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On being pulled: Spectator engagement and spectacle in the context of live theatre broadcasting and NT at Home

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Abstract:
This article builds on the concepts of affective arrangement and affect from the perspective of cultural theory as an outcome of the interactive dynamics between multiple actors and actants in sociomaterial settings (Slaby, Mühlhoff, and Wüschner 2019, 3). It seeks to discuss how in the context of NT Live and NT At Home, when a live theatre performance is transported onto the screen and when one compares this experience with that of past live theatre performances, spectator engagement can be illustrated as a 'pull'. The article argues that the medial and paratextual set up of NT Live and NT At Home hinges on highly orchestrated pulls that are created, on the one hand, through relying on the dynamics of the (cinematic) frame that mediates the performance, and on the other hand, on embedding the performance in/on individualized hardware and media such as smartphones and YouTube. While the focus in this article will be on both the live production and the NT Livecast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Bridge Theatre/NT Live), the discussion will be complemented with an assessment of the workings of this 'pull' in the context of NT At Home during the COVID-19 related lockdown of the summer months of 2020.

Keywords: NT Live, NT At Home, affective arrangement, spectator engagement, Twitter

I. Introduction

In the context of livecasting (see Bakhshi 2011 and NESTA 2010 for two reports on NT Live), the invitation to engage with a performance, to get closer (behind the scenes, or to see a performance from "the best seats in the house", cf. "About National Theatre Live"), suggests a dispelling of distance, not dissimilar to that in immersive theatre performances. dally, one has the option of sharing one's feedback on social media and tell others about the livecasts one has seen, but this is entirely voluntary and does not have any direct or immediate

influence on the outcome of a given show. However, when both NT Live and NT At Home use the slogan "Get the best seat in the house", this beckons the question what such a framing does to the position of spectators and their engagement and whether such a superlative somehow entails the promise of less spectatorial labour that needs to be invested in the performance. As this article argues, by using the Bridge Theatre's/NT Live's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2019) as an example, this is not the case because both livecasting and NT At Home in fact rely even more on the spectator who lets her- or himself be pulled into the experience of the mediated performance. In the discussion that follows, I use 'engagement' as a general term to denote scalable levels of involvement and I suggest the concept of the "pull" as a specific realization of processes of engagement.

Some preliminary thoughts on the terminology used: Livecasting hinges on the immaterial and the affective as much as it does on the visual. More specifically, livecasting affords a mediated, more varied type of spectacle that emotionally engages and stimulates spectators on several levels of sensory perception, namely the visual, the auditory and affective – both their own and others', when a recording/filming of a theatrical performance and its audience are watched on a cinema (or laptop) screen. These dynamics gained new contours during the COVID-19 pandemic when theatres were closed in the UK and the NT launched the initiative NT At Home to compensate both for their loss of ticket sales (donations were welcome and many viewers followed this plea) and the gaping hole left in many people's lives who could not enjoy theatre in situ any more. In this context, watching others having fun, perhaps even watching a former version of oneself having fun, acquired new gravitas: in yearning for theatrical engagement, one's role as a spectator certainly was to let oneself be engaged by this compensation affectively and engage with it?

Following the understanding of affect from the perspective of cultural theory, affect here is approached as an outcome of the interactive dynamics between multiple actors and actants in sociomaterial settings (Slaby, Mühlhoff, and Wüschner 2019, 3). Affect is an effect of an affective arrangement, a concept introduced by Slaby, Mühlhoff and Wüschner to describe

> a material-discursive formation as part of which affect is patterned, channeled, and modulated in recurrent and repeatable ways. Key to such arrangements is that they bring multiple actors into a dynamic, orchestrated conjunction, so that these actors' mutual affecting and being affected is the central dimension of the arrangement from the start. (2019, 5)

Given the philosophical footing of this concept, this is a definition that is both abstract and broad – as the authors readily admit, affective arrangements in this sense are "ubiquitous in social life" (ibid.). Yet shortly before this remark, the authors speak of "thresholds of intensity" that give affective arrangements their "contours" and describe affective arrangements as exerting a "'pull', a kind of active allure, potentially drawing individuals into

their ambit by offering them occasions for immersion within a sphere of resonance and intensity." (5)

As this article seeks to develop, livecasts and the NT At Home initiative are an illustration of what this 'pull' can look like when a live theatre performance is transported onto the screen and when one compares this experience with that of live theatre performances. In other words: the affective arrangement differs when one looks at livecasts versus live theatre performances because the thresholds of intensity characterizing both setting are crossed/played with differently. To be engaged, in this context, is actually synonymous with being a spectator – in the moments in which one leaves the affective arrangement of the show, for instance, to check one's phone, one is not engaged. To be engaged can present itself as an obligation that oscillates between freedom and affective labour. This article will argue that the set up of NT Live and NT At Home hinges on highly orchestrated pulls that are created, on the one hand, through relying on the dynamics of the frame and medium that mediate the performance, and on the other hand, on embedding the performance in/on individualized hardware and media such as smartphones and YouTube. While the focus in this article will be on both the live production and the NT Livecast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Bridge Theatre/NT Live), I will complement my thoughts with an assessment of the workings of this 'pull' in the context of NT At Home, using an approach and methodology that is informed by cultural studies, auto-ethnography and netnography.

II. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Bridge Theatre 2019

London's Bridge Theatre put the commonly human (see Kershaw 2007, 209) at the heart of its 2019 summer production, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There were experiences in the in situ performance that one would think difficult to capture in the subsequent NT livecast. Yet the effect of the spectacular set-up managed to cross the real-digital divide and created a manifestation of mediatized communitas (picking up from Turner 1982, 45-47) and communal engagement. The performance and the NT Live recording of it can be characterized as projects that were centered on coordinating and manoeuvring energy, and extending invitations to be pulled into the experience.

Directed by Nicholas Hytner, with design by Bunny Christie, the play ran from 3 June to 31 August 2019 and was staged in the theatre's promenade format.[1] This meant that one could choose whether one wanted a seat in the auditorium or a standing ticket in the pit. In an email sent out to all subscribers to the theatre's newsletter, which had the function of a countdown until opening night on 3 June 2019, future audience members were assured that "summer is coming" and sent rehearsal pictures and a link to the appearance of Gwendoline Christie (who played Titania) appearance in *The Graham Norton Show* on BBC One. The email also included a section titled "Choose how to experience it" which read: "The special thing about our production is that *you* can choose how to experience it – sit wrapped around the action or follow it on foot with immersive tickets. There are perks to both depending on what tickles your fancy." (Bridge Theatre "A Midsummer Night's Dream begins

on 3 June", emphases in original) When clicking on "immersive tickets" one was forwarded to the theatre's homepage and got the information that:

> The theatre becomes the forest – a dream world of flying fairies, contagious fogs and moonlight revels. The seating is wrapped around the action while the immersive tickets allow the story to be followed on foot. (…) Standing tickets: To be immersed in the action you should select 'pit' when booking tickets. This will mean you will stand for the performance and move around as the story develops around you. There may be elements of participation for those with these tickets (but don't worry, you won't have a speaking role!). (Bridge Theatre homepage)

In addition, the email already included the "NT Live announcement": "We're so thrilled to announce that NT Live will be streaming a recording of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on 17 October [2019] to cinemas around the world. Perfect for those who can't make it to London this summer or who want to see the show again from a whole new perspective." Further email updates included new trailers of the show while it was already running, which gave an impression on what to expect and included several sequences in which audience members were the heart of the spectacle, as in the screenshot below:

Figure 1. Screenshot from the NT Live Twitter Page showing a scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, posted on 17 October 2019, taken on 24 October 2020.

An email sent out on 15 June 2019 to mark the half time of the run of the production stated that "we are certainly feeling the love from our audiences and reviewers alike", notably putting the audience first. Even before the show had started and throughout its run, the affective quality of it was emphasized by describing it as wrapping itself around "you" (personalized), taking place in the summer (associated with warmth) and how it created a feeling of love among audience members. There were no comments on the content of the play, only on individual actors' performances and the effect it achieved. Before the final performance, an email summed up the highlights from "*The Dream*" (the abbreviation creating a familiar atmosphere, as if the play was an old friend) and encouraging prospective audience members to come and see the play ("Need more convincing by people that aren't just us?"), using tweets by spectators referred to as "the stream of love" (Bridge Theatre "The end of the dream").

The production itself playfully blurred the boundaries between illusion and theatrical artifice. When I attended the show at the Bridge Theatre on 15 June 2019 with my partner, we were indeed part of the forest in which the plot unfolded since we had standing tickets in the pit. In the performance captured for NT Live, Puck looked at one woman in the audience and complemented her on her dungarees (Figure 2). At the end of the first part, right before the intermission, there was an extended party scene celebrating the love between Oberon and Bottom-as-Ass. The actors and actresses playing the "Rude Mechanicals" turned to the audience members, grabbed a few by the hands and manoeuvred us dancing in a big circle in the pit, around the stage islands. When the music stopped after a couple of minutes to signal the beginning of the intermission, we found ourselves dancing with strangers in a liminal space (and time) between performance and intermission – the illusion was dispersed. What is more, we found ourselves performing ourselves, or rather "performing 'audience'" (White 2013, 5) as we were watching the performance. There was an awareness of being part of an audience as both a socially constructed practice and a position taken through being a spectator to the world around us, "our own actions in it as well as those of other people" (White 2013, 5).

Throughout the performance there were breaks in the experience of immersion and illusion because we were repeatedly gently pushed around and guided by the stage-hands positioned around the stage islands making sure that the action could unfold as planned. Being shoved around like this and bumping into fellow spectators made it hard to allow for an all-encompassing manifestation of an illusion; one can say that not only the fourth wall was broken, but also the fifth wall between audience members.

The play was pitched to audiences as an immersive experience, a somewhat surprising word choice, given that the term is quite vague in the contemporary academic discourse. Gareth White in *Audience Participation in Theatre. Aesthetics of the Invitation* (2013) points out that the nascent genre of "immersive theatre" applies only to a small selection of audience participatory theatre. Put simply, to immerse oneself in a performance means to change one's perspective. What White points to in his study (2013, 169-170), and

what is reminiscent of Dennis Kennedy's terminology when he speaks of spectators assisting at a spectacle (2001), is that to accept the invitation to plunge into the spectacle, as in the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is to be pulled into it and become an integral part of it.

Figure 2. "I like your dungarees!" – Screenshot from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when it was shown as part of NT At Home on YouTube between from 25 June–2 July 2020, taken on 25 June 2020.

In the case of the livecast, this is complicated because those audience members at the Bridge Theatre who were there on the night the livecast was made played the part of the carriers of affect for those audiences watching them in their cinema. Therefore, I claim that 'immersion' should not be limited to the dramatic world but can also apply to the experiential world of being a spectator. What White talks about is similar to what Roland Barthes has discussed with regard to nineteenth-century literature and the active role of the reader when engaging with writerly versus readerly texts in his book *S/Z* (1970/1990): when the author (of a novel, but also of a play) is 'dead' it is the task and perhaps even duty of the reader (and spectator) to engage with it.

In the marketing emails prior to the performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, future spectators were indeed invited to (possibly) participate and let the story develop around them and the experience of the pit was characterized by an atmosphere of proximity, flexibility and interaction. While #LoveOnTop was one of the hashtags promoted by Bridge Theatre – a reference to the scene in which Oberon and Bottom dance together in a flirtatious way to Beyoncé's song with the same title – the show was staged in such a way as to allow a moving *through* the theatrical space, both the fictional and actual one, rather than remain on top of it (that is, removed or detached). To reiterate: "immersion" does not have to be limited to an immersion in the drama or the dramatic fiction, it can also occur inside the experiential space of being a spectator, in which case it refers to *spectatorial*

engagement. The performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presented the two sides of what such an immersion and the resulting engagement can be and feel like: on the one hand, a gentle plunge into a world that had not much in common with the busy atmosphere on London Bridge just a few metres outside the building in which the theatre is located; and at the same time, on the other hand, a constant reminder of the bodies of other temporary theatre visitors around us.

III. Livecasting as Affective Spectacle: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as part of NT Live

In the following I would like to shed light on how the notions of proximity, flexibility and interaction were transported into the supposedly less engaging space of watching the production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on a cinema screen and elaborate on what the pull into the experiential space looked like in this new context.

The play was chosen to mark a decade of NT Live, an ambitious decision, given that 1,200 scripted shots for seven cameras were necessary in a 2.20 hour show to capture "not just theater in the round" but "theater in the round with an audience smack in the middle" (Valentini 2019; see also MacGibbon). It was first shown in cinemas on 17 October 2019 as a "filmed live screening" (there was a slide including that specification when one entered the cinema auditorium) since the "capture" of it had happened in the final week of its run for scheduling reasons (Buckeridge 2019).

When comparing the livecast with the live performance in terms of their affective arrangements as "a material-discursive formation as part of which affect is patterned, channeled, and modulated in recurrent and repeatable ways" bringing together many actors "into a dynamic, orchestrated conjunction" (Slaby/Mühlhoff/Wüschner 2019, 5) one notices the different structure of their thresholds of intensity. In other words: their affective arrangements differ from one another because they demand different kinds of engagement from spectators – that is, they pull spectators in differently. Because of the promenade format of the show and the invitation to become part and walk through the dreamland, spectators of the in situ performance, after they had crossed this threshold of intensity and had accepted the invitation, were a vital part of the affective arrangement. In the case of the live theatre event, this arrangement could be experienced as relatively self-sufficient and structured both by the stage hands and the experience of the play itself.

In the case of the livecast, these thresholds are lowered and expanded, to make up for the in-situ intensity absent in the mediated production and to prolong the affective attachment to it. The affective arrangement of the livecast was therefore more permeable: in its default position, a livecast presents itself as a recording of other people's participation in an affective arrangement; cinema audiences are onlookers and a priori excluded from it. As a consequence, the threshold to cross in order to re-enact the intense theatrical experience is low, it does not seem to address one directly. The effect of the affective arrangement is dispersed and can be localized in different places: it is contained within the

cinema screen, as one watches its manifestation in the actual theatre; it spills over into the cinema auditorium; and it is prolonged and further dispersed in comments on social media. This means that, in contrast to its stability in the context of in situ performance, the arrangement is not there from the start; it is (re)created while the broadcast is being watched and spilling over into the cinema. This can be monitored when one compares the livecast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with its live-theatre equivalent.

A feature that was particularly striking when comparing my experience as a pit member and a livecast attendee, was that seen on the screen the crew with their headsets seemed to be part of the show – not only because they ushered spectators and ascertained the smooth goings on of the production, but because they were so close to the stage, at the same time reacting and watching the events unfold very enthusiastically and closely, as if for the first time. Additionally, in several shots there was one of the cameras visible, as if it were a spectator, too, recording/watching the performance. This was complemented by seeing many audience members wear purple floral head decorations after the intermission. Ross MacGibbon, who filmed the production for the screen, refers to these shots, when somebody seems to be in the foreground by accident, as "dirty" shots, that increase the dynamism of a performance and contribute to a participatory and communal feeling.[2] Watched in the cinema, there was no clear hierarchy between performers and spectators; while the performers were on elevated stage islands, the spectators formed the majority and thus filled most of the screen. The dramatic space appeared in an extended form, with the roles reversed – it became less clear who was merely watching and who was part of the play that the cinema audience was watching.

In an actual piercing of the fourth wall, the actor (Jermaine Freeman) playing an actor playing 'Moon' in the Rude Mechanicals' rendering of *Pyramus and Thisbe* shone his torch right into the camera, thus blinding the cinema audiences (there was an audible flinching in the Barbican cinema) in the same way in which the actors on stage were blinded. During the entire play, but especially in the second half the atmosphere in the cinema was equally joyful and enthusiastic, many people were laughing, a few even applauded at the end.

Why was the livecast so successful in showing on screen how the immersive experience of live theatre worked and on engaging livecast spectators as well? One aspect is the technical skill of the multi-camera director. As a former dancer, MacGibbon[3] in his work focuses on filming (he avoids the term "capture" because it suggests stasis) the energy of human bodies in motion. When confronted with a rather untypical format such as that of the promenade, the task is especially complex. The spectator in the cinema cannot use their eyes, ears and brains to focus on what is needed to build a story, but has to rely on the screen director to tell you that story (see Champagne 2018).

When preparing for his filming of the show, MacGibbon did not go to the rehearsals because in his experience it sometimes "confuses things" and waited until the show was in production. He saw the show twice, one time from the promenades and one time from the audience, and relatively late in the run since it would then come closest to the show that he

would shoot. For a screen director doing a livecast of a theatre show, the first question always is, how many cameras their team will have. When doing a livecast for the NT, there are usually 6-7 cameras available. Something that was noticeable when watching the livecast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was the intuitive and dynamic approach to filming. It did not seem as if the camera was shutting some part of the stage off, even though because of the promenade format there was no actual centre. MacGibbon worked with a scratch tape, filmed in one wide shot from that spot in the Bridge Theatre where people naturally assume that this is where the front is, combined with his own, as he said, "gut feelings" from watching the show (he had already prepared his camera script directly on the play text, after having watched the shows). In several scenes, the camera seemed to capture moments that only lasted for the blink of an eye, such as Puck's leap into the audience; all of these, however, were moments of planned improvisation. In one scene, for instance, Bottom grabs a phone from an audience member to consult a calendar and find out what the date of the Midsummer festivities is. The Rude Mechanicals then take a selfie with this phone (Figure 3) and the camera captures this moment in such a way that the shot of the group on the phone screen is visible for two seconds – a small screen within a bigger screen. This had been arranged beforehand, however, since MacGibbon instructed the actor to be roughly in this area so that he could have a camera nearby and film the moment accordingly. These are instances of planned improvisation, as MacGibbon detailed. Analogously, what is required of the involved cameramen is both physical presence as well as the skill to be courageous and spontaneous; the screen director choreographs them as well while the show is happening, sometimes telling them what to shoot in the last second. None of this can be theorized or planned in advance in its entirety, an element of risk is crucial.

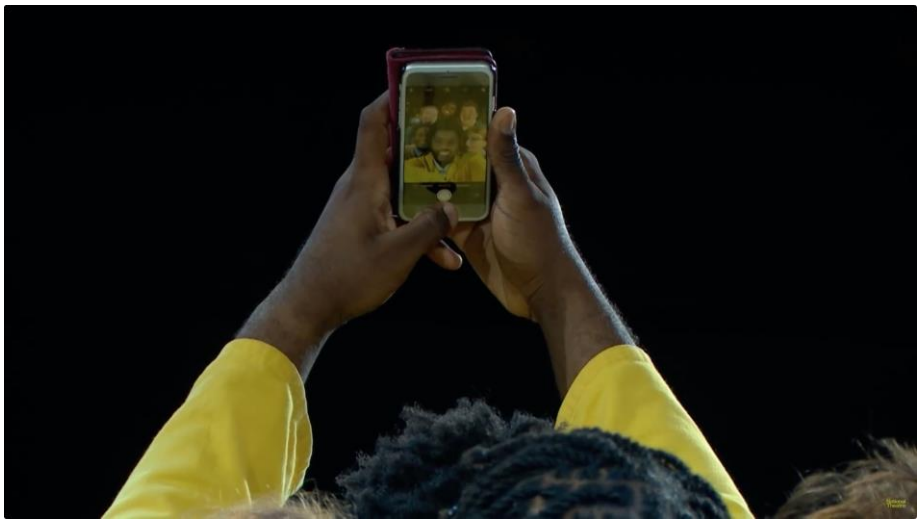

Figure 3. Screenshot from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when it was shown as part of NT At Home on YouTube between from 25 June–2 July 2020, taken on 25 June 2020.

The reason to film many scenes with a handheld camera was twofold – first of all, MacGibbon did not want the livecast "to be just observational" but "to be anticipatory, like the production was" to render the excitement audiences members, who had been in the pit,

had felt. Secondly, the screen director wanted to transport the three dimensions of the performance onto the screen, that is, a mixture of foreground, centreground and background. In order to do this, many slightly wider shots, with the camera slightly lower than the eye line were used to frame the layers of action and the visceral depth of the production by taking into account a mix of angles, and for instance, shoot the low foreground, the centreground where the action was happening on one of the "stage islands" and the trapeze on top in the background all in one frame.

This artistic vision has also been influenced by MacGibbon's background as a dancer: the camera is not primarily a framing device but a motor, a device that has a direct influence on the pace and depth of a performance:

> (…) Cameras can change scenes that appear flat on the stage. (…) For me the important thing above all is to keep it visceral, entertaining, imaginative, and honest to production. So that people see the production and not your kind of whacky interpretation. It *is* your interpretation, but it is done with the best possible motives. (MacGibbon 2019)

The filming team of the livecast was therefore far from just passively "shooting" the show – under the instruction of MacGibbon their labour is a highly creative and alert process that requires a great amount of focused attention that still lives a leeway for enjoyment. While some theatre companies often think that the filming of a performance for livecasting purposes happens as one goes along, it is an intricate process of script and camera work and improvisation within parameters.

When watching the livecast, another noteworthy aspect from the perspective of the cinema audience was the enjoyment of mediatized communitas. After the show, when I was cramped with fellow cinema spectators in the elevator one woman said to another: "I wonder what it would have been like for people in the seats – watching everybody having fun." A selection of responses on Twitter reflects in what ways the livecast was perceived, namely as a spectacle on the one hand and as a primarily affective experience that made @hvamitchell, for instance, "[f]eel[…] so happy"(18 October 2019, 12:06 am). One user described the atmosphere in the cinema as "@NTLive that was incredible! The whole cinema was crying with laughter at the rude mechanicals and the staging and direction was magical. A truly wonderful experience. #BridgeDream" (Rebecca @Becci_Nembs27, Oct 17 2019) and another wishes she could have immersed herself in a literal way when she says "Oh WOW. @NTLive. I can't remember a better night out in ages. I wanted to climb into the screen and join you all at the Bridge. Just JOYOUS [followed by nine emojis depicting a cone full of confetti]" (Sarah Todd Taylor @scraphamster, Oct 17 2019). Another user tellingly, calls this her "favourite theatre" that she's watched this year, suggesting that there is no distinction between the particular place where a theatrical performance is watched.[4] In a review, the immersive experience was described as being "palpable even via live broadcast" (Hatfull 2019, n. p.).

Apart from the enjoyment it induced in audiences around the world to watch people just like them be put first, the use of pop music in particular contributed to a prolonged affective engagement with the show. Hytner for this production focused on three main pop songs to "lodge specific moments in the audience's memory" after it was over, namely Dizzee Rascal's 'Bonkers' (2009), Beyoncé's 'Love on Top' (2011) and Florence + The Machine's 'Only If For A Night' (2011) (Hatfull 2019, n. p.), each of which encapsulating a pivotal scene in the play. "Love On Top", one of Beyoncé's most upbeat tracks functioned as an enhancing meaning carrier to describe Oberon's (in this version it is not Titania) sudden and powerful infatuation with Bottom. Their first scene together becomes an act of erotic celebration that is both hilarious and sexy. This scene was scripted roughly by MacGibbon, who called the shots while watching the action, comparing this method to the filming of a rock show. The cameras were mostly improvised, the handheld camera would follow Oberon and Bottom all the time but everything was controlled, thus another instance of planned improvisation.

Typically, when a play is over, strangers shuffle out of the venue, in moments that Richard Schechner calls "'cool down,' so reminiscent of when the lights come up after last call in a bar to reveal the tired, too human, sweaty flesh of ordinary people who'd been transformed only a moment ago by flashing lights and a persistent, irresistible beat." (in Dolan 2005, 19) *A Midsummer Night's Dream* indeed ended with an extended scene in which audience members were encouraged to hold hands and dance or walk around the scene islands, after having danced to Dizzee Rascal's song "Bonkers." Thus, after the play was over, it was like the awakening from a dream, usually, as Bert O. States puts it in his "Phenomenology of the Curtain Call" "an abrupt fall into the mundane, fraught with the nostalgia of exile." (1981, 374) Yet the production managed to ease this cooling down by providing a Spotify playlist to the production, which was made up of the show's five theme songs, namely Beyoncé's "Love on Top", Serge Gainsbourg's and Jane Birkin's "Je t'aime moi non plus", Johnny Nash's "I can see clearly now", Dizzie Rascal's "Bonkers" and Florence + The Machine's "Only if For A Night" that with their lyrics also commented on the plot of the play. In recent years, directors of Shakespearean productions have sought to connect with their audiences by incorporating popular music in their plays.[5]

As Alf Gabrielsson has found in his study on *Strong Experiences with Music*, music can evoke the situation one heard it in and arouse associations and memories that are "entirely individual and can concern the most varied things: people one has met, events one has been involved in, situations one has found oneself in" (Gabrielsson 2011, 384); the qualities of the music and the person's reaction to it (something is "pleasant," "delightful," "beautiful") tend to merge, which makes it impossible sometimes to determine whether these expressions allude to the one or the other (387). The NT livecast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* made use of that by combining the potential of the visual spectacle of the performance with the display of fellow spectators' and the use of pop songs. While the live performance was a special and unique event, the multi-camera directing employed here transported the spectators' embodiment onto the screen, creating a mediatized form of communitas. In the

cinema, where the threshold to cross in order to re-enact the intense theatrical experience is low, the effect of the affective arrangement was dispersed: it was contained within the cinema screen, as one watched its manifestation in the actual theatre; it spilled over into the cinema auditorium; and it was prolonged and further dispersed in comments on social media.

This was complemented by follow up posts on the NT Live Twitter page even 2.5 months later, on 30 December 2019, asking followers and notably those spectators who had seen the livecast in a cinema, about their favourite line (or insult) from the play: "'Thou painted maypole'. We heard some of Shakespeare's finest insults in cinemas around the world, thanks to @_bridgetheatre incredibly bonkers #BridgeDream. What's your favourite line from this much loved play? #TenYearsOnScreen", a post that received 24 retweets and 80 likes as of 21 January 2021.[6]

What may seem obvious but is nevertheless noteworthy about both the tweets and the follow ups is that they were posted in such a point in time as not to interrupt the watching experience. Posting about a play at one's own discretion – especially in lieu of a post-show chat with fellow theatre or cinema goers – does not limit one's freedom as a spectator. Follow up posts several months later can elicit memories of a performance. This is different in the case of other ways in which NT Live tries to engage audiences, namely the interval features during the show, a typical 'bonus' of NT Live. Several spectators were critical towards them and posted their dismay on Twitter, for instance the following:

> @cathusmax (18 Oct 2019: I had to leave halfway. Please don't put any more analysis content in intervals. It totally took me out of the show which was wonderful. I never want to analyse the thing while I'm watching the thing. Also presenter spoiled things at the start. Usually such a fan of NTlive.

To which @ironwrites replied the same day:

> Seconded. Those of us who know the story didn't need the alterations spoiled for us (after the cast were so tight-lipped and cautious over them too) and those of us who were new to the theatre did not need the plot told to us before or during the interval. Very poor judgement imho.

The verbs used here about the features were that they "took [the user] out" and "spoiled" the show, and, most importantly, they suggested a set role for the spectator, namely the person "analyzing the thing", associated with labour rather than freedom. To say that something "spoiled" the show suggests a strong affective connection to it – the spectators are frustrated because they feel betrayed, as their engagement with the show has been interrupted. There is a parallel here to phenomenon Rita Felski takes up in her recent study *Hooked* when one feels personally offended when somebody does not like a book or movie that one loves (2020, 1): if a person either takes a (perceived) disturbance or someone else's

reaction to a cultural product one likes as an offense suggests the affective ties in place in both scenarios.

In order to understand the appeal of livecasts it is therefore necessary to see this kind of twenty-first century spectacle as part of the affective turn, which has "has shifted credit for meaning-making *from* features and practices which focus on semiotic systems, representations, sense-making and interpretation *onto* bodily experience, feelings and emotions." (Harvie/Allain 2006, 149) Livecasting, too, when putting the audience first, affords intimate engagements (as opposed to intimate relationships which are based on contracts and duration). The broadcast of a theatrical performance becomes an event which is "about individuality and potentiality coming together to produce a radical form of presence and present-ness" (Sullivan 2018, 61-62) or an engaging affective arrangement into which spectators are pulled. What becomes apparent here, and even more so in the case of theatre watched at home, is that distance as a "psychological phenomenon basic to art" as Daphna Ben Chaim has put it (1984, 70) over 30 years ago is becoming less of a defining feature to experience theatre. Or put differently, even if something is aesthetically distant and clearly a fiction (as is the magic forest populated by fairies) the distance does not need to be maintained throughout but spectators want it to be dispelled in varied ways and be pulled through the invisible barrier surrounding the fictional world.

IV. The Pull of NT At Home

The pull into its affective arrangement the NT Livecast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* managed to exert extended, in fact, into the domestic sphere, when the livecast was watched during the COVID-19 pandemic as part of NT At Home on YouTube. It encapsulated the ache for proximity that was created by an almost historic sense of watching a play, increased by the "archival framing" on/through the screen that created a snapshot of a joyful, convivial atmosphere from a time when that was still possible.[7]

When investigating different broadcasts of Shakespeare plays in the early weeks of lockdown in the UK, Pascale Aebischer argued in an online talk on 20 May 2020 titled "Viral Shakespeare – Binge-Watching *Hamlet* in Lockdown", that the broadcasts developed agency and, by inscribing themselves on the time and space in which they were being watched, they came particularly alive. I argue that the broadcasts' agency is, however, a highly unstable one, one emerging out of an environment of contagion. The audience is the performer, being an audience member is to feel and enact one's vitality. Precisely because the broadcasts bleed into one another, a broadcast is only defined against other broadcasts, it is what it is not. For this reason, it is in fact the spectators who bleed or are "bled" in that they are the agencies forced to make the connections between the streams and creating equally unstable intra-textual (trans-textual) landscapes. Defying logical (or at least linear) orders of time and space, it is the agency of the spectator that creates an experience of retrospective synchronicity. In an environment characterized by attention, distraction and chopped up performance, it is the spectators who become their own broadcast editors. If livecasts are what is referred to today as (theatrical) spectacle, this trivializes 'conventional' theatre, one

must ask now if the form of streamed online theatre catapulted forward by the COVID pandemic does contain an energy akin to radicalism that can truly shake up what we deem theatre to be capable of.

During the first Corona lockdown of 2020, several theatres in the UK, such as the National Theatre (with the initiative NT At Home), the Royal Shakespeare Company (in partnering up with the BBC's "Quarantine in Culture" programme and Marquee TV) and the Royal Opera House made former performances that had been archived available to the public online. In Germany, the Berliner Ensemble encouraged their remote audiences to "discover their digital offer in times of the Corona break" under the slogan "BE at Home" and many other theatres around the world followed suit. In her talk Aebischer argued that – since it was possible to watch very different *Hamlet* productions from different countries and decades one after the other, they began to "infect one another in the mind of the viewer. The clarity of chronological order was "smudged" by lockdown, and time was "out of joint in a way that makes life slow down, pulls all together, while also accelerating." (Aebischer 2020) It was possible, therefore, to experience Thomas Ostermeier's *Hamlet* staged at the Schaubühne Berlin in 2008 alongside Federay Holmes's and Elle While's *Hamlet* at Shakespeare's Globe in 2018 interwoven with Dimiter Gotscheff's *Hamletmaschine* at Deutsches Theater Berlin in 2008.

From 2 April until 23 July 2020, the National Theatre streamed 16 of its archived – and previously partly livecast – productions on YouTube for free.[8] The NT At Home initiative stood out because it went against the repeated assertions made by the NT since the launch of NT Live in 2009 that it would not make the livecasts available in any other format, for instance on DVD, and that the only other way to watch them apart from the cinema would be to book an appointment in the theatre's archive – an offer hardly taken up by 'regular' audiences.[9] Once the decision was made to launch NT At Home, both the NT and the NT Live Twitter page advertised the initiative with posts such as the following:

> We're all about experiencing theatre together. At a time when many theatre fans around the world aren't able to visit National Theatre Live venues or local theatres, we're excited to introduce National Theatre At Home.
> You will be able to watch some of the best British theatre from the comfort of your living room, via @YouTube for free for one week. (@NTLive, 26 March 2020)

In this context, engagement takes on the form of the theatre caring for people and its audiences: community and comfort are the keywords here. A virtual community of theatre lovers is evoked that will be given the opportunity to experience plays for free on their computer screens at home. Notably, below the National Theatre's Facebook announcement of the initiative user Anne Kohn commented on how "the arts continue to provide comfort *through* community and creativity" (26 March 2020). The arts in general and the NT in particular for the UK context, play the role of carers. This caring took on the form of play

when those at the NT responsible for their social media account took on the role of jesters. For instance, ahead of the streaming of *Frankenstein* on 30 April 2020, GIFs were posted that functioned as meta comments on the conditions of people's lives during lockdown. The GIF in figure 4 was edited as a 10 second contiguous clip of video in which Frankenstein's monster, portrayed by Johnny Miller, crawls through grass and is visibly taken aback by touching something like that for the first time. The caption reads "Dreaming of sunny days in the park". GIF stands for 'Graphics Interchange Format' and can be either a short, looped animated sequence made from static images or a 5-10 second contiguous video clip. While GIF sequences can be accompanied by an audio feed, "a large part of the humour of the format is derived from their absence of sound and the potential incongruity caused by the application of the original (silent) video to a new contexts." (Blackwell 2018, 112) In the context of theatre, GIFs can thus subvert the associations spectators have with a text and make theatrical bodies speak (or move) in unexpected ways. This is also what happens with the *Frankenstein* GIF: it takes away the horror or disgust associated with the monster and ridicules it. One can draw a parallel to the observation made by Anna Blackwell with regard to GIFs made about Shakespeare plays (especially such performances featuring Tom Hiddleston, see Blackwell 2018, 113): The humour derived from a GIF like this lies in its refusal to treat both *Frankenstein* and Mary Shelley in the ways it has been as part of the Western canon: that is, mostly critical rigour and venerability. The referring back to lockdown creates an unexpected sense of complicity between the monster and spectators but most importantly adds comic relief and silly play, something that the 1.3K likes, 1K 'laugh' reactions and 175 'hearts' (as of 3 December 2020) attest to.

Figure 4. Screenshot from the National Theatre's Facebook page, posted on 6 May 2020, taken on 02 December 2020.

While it was indeed free to watch the plays that were part of NT At Home, there were reminders both before, during and after the streams to donate to the NT. This was complemented by video messages of the actors involved in the NT At Home repertoire, such as Ralph Fiennes, who played Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and sitting in front of a nondescript white wall, wearing a casual sweater and with a dishevelled hairdo, thanked everybody who had watched the stream for supporting "the fragile business of theatre" in a video message posted on the NT's Facebook page on 10 May 2020.

The agency OneFurther conducted research into what percentage of all the viewers who watched the first NT At Home performance, *One Man, Two Guv'nors*, watched it on the night it was first broadcast, and whether there was a correlation between this premiere experience and the donations made. According to their research, the total number of views (i.e. the number of devices to which the play was streamed) was 2.6 million at the end of the week. 8% of views came during the live premiere. By the end of the premiere, $41,600 was raised, and $82,500 shortly before the stream was taken offline a week later, which means that about 50 % of donations were raised on the first night. (OneFurther.com) With regard to all the 16 productions, about 25% of the total views a performance received did take place on the night of the premiere. That is, while digital media indeed allow productions to keep '*living*' even if they are no longer '*live*' and 'remediated' theatre "carr[ies] on performing in the present of the online environment even as the live event to which it is related has receded into the past" (Aebischer 2013, 146), there is another hierarchy discernible when it comes to theatre streamed in for a limited time: it suggests that when a recording it shown for the first time, it lives more than when shown or watched later.

According to its own statistics, the initiative had nearly 15 million views, reaching 9 million households in 173 countries (most viewers in the UK, followed by the US, Australia, Canada, Russia and Germany). As of 26 October 2020, there are 232 comments below this trailer and the vast majority of users asks for a streaming service or others ways to keep enabling access to the NT's plays – something that indeed has happened in the meantime, when on 1 December 2020 the NT launched a streaming subscription service, also called NT At Home.[10]

A Midsummer Night's Dream was among the shows mentioned most often below the Facebook posts advertising NT At Home during lockdown. When it was shown from 25 June to 2 July 2020, there were several tweets mentioning the fact that a spectator had seen the show live and was reliving it now at home.[11] The following spectators mention dimensions characteristic for the affective arrangement of the livecast watched at home during the COVID pandemic and how it manages to exert its pull on them:

> @clareereynolds1: I absolutely LOVED this – it was brilliant!! Very jealous of all those who managed to go as a 'groundling'. Thank you @NationalTheatre for all these brilliant broadcasts x (25 June 2020)

> @BradleyMell: This play, more than the others, showing just how important theatre is as a communal experience. With live theatre, however it's staged, the audience are very much a part of the play. I miss it so much #BridgeDream #NationalTheatreAtHome (25 June 20)
>
> @ColdharbourAndy: as many have said it really was joyous. At The Bridge in particular, I love the looping energy transfer between Pit and performers. Such a great, flexible space. (27 June 20)

Merely seeing other spectators attending the play (again: the carriers of affect for those not physically present in the theatre), manages to pull spectators into the experience and create strong affective responses. The first user LOVES the play and is "very jealous" of not having been there, the second user reflects that they, seeing this, they miss theatre "so much", whereas the third one finds it "really joyous" and loves watching the "looping energy transfer" between performers and audiences.

As Sullivan (2020, 101-2) and Barker (2013, 30) have suggested, the perception of simultaneity (with in-situ audiences) is central for the success of a livecast for those watching it, especially when asked directly after the live transmission has taken place (Sullivan 2020, 101-2). John Wyver held that "both the live-ness of the broadcast and the social context in which they are watched appear to be central to their success" (Wyver 2015, 298) In the context of NT At Home, one cannot even speak of a "social" context per se, as the shows were/are watched in the privacy of one's home. Still, the dimension of simultaneity did pop up, if in a different sense than in the livecasting scenario. For instance, @CharisPayne wrote:

> Watching #bridgedream simultaneously with parents – them in Somerset, me in London – with joyous memories of seeing it live @_bridgetheatre with mum last year (emoji) Thanks for making it possible @NationalTheatre! (25 June 2020)

It was also kept up in two other ways: first of all, when searching the National Theatre's Twitter page for posts containing both hashtags #bridgedream (the official hashtag for the production) and #ntathome, one notices that most tweets referring to the NT At Home broadcast were posted on its 'online premiere', on 25 June 2020. That is, it was an important factor for spectators to have a 'kind of' premiere if only in the sense that it was the online premiere of a recording. Looking at the statistics of NT At Home, one can see that on average, 25% of viewers tuned in on the premiere date with 16% across all titles watching in 'premiere mode'. The highest percentage of people watching on the premier date was for *One Man, Two Guvnors* where it went up to 34% (Buckeridge 2020). One must add a further qualification: most tweets about *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (using the above two official hashtags and posted below @NationalTheatre tweets) were posted either

on the premiere evening or on the last evening it was available, suggesting that spectators who had the awareness that they were among the first and last to witness the streaming were particularly motivated to tweet about it. In fact, this 'special status' of those watching the show on its online premiere was fostered by the prompt replies from the two theatres in question: every tweet relating the experience watching the play received a individualized reply by those in charge of the @NationalTheatre or @_bridgetheatre Twitter accounts.

To link these observations to the questions of engagement and the pull of the production of/on spectators, one can say that – in a scenario when the show itself cannot exert a pull – this labour was primarily exerted by the spectators and their willingness to build up the excitement and high levels of engagement themselves. This was to a large part linked to spectators' relation to the factor of time, which was upheld to some extent within the NT At Home initiative. On the one hand, there was the time-limitation of streams that was supported by the framing of the streams as "events" (taking place within a limited time frame, and Facebook events) and temporal anchors, adding a "…now" to Robert T. Tally's "You are here" arrows (2013, 2) and detailing, for instance in a Facebook post on 6 May 2020 about *Antony and Cleopatra* that there would be an "online premiere, Thursday 7 May, 7pm UK time". As Peter Kirwan discussed,

> the choice of many of these theatres to enhance the sense of live participation by imposing tight time limits on the availability of the recording, or to hold a 'premiere' event hosted by the theatre that takes place at a particular time, seems to have had an enthusiastic take-up; and where theatres haven't done this themselves, audience communities have self-generated watch-parties to allow for collective viewing and live-tweeting. (Kirwan 2020, n. p.).

That is, the notion of a communal assembly in Fischer-Lichte's sense (Fischer-Lichte 2005, 23), still played a role in the experience of spectators. But while normally, it is the plays and their being set in a particular place and at a particular point in time that invoke this assembling and engagement, in the setting of NT At Home it was the spectators who took up this part, quite willingly. It was playful and exciting, for instance, to organize watch parties, and there was something pleasingly subversive about it when Twitter was used as a schoolyard or speakerphone where one could shout out to one's friends and contacts to hurry up and get ready for a watch party. At the same time, though, these acts of organized conviviality should not be trivialized, or, even worse, overlooked. In the context of Covidian theatre[12], these acts of gathering are acts of spectatorial labour that in their entirety make the experience into what it is. While it is not always as structured and synchronized as a watch party, the self-generated moments of connectedness and spectatorial shared attention topple the autonomy of the theatrical space-time frame and create a kind of theatre that actually exists first and foremost because of the energy and goodwill of its spectators.

In addition to this spectatorial labour, the pull of the spectators of *MSND* into the show's affective arrangement was achieved by paratexts advertising the show. These functioned along the lines of affect when they emphasized its escapist quality ("Are you ready to Dream? Fly away with us to a land of mischievous fairies, feuding royalty and mistaken identity" in the tweet on 25 June 2020), evoking the "flower crown" that had been given out to spectators of the live performance (two tweets on 25 June 2020) and by advertising it through three different videos showing the actors in their private homes during lockdown. In one of these videos, the actor Hammed Animashaun (@Hammedhamz) on 25 June 2020 emphasized the importance of theatre and the arts for communities and received 5.5k views. Another video showed a cast reunion shared via YouTube which received over 42K views and the third video showed a phone call between Lysander (Kit Young) and Demetrius (Paul Adeyefa) getting ready for their "half-hour call", viewed 12.1K times. The use of such paratextual devices chimes in with what Lynne Conner (2013) and Chris Bilton (2020) have argued with regard to the audience's need to make sense of an arts event or arts objects with the help of ancillary material and the shifting forms "creativity" can take in the creative industries. While Conner has made the case for "Arts Talk" (trying perhaps a bit too hard to introduce a new term – the capitalization is intended) as "a new modality for arts-centered conversations that reframes the critical roles that both dialogue … and discussion … can play" (5) – i.e. not just actual lectures before or after arts events but people's engaged conversations surrounding the event — Bilton has stressed the growing agency consumers have on digital platforms to "'co-create' meaning and value" (2020, 213). Perhaps more than co-creating, the importance of co-finding became apparent in the pandemic: Seeing live audiences from the past in the filmed performance during the pandemic for some spectators meant being reminded of what they could not have and experience at the moment:

> @tatmeggg: It's still one of my fondest theatre memories, oh to be wandering around the room dancing to Beyonce with a bunch of strangers again #bridgedream
>
> @claireyfairy1: All those strangers holding hands. (sad emoji) #BridgeDream", followed by "I remember at the time feeling a bit eye rolly at being made to do the conga thing but right now I'd give anything to be able to get involved. (crying emoji) #BridgeDream (25 June 2020)

Holding hands with strangers, as awkward as this can be, presented itself like a beautiful instance of connection that it was painful to miss at a time when one could not have it.

Conclusion

To let oneself be pulled emerges as an affectively charged act of trust on the part of spectators. In the context of NT Live and NT At Home, spectators' engagement hinges on

highly orchestrated pulls that are created, on the one hand, through cinematic means, but also through spectators' willingness to be engaged, and, on the other hand, through prompts and paratexts framing the experience on social media and on triggering memories of past performances which audiences have seen. Rather than creating a greater affective distance between the performances and their audiences, both livecasting and NT At Home in fact rely even more on the spectator who lets her- or himself be pulled into the experience of the mediated performance. To assess and categorize the responses to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (both NT Live and NT At Home) on Twitter, and put them in the context of my own memory of the in-situ and the NT Live showing, is to document acts of negotiation and affective labour. Both livecasting and NT At Home foreground the theatricality behind all spectacle and tease out different experiential dimensions.

I have developed two key concepts in my article: first, the "pull" as a series of calls to kinds of involvement enacted in both the live encounter and the cinematic version of the play. Second, that of "communitas" as an enacted sense of being part of a community of watcher-participants that is enabled by the ways in which the event was filmed. I have argued that spectators' pleasure is closely interwoven with their ability to create a sense of co-viewing as they watch that manages to dispel distance(s) that are geographical, artistic or experiential.

Two things emerge from this and suggest that the above concepts will be operating differently now because of COVID: first, as my analysis of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has shown, the pleasure evoked by these livecast spectacles to a great part relies on watching others (other spectators) watch and participate in a performance. Despite the lack of corporeal co-presence, therefore, the human is put back at the centre and the joy of experiencing theatre together with others and distant/recorded spectators become carriers of affect for those watching the livecast. The same holds true for those responding to or talking about their experience: they contribute to its existence as their tweet snapshots are testimonies of their engagement. Second, at a time when theatres and theatre makers have to explore and test the potential and limits of performance and especially performance created through (or despite) distances, one cannot rely on the shows themselves being the source for engagement and for spectatorial pulls. What the above study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in its three forms exemplifies, is how spectators are pulled into the affective arrangement by taking on the role of engaging others as well. It will be worthwhile investigating what the next couple of years bring about in this regard and what effect it will have on our understanding of theatre and performance when a considerable amount of spectatorial engagement will be displaced to the surrounding paratextual spaces.

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Notes:

[1] The Bridge Theatre also used the promenade format of its auditorium in its production of *Julius Caesar* (20 January to 11 April 2018), where spectators – if they had a ticket in the pit – were involved in the action against their will, either as the crowd greeting Caesar, the congress witnessing his murder, or part of the civil war mob afterwards.

[2] All references to MacGibbon in the following from the interview with the author on 7 November 2019 in Gail's Café in Pimlico, London.

[3] Ross MacGibbon is a film-maker and photographer. He danced with the Royal Ballet from 1973 to 1986 and has since then worked as one of the world's leading dance film-makers, whose work is regularly seen on British television. His film of MacMillan's last ballet, *The Judas Tree*, won the 1998 International Emmy Award for Performing Arts and he has won the 2013 Prix Italia for his Channel Four film, *Matthew Bourne's Christmas*. He has directed and produced over 75 performance films for, among others, the BBC, Channel Four TV, The Royal Opera House, The Royal National Theatre and The Mariisnky.

[4] "Just watched @NTLive's broadcast of #MidsummerNightsDream and that might be my favourite theatre that I've watched this year. It was incredible. So clever and fun and captivating. I want to watch it again!" (Jada, @JadaAddo, Oct 17, 2019)

[5] Examples include, notably, Lyndsey Turner's hugely successful *Hamlet* (5 August – 31 October 2015) starring Benedict Cumberbatch in the title role opened with Nat King Cole's song "Nature Boy" while the Young Vic used Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know" to mirror Marina's fury in Joe Hill-Gibbins' *Measure for Measure* (the show ran from 1 October – 14 November 2015).

[6] See https://twitter.com/NTLive/status/1211699214792712192.

[7] Thanks to the NT At Home discussion group convened by Isabel Stuart and the discussion on 26 June 2020, 11.00-12.00 BST via Zoom. Present: Amber Ash, Susanne Greenhalgh, Sophie Hamlet, Gill Lamden, Heidi Liedke, Isabel Stuart.

[8] These productions – listed on the NT's page as "National Theatre at Home streaming history" – were *One Man, Two Guvnors* (2-9 April), *Jane Eyre* (9-16 April), *Treasure Island* (16-23 April), *Twelfth Night* (23-30 April), *Frankenstein* (30 April-8 May), *Antony & Cleopatra* (7-14 May), *Barber Shop Chronicles* (14-21 May), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (21-28 May), *This House* (28 May-4 June), *Coriolanus* (4-11 June), *The Madness of King George III* (11-18 June), *Small Island* (18-25 June), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (25 June-2 July), *Les Blancs* (2-9 July), *The Deep Blue Sea* (9-16 July), and *Amadeus* (16-23 July). See https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/nt-at-home. See, for example, Liedke 2021 for a review of *Antony and Cleopatra* watched again during lockdown and Exeunt Magazine's Redux Reviews series.

[9] Between 2015-2020, 18% of those visiting the archive (based on about 6500 enquiry forms relating to circa 18,000 people visiting the National Theatre Archive) identified as "general interest", while the majority (54%) identified as academics, students or teachers (Lee 2020).

[10] Within 8 hours, the post received 1.3K likes, 385 retweets and 318 quote tweets.

[11] For instance, @fiona45: "Everyone should watch this. It was brilliant. I was there for this actual performance! X" (26 June 2020); @bowerhe: "I was lucky enough to see #BridgeDream three times during its run and a year later it has not lost its magic" (25 Jun 2020), and @Kieran_Sangha even saw it four times (tweet on 25 June 2020). One viewer with health problems (@Lindfordhedgies) tweeted that because of bladder problems they "never got to fully enjoy or concentrate on any play [they] saw. The same with watching live productions at the cinema. This is the first time I have been able to truly relax and enjoy the theatre – please don't take it away. Please remember those of us with health issues." (26 Jun 2020)

[12] I am using this term to refer to all kinds of theatrical performances produced in 2020 during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and referring to it either aesthetically or regarding the content. I'm

developing this notion further in a chapter of my ongoing book project, *Spectacle, Materiality, Engagement – Livecasting in Twenty-First-Century British Theatre*.