injurable, interdependent and exposed, and that is made legible as such through the claims of visual language.

In line with these habitual distinctions between protagonist and viewer, *Courier Culture* ultimately questions the existence of a 'universal' condition of precarity. It ends with the protagonist placing an order on the doormat of a house that has a 'thank you key workers' rainbow sign in the window. A couple of seconds later, he receives a message via his app: 'Chips are cold. One Star'. He then looks directly into the camera for the first time: 'We're all in this together. Right?'³² Are we, though? Such breaking of the fourth wall often attempts to foster a sense of solidarity, if not in-group membership. But here this would be at odds with the viewer's recurrent positioning as observer and, accordingly, as privileged in comparison to the delivery driver's precarious existence. His irony, too, undercuts any viable sense of a 'we', and so this communicative move only solidifies the metaphorical walls between protagonist and audience highlighted above. In conjunction with the very literal separation by a screen, this concluding line reminds viewers of their isolation, which, although burdensome in itself, here figures as a condition of safety.

'A circle of ill': Jenni Fagan's *Isolation* (2020)

Whereas *Courier Culture* positions the ability to self-isolate as a form of privilege, in Jenni Fagan's monologue (dir. Debbie Hannan) the titular isolation poses a threat to the protagonist's already poor mental health. Mark Fisher comments how, 'Viewed from afar', *Scenes for Survival's* individual videos 'will become time capsules', throwing viewers back to their own pandemic routines;³³ as Fagan suggests, this effect also works with less temporal distance. The video shows an unnamed woman, played by Kate Dickie, in her bedroom. It is suggested she has not yet fully recovered from COVID-19, as she is coughing and has some trouble breathing. But more than with the disease's physical aftershocks, she struggles with forced isolation and 'the debilitating aura it exudes'.³⁴ 'I am not the same person I was three weeks ago', she says twice.³⁵ Her son, whom she intermittently addresses throughout the video and who returns to her at the end, has been sent to stay with his father in order not to catch the virus. She is scared of infecting others, too, because in the liminal state between illness and full recovery, 'Every direction is a minefield. Every move feels like it could be the wrong one'.³⁶ As even the basic bodily function of breathing is potentially harmful, she does not even dare to ask friends and neighbours to provide

her with fresh supplies. Hannan's direction offers close-ups of the woman disinfecting her son's plastic toy animals, and resorting to almost grotesque acrobatics in order not to touch the tap when washing her hands. Images of people frantically disinfecting their domestic, now potentially unsafe, surroundings particularly resonate with the beginning of lockdown, when there was insufficient data about the virus's ways of transmission. This reliance on an easily recognizable pandemic iconography simulates Auslander's concept of a 'technologically mediated temporal co-presence with others known and unknown'.³⁷ In this case, the resulting feeling of liveness is established through shared experience and being caught in the same larger cultural moment rather than through immediate, physical co-presence at a given moment in time.

Even though they may be familiar to many viewers as part and parcel of their lockdown routine, the protagonist's actions seem disconcerting in the way they are montaged, communicating precarious levels of anxiety. Variably speaking directly into the camera and through voice-over, she discloses her history of mental-health issues, and thus her own injurability, in Butler's sense. The pandemic has brought hitherto unknown challenges; it has engulfed her by 'a circle of ill' around which her 'daemons are gathering'.³⁸ Her vulnerable state is visualized by short nightmare sequences, designed by video artist and composer Lewis den Hertog. These include black-and-white snippets of an origami bird the woman mentions sending to her son, a large Titanic-like steamship she imagines passing through her street, and the shadow of a crocodile that threatens to invade her bedroom. Through these sequences, Claire Wood writes, Fagan and Hannan's 'creepily atmospheric piece strikes a brilliant balance between filmic panache and the brutal immediacy of theatre'.³⁹ The video's sound editing, with its sense of 'dramatic foreboding', similarly bears theatrical resonances. As Corr Blimey notes, Den Hertog's sound design 'neatly ties deeper into Fagan's descriptive troubles of mental deterioration, the almost hallucinogenic properties where isolation forces us to confront ourselves, in the absence of being able to see this alien entity, this virus'.⁴⁰ For the most part, the woman's only link to the outside world is the sudden eruption of clapping for healthcare workers, which appears entirely incongruous with the protagonist's desperation and furthermore faintly recalls an audience's applause in the theatre. The way the clapping gradually morphs into a threatening sound in the nightmare sequence bespeaks Fagan's larger portrayal of the paradoxical craving for, and concomitant fear of, physical co-presence.

In its second half, *Isolation* moves from claustrophobic introspection to 'an ethereal, almost detached view of the world and its recovery in our absence'.⁴¹ The protagonist recounts surreal headlines about how various animals invade cities across the world, from deer in Tokyo to 'goats [that] have taken over Llandudno' in northern Wales.⁴² Echoing the optimistic 'nature-is-healing' narrative overemphasized by the media,⁴³ these images are taken as a symptom of nature's revenge against the 'narcissistic, hateful men in charge of entire countries' who 'only serve their own ego and profit'.⁴⁴ Like these animals reclaiming space, human beings, too, have to come together again, because 'every living thing needs every other living thing'.⁴⁵ By way of

accentuating these words, the protagonist reassembles the previously disinfected toy animals, placing them next to each other as a herd made up of various species. As the doorbell rings, the woman moves closer to the camera, saying, 'I am so grateful for this moment. And I won't forget those who can't be here'.⁴⁶ Her words aptly capture the intertwined precarity of physical and mental health as embodied conditions – embodied because they rely on a social infrastructure that requires the physical presence of other bodies. Whereas the woman is eventually released from her isolation, the same kind of relief is withheld from the viewer, maintaining the claustrophobic tension communicated in the scene at large. The video ends with the woman audibly greeting her son, yet the camera stays focused on the bed. Quite literally, what viewers see here is an actor leaving the stage, as all further action is relegated to an offstage space. This serves as a poignant reminder that, at this point in 2020, theatres were still closed. Physical co-presence, however much craved by performers and audiences alike, was highly precarious and perilous, and thus only imaginable on the smallest possible scale.

'It's showtime': Catherine Grosvenor's *Listen to Me* (2020)

So far, I have discussed formations of precarity as grounded in the interlinking categories of race, class and mental health. My third example, Catherine Grosvenor's *Listen to Me* (dir. Shilpa T-Hyland), likewise centres on mental health, while also meta-reflexively addressing the pandemic's impact on the already precarious condition of actors. The monologue presents a short drama in three acts, with the first demonstrating a poignantly maladaptive way of coping with lockdown isolation. It shows a character named Fahad, played by Taqi Nazeer, whom Grosvenor aptly describes as 'part self-help guru, part boot camp instructor'.⁴⁷ He directly addresses the viewer, calling them out on their laissez-faire lockdown behaviour and on not having used the time to accomplish such tasks as running 'marathons in their back garden' or learning Gaelic.⁴⁸ Looking coiffed and stylish himself, he accuses the viewers of neglecting themselves. Looking up and down the screen as if to scrutinize their bodies, he quips, 'Stay home, they said. Aye. But they never said stay home and sit on your arse for four months, eating pot noodle, did they?'.⁴⁹ He commands to doff the sweatpants and start getting in shape again, because 'physical strength equals mental strength'.⁵⁰ Fahad's hostile address, on the verge of verbal abuse, makes viewers conscious of their own physicality, suggesting that something about them and their bodies is just not right. He furthermore belittles conditions of vulnerability as carved out in Fagan's monologue, suggesting that a lack of activity, self-care, grooming and so on are symptoms of laziness rather than of deteriorating mental health.

From the outset, this opening part of the monologue constructs a dramatic character rather than a real person. Fahad's mocking posture reveals cracks in his self-assured demeanour, for instance when thinking about his brother, a doctor who works at the front line of the pandemic. His reference to the fatal explosion in the port area of Beirut, which took place in August 2020, and thus only a couple of weeks before *Listen to Me* was released, hints at his own ethnicity as a marker of precarity.

Fahad tries to cheer himself up, but then starts screaming at the camera; then cut to the next act. These ruptures between Fahad the motivational coach and his more vulnerable private persona suggest that his way of coping with lockdown is a mere performance, a role he has internalized. The monologues' assumed communicative perspective, too, begs some scrutiny in the context of acting and performance. Fahad's audience address constructs a very specific implied viewer, decidedly not someone whose classification as 'essential' exposes them to the risk of contagion and thereby renders them precarious. The video's aesthetics, filmed in portrait mode with the characteristic red button and a timer denoting the recording time, create the impression that it has been filmed with a mobile phone. If that were the case, he would be talking to someone watching from a different location, and at a later point in time. Through explicitly directing its focus toward the viewer's body, *Listen to Me* demarcates their bodily presence in a space that is not the same as that of the actor/character, with no physical co-presence whatsoever. At the same time, Fahad repeatedly implies that he can see the viewer and that they, in fact, talk back to him. In this way, the camera perspective also raises the question whether the camera functions as a technological substitute for human recipients of his speech. In the first act, then, acting emerges as a way of enhancing precarity, further destabilizing Fahad's already fragile states of mental health. Mostly, though, his performance registers as toxic because there is no viable outlet, neither differentiation between actor and character, nor a responsive audience.

The second act, by contrast, cautiously positions acting as a possible way of redressing conditions of precarity – at least once there is an audience. It opens to Fahad in a state of apathy, lying on the floor with empty take-out boxes beside him. He talks about an impending family reunion that he is dreading, in terms of both the physical and the emotional invasion of his personal space that this entails: 'What if someone tries to touch me? What if I break?'⁵¹ The viewer learns that he is an actor struggling with feelings of inadequacy, particularly if compared to his doctor brother, with his meaningful, 'essential' job. As Liam Offord notes, this is 'a familiar image of the creative made fragile' that 'speaks to the precarious place that the arts have been left in'.⁵² Fahad gets especially caught up in the negative connotation of acting-as-pretending: 'All I ever did for a living was make shit up and pretend. Like, what use is this now?'⁵³ But as he speaks these words, he realizes the subversive potential of such pretending, because his training enables him to simply play the part everyone expects him to fill at the family reunion. And yet this coping mechanism still suggests that Fahad has internalized the parlance of toxic productivity he ironically recites here, that he is not entirely ready to embrace the truth that 'productivity and achievements within lockdown are not the be all, end all. That our worth is not necessarily measurable.'⁵⁴

The third act finally settles on theatre and professional acting as productive social forces. Fittingly, therefore, in this part of the monologue Fahad features as an actor donning his costume, getting ready for the performance. He does vocal exercises and rehearses a speech in front of the bathroom mirror, mockingly parroting hollow (if familiar-sounding) lines, such as, 'Our culture is so driven by doing, but

sometimes, we just need to ... be.⁵⁵ Even though earlier the prospect of having to face his family felt burdensome, the same scenario is now reframed as a creative test, a 'lying through his teeth' that offers 'a way to cope'.⁵⁶ Yet what helps him cope is not what he is saying but the creative process of acting as such. These are scenes *for* rather than *of* survival. Theatre thus emerges as a form of escapism in a productive sense precisely because it demands bodily transformation – in other words a creative response to, and renegotiation of, the embodied concepts of precarity, vulnerability, injurability or social belonging. But the bodily transformation Fahad seeks to enact is necessarily precarious in Butler's sense, as it depends on the presence of others; it can never exist entirely on its own terms. The monologue therefore ends with Fahad leaving the house, accompanied by the line 'All you need now, is a live audience ... It's showtime.'⁵⁷ Paradoxically, the stage he thus enters is not that of a theatre, but the streets of Edinburgh. Moreover, while plausibly communicating an actor's longing for a return to the stage and feedback that only physically co-present audiences can supply, he implicitly tells the viewers they are not the real deal, because they are not part of a live audience. Of course, the mere existence of the video undermines this claim – what, then, have viewers been watching all along, if not a performance? Grosvenor's *Listen to Me* thus destabilizes the ontological categories of stage, performance and audience, gesturing at how these might be reconfigured and relocated in the context of (post-)pandemic theatre.

Conclusion

The three monologues discussed in this article are conditioned by a scenario in which bodies cannot be physically co-present in the same space. In this sense, they are bound together by a universal precarity that is characteristic of pandemics, when all bodies are rendered potentially vulnerable. Yet, in addition, they keep circling around different and much less universally felt dimensions of precarity – poorly paid work, marginalization and abuse, illness, lack of job security, self-doubt. All three monologues therefore envision a new bodily ontology in Butler's terms on a social level. They prompt viewers to reconsider how to define vulnerability, injurability, interdependence and exposure; that is, conditions overwhelmingly affecting those whose bodies are always perceived as Other to a given norm.

Simultaneously, the three scenes delineate pertinent ways of how this new bodily ontology can generate a novel understanding of spectatorship in (post-)pandemic theatre. The series certainly identifies theatre, writers above all else, as an essential and resilient commentator in times of crisis, able to capture the seemingly universal precariousness of life under lockdown. Still, theatre's status as an art form whose very definition is precariously predicated on physical co-presence surfaces in all three monologues' uneven responses to their lack of a live audience. Although recurrently constructing the viewer as a passive and partly also privileged onlooker – at least in the moment they are watching the scene – the monological format and idiosyncratic mediation open up an additional, often contradictory, perspective that relies on identification between viewer and actor/character. Interestingly, this confusion

regarding where and how to locate the audience extends to some of the responses online, as YouTube's commentary section features a large number of thank yous and other expressions of approval digitally replicating applause. Viewers here enact a form of ritualized audience behaviour that has been similarly identified in the context of theatre broadcasts,⁵⁸ seeking some sort of interaction with the actors' and other spectators' otherwise remote presence.

In a blog post about Shakespearean theatre's response to the pandemic, Peter Kirwan posits that, rather than on physical co-presence, 'Theatre subsists on an economy of "togetherness" – whether of performers, of audiences, or both'.⁵⁹ As *Scenes for Survival* suggests, this notion of an economy of togetherness provides an apt terminological tool to conceptualize the precarity of pandemic spectatorship. 'Togetherness' – that is, the feeling of connection, of joint experience and of being able to relate to one another – can be formed independently from physical co-presence, thus recognizing precarity as a condition relating to individual bodies. Concomitantly, it acknowledges the potential for precarity to emerge through interaction and dialogue between individual bodies – or, precisely, the lack thereof.

NOTES

- 1 Arifa Akbar, 'Up Close and Sensational: The Best Monologues Made during Lockdown', *The Guardian*, 7 May 2020, at www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/may/07/eight-best-monologues-made-in-lockdown (accessed 6 July 2022).
- 2 In this context it is worth mentioning that *Scenes for Survival* is not the first inclusive and polyphonic piece of digital theatre produced by the National Theatre of Scotland. Rather, it builds on projects like *The Great Yes, No, Don't Know, Five Minute Theatre Show* (2014), which in anticipation of the Scottish referendum explored different forms and meanings of independence. Co-curated by David Greig and David MacLennan, it showcased a twenty-four-hour cycle of short performances by professional as well as amateur theatre-makers, livestreamed to audiences online. As its mission statement announced, the project was created 'by anyone, for an audience of everyone'. National Theatre of Scotland, 'The Great Yes, No, Don't Know, Five Minute Theatre Show', at www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/past-performances/five-minute-theatre-the-great-yes-no-dont-know-five-minute-theatre-show (accessed 9 September 2022).
- 3 I use the word 'sometimes' because, while a virus itself does not recognize borders, many responses to the COVID-19 pandemic also fortified borders. This included governments shutting down borders to restrict global travel as well as widespread sinophobic narratives of people from certain countries as prime carriers of illness.
- 4 National Theatre of Scotland, at www.nationaltheatrescotland.com (accessed 5 July 2022).
- 5 On the shifting connotations of the term *systemrelevant* see David Kaldewey, 'Was bedeutet Systemrelevanz in Zeiten der Pandemie?', *Berliner Journal für Soziologie*, 32 (2022), pp. 7–33.
- 6 Emily J. Hogg, 'Introduction', in Emily J. Hogg and Peter Simonsen, eds., *Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), pp. 1–24, here p. 1.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 8 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), p. 14.
- 9 Judith Butler and Arne de Boever, 'Demonstrating Precarity: Vulnerability, Embodiment, and Resistance', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 23 March 2015, at <https://lareviewofbooks.org/av/demonstrating-precarity-vulnerability-embodiment-resistance> (accessed 5 July 2022).
- 10 Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 2.
- 11 National Theatre of Scotland, 'Scenes for Survival', at www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/events/scenes-for-survival (accessed 6 July 2022).

- 12 Joyce McMillan, 'Theatre Reviews: Scenes for Survival | Dogstar Theatre Archive', *The Scotsman*, 25 July 2020, at www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/theatre-and-stage/theatre-reviews-scenes-survival-dogstar-theatre-archive-2924140 (accessed 6 July 2022).
- 13 Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 2.
- 14 For a more detailed overview of this debate see Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 'Liveness: Phelan, Auslander, and After', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 29, 2 (2015), pp. 69–79; Suk-Young Kim, 'Liveness: Performance of Ideology and Technology in the Changing Media Environment', *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, at <https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-76> (accessed 9 March 2022).
- 15 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 46.
- 16 Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'The Art of Spectatorship', *JCDE: Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 4, 1 (2016), pp. 164–79, here p. 164.
- 17 Fischer-Lichte quoted in Ivan Medenica, 'A Digital Talk about an Analogue Art: Interview with Erika Fischer-Lichte', *Critical Stages*, 22 (2020), at <https://www.critical-stages.org/22/a-digital-talk-about-an-analogue-art-interview-with-erika-fischer-lichte> (accessed 5 July 2022).
- 18 Mark Brown, 'Ceci n'est pas un théâtre: Theatre in the Age of COVID', *Critical Stages*, 22 (2020), at www.critical-stages.org/22/ceci-nest-pas-un-theatre-theatre-in-the-age-of-covid (accessed 9 March 2022).
- 19 Ibid. To be precise, much of Brown's scepticism relates to the flurry of livestreamed and recorded performances rather than to 'digital theatre' in a narrower sense; that is, productions merging 'live theatre with simultaneous internet broadcast in ways that were both aesthetically innovative and rooted in the seminal liveness of theatrical performance'.
- 20 See, for instance, Rhiannon Ling, 'Accessibility in the Time of Corona: An Overview', *Theatre Times*, 2 October 2020, at <https://thetheatretimes.com/accessibility-in-the-time-of-corona-an-overview> (accessed 10 March 2022); Lucy Webster, "'We Know They Can Do It When It Suits Them': Theatre Became More Accessible during Covid. Will It Last?', *The Guardian*, 15 October 2021, at www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/oct/15/we-know-they-can-do-it-when-it-suits-them-theatre-became-more-accessible-during-covid-will-it-last (accessed 10 March 2022).
- 21 Nicholas Potter, 'Going Viral: On Streaming Theatre in and after a Pandemic', *Theatertreffen-Blog*, 1 May 2020, at <https://theatertreffen-blog.de/blog/going-viral-on-streaming-theatre-in-and-after-a-pandemic> (accessed 5 July 2020).
- 22 Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008; first published 1999), p. 5.
- 23 Philip Auslander, 'Digital Liveness: A Historic-Philosophical Perspective', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 34, 3 (2012), pp. 3–11, here p. 3. On how Auslander's understanding of liveness relates to Phelan's, see Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 'Liveness', pp. 69–72.
- 24 Auslander, 'Digital Liveness', p. 6.
- 25 For Liedke and Pietrzak-Franger, this 'state of disruption' shared by performers and audience members is a prerequisite for what they call 'viral theatre', a specific form of theatre that emerged during the pandemic. Heidi Liedke and Monika Pietrzak-Franger, 'Viral Theatre: Preliminary Thoughts on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Online Theatre', *JCDE: Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 9, 1 (2021), pp. 128–44, here p. 135.
- 26 Kevin Gilday, *Courier Culture*, dir. Graham Eatough, perf. Jatinder Singh Randhawa, National Theatre of Scotland, 8 July 2020, at www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/latest/courier-culture (accessed 6 July 2022), 00:43.
- 27 Ibid., 04:11.
- 28 McMillan, 'Theatre Reviews: Scenes for Survival'.
- 29 Lotty Holder, 'Review: Scenes for Survival – Courier Culture, National Theatre of Scotland', *A Younger Theatre*, 15 July 2020, at www.ayoungentheatre.com/review-courier-culture (accessed 28 January 2022).
- 30 Gilday, *Courier Culture*, 03:43.

- 31 Ibid., 02:56.
- 32 Ibid., 05:02.
- 33 Mark Fisher, 'Scenes for Survival Review – Alan Cumming Runs Wild in Lockdown Drama', *The Guardian*, 4 August 2020, at www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/aug/04/scenes-for-survival-review-national-theatre-of-scotland-bbc-alan-cumming-val-mcdermid (accessed 28 January 2022).
- 34 Corr Blimey, 'Scenes for Survival Launch – National Theatre Scotland', *Corr Blimey*, at <https://corrblimey.uk/2020/05/30/scenes-for-survival-launch-national-theatre-scotland> (accessed 14 March 2022).
- 35 Jenni Fagan, *Isolation*, dir. Debbie Hannan, perf. Kate Dickie, National Theatre of Scotland, 27 May 2020, at www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/latest/isolation (accessed 11 March 2022), 00:24, 04:41.
- 36 Ibid., 00:36.
- 37 Auslander, 'Digital Liveness', p. 6.
- 38 Fagan, *Isolation*, 02:45.
- 39 Claire Wood, 'Scenes For Survival: Launch Collection', *Wee Review*, 5 June 2020, at <https://theweereview.com/review/scenes-for-survival-launch-collection-online> (accessed 14 March 2022).
- 40 Blimey, 'Scenes for Survival Launch'.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Fagan, *Isolation*, 06:20.
- 43 See Brian Owen, 'Nature Isn't Really Healing', *The Atlantic*, 30 May 2021, at www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2021/05/pandemic-lockdowns-nature-wildilfe/619054 (accessed 28 March 2022).
- 44 Fagan, *Isolation*, 05:02.
- 45 Ibid., 07:14.
- 46 Ibid., 07:51.
- 47 Catherine Grosvenor, *Listen to Me*, dir. Shilpa T-Hyland, perf. Taqi Nazeer, National Theatre of Scotland, 7 September, at www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/latest/listen-to-me (accessed 9 March 2022).
- 48 Ibid., 00:22.
- 49 Ibid., 01:03.
- 50 Ibid., 02:08.
- 51 Ibid., 04:45.
- 52 Liam Offord, 'Review: Scenes for Survival – Listen to Me, National Theatre of Scotland', *A Younger Theatre*, 10 September 2020, at www.ayoungentheatre.com/review-listen-to-me (accessed 28 January 2022).
- 53 Grosvenor, *Listen to Me*, 06:15.
- 54 Offord, 'Review: Scenes for Survival'.
- 55 Grosvenor, *Listen to Me*, 07:28.
- 56 Offord, 'Review: Scenes for Survival'.
- 57 Grosvenor, *Listen to Me*, 08:18.
- 58 See Erin Sullivan, 'The Audience Is Present: Aliveness, Social Media, and the Theatre Broadcast Experience', in Pascale Aebischer, Susanne Greenhalgh and Laurie Osborne, eds., *Shakespeare and the 'Live' Theatre Broadcast Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 59–75; Rachael Nicholas, 'Understanding New Encounters with Shakespeare: Hybrid Media and Emerging Audience Behaviours', in *ibid.*, pp. 77–92.
- 59 Peter Kirwan, 'Streaming Shakespeare: The Theatre Industry in Lockdown', *University of Nottingham*, n.d., at www.nottingham.ac.uk/vision/vision-streaming-shakespeare (accessed 14 March 2022).

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