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The Tempest (2020) by Creation Theatre: Live in your Living Room

Performance Review

Heidi Lucja Liedke

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Factual information about the show

1 Performers

Al Barclay
Ryan Duncan
Madeleine MacMahon
Itxaso Moreno
Giles Stoakley
Rhodri Lewis
Simon Spencer-Hyde
PK Taylor
Annabelle Terry

2 Creative Team

Adaptor/Director: Zoe Seaton
Designer: Ryan Dawson Laight

3 Production Team

A Creation Theatre production in association Big Telly.
Production Manager: Giles Stoakley
Stage Manager: Sinead Owens
Videography: Stuart Read
Producer: Crissy O'Donovan

4 Websites

Creation Theatre: <https://www.creationtheatre.co.uk>
Big Telly : <https://www.big-telly.com>

Review

- 5 Prospero is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.
 Topic: The Tempest | 18/04/20 at 7 pm
 Time: Apr 18, 2020 07:00 PM London
 Join Zoom Meeting
<https://zoom.us/j/95301315614>
 Meeting ID: 953 0131 5614
 Password: 027373
- 6 As I receive this email on April 18, 2020, a few weeks into Covid-19 lockdown, I am partly confused (So this is theatre now?) and partly simply pleasantly bewildered. Nothing is as it used to be, everybody's daily lives have been adjusted to a "new normal," so why shouldn't a Shakespearean character from the past email me in the Here and Now? Fiction and reality, technology and analogue materialities become concepts whose meanings are now more than ever somewhat insignificant. With the advertising phrase "'We are such stuff as dreams are made on'—11-25 April, The Tempest LIVE, interactive and in your living room" the Oxford-based theatre company Creation Theatre is one of the first to create a piece of Covidian theatre, that is theatre that has been created during the global pandemic, that makes use of communication technologies such as the programme Zoom and repurposes them in their function and that either explicitly or implicitly addresses the fact that both performers and spectators are witnessing the performance in a state of emergency. The result is a playful take on William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a production far from perfection but without the desire to be so—an experiment that tackles and plays with precisely the "stuff" that dreams are made on, by letting spectators contribute "props," such as their teddy bears and crisp bags.
- 7 Zoe Seaton (Big Telly) has already adapted *The Tempest* in 2019 and the version shown in April works with the same cast. Since this is my first Zoom performance, and also one of the first times I am using the communication programme at all, I am a little apprehensive about turning on my laptop camera. My partner and I have made a date night out of it, put on nice clothes and hurried to finish dinner before the show starts, just as we would have done before attending a regular performance. Creation Theatre's chief executive, Lucy Askew, offers a brief introduction and seeing that the circa 100 viewers have settled in, the show begins. The 'Zoom host' Prospero (Simon Spencer-Hyde), is a stern-looking middle-aged man, wearing a black turtleneck and big rectangular glasses. He is sitting in front of a wall of TV screens (fig. 1) and asking his spirit Ariel to conjure together Antonio (Giles Stoakley), Alonso (Al Barclay), Sebastienne (Madeleine MacMahon), Ferdinand (Ryan Duncan, eating a Magnum ice cream) and Trinculo (Rhodri Lewis, in an Irish pub). The use of virtual backgrounds is well chosen and highlights a main facet of a given character. In the context of the pandemic, this urgent plea for help by Prospero sheds a new light on the supposedly powerful centre of the play: he may sit in the "control centre" and see where everyone is on his screens, he may be the one in charge of the microphone but he is shut off from the actual world and in fact powerless and immobile. One is forced to draw connections to the individual's position during lockdown: on the one hand, we have access to social

media and all kinds of electronic devices and screens. But how far will they get us? Where would we be without the help of devoted spirits?

Figure 1

Simon Spencer-Hyde as Prospero

Photographer credit: screen shot taken by author

- 8 In the beginning of the show, there are a few instances of not quite successful audience engagement: after Alonso and Sebastienne have been invited to an award ceremony on a ship, randomly selected audience members find questions in their Zoom chat that they can ask them stepping into the role as journalists, for instance from the *Gloucestershire Echo* or *The Daily Mail*. This has a rather stilted effect and slows down the pace at the beginning, as we are eager to get the show started. Some of the questions, however, play the role of a wrap up, such as “How do you respond to the Prospero allegations?” enabling a quick exposé that is, interestingly, guided by the spectators and not, as is usually the case, presented through dialogues in the text.
- 9 The idea that the figurative power belongs to the audience is the most memorable impression I got from attending this production. On the one hand, this is achieved through the character of Ariel (Itxaso Moreno). The spirit is the messenger, the doer and the bridge between fiction and reality, technology and materiality, ‘us’ (the spectators) and ‘them’ (the actors and actresses). When Prospero asks the spirit to create a storm, Ariel turns to us to click our fingers for rain drops (fig. 2), clap our hands for heavy rain and we can see randomly selected screens showing people in their living rooms doing just that. After a few seconds of skeptical wrinkled foreheads, one notices how spectators chime in enthusiastically and we see strangers’ smiling faces. As the storm successfully brings all of Prospero’s enemies onto the island, even the production’s internet connection gets wobbly, creating a truly immersive experience. Through this, our emotional connection to Ariel is especially strong—we are part of

their team, after all—which makes the ensuing power play between the spirit and Prospero even more painful to watch.

Figure 2

Itxaso Moreno as Ariel, asking audience members to conjure up a storm with her by rubbing their hands and imitating the sound of blowing wind

Photographer credit: screen shot taken by author.

- 10 What this production of *The Tempest* is especially successful at is reminding us of the fact that theatre—even if it cannot take place as we’re used to it at the moment, on a stage, in a theatre building—transcends spatial restrictions. Theatre is not a fixed thing, we create its magic, and this magic can be far from being polished and perfect. Yes, there are technical glitches throughout this production and some missed connections. But they do not disturb the enjoyment of the play, they actually add to its urgency. When Miranda—in a millennial take on dating, perhaps: many people dating in the 21st century meet their love interests via screens first, after all—sees Ferdinand for the first time (fig. 3), she is both paralyzed and curious. She has never seen a man in her life and cannot come to terms with this new feeling of being in love. Of course, this relationship is one of Shakespeare’s more one-dimensional and stereotypical ones, however, in this production, it becomes quite clear that Miranda is in a power position to gaze upon Ferdinand and select him. At the same time, there is something fragile about this one-sided encounter: the fear, also characteristic for online dating, of actual human encounters, an insecurity that comes along with a shift in social life from analogue to the virtual. In the current context, it also reflects the lack many people feel as it is impossible to visit friends and loved ones.

Figure 3

Annabelle Terry as Miranda, falling in love with Ferdinand 'at first sight'

Photographer credit: screen shot taken by author.

- 11 Perhaps one of the most memorable scenes is the equally kitschy and funny moment when Ferdinand and Miranda get engaged: separated by screens, Ferdinand hands her the engagement ring across the screen border. During this scene, some spectator's screens pop up in the margin so I can see a woman following the dialogue with a curious look on her face. In the very moment in which Ferdinand and Miranda 'touch' (fig. 4), the screen lights up in pink and red colors and the two share a screen in a composite montage accompanied by cheerful music that was recorded before the show. It is an incredibly moving moment to witness what can happen when the technological divide is broken up and bridged. I feel myself wishing to be pulled into the screen as well, an emotional yearning that is only heightened, when I see the other spectators, including the woman who had watched the performance with a neutral facial expression a moment ago, start smiling brightly. To see the faces of my fellow spectators is a new and wonderful addition, something impossible in the regular setting when one is, in comparison, left on one's own, in the darkness, having to wade through the emotions the performance confronts one with in isolation until the lights go up. Here, we may be alone in our living rooms, but we are more aware of the actual community of spectators we are part of because we can see them and see their reactions.

Figure 4

Miranda and Ferdinand bridging the technological divide that separates them and audience reaction
 Photographer credit: screen shot taken by author.

- 12 The second dimension Creation Theatre's *The Tempest* evokes emphatically is that of the communal labour involved in creating any theatre production. After the show, as the performers bow and are applauded by their virtual spectators, they reveal their living rooms to us, posing in front of green canvasses or happily washing off their make up (fig. 5). We look into exhausted, sweaty faces and the joy of theatre is as palpable and somehow more intimately so than in the traditional setting of curtain calls in a theatre that are over after 30 seconds, with the lights going on and everyone rushing off to get home. Now, we do not have to rush anywhere. We can enjoy having witnessed an unusual piece of theatre, we can acknowledge the work that has been put into it—not invisible work, but manual and physical work as well—and we can acknowledge our fellow spectators (fig. 6). To have this communal bond is something that is crucial in times of social isolation for many. When Prospero says at the end of the play "Now my charms are all o'erthrown / And what strength I have's mine own" I beg to differ: you are not alone. We are all in this together.

Post-show discussion

- 13 After the performance on 18 April, I attended a post-show discussion group via Zoom that was organized by Erin Sullivan and Peter Kirwan. Thank you to all members of the discussion—it was wonderful to find words for, celebrate and also be hesitant about this new theatrical form. (In alphabetical order: Pascale Aebischer, Michael Joel Bartelle, Judith Buchanan, Thea Buckley, Sarah Busch, Colette Gordon, Susanne Greenhalgh, Ronan Hatfull, Stuart Hampton-Reeves, Elizabeth Jeffery, Emer McHugh, Steve Purcell, Lyn Tribble, and John Wyver).

Figure 5

Madeleine MacMahon/Sebastienne after the show
Photographer credit: screen shot taken by author.

Figure 6

Audience members waving to each other after the show
Photographer credit: screen shot taken by author.

ABSTRACTS

Theatre review of *The Tempest* by Creation Theatre, directed by Zoe Seaton. Venue: Live, in your living room (online only). 11 April–10 May 2020.

Critique *The Tempest* par Creation Theatre, sous la direction de Zoe Seaton. Spectacle en ligne (uniquement). 11 avril – 10 mai 2020.

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