

Alienation through Theatre: Examining the Viability of Digital Theatre In Amitesh Grover's *The Last Poet*

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Abstract

*In this digital age, where technologies powered by the Internet have become an integral part of our lives, the easiest way to revamp contemporary theatre is to digitise it with a range of tools, such as interactivity, projection mapping, virtual reality and motion capture, while also broadcasting the performance live through online platforms. Although it suits modern tastes and offers flexible space, unchecked use compromises the essence of theatre, which is to bring people together, cultivate harmony, and evoke emotions. Such performances begin to lose much of their dramaturgical texture and aesthetic integrity. Digital Theatre, thus risk evolving into a distinctly personal space, fostering a sense of alienation among individuals. Drawing on Brecht's Alienation theory and Nadja Masura's concept of digital theatre, this paper examines the viability of digital theatre in the Indian context through an analysis of Amitesh Grover's production of *The Last Poet*, while also emphasising the need for a coherent framework and critical evaluative approach toward the digitalisation of theatre.*

Keywords: Performance, digital theatre, alienation, Indian, screens, technology

Introduction

Theatre should continually adapt to remain relevant to changing circumstances. Digitalising theatre is an attempt to reconfigure traditional theatre to align with the sensory perceptions of the contemporary audience, who are accustomed to the ever-growing digital world. Oskar Schlemmer accurately observes, "The theater, which should be the image of our time and perhaps the one art form most peculiarly conditioned by it, must not ignore these signs of technology" (18). For a theatre to be considered digital, several scholars set conditions for its recognition as such. According to Steve Dixon, "what can be seen as "digital performance works" are all those productions" where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery forms" (6). In Dixon's definition, a computer assumes the primary role of mediating any performance. Nadja Masura proposes four conditions for any theatre to be digital.

1. A limited interactivity of message.
2. The presence of verbal communication.
3. A co-present audience and actor. And

4. The existence of digital technology in the central creation of the performance (not as an archival tool. (6)

It is essential to analyse these conditions from the point of their practical applicability. The first condition, as listed above, for a theatre to be digital is to promote a limited level of interactivity. Janet H. Murray defines 'Interactivity' as the "procedural" and "participatory" affordance of digital environments, where users have the ability to take meaningful actions and see the results of their decisions (71). The term 'procedural' suggests a defined, step-by-step process, whereas 'participatory' means that users are not passive spectators; instead, they actively engage with the system by making choices. It allows users to perform meaningful actions and immediately see the consequences of their decisions, creating a dynamic, immersive experience. As per the definition, 'Interactivity' is 'limited,' which means in live performance, it requires interaction between performers and the audience, but not to the extent of disrupting the performance. However, questions such as "How much interactivity is desirable? How to limit it, and is it specific to online performances?" remain unanswered.

The second point, 'The presence of verbal communication,' refers to the use of spoken or written language in an interaction or situation. It indicates the use of speech to express ideas, emotions, instructions, or information. Though it disregards the possibility of pantomime, it does not offer any specific direction to digital theatre, as dialogues accompanied by 'actions' constitute an essential part of any play.

The third proposition asks for a 'co-present audience and actor', elucidated further by Masura as "A live performance, placing at least some performers in the same shared physical space with the audience" (6). Theatre has always been a live show in the sense that the audience is placed in the same space as the performers in real time. It emphasises the importance of co-presence; however, since the performance would also be distributed online, the concept of a singular space for both audience and performers remains unclear. According to Masura, some performers should be placed in a shared physical space with the audience in digital theatre (6). What about the other performers or the audience? Will they be joining over screens? It opens the possibility of a hybrid performance. Maria Chatzichristodoulou points toward such a possibility: "Another example of the strategic deployment of digital technology as a means to an end is in its use for the live broadcasting of theatre, as in the case of Metropolitan Opera Live in HD and NT Live" (315). However, would this disjunction ensure the seamless production?

The last proposition emphasises the use of digital technology as an essential part of the 'primary artistic event,' i.e., the existence of digital technology in the central creation of the performance (not as an archival tool), as suggested by Masura (6). It mandates the use of technology. Typically, when a play begins, the props are arranged, and spotlights/footlights illuminate specific areas of the stage. Foot mics or overhead mics are used to capture the sound. However, they are incorporated in all modern theatres today; clarification is needed on which kind of digital technology should be part of the primary artistic event for a theatre to be considered digital. Also, what if the primary event does not require 'digital' aid?

Based on the preceding discussion, three key inferences may be derived. First, there exists a notable paucity of engagement with the concept of 'digital theatre', particularly concerning its scope and modes of implementation. Second, there is an absence of a coherent framework that effectively translates theoretical propositions into practice, and third, it does not establish any guidelines for playwrights and practitioners seeking to craft their works for such theatres. In the absence of a coherent framework, the transition of performance to virtual platforms often redistributes creative authority to those skilled in audiovisual storytelling, multimedia integration, and platform-specific practices. Grover admits, "That was a major concern because one has less control over digital distribution of theatre than you have in a physical space" (Nath).

Consequently, the playwright and theatre practitioner, once central to the creative process, risk being overshadowed by software developers and engineers, whose technological interventions may redefine the performance into a fundamentally different artistic entity.

The extensive use of digital tools in theatres enhances connectivity with the global audience, but it also promotes tendencies toward alienation among youth. Excessive screen culture introduces alienation not by cutting us off from communication, but by changing its nature. Chatzichristodoulou aptly captures both sides: "Digital theatres, as well as all theatres embedded within digital culture, are both gifted with and hounded by an often inherent capacity to capture and document themselves or be captured by others" (318). Digital theatre can facilitate participation across geographical boundaries while creating inclusive spaces for individuals who may face barriers to attending conventional theatre. Moreover, digital technologies enable the staging of scenes and environments that were previously beyond the scope of traditional production. On the contrary, any performance mediated through technology, particularly the screen, introduces a disjunction in reception, eliciting a critical stance among the audience.

The Last Poet, written by Sarah Mariam and directed by Amitesh Grover, is innovative in its approach, deconstructing the notion of theatre as a 'space' by distributing the audience and performers via specially designed software in an online mode. This paper analyses Grover's production of *The Last Poet* vis-à-vis Masura's concept of digital theatre and the alienation tendency such theatre introduces among the audience. The paper also examines the viability of digitalising Indian theatre, whether it should be digitalised strategically to critically reflect a world increasingly inclined toward technology, or due to unchecked digital intervention, theatre itself is on the verge of being engulfed and overpowered by the very technologies it seeks to represent.

'Alienation' at Play When Theatre Goes 'Digital'

Technologies such as dimmers, spotlights, sound systems, music, and projectors have significantly influenced the course of modern plays. However, they do not qualify as digital, as the terms 'technology' and 'digital technology' point to two distinct aspects. Gere observes, "to speak of the digital is to call up, metonymically, the whole panoply of virtual simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media and global connectivity that constitutes much of our contemporary experience" (15). To construct a Digital theatre, it is necessary to integrate computers, smartphones, and Internet to communicate via electronic signals. One possible way to achieve this is to construct a technologically advanced stage using a range of technologies. According to Masura, digital theatre includes projected elements with live actors, such as animated sets, motion-triggered effects controlled by performers to cue video or sound media, or online performances between performers in different rooms, states, or even countries (9). Additionally, the performance can be broadcast live across multiple platforms, allowing audiences to access it from virtually anywhere. However, recording the performance and making it available later is not currently within the scope of digital theatre. Archival of real-time web-casts which do not generate feedback influencing the live performance are not within the range of Digital Theatre (Masura 7). It is the interactivity of a performance that distinguishes a recorded performance from a live one. However, such a practice of recording has also started (<https://www.digitaltheatre.com>).

To ensure a fully functional digital theatre, Masura suggests incorporating a range of digital technologies to broaden the show's horizons by telecasting it online and collecting feedback, while also enhancing theatrical effects to delight the audience. However, the indiscriminate and excessive use of digital technologies in theatre raises several concerns, foremost among them the potential to intensify feelings of alienation among the present generation. Feral and

Bermingham observe:

Imagery brought to the stage through the use of the various media creates the rupture that forces us to adopt a critical stance with respect to stage. Such imagery displaces the subject of enunciation, bringing a different point of view to the stage, i.e. that of camera with its corresponding relationship to reality. Media such as screen, video, television, and film introduce a non-polarised subject, a new subject of enunciation that disbands the process of representation in progress. (470)

Instead of reinforcing spatial cohesion and embodied experiences, digital theatre often fractures the sense of communal presence, dispersing spectators across individual screens and environments. Consequently, the audience adopts a 'critical stance' toward the stage while comparing the physical experience of theatre with that of online or on-screen performance. This critical stance differs from what Bertolt Brecht says: the spectators should not merely identify with characters; instead, they should consciously judge the actions presented on stage. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane (Brecht 91). In Brecht's view, the physical presence, as well as the theatre as a space, was necessary to adopt a critical attitude. However, in digital theatre, technology disrupts the performance, distancing the audience more than required. While TV studio audiences may feel that they are at a public "live" performance, these performances are often edited and remixed for the benefit of the home audiences which are viewing the mass broadcast in private (Masura 7). However large the screen may be, it fails to convey the grandeur, scale, and presence that are intrinsic to live theatre. Digitally mediated alienation arises when the screen replaces three-dimensional, human experiences with highly mediated, two-dimensional simulations. When the primary window to the world shifts to the screen of a smartphone, laptop, or television, alienation happens across three core dimensions: somatic (bodily), relational, and existential. In the somatic alienation, screens filter out most of the human sensory data. Interacting through text, video, or feeds deprived the nervous system of the biological markers required to establish genuine trust and a sense of safety. Marshal McLuhan considers that new media acts as an amputation of a human faculty (43-45). Screens amplify our visual and auditory processing while effectively amputating our physical presence. Relational alienation can be understood through Sherry Turkle, who highlights that digital interfaces allow us to edit, sanitise, and control how we present ourselves (15). This hyper-control fundamentally breaks the raw, unedited vulnerability that binds humans together. Existential alienation emerges from the fact that the 'documentation' of life becomes more important than the lived moment, alienating the individual from their own immediate reality. Through its cyber-theatrical form, *The Last Poet* also depicts these three interconnected forms of alienation, which have been discussed later in the paper.

Turkle argues that digital technologies create an illusion of companionship without the demands of real intimacy, fostering emotional isolation despite constant connectivity (27). In seeking to sustain performance practices amid technological and cultural shifts, it situates liveness within mediated, asynchronous, or distributed formats. On the contrary, through devices such as direct address, episodic structure, visible stage mechanics, meta-theatrical commentary, explanatory captions, or projected illustrations on the screen, the playwright prompts the audience to reflect on the socio-political conditions embedded within the narrative. The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected (Brecht 143-144). With 'alienation' as a motif in Brecht's theatre, the attempt was to portray a phase of life, and people gathered at a designated space to experience it. While such theatre seeks to cultivate a shared physical and affective space, the emergence of digital

theatre marks a significant departure from the premise.

Baisya accurately reports that theatre is more than performance; it is the community, ritual, and interaction dimensions that cannot be replicated digitally. Richardson describes the observation of one of the participants, "It was remarkable. I had never been in my life to an actual play, the idea that anything can happen while the act is going to make me personally more focused and intrigued by the play" (212). Digital mediation introduces screens, cameras, projections, and virtual interfaces that can distance audiences from the live human presence on stage. Consequently, spectators may engage more with the technological representation of performance than with the performers themselves.

Reconfiguring Theatre to Digital in *The Last Poet*

In response to shifting cultural and technological contexts, the use of technology in theatre has evolved. Theatre practitioners in India, while constructing their plays, showed awareness of it, but this awareness has been limited to the use of spotlights, projectors, plasma screens, projections and sound effects. The digitalisation of theatre, such as motion capturing, interactivity, and virtual reality to enact performances in varied ways, as elucidated by Masura, remained a less explored field in India. One such theatre practitioner is Amitesh Grover, who extends the horizons of digital performance in his production of *The Last Poet*, thereby opening the possibilities of digitally mediated theatre in India. *The Week* magazine declared *The Last Poet* as India's first genre-bending broadcast of theatre-on-the-internet, commissioned by SA Virtual of Serendipity Arts Foundation" (Bhura). The play became 'live' in December 2020, during the COVID pandemic, in collaboration with Serendipity Arts Foundation (SAF). The disruption of spatial dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected the performing arts sector, compelling practitioners to experiment with space and explore new modes of expression. The pandemic also gave the performing arts an opportunity to adopt the 'new normal' by moving online (Methe and Dawle 171). *The Last Poet* emerged not organically, but as a creative response to the crisis precipitated by the pandemic. Grover says, "The pandemic brought about a permanent shift in the way I think about theatre. I made *The Last Poet*, a digital theatre piece that is performed live, and learnt a lot about how to think about digital performances and why live theatre is even more important in the online world than in the physical one" (Nath). The show starts with a disclaimer, "This city will seek you, as you seek what is inside this unbuilt world, highlighting the futuristic approach of Grover, who advocates that the online theatre over physical ones foster accessibility and reach, as the contemporary era increasingly polarises toward digital technology.

The Last Poet is about the disappearance of a poet, in which characters such as a weaver, a prosecutor, a student, and a publisher speak to unravel the mystery. The missing poet acts as a metaphor for writers, artists, and intellectuals who face censorship, persecution, or erasure, an issue which is quite relevant in contemporary society. With faces besmeared to reflect their fading existence and mouths covered to suggest the loss of speech, the characters vividly enact their role. A character reflects first on what the world would look like without a poet, and then a series of fragmented images portrays a society stripped of harmony, imagination, and human connection. Through this production, Grover seeks to reaffirm the significance of art and its role in holding society together. Interestingly, he does so with the aid of digital technology, underscoring the need for both science and the arts to complement each other for holistic growth. When the show starts, the audience enters a virtual city with poles, benches, lights and rooms floating on the screen. The audience can click any of the rooms to see an actor performing live on the other side. Sarah Mariam says, "The whole show is arranged in such a way that you can put any actor in any room in any way and still the same story will emerge" (Bhura),

pointing toward the interactivity. Parul Rana, in her review, points toward the ‘interactivity’ of the performance and says, “There is also a live voting poll conducted at the end of each performance, giving the audience the choice and freedom to decide what the next scene should be about.” Even the concept of the virtual room draws inspiration from a real-life structure. Grover admits it is based on the Kanwar of Rajasthan, a small, box-like wooden structure that unfolds multiple times until the shrine is reached (TheatreRoom 1:14 -1:30). He reconfigured this idea in a digital environment. It refutes the notion that virtual reality is completely detached from real life.

The production fulfils almost all the criteria of digital theatre laid by Masura, except one: placing at least some performers in the same physical space as the audience, since the entire play takes place ‘online’ in a specifically designed software environment where both performers and audience can join at their convenience. Grover’s play challenges the idea of ‘theatre as a space’ by bringing together ‘digital scenography and live performance’ through a specifically designed software operated on the Internet, also referred to as Multimedia Performance. *The Last Poet* opens a world of possibilities and experiments, providing an experience mediated by specific software over the internet. Although Grover’s play attracted an audience during the pandemic, “I had the fortune of showing *The Last Poet* at the Serendipity Arts Festival in December 2020 to audiences of 400 people” (quoted in Nath), the pertinent question is whether it can sustain audience engagement and entertainment in the long term. Smriti Rajgarhia, director at SAF, questions, “How can this audience-performer relationship adapt to technology?” (Avantika). Though *The Last Poet* echoes the real experiences of disappearances and the loss of life during the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital medium distances the audience from the immediacy of lived reality. VR theatre places the users directly within an experience, where they become enveloped in a synthetic world (Park 183). Rather than inviting emotional identification, the mediated performance encourages critical detachment. In doing so, it also risks trivialising the gravity of the pandemic’s human suffering by transforming it into a technologically mediated spectacle. Displacing embodied presence into digital navigation produces somatic alienation. While this work creates immersion, it simultaneously foregrounds the loss of corporeal presence. The missing poet becomes a symbol of the broader disappearance of embodied human connection in an increasingly virtual world. The production also unveils relational alienation by depicting fractured human connections in a networked environment, where each character offers fragmented memories of the lost poet. Rather than participating in a shared collective narrative, these characters remain separated by distance and incomplete knowledge. Additionally, though multiple spectators inhabit the same virtual environment in *The Last Poet*, they encounter one another only as ghostly presences. Altogether, the production fosters existential alienation, in which a world is haunted by absence, uncertainty, and the disappearance of truth. The missing poet ultimately becomes a powerful metaphor for what contemporary society risks losing: bodily presence, meaningful relationships, and a coherent sense of purpose. The endless labyrinth of rooms and narratives further intensifies the existential uncertainty.

The Last Poet, though innovative in its approach, could not offer a distinct experience, as the production is entirely on-screen and online. According to Richardson, “The only remarkable aspect that sets theatre aside from the film is its capacity to present people instead of pixels” (212). Putting a performance completely on screen blurs the boundary between theatre and cinema. Hence, Methe and Dawle are right in their approach by suggesting that the forward path must balance technological integration with cultural traditions (172). In digital theatre, the only distinguishing factors are ‘liveness’ and ‘Interactivity.’ However, it remains a matter of inquiry whether the audience truly takes cognisance of these features amid the consumption of high-quality, pre-recorded, and edited content saturated with spectacle, action, and special

effects. Richardson explores, “One of the themes that quickly emerged in the focus group was the fear of getting bored in the theatre. When you’re on Netflix, and when you don’t like the movie, after ten seconds, you change it. Jack said, when you’re going to the theatre, you don’t- you cannot leave the room and go another room for another play” (212). Grover made it possible by allowing the spectators to navigate a three-dimensional virtual city, choosing which rooms to enter and which stories to follow. He wanted the screen to come alive, inviting audience immersion (TheatreRoom 11:17-11:25) to cater to the modern audience’s tastes, as each viewer experiences a unique narrative pathway. This interactivity also posed a challenge for the actors, who are required to repeat their performances multiple times during the same play as per the audience’s choice, often over camera, while confined to a room. Grover admits, “Actors are quite disappointed that they got to play their least favourite scene thrice, which they did not want to play, but the audience kept asking for it” (TheatreRoom 10:18-10:25). Since the play is live, the disruption caused by internet outages and software glitches during the performance remains a technological challenge. A specialised software application is required whenever such a play is conceived and staged. Grover worked with a team of programmers to build this virtual city over four months, navigating questions such as what kind of code to use, how complex the code would be, and how to weave in audience interaction (TheatreRoom 8:45-9:05). Also, as stated earlier in this paper, software and tech experts assume the central role, it is difficult to regulate such a performance since without them. There is a possibility of excluding audiences who lack access to digital devices, reliable internet connectivity, or the technical skills needed to navigate online platforms. It is important to note that only two productions of *The Last Poet* were successfully staged, both during the COVID period. Furthermore, Grover did not create another similar production afterwards, which reflects the complexities and challenges involved in such theatre practices.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that integrating digital technology into contemporary theatre offers significant advantages. Experiments such as *The Last Poet* are commendable, as they revitalise theatrical possibilities through interactivity, multimodality, and accessibility while also introducing new forms of representation. These interventions should complement and strengthen the theatre’s immersive, embodied, and communal nature rather than detract from it. The excessive use of digital tools will foster artificiality, whereas distributing theatrical space across screens will alienate the audience from the surroundings at somatic, relational, and existential levels. Indeed, there is a need to renovate the theatre to meet current demands; however, a proper framework is required. According to Grover, the immediate future is to develop a sort of educational programme and to understand what digital theatre is, not in opposition to the physical and the digital, but as an extension of an expanded field where both can coexist (Theatre Room 6:15-7:00). It involves the identification of socio-cultural situations, geographical spaces, and audiences, as well as educating playwrights about how digital interfaces, live-streaming, motion capture, and algorithmic elements reshape the temporality and liveness traditionally associated with theatre.

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