



W.B. Worthen
Shakespeare, Technicity, Theatre

How can we move from thinking about uses of technology on stage to thinking about the theatre as a technology in itself? What are the representational technologies performance has always operated on – from acting, playwriting and costuming onwards – and in what ways have they shifted over time? How do the spectating and making of performance both produce and react to particular technological – and thus also social, economical and ideological – set ups?

In this introduction to his recent *Shakespeare, Technicity, Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), W.B. Worthen explains how an analysis of various examples of contemporary Shakespeare performance allows us to think broadly about the theatre as an apparatus. Taking his cue from Samuel Beckett's idea of the theatre as a medium and from Bernard Stiegler's reflections on human technics as a process of exteriorisation of humanness, Worthen talks us through a volume that moves from the zoomed-in space of the face on screen to immersive practices in which the audience becomes part of the spectacle.

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[00:00:15] WHAT IS THE BOOK'S TITLE?

The book's title – I have a copy here – is *Shakespeare, Technicity, Theatre*.

[00:00:26] HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITING THIS BOOK? / WHERE DOES IT SIT IN RELATION TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORK AND INTERESTS?

I came to writing this book in an interesting way. I've long been interested in theatre – the various technologies that compose theatre. My first book was about acting and the way in which acting could be thought about both as a kind of rhetoric, but also as an ideology. I wrote a couple of books about contemporary Shakespeare performance and the ways in which particularly material textuality plays into that, and then throughout a series of books, both about Shakespeare and about modern theatre, I've become more and more interested in technology, even going back to an essay I wrote a long time ago about hypertext – a word we no longer use – but hypertext in Shakespeare.

So this is a book that came about, really, through my thinking about various technologies that both appear in the theatre but also about theatre as a kind of technology and using that as a way to take a kind of overview perspective on a range of contemporary performances.

[00:01:43] WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AND WHAT IS THE MAIN OVERARCHING THESIS OR ARGUMENT?

So the book has a kind of underlying argument. And I guess I should say at the first, like in many of my books, Shakespeare is a kind of excuse or a kind of occasion for thinking about broader questions of performance. So although most, not all but most of the performances that I talk about have to do with contemporary Shakespeare performance, the book is really about a conception of theatre as a technology. And I guess I want to underline that idea 'as a technology'. I take my inspiration, in a way, from a remark by Bernard Stiegler, the philosopher, in which he says: 'The being of humankind is to be outside of itself' [1998: 193], to be constituted by its prosthetics. And I'm interested in the conception of theatre as a prosthetic: as a way not only of representing the human but of also constituting the human insofar as theatre is a 'thing' that engages with an audience.

I would say the principal argument has to do – takes off in a way, departs from in a way from Samuel Weber's book *Theatricality as Medium*. In that book Weber – and it's a wonderful, smart, brilliant



book – I had the feeling that he kind of shies away from theatre, because in its variety and plurality it's very hard to distinguish and concentrate as a single medium. So that's why he engages with theatricality as a kind of principle. So I'm interested actually in this notion of theatre as a medium, and what distinguishes theatre as a medium, I think, is that it's a technology of the human that is composed of other technologies. There's a way we have of thinking about modern theatre, and really contemporary theatre, as though 'technology' were a thing that were imported to the stage: now we have screens, now we have digital video on stage, now we have technology in the theatre. But theatre from the beginning has always been a technology composed of other technologies – theatre is about the technology of acting, which we might think of as a series of conventions for representing social embodiment and social gesture. Nobody in the 18th century ever walked and talked like David Garrick – you know, that famous description of Garrick falling back as Hamlet when he sees the Ghost, that was a technology for representing, for saying something about social life so acting is a form of technology. Costume is a technology for representing embodied clothing in the theatre, using it to say something. Scenography, the way in which space both onstage, but also the extent to which scenography refers to the architectural space of theatre as a way of constituting the space within which theatre will take place. So my argument really is the theatre is actually a technology in itself that is composed of a range of technologies, and that the sign of that really is, I think, the extent to which theatre is capable of its own remediation. You know, we're familiar with the notion of remediation – the representation of one medium in another. So I was thinking the other day, I was going to teach Beckett, and I was going to show one of those great videos of Beckett's television work – which I believe now no one ever watches on television! – that is to say, I'm speaking to you now on my laptop screen and after this I could be watching Beckett on this screen. So Beckett on television is remediated through digital technology and streaming as a form of laptop experience, in a way. But there are some notable occasions in which theatre remediates itself. And I'm thinking, both of, you know, older examples – the production of *Oedipus the King* at the Teatro Olimpico – now, obviously, the Globe [Theatre] and the Wanamaker theatre [Sam Wanamaker Playhouse] in London. But the notion that theatre is capable of remediating an earlier theatrical performance suggests that it's able to do that precisely because the technology of theatre has changed. That the technology, say, of sitting in the dark or in the notional dark as we do now and looking onto a fundamentally proscenium stage and consuming a kind of private, almost a socialised, experience – which is not a definitive, the only experience of contemporary theatre but as a widespread experience of contemporary theatre – is a kind of theatrical technology that would have been, I don't know, incomprehensible to, say, Louis XIV sitting with everyone watching him watch the play, but to anyone in his audience as well: the notion of theatre there as a technology for the production of a public experience.

So the argument of the book really has to do with taking this perspective on technology and using a variety of theatrical productions of Shakespeare to elucidate it.

[00:06:50] WHAT DOES THE BOOK CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ITS FIELD?

I guess, in one way, that's a question for readers, and they will decide whether it makes a contribution! For me, I think the contribution I would like it to make is really twofold. One, providing a way to think about the apparatus of theatre in its material form as central to the understanding of the kind of meaning that theatre is capable of making in any given time – I guess that would be the largest contribution I would like it to make in sort of a very particular way. But I'd also like it – I suppose, going back to Stiegler – to suggest the ways that we might think about theatre, not merely as representing the human but as constituting it in the particular kind of interactivity that takes place during a theatrical performance.

[00:07:47] WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND WHY?

I'll confess that I'm a person who tends to work from the smaller to the larger, so in some ways I suppose the dirty secret of a book – maybe pretty much any book that I write – is that it doesn't begin



with a grand idea that I then imaginatively sort of march through a roadmap that I've already half-defined. I tend to learn by writing where I'm going. So this is a book that really began with me thinking about various theatrical technologies in relation to individual performances. But I think then having begun that way, obviously the task is then to make the argument, make the work execute the argument in a rich and sort of generative way.

So the way the book begins is with an introduction – I talk about the things that I've talked about so far. How to think about theatre as a technological medium. And then I work through a series of what I would think of as problems and sites wherein that set of issues comes into a particular kind of focus.

The first chapter is called 'The face, the mask, the screen', and in that I develop a kind of reading of an important dimension of contemporary performance, which is the live video on stage of the performance itself. Ivo van Hove is widely associated with this, and I talk a little bit about *Roman Tragedies* in this chapter. The production that I deal with at more length is the Thomas Ostermeier, Schaubühne in Berlin production of *Hamlet*. But in all of those productions, there's this relationship between the face of the live actor and the usually much larger, much more visible, much more detailed – from the point of view of the spectator – screen face. And I use a kind of development and critique of Emmanuel Levinas in this chapter. Which is, I think, a little bit surprising in that Levinas is I think – well, anyone would think – resolutely anti-theatrical and that the notion of being masked or concealed or artificialised is obviously directly opposed to the notion of the encounter with the other that he's engaged with. But I think actually that kind of discussion suggests some of the complexity that operates on stage when there are faces and screen faces in a kind of dialogue. So that's the first chapter.

The second chapter is called 'Shax the app', and it's about acting – applications for your cell phone, your iPhone, that are basically used by actors. Some of them have career functions – you know, managing when you're going to have an audition and dealing with your agent – but many of them have a whole rehearsal protocol and they even allow a company to download a text, do the editing of the text and then distribute it to the actors who will learn it from the app. Some of these apps have voices that you can buy, so that you can cast Hamlet and Horatio in different voices and then you have your own voice as Marcellus or something. The ways in which that technology relates to a conception of acting and the text is sort of the focus of that chapter. And in that chapter I bring in an alternative technology, which is also a contemporary technology, which is the use of scrolls by companies that are engaged in 'original practices' performance: how did Shakespeare's company do it? You didn't get the whole text of the play, you only got your part on a little scroll on your side and you learned that. So I deal with a couple of different apps – old and new – as a way of thinking about this particular interface for the production of the text in relation to acting.

The next chapter is about interactivity, which is a key term in practice of original practices. And I talk about original practice of Shakespeare, the attempt to recover early modern strategies of rehearsal, acting, costume that would be implemented by the Globe Theatre or the Swan Theatre, and the kinds of interactivity they promise. This is clearly a contemporary technology, and it's a contemporary technology I argue that's built on a notion that we're all familiar with from digital media, which is to say interactivity. And so this chapter puts into dialogue contemporary original practices and alternative modes and really more familiar modes of interactivity.

The next chapter is about immersive theatre. The notion that the contemporary – and I think this is where contemporary design technologies for the most part create an environment within which the spectator enters as opposed to standing outside it, either in a proscenium or a thrust stage environment. In that chapter I talk chiefly about *Sleep No More* [by Punchdrunk] which is a production I'm interested in, but I talk about a range of other immersive performances as well, in part as a way of engaging the question of immersive performance as a kind of capitalist technology and its rich interplay with neoliberalism – which is not my invention but I think it's an important recognition about this contemporary form of performance.

And then the last performance I talk about really has to do with 'algorithmic performance', which is a term used by Annie Dorsen [2017], and I talk about her terrific production of *Hamlet* called *A Piece of Work* [2013]. This is a production of the text of *Hamlet* – which is I think a fascinating idea – in which



she puts a tagged text of *Hamlet* through a series of algorithmic reproductions, and those reproductions are shown to the audience on a screen and they're vocalised by a computer voice, and I talk a little bit about the different ways in which those algorithms operate. And then in the centre of the production there's a performance with a live actor – and how the relationship between the technology of writing, the technology of textual production and the technology of embodiment operate in that production.

So in a way, I have a general question, and I use it to kind of not so much to map everything that's going on in contemporary performance, but to choose several different sites of production in which the question of the technology of performance, I think, is asserted and complicated in some interesting ways.

[00:14:35] HOW ENJOYABLE/DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE BOOK?

It's always enjoyable, but there's parts of it that are less enjoyable than others. And I would say, for me – I mean, just to speak autobiographically – I tend to write in longhand first, and it's not because I'm some kind of a Luddite, I think it's because I think slowly. And when I'm putting my first thoughts down at the computer, it's kind of terrifying. So for me actually, the most difficult part is like I've got my yellow pad and my pen and I'm kind of working that out. So that, just for any book, I find extraordinarily difficult. I think, for me, the thing that was difficult but enjoyable was just the wide range of reading I needed to do to do this: some of that reading was philosophical like Stiegler, I read a lot of work on just contemporary technology – how it works in a kind of material way and also more sociological and political, ideological studies of the presence of technology in contemporary culture.

On some occasions, I think the thing that was enjoyable about it was the opportunity to see the work that I was writing about. In my career, I've spent a long time in places that were sometimes remote from theatre. Now being located in New York, I have the opportunity to see a lot more theatre and Europe is a lot closer if I want to see European productions – so I think that was a real benefit for me in being able to write a book like this.

[00:16:10] WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PASSAGE, CHAPTER OR IDEA FROM THIS BOOK?

[Smiles.] My favourite passage from the book is – so this is a book that had a different beginning at one time, and I decided for a variety of reasons not to use that beginning. So this is a book about Shakespeare that begins with 15 or 20 pages about Beckett. And Beckett, I think, is the place to begin any study of the technology of drama and playwriting in contemporary theatre and recorded modes of production like television, video, film, radio. So in a way, I'm really very fond of the opening of this book. And you know, I'm surprised in a way that the publishers didn't give me more pushback on it! The question of how can you begin a book on Shakespeare with 20 pages on Beckett was not a question they raised and I'm really grateful for that. So that's my favourite part, I think.

Transcription by Nick Awde

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