



Title page image shows Not Mad Enough
by Active Inquiry
Four performers standing front of stage
looking into camera. Background shows a
large projector
screen with a fifth performer or audience
member.

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About

Collective Encounters specializes in using theatre as a tool for social change through collaborative practice. Established in 2004, and based in Liverpool, Collective Encounters delivers a place-based participatory programme across the Liverpool City Region using theatre to empower, inspire, build networks and develop the skills of those taking part.

In 2019 Collective Encounters launched the UK's first Centre for Excellence in Participatory Theatre to explore what excellence means in a participatory and community context, and to advocate on behalf of those making the work.

Since 2019 the Centre has provided 50 training, networking and debating events reaching over 2000 people. These events are supported by an online resource centre which includes:

- A library of academic resources, toolkits and policy papers.
- A community theatre timeline.
- A global map of participatory theatre practitioners.
- Brief Encounters: short films decoding arts and cultural concepts.
- Making Digital Participatory Theatre: a series of four filmed essays and case studies.

This publication is part of a series of works published by the Centre for Excellence in the last two years, that are supporting the evolution of participatory arts practice. Other publications in the series are:

Delivering Participatory Theatre During Social Distancing: What's Working? <https://collective-encounters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/low-res-report.pdf>

Participatory Theatre: Top Tips for Online Facilitation <https://collective-encounters.org.uk/library-resource/participatory-theatre-top-tips-for-online-facilitation/>

Making Digital Participatory Theatre <https://collective-encounters.org.uk/library-resource/making-digital-participatory-theatre/>

WHAT IS HYBRID PARTICIPATORY THEATRE?

Participatory theatre can be an unwieldy term to define. It can describe the process of making theatre or the role of the audience in the presentation of theatre, or both. As such, hybrid participatory theatre does not yield to one definition. For some, it means using technology to facilitate audience participation in the presentation of theatre or the performance itself (examples of this can be found in case studies from Dr. Tyrone Grima, Active Inquiry and Coney below). For others it means using online platforms to enable people to take part in the process of creating theatre (see case studies from MDI, Crowded Room). This document contains six case studies kindly given by five companies and practitioners with very different approaches to hybrid participatory theatre.

It has been compiled to demonstrate the breadth of practice and experimentation currently underway in the arts and cultural sector, and includes contributions from:

- Active Inquiry, who analyse a hybrid participatory Forum Theatre performance they created for the Aesthetics of Solidarity Festival, Berlin.
- Tassos Stevens, who writes about augmented reality and game play within Coney's new project, Magic Parcel.
- Merseyside Dance Initiative on building a hybrid studio and delivering hybrid dance workshops with community groups.
- Dr. Tyrone Grima, who synchronised two 'in the real' spaces and
 - one online space for romantic comedy drama in Malta, and
 - Crowded Room on using a hybrid approach to facilitate co-creation and power sharing during the making of a film (La Lucha) with nine women from Latin America who had fought back against exploitation
 - in the cleaning sector.
- Women in Action is an intergenerational group of women with an interest in the arts and a passion for social justice, who have been meeting regularly online, via Zoom since the start of the pandemic.

Hybrid participatory theatre

At the beginning of the document is a summary of some of the observations and recurring themes within the case studies. Case study contributors were asked to describe:

- The technology or physical space used.
- The team you needed to make it happen and any other additional resourcing.
- What worked and what issues did you encounter.
- If something worked, why did it work and could it be recreated.
- If something didn't work, were you able to remedy it at the time or is it something that could be remedied in the future.
- What was the effect of hybrid working? What did the participants or audience members experience?
- What did you learn? What were the most important learnings for you as a theatre maker?

This document has been published in March 2022 and we expect to publish a further series of case studies later on in the year. If you have an example of hybrid participatory theatre you think should be included in a future publication contact details for Collective Encounters can be found at www.collective-encounters.org.uk

THE AFFECT OF HYBRID PARTICIPATORY THEATRE PRACTICE

on space, architecture and experimentation

Hybrid participatory theatre is an opportunity to **reimagine the boundaries and intricacies of the performance space**. It also allows for the audiences and participants to play different roles in the experience; it can transform them into curators, agents or players. The possibilities of hybrid participatory theatre are endless and a useful principle when developing new work is to **keep the audience experience as central to the development of the architecture for the performance**, similar to the approach used for site-specific or site responsive performance. Hybrid participatory theatre can **add depth and experimentation to existing practices and techniques**. For example, delivering Forum Theatre or Theatre of the Oppressed in a hybrid way adds a new experiential dimension to a form and technique that can sometimes be formulaic.

La Lucha, Crowded Room



Three women performing dance in traditional Latin American dress

Co-creation and power sharing practices in the process of creating hybrid participatory theatre can be enhanced and more easily embedded into the preparation and development of a performance piece.

Hybrid can be a democratising tool and a great equaliser. Whilst research, preparation and planning are key to successful experimentation, be mindful of **and leave space for creativity, the unexpected and spontaneity**.

New virtual spaces can provide endless possibilities, and asking people to engage online **can cause excitement or anxiety depending on participants' and audience confidence levels with technology.**

A defining feature of theatre is that it is a 'collective' experience.

Find ways within the architecture of the performance or workshop to connect audience, participants and performers with each other. This could be through collective moments or a more intimate intervention as part of a bigger experience. This observation is particularly pertinent to asynchronous hybrid participatory theatre. Ask yourself, in what ways and when does the performance or workshop bring people together as part of a shared experience?

on preparations, rehearsals and creativity

Each case study cited the need to introduce **new skills and collaborations to the delivery team** to support technical creative and logistical aspects of theatre making. The case studies provided examples of these roles and included Zoom Stage Managers, Game Developers, Digital Programme Manager and Technical Directors. However new roles should not be limited to these and different types of hybrid participatory theatre activities will need different collaborations and external expertise.

Blocking actors during rehearsals has a greater degree of complexity and needs to include sightlines for those online. Ensure the positioning of cameras works for the whole performance, including any time that performers online need to interact with the 'in person' audience. This is also an important principle to remember when facilitating hybrid workshops and designing spaces for them; if leading a workshop in a physical space the **best**

positions for workshop facilitators to give instruction from should be identified before the workshop starts.

Be conscious that a reliance on technology is likely to **heighten the anxiety experienced** by actors, presenters, directors, the support team and anyone else involved in making the event happen. Set up systems for those working in different spaces and locations that enabled debriefs, reflections and feedback, be kind and aware of the mental health of those you are working with.

Failed technology or an internet outage has the potential to put an entire performance or event at risk. **Create a plan b** for last minute outages, this will have the added benefit of reducing anxiety amongst the performance, facilitators and technical team. Don't underestimate the additional time delivering participatory theatre in a hybrid way will take. Ensure you have the resources in place to work at a reasonable pace.

on audiences and participants

Audiences are excited by the possibilities of hybrid approaches to theatre making: the idea of connection with different people in different locations and an increased sense of agency and choice within the theatrical experience adds a **compelling dimension and dynamic**.

Audiences and participants are generous in their response to technical glitches such as lagging, bugs or poor sound, so long as these are embraced by the facilitators and performers they are accepted by audiences and participants as an integral part of the experience.

The potential of the hybrid space to engage new audiences and participants is, in some ways, limitless but not every show will appeal to every audience.

Think carefully about the audiences you want to reach in the online space and how, and **develop a strategy to target audience development activity**. Hybrid participatory theatre offers an opportunity to engage new and different audiences and participants, and this includes people with limiting health conditions, disabilities, caring responsibilities and anyone from around the world with an internet connection. Be mindful of structural inequities and socio-economic barriers when planning hybrid participatory theatre and identify means and mechanisms to create a welcoming and inclusive experience.

UK - wide research has shown that during the first two years of the pandemic that arts and cultural participation declined amongst **people from ethnic minority backgrounds who were less likely to engage in online events and activities**. There are also many people living with digital poverty with limited access to hardware, software or connection. Participants involved in devising and creating hybrid performance need **opportunities to reflect and feedback** on their hybrid experiences, this will both sustain participation, improve the quality of their experience for future activities and improve the practice of people leading and designing the work. Reflections and feedback should be honest and well-intended and understood within the context they were given. **Those who are more reluctant to feedback should be inspired to do so**; the sector is going to need a **plurality of voices** if hybrid participatory theatre is going to evolve and be sustained.

Hybrid participatory theatre

NOT MAD ENOUGH, HYBRID FORUM THEATRE by Gavin Crichton, Artistic Director, Active Inquiry

about Active Inquiry

Gavin is Artistic Director of Active Inquiry, a theatre company based in Edinburgh enabling grassroots communities to make and use excellent theatre to uncover and challenge injustice. Their work is heavily influenced by Augusto Boal and the Theatre of the Oppressed and they are part of the European TOgether Network of Theatre of the Oppressed companies. They are currently working on a Legislative Theatre project called Drama for Democracy.

Theatre as part of the Aesthetics of Solidarity Festival in Berlin. Over lockdown we developed a piece of Zoom Forum Theatre called Not Mad Enough and decided to adapt this for the Festival.

There are 5 actors in the play and one facilitator (or 'Joker' as the facilitator is named in Forum Theatre). Only three of the Company were able to travel to Berlin (2 actors and 1 Joker). We saw a hybrid performance of Not Mad Enough as an opportunity to develop our practice as participatory theatre practitioners.



Not Mad Enough, Active Inquiry

Stage setting with red lighting. One performer on stage holding long sticks in cross shape. Background shows a large projector screen with performers.

the performance space

The Aesthetics of Solidarity Festival was run by **Kuringa**, a Theatre of the Oppressed Company based in **Berlin**. This was a week-long festival with performances in the evenings and workshops and laboratories during the day. We performed to an audience of 75 people who were a mixture of local people and Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners from across Europe. There was a large theatre space on one level with a large area marked out as the stage. The play was streamed live, enabling a digital audience to watch, but not interact, with the performance. The play involved **the three actors who were still in Scotland performing on Zoom and this screen was projected onto the wall at the back of the stage**. We rigged a camera and microphones to enable the actors on Zoom to see and hear what was happening on the stage. We were lucky in that the Festival had employed some technicians who could help with the setup of the technology.

We had about three hours to rehearse in the space, set up the technology, work with the lighting designer and finalize our staging. This was not enough time and we ended up needing more. However, we managed to get set up and, after only a short delay, were able to get the audience into the space and perform.

what went well

The dynamic: having the actors on Zoom gave a different theatrical dynamic to the performance which heightened the theatricality of the piece. At the end of a week-long festival with a festival-fatigued audience, our piece brought a new energy to the space. This was partly because it was something new but also because **we had spent time in rehearsals exploring how we could connect the stage with the screen so we made sure that actors on Zoom would look in the right direction** so that they were looking at actors on stage, we put props on large poles so that they could be held up to the screen, **we worked on costume and other aesthetics to ensure that there was continuity between screen and stage.**

The Zoom aesthetic: everyone in the audience had probably spent lots of time on Zoom meaning they were familiar with the aesthetic and therefore able to assimilate this into their understanding of the performance. **The Zoom aesthetic was part of people's daily lives** and so it felt comfortable having it as part of the staging. We also realised it added symbolic depth; our central character felt very isolated and often stayed in her room. We wish that this was by design but it was by accident! Our original plan was to have the actor playing our central character in Berlin with us but she was not able to travel in the end.

Audience-performer interactions: audience members were keen to intervene in the play and to interact with characters on the stage and on the screen. It was a good story that encouraged interventions and **the audience also felt excited about being able to intervene across the physical and digital spaces.** There was excitement about entering a story in Berlin and actors in Edinburgh being in that story with you.

It added a different dynamic to the interventions. Forum Theatre is a form that can sometimes feel formulaic but this added another dimension.

some of the challenges

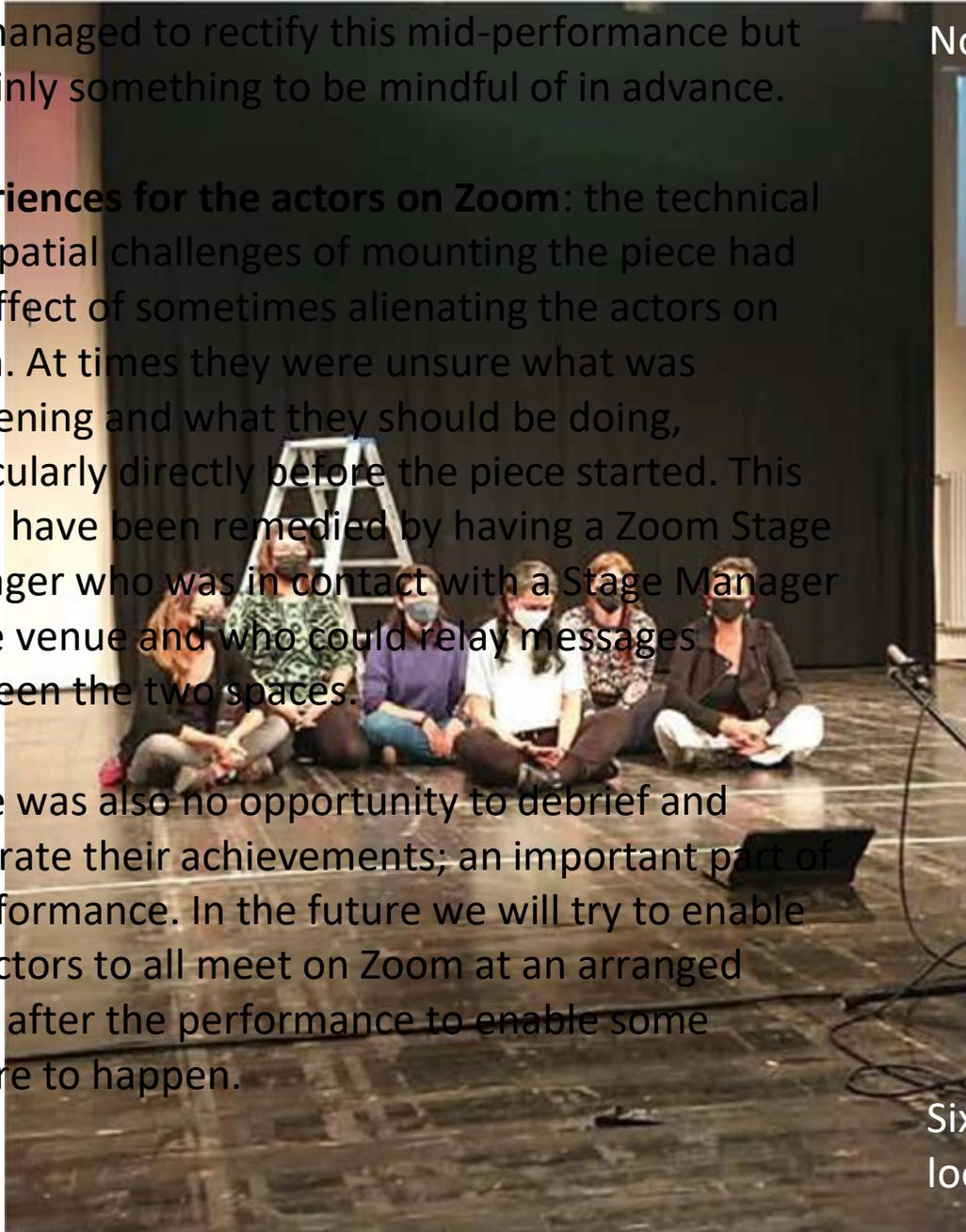
relying on technology: so much of the preparation work in Berlin felt out of our hands because of our reliance on technology. We encountered problems in rehearsal with getting the Zoom to work onstage and this put the performance in jeopardy. This was startling. In the past, as long as the actors were there, we could always do something even if technology let us down. This was not the case here. Luckily it came together but in the future we would need much more time and resources for tech, rehearsing, set up and a plan B if the technology failed.

Audience, screen and camera positioning: the camera and screen were positioned in a way that when the audience wanted to communicate with actors they had their backs to them/the camera.

We managed to rectify this mid-performance but certainly something to be mindful of in advance.

Experiences for the actors on Zoom: the technical and spatial challenges of mounting the piece had the effect of sometimes alienating the actors on Zoom. At times they were unsure what was happening and what they should be doing, particularly directly before the piece started. This could have been remedied by having a Zoom Stage Manager who was in contact with a Stage Manager in the venue and who could relay messages between the two spaces.

There was also no opportunity to debrief and celebrate their achievements; an important part of a performance. In the future we will try to enable the actors to all meet on Zoom at an arranged point after the performance to enable some closure to happen.



No

Six
loc

some important lessons

1. Spend time playing and experimenting. This may sound obvious but a hybrid performance opens up new possibilities that may only become apparent through experimentation.
2. Recreate performance conditions in the rehearsal space. As much as possible try to have the technology available to you in rehearsals as well as actors staying at home and accessing Zoom so that you can practice this well in advance.
3. Give lots of time for tech setup and rehearsals. Hybrid working relies heavily on technology. There needs to be a lot more time given to tech rehearsals in a venue. A cue to cue run-through will not be enough.
4. Put yourself in the audiences' shoes. Keep thinking about the potential interventions that an audience could make. Do you have the technology and people to support this intervention?
5. Keep a connection between the physical and digital spaces. The actors on Zoom often felt a bit left out of the process or unsure what they were supposed to be doing. A Stage Manager in both spaces would help but also some time spent rehearsing interventions to develop a connection between the Joker and the actors so that they are able to follow some predetermined cues whilst the interventions are occurring. Overall, this was an amazing experience for us that enabled us to connect with peers and new audiences and take something that felt very daunting and turn it into something that felt experimental and creative.

THE MAGIC PARCEL

by Tassos Stevens

about Coney

I'm from Coney, a charity making all kinds of play to spark change. Here I'm reflecting on the challenge of designing play for hybrid set-ups where our 'playing audiences' could both be in the same room as each other and also remote over a platform like Zoom - focusing on a piece in development The Magic Parcel.

The Magic Parcel is a project supported by Innovate UK.

about The Magic Parcel

I'm currently part of a making team - together with Arlo Howard, Caitlin Williams, Eliza Cass, Jess Sanders, and others representing Coney - developing and piloting a project called The Magic Parcel.

This lands in a workplace for a team to play together, designed to spark positive impacts in individual and collective well-being, a sense of mission, and better connection between colleagues... basically all the kinds

Typed label with words, 'Do not open until instructed' in capital letters.



Envelope in The Magic Parcel by Coney

of impacts promised by conventional team-building and reflective activities, but with three key differences:

- everything's wrapped into gameplay, making it fun;
- it doesn't rely on any direct facilitation, but plays itself;
- it adapts to play whether everyone is in the same room, or everyone is remote from each other, or anywhere hybrid in between.

The Magic Parcel combines a number of different platforms and technologies to make all this happen.

First, it's literally a parcel, containing a number of boxes, each with some beautiful and intriguing objects inside (can't say too much here cos #spoilers).

Second, we use our magic phone platform, based on Twilio [a customer engagement platform], to send and receive text messages to prompt players and send them more pieces to play.

Third, one of the players screen shares an online piece which facilitates play through the recorded voice and other instructions delivered by our mysterious associate Frankie Kuniklo (who sounds a lot like the brilliant Emma Frankland).

And last, in a first for Coney, we're using little bits of magic conjured with augmented reality inside Snapchat.

An example player experience

Only one player can receive the parcel - because there is only one parcel - and it sits on their desk, at first unopened. Every other player, wherever they are, is asked to place a sheet of paper on their desk.

Everyone is challenged by Frankie quickly to go fetch three objects - a favourite cup, a favourite pen, and a random object which sparks joy - and then to place these around the parcel or the sheet of paper which is its proxy.

While the player with the parcel proceeds to open it, Frankie then flashes a snapcode on screen, which for everyone else conjures an AR version of the parcel on the sheet of paper. And on the inside of the first layer of the parcel there's a key which the players need to open the next chapter of play, one half of the key in the physical parcel, the other half in the conjured parcel.

the making experience

There's a useful saying often attributed to coders: **make a feature of the bug**. Whatever is the problem, the bug, make something from it that can only happen because it is this way. With a remote or hybrid context for play, the bug is quite simply that people aren't in the same room as each other. So here **we're trying to design moments in play which have the most impact because people are not in the same room as each other, which requires them to connect and collaborate together**.

In devising The Magic Parcel, we asked Chloe Mashiter, game designer par excellence and expert in live streaming gameplay - and Coney associate - to reflect on the different strengths of players in the same room and remote. In Chloe's own words: Physical players are:

- more easily **able to interact physically** with other players and other teams
- able to **determine the position and viewpoint of the digital participants/control what they see by controlling their perspective**

Digital players are:

- **more immediately able to access information**, and
- able to take advantage of their unseen surroundings/physical items they have being accessible solely to themselves.
- easily able to **manipulate how they appear**.
- **more easily able to be 'independent agents'** (leaving space unhindered, for private chats etc).

Trying to maintain symmetry between physical and digital participants in terms of how they interact/access and share information is difficult and arguably it's better to embrace and lean into the asymmetry, provided both groups still have meaningful and essential roles to play. The ideal is mechanics that are only possible in such a hybrid setting. I think it's useful to imagine the architecture of a remote or hybrid setting not as happening inside a Zoom screen but inside all the different rooms. The play space for players is around the screen in their room. The more a designer can help players create a sense of this architecture, and their place inside it, the stronger the sense of connection players will feel with each other.

MERSEYSIDE DANCE INITIATIVE

(MDI): Hybrid Studio and Hybrid Working

About MDI

MDI is a charity working across the Liverpool City Region, using dance to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of participants and creatives of all ages, abilities and backgrounds. The team members sharing feedback for this case study are our Community Dance Artist and Digital Programme Manager, who have both had first-hand experience of preparing and delivering hybrid sessions, as well as attending participatory hybrid working training sessions led by third parties.

Resourcing the Hybrid Studio space

We invested in a hybrid set-up in MDI Studio 2, to ensure there was a space where participants and artists could continue to practice, create and teach within the environment of their choice. Our primary equipment included an 86" display screen and camera, wireless mics and speakers. We introduced a new role, Digital Programme Manager to lead our digital agenda.

We piloted classes via our Dance for Health programme, delivering to our groups of older and / or more vulnerable dancers, **50 Moves, Men Dancing** and **Dance for Parkinsons**. learning to facilitate in the Hybrid Studio In advance of the programme starting, we had to factor in time to engage those who were unfamiliar, afraid or suspicious of online ways of payment, communication and participation. This was a powerful piece of work led by our Community Dance Artist, which resulted in the return of all participants. In addition to running classes, members of the team also participated in a number of online hybrid workshops, which led to a deeper understanding of how to successfully deliver a hybrid model. **Training to become more tech-savvy as a team was our first challenge** and priority. Understanding the technology and equipment needed to facilitate this is essential to pre-planning.

We needed to learn how the screen, camera, computer and sound system all interacted with each other, and how to use the wireless mics to ensure a good sound experience for all.

During classes we **often had instances where the sound sources got mixed up**, the wireless mouse turned itself off or the Zoom camera didn't switch on, but with time, we learned how to troubleshoot more effectively! **Dance sessions are about space, sound and direction.**

We discovered that **spontaneity can be difficult**. We experienced this first hand. We took part in a training course that was delivered in a hybrid way. We found that there were **moments of feeling detached and excluded** when something happened spontaneously in the room. From this we learned that as a facilitator, you have to **set the correct foundations for spontaneity to evolve**, allowing conversation and sharing between participants and to keep the flow.

Communication is key and with hybrid it's slower than an in-person conversation and **there's a different etiquette**. Creating space for people to **share and feedback** is essential, we made sure to include time for this in our session planning. For example, whilst it is important during a class to have online participants on mute to preserve quality of sound [when delivering dance & music based workshops], we regularly unmute so they have as much opportunity to feed back as those in the room.

With hybrid classes it has also been important to consider the best place for the facilitator to be to ensure that everyone has a quality experience. This differs per class, but again, needs to be factored into the planning. The session leader has to place themselves where they can keep an eye on Zoom chat or for people 'raising their hands.'

Hybrid participatory theatre

Some people online will need specific support (e.g. 1:1 assistance), and also **prepare detailed instructions and lists of what they will need**, as they don't have the benefit of immediate access to the people and equipment in the room. Hybrid working is a great way to create togetherness and common ground. However we found that for certain tasks, we needed to **group those online working together via breakout rooms and those in the room separately for a more productive approach.**

Hybrid has allowed us to continue to offer our work during a pandemic to audiences larger than covid-restricted capacity has allowed, and beyond the limitations that the last 2 years have imposed on our community. It has offered those unable to attend in-person classes a chance to maintain their routines, grow in confidence and the freedom to practice in a space that works for them.



Dance artist Jenny Hale leading Hybrid 50 movement class with older people. Background includes large screen showing participants on Zoom.

It has been extremely rewarding to see how some of our older and more vulnerable participants have experienced technology, whilst engaging, moving and socializing in ways that may not have been possible without a hybrid option.

We have been able to provide artists with an opportunity to rehearse, practice and deliver from their chosen location and to wider audiences. **As arts professionals, hybrid working can be a valuable way to preserve work-life balance**, to network, meet other artists, experience more diverse work and learn and share ideas outside of our own immediate circles.

There are challenges we are still hoping to counter when working online and in a hybrid way. These include: Zoom fatigue during longer sessions; misinterpretation of instructions due to sound delay or difficulties; and the disconnect that not being in the room to read energy or body language can create. We have discovered that to deliver hybrid sessions it is important to remain ambitious, be open-minded, patient and curious. Hybrid is a discipline and has an etiquette. The needs and requirements of all participants must be carefully considered before sessions go live, and mindful planning is essential. This is the future for us.

ZOOM: A CASE STUDY

by Tyrone Grima, Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST)

about Tyrone Grima

Tyrone Grima is a senior lecturer and researcher at the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST).

He also lectures part-time at the University of Malta. Tyrone is also a practitioner and a playwright. His areas of interest in research are the interface between spirituality and theatre, as well as queer performance.

Performer walking through garden at night with elevated TV screen in the background. Photo: Ryan Galea



about Zoom: a case study

Zoom: a case study explores the process of staging a hybrid performance that took place in September 2021 in Malta as a response to the Covid scenario. For this production audiences could watch live online or attend in person, with actors performing, using both realities.

The in-person performance happened in two 'real' spaces, connected one to the other through an intricate use of screens and cameras, in such a way that whichever way the audience decided to watch the performance, they could still understand the narrative of the play.

Insights are based on interviews conducted with the cast, crew, and audience, framed by my experience as co-producer, writer and director.

the story

The storyline was light and entertaining. Samantha, an events manager, organises a show to regenerate her career after the lockdown.

She commissions a cabaret artiste, Guapa, who can only perform on screen since she is vulnerable.

Samantha invites an audience to react to the show. Samantha also recruits a friend, Damian, and his sister Gertrude, to prepare the catering.

As the show unfolds, despite the planning of Samantha, technological issues arise, ranging from loss of connection to unplanned interruptions on Zoom.

Damian, disinterested in the show, develops a crush over Caroline, one of the persons watching the cabaret online, and is determined to conquer the love of his life



Archway linking the garden with the courtyard.

the audience & performance space

This was a hybrid performance within multiple spaces. The audience could watch it online. This enabled more people to engage in the performance. At the time, some people were not permitted to attend in person because they were not vaccinated. Others were fearful of the health risks, or had transportation issues or caring responsibilities. For some, their busy lifestyle did not allow them time to attend. Working in a hybrid way also allowed people from overseas to watch the show.

Audiences that attended in person had to select one out of two different outdoor spaces which were connected via a corridor. One space, 'The Garden' was the location of the 'show within the show'; that is the event organised by Samantha. In 'The Garden' the characters interacted with the audience.

The other space, 'The Courtyard', was the backstage space, where the character Damian was preparing the food. In this space the characters vented out their frustration caused by the technological mishaps, as well as their personal issues. In 'The Courtyard', the audience served as a fourth wall.

The two spaces were also interconnected through an intricate use of cameras. Each space had a big screen, where the cabaret show could be seen. Both spaces had another screen which allowed the audience to watch what was happening in the opposite space.

The actors performed in multiple spaces. Guapa was online on Zoom throughout the performance. Her acting space was a hall at the top of the building where the performance was held. Caroline appeared as a thumbnail until the middle of the performance, where she then shared the screen with Guapa. In the dénouement [the final narrative], she made a surprise physical appearance in the Garden.

The other characters used both the Garden and the Courtyard but were never part of the Zoom call.

The performance also integrated the past with the future. This project investigated the interface with technology without ignoring traditional theatre-making. The romantic comedy genre, influenced by the Maltese farsa, was an homage to when community was created in the village theatres. Yet the presence of technology rooted the performance in a contemporary setting.

the affect of technology

The technological dimension presented unexpected difficulties. Some of the actors expressed fears of performing on Zoom as it made them vulnerable: they could not fix any arising technical difficulties. Some also experienced overwhelming anxiety because of the technical checks required before each performance. To address these concerns, **I asked the technical director to attend rehearsals** to support decision

To link the Zoom reality with the theatrical experience was a struggle that also generated anxiety, however the piece used these challenges as a source of humour, **making the most of technical shortcomings such as lagging or 'unmuted' dialogue**. For example when the agitated voice of Guapa was muffled Samantha asked her to calm down because she could not hear her properly. This intelligent and playful addressing of the problem worked effectively

The risk of overstimulation also presented a further performance challenge. **The overpowering presence of the screens could upstage what was occurring in the acting space**. The movements and the reactions of the actors had to be restrained to ensure the audience were not overwhelmed by the multiple semiotics.

Hybrid participatory theatre

The varied platforms (on and offline stages) in this performance were an added difficulty: the **performers had to work theatrically and be sensitive to sightlines, and simultaneously work for the camera.** Furthermore, they only had limited days to adapt to this balance. One of the actors highlighted that they had to constantly reflect on how to project the character vocally, emotionally and psychologically for both the live and online audiences.

This case-study demonstrates the advantages of a hybrid performance without shying away from revealing the challenges faced by the performers. It also shows that the infrastructure and the design of the production need to be meticulously planned to contain the dynamics effectively.

This project was supported by the Digital Research and Development Fund of the Arts Council. A more detailed version of the paper originally appeared in the journal 'Body, Space & Technology'



**Seated performer in colourful attire expressively speaking to a laptop. - Antonella Axisa, Zoom: a case study
Photo: Ryan Galea**

LA LUCHA/THE FIGHTBACK

by Mark Knightley and Nicole Mieles of Crowded Room

about Mark Knightley

Mark Knightley is so-artistic Director of Crowded Room. Currently in post-production of new film 'Sentinels', commissioned by King's College London, the film is shot in 360 and tells the story of 25 young Colombian climate activists, who took their government to court for deforestation of the Amazon and won. Other directing credits include: Immersive installation '2030', which was commissioned by art/tech experts Collusion and shortlisted for the Barbican's OSBTT Award. Echoes, which toured UK prisons and the The Heart of Adrian Lovett - a theatre show which explored the privatisation of the NHS (5 stars, The Stage). For Crowded Room Mark produced and performed in The Listening Room (Theatre Royal Stratford East and UK tour) and The Colours (Soho Theatre). Mark is currently creating '1797' a new show at the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich.

about Nicola Mieles

Nicole is 23 years old, she was born in Manta/Ecuador, she studied psychology at the University of Guayaquil, she stayed until third year, but was able to do a short career as a nursing assistant in Ecuador, she emigrated to England in 2019 to be with her husband. They have a YouTube channel, she is a member of the IWGB and works in the cleaning sector although she also currently works as a bar support, she is studying English for the future to continue her career in Psychology in London and also plans in the future to be a professional and help her family in Ecuador and after that have her own family with her husband.

Publicity poster for La Lucha, Crowded Room



who we co-created the project with are all members of the radical trade union “the International Workers of Great Britain” or IWGB (the self-style “baddest union in town”), and through the IWGB they have fought back against injustice, and won case after case for the rights of all workers

Nine contemporarily dressed women, photographed in a sepia tone, casually standing in front of 'La Lucha' red text.

Hybrid participatory theatre

We gained a commission from the Co-creating Change Network and began working with IWGB caseworker Jordi Lopez, who recruited nine courageous, funny, and poetic co-creators. We planned to run workshops fortnightly between February and May 2020 that would culminate in a short play, performed by the women, telling the story of their experiences. Of course, we all know what scuppered that plan...

When lockdown hit after our second rehearsal, it was a worrying blow. We felt that we had the beginnings of something. The co-creators had approached the workshops with warmth, generosity, and humour. They'd begun to share their stories with each other, and as improvisations developed by the end of the second rehearsal there was a feeling of catharsis.

However, this felt fragile. We were aware that precarious workers are often a hard group to organise.

In fact, their work has been specifically designed to make it so, with workers kept on zero hours contracts, with changing shift patterns, low pay and insecurity, in order to make resistance difficult. A couple of the women were thinking of returning home and our funding was not sufficient to extend our timeframe.

pivoting the project online

When the first lockdown hit, we were left with no choice but to shift our rehearsals and our communications online. At first this was intended to be a temporary measure, with in-person work resuming after the restrictions were lifted and culminating in a live theatre performance as the primary output. **We used Zoom to catch up with the whole group, and invited our co-creators to send us videos filmed on their phones to convey their realities during this strange and difficult time.**

Our collaborators told us of their fear, as key workers on the front line of the pandemic, and the surrealism of being out in a deserted London, cleaning empty offices and workspaces in full protective gear. **They sent us videos of ghost towns and hazmat suits.** They also shared creative content that not only documented their lives but also expressed things that they wanted to share, using music, drama, and dance.

how hybrid facilitated co-creation

As the pandemic stretched on, we watched the project evolve into something different, that we were less in control of, and that was increasingly initiated by the co-creators rather than by us.

Together we discussed the best way to weave this content together into something that would tell the stories of the co-creators before and during the pandemic, **using both the film content and – once it was possible – live, in-person performance**

We documented the process as we went along and ultimately decided to include this documentation in the final piece. **Whilst we found this resulted in a unique and vibrant film, it had its drawbacks in that the final output was judged against different criteria to how it was first conceived and we had to compromise on production values.** If we were to repeat the process and planned for a hybrid approach from the outset **we would invest in equipment for the co-creators and workshops in filming and audio capture techniques.**

Nicole Mieles, one of the co-creators, wrote the following:

“What encouraged me to do [the project] was to allow people to learn a little more about the experience of emigrating to another country and having to take the first job that comes up to make ends meet; in my case, a cleaning job. The dream that many of us have is to emerge to have better opportunities in life, and that is why we fight every day; not only for ourselves but also for our family who are far away.

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“One of the events that impacted us worldwide was COVID-19, a pandemic that we did not expect. I cannot deny the fear that I felt, not only for myself but for my family. In this project we captured what we were experiencing because many of us continued to work. We did not stop during the pandemic; we had some setbacks due to the COVID restrictions so we had to continue doing the project remotely, but this turned out to be positive. **Thank God we were able to narrate our experiences through video calls**, both group and individual, and this was an experience that will remain engraved in my head and heart forever, since **I had never thought to record and share my experiences in this country through film**. It connected me with such a wonderful group of warrior women, each with a different experience, but who left me with a lot of gratitude and learning.

“I am grateful to the entire team behind this wonderful production, because I know that after this there are many people who will value our work much more. Behind each person there is a story to tell, a family to fight for, and a life to live without feeling less than others for having a different language. Explaining my experiences through film was a way to express a little of what we had repressed, and to overcome the fear that we all felt and the loneliness of being away from family during those difficult times.”



La Lucha, Crowded Room - A women spotlighted and performing dance in traditional Latin American dress

shifting power

A common maxim is that you should make theatre about what you know. **We could not have been any more different from our co-creators**, in terms of language, culture, and life experiences. However, we found that when we shifted the project to a hybrid model, these differences actually became a strength. **A key challenge of co-creation is to share power over both the process and the output**, but in a theatre space there is a clear power differential between those who have been trained in theatre and are used to operating in this arena, and those who have not and are not.

When we were forced to move to a **hybrid approach, this effectively shifted power to the co-creators**, as they were filming themselves in their own environment and had the freedom to play with form, style and content with minimal direction from us, the theatre-makers. It was difficult but necessary to relinquish power in order to co-create work with a group who are often disempowered, and hybrid working pushed us further in that direction.

A key lesson was that we needed to focus on the process rather than on a set output, and let the project evolve collaboratively into an output that we could not determine in advance

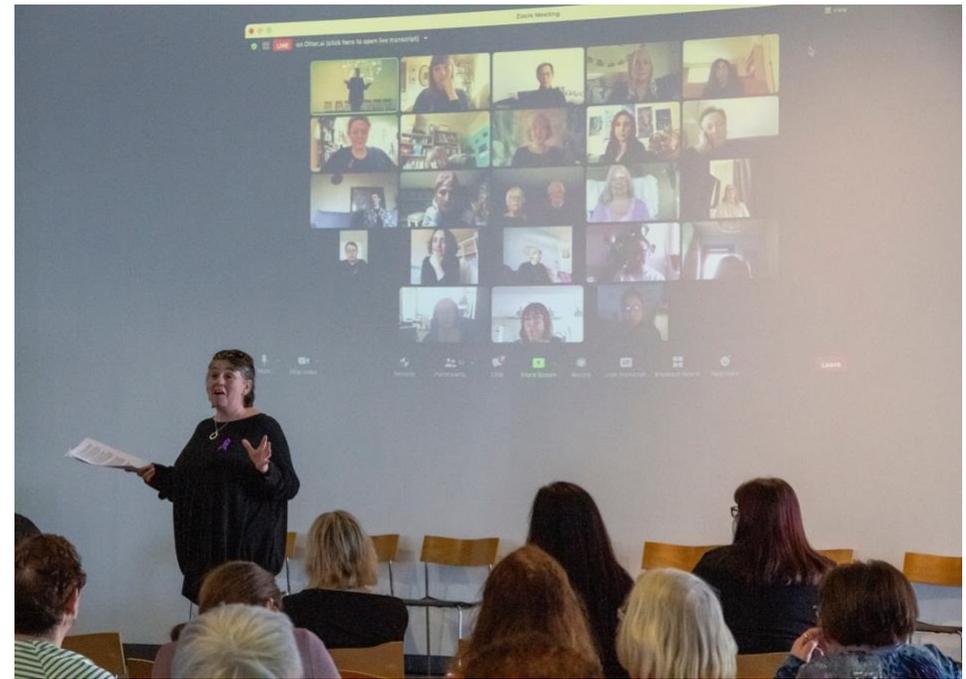
WOMEN IN ACTION

by Tessa Buddle of Collective Encounters

about Women in Action

Women in Action is an intergenerational group of women with an interest in the arts and a passion for social justice, who have been meeting regularly online, via Zoom since the start of the pandemic. For the last year the group has been testing out new live hybrid workshops, with both in-person and online participants interacting together, and these have been met with enthusiasm. Below is a description of some of the things we've learnt. We have used a few different spaces and tried different set-ups to suit different activities. In all cases, the online platform used has been Zoom. Other necessary equipment has been:

- A static large screen and at least one portable device.
- Microphones.
- A physically separate breakout space.



Women In Action, Collective Encounters - Female speaker in front of live audience. Background shows a large projector screen with women in multiple Zoom windows. Photo: Joanne Roberts

- Minimum staffing is an in-person facilitator, an online facilitator and a technician.
 - Good Wi-Fi connection.
 - Preferably laptops/computers for remote participants.

static group activities

For workshops sitting around a table or in a circle, we used a simple laptop and secondary tablet to enable online participants to take part. The laptop would generally sit on a table facing the group facilitator, while the tablet established a wide shot of the workshop room and enabled online and in-person participants to see each other. Sound was turned off on the tablet to avoid feedback, meaning that if anyone wanted to communicate with the online participants, they needed to do so via the laptop, which could be easily moved around the circle/table.

Having **portable technology also enabled small group work**. For example, online participants could be put into breakout rooms, and the 'laptop' and 'tablet' could then join those breakout rooms and the devices could be physically moved to a breakout space. To avoid audio feedback or background noise, this requires the devices to be in actual separate spaces, not simply different parts of the room.

mobile group activities

When doing work 'on our feet', such as games in pairs, devising in small groups, and physical exploration of space and staging, the technical set-up used for the more static sessions has proven inadequate.

The best approach we have found so far is the use of a large static screen with a wide-angle camera and digital wireless microphones attached. This enables online participants to see most of what is happening in one go, and it gives them a strong presence in the room. With wireless microphones participants in the room can be positioned far from the camera and still be understood.

The set-up we are currently using provides two microphones. One is connected to the workshop facilitator throughout, and the other is moved around as needed. It is sensitive enough that it can pick up the group's voices if placed in the centre of a drama circle, for example, or in front of a small group performing a scene

online participants

An **essential addition is an online facilitator**. This facilitator hosts the Zoom and manages all technical aspects such as spotlighting, muting/unmuting, setting up breakout rooms, screen sharing etc, and is also a more direct contact for the Zoom participants who can otherwise feel left out of what is happening in the room.

Participants' ability to take part in hybrid sessions is also highly dependent on their own at-home set up. We provided tablets for many of our participants and while these were great for enabling people to get online, they limit what people can do and how much they can see/hear. We have supported participants to use headphones or set up a speaker to help with sound and are planning to provide laptops for those who regularly join online. This will mean a much richer experience and provides many more accessibility features than are possible on a mobile device.

different but equal experiences

Our hybrid sessions have been most successful when **exploring the possibilities of the mixed participation modes**. While we do a lot as a whole group, we also do breakout work where two separate activities are delivered at once – one in the room and one on Zoom. This is useful for activities that only work via one medium or the other. Rather than everything being delivered to both groups at once, groups can work in their separate spaces and then share back what they have done.

Another successful strategy has been to **acknowledge that participants are engaging with the space in different ways and therefore give them different roles** in games and scenes, which enable them to make the most of their environment and media. Rather than everyone participating in the 'same' way, we create opportunities for equal participation by, for example, exploring dialogue between the domestic space and the workshop space, making a game out of microphone use, playing with the fact that we can go in and out of shot etc.

participant's responses

This has been a mix of frustration, gratitude, and excitement. Sometimes sessions can feel stilted, confusing and excluding. But at its most successful, hybrid working deepens the positive impacts of participatory theatre: **it brings people together from different backgrounds, developing communication skills, and opening us up to different perspectives and possibilities.** In every hybrid session we run we get to hear from people who would not have been there if we didn't have a remote participation option; **we are challenged to think about how we communicate** and the needs of other people; and we discover new **creative and collaborative possibilities.**



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