

Action/Reaction and everything in between in the Virtual Space: (dis)embodied learning through online performance practice

Robert Lewis, Charles Sturt University, Australia

Dominique Sweeney, Charles Sturt University, Australia

Robert Lewis and Dominique Sweeney have been developing a place-based actor training andragogy at Charles Sturt University. Since moving practical classes, rehearsals and performances online during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, this 'place-based' andragogy has been somewhat challenged. What happens when place is disrupted and student actors are connecting from multiple 'places'? Is there a unified place/space in between these points? Throughout the rehearsals of Mark Roger's 'Seeing Horrors 2' during the lockdown, the authors address how place, space and grounding have maintained a strong element in their work via the online space. Online actor training for platforms such as Zoom is an new and foreign phenomenon. Actor training for film and television contexts may not be suitable for this platform, therefore it is important to look at what Zoom offers that other screen media doesn't. In addition to the performance process, the authors discuss one specific training system that has been developed for the online performance space.

Keywords: Archetypes, character, embodiment, imagination, creativity

INTRODUCTION

Dr Robert Lewis and Dr Dominique Sweeney have been developing a place-based actor training pedagogy throughout the last five years at Charles Sturt University's Acting and Performance specialisation based in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales. Since transitioning practical classes, rehearsals and performances online, this 'place-based' pedagogy has been challenged in the fact that these students have been physically removed from Wiradjuri Country, the place where all the training and performances take place. However, the philosophies and practices have been still rooted in place-based philosophy. What happens when place is disrupted and student actors are connecting from multiple 'places'? Is there a unified place/space in between these points? Throughout the rehearsals of Mark Roger's

Seeing Horrors 2 during the lockdown period due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors address how place, space and grounding have maintained a strong element in their work via the online space. In addition to the performance which will be discussed in this paper, a specific training exercise was developed and executed with several graduates of the acting and performance course in order to examine the benefits and the shortfalls of working in this medium in order to future proof performance training.

The turn of the 21st Century has brought with it a new way of merging live theatre and technology. Although technology has been embedded in live performance for decades, it has seemed as though it has only been an appendage for the sake of introducing a new form of media to performance. Technology should be amalgamated with performance and performance training from the onset, and not treated as an accessory. In the era of COVID-19 and the resultant lockdown period, this is exactly what happened; actors were forced to integrate new ways of working from the onset, giving rise to new aesthetics not for the purpose of exploration, examination and or novelty, but due to sheer necessity and survival.

Although theatre and performance has always been fundamentally integrative and intermedial, this new era of online performance and training, which is utilised in addition to and never will replace the fundamental face-to-face experiences, sees the student actor decentralised and challenged by these new online media platforms. What these online platforms do not capture is the immediacy of live performance, therefore, when working in this medium, how does an actor achieve this virtual immediacy and how does an actor train to get to that space?

The following section of this paper, draws on the transcript of the online Zoom presentation at the 2020 AusAct Conference, which was conducted online for the first time due to the lockdown as a result of COVID-19. Wagga Wagga is the place where the initial ideas are conceived, and in the Wiradjuri language, that name means ‘place of dancing’. Place based teaching is core to this discussion and what Dr Lewis and Dr Sweeney are jointly developing together with Wiradjuri teachers Letitia Harris and Professor Sue Green for a new actor training andragogy.

DOMINIQUE SWEENEY: 'SEEING HORRORS 2'

I'm going to leap straight in and acknowledge where Wiradjuri Foundations is the basis for how I live and work here in Wagga Wagga (Grant and Rudder 2010). I will summarise what that means after discussing what happened in the academic year of 2020 for the Charles Sturt University Acting and Performance students. Wiradjuri Foundations are critical to the way that I'm thinking about how to manage the world we've been jettisoned into with COVID-19. The world was sort of moving there anyway but COVID-19 has zoomed that in a lot quicker.

Normally I teach and direct first and third-year acting students at Charles Sturt. First years were lucky this year in that they only had one public production which is usually in second semester and they managed to complete that live on stage. We were fortunate to return to campus in the second semester and return to face-to-face classes and rehearsals with two back-to-back condensed four-week blocks. This allowed us to mount our stage and screen productions during the lockdown period which included devised theatre performance, television productions, and short films. One of the COVID-19 advantages of studying in a regional city like Wagga Wagga, was that we could contain our interactions in a safe bubble. As acting requires close contact with other students and academic staff, it was important that we were safe and followed hygiene and physical distancing rules that were implemented by the university. We were out of the metropolitan hotspots and that helped secure us.

Typically, first years create a selection of self-devised Lazzi. This is both fun and a training tool in the three-year andragogy. As the culmination of the first year acting process we throw the emphasis onto the students to make something out of nothing in a highly theatrical style. They perform in what Jacques Lecoq terms the 6th level of theatrical tension or stylised performance with masks and white face to assist elevate the acting style (Lecoq 1997).

In terms of connectivity during COVID-19 a side note in first semester happened within a week of transferring to Zoom where we went straight to zoom from face to face. In that process one of my students, Chloe, a first year Acting and Performance student, had to climb up a water tower with her phone to get reception from her farm and another student couldn't make any classes because she didn't have enough data. Her family didn't have sufficient internet service and she was using data from her phone which constantly cut off; she was off

the grid almost completely. There are serious online connexion issues in regional areas that our students face studying from home.

I want to now discuss our third-year programme where we work with Booranga Writers' Centre, an organisation that was established in 1994 to serve and promote the interests of local writers; it serves its members and the local community through hosting Writers-in-Residence at the Booranga facility located on the Charles Sturt Campus in Wagga Wagga. Booranga assist the performance program with one of their grants going to a playwright each year who visits the region to develop new work, continue working on existing works, and engage with current performance students. Typically, the playwright works with our first-year students over a two week period at the beginning of the semester, and writers in previous years such as Donna Abella and Van Badham have produced new works to be workshopped and performed on campus, in conjunction with the Acting program and current students. In 2020 we had Mark Rogers and we produced, with the third years, his play *Seeing Horrors 2* in the middle of the year. We started that process as a stage production at the CSU Riverina Playhouse and overnight with COVID-19 restrictions when all students were sent home, suddenly it was a Zoom production. Again, we're lucky that this play actually suited a Zoom environment. We decided to keep it a live Zoom production with eight performances throughout the performance season.

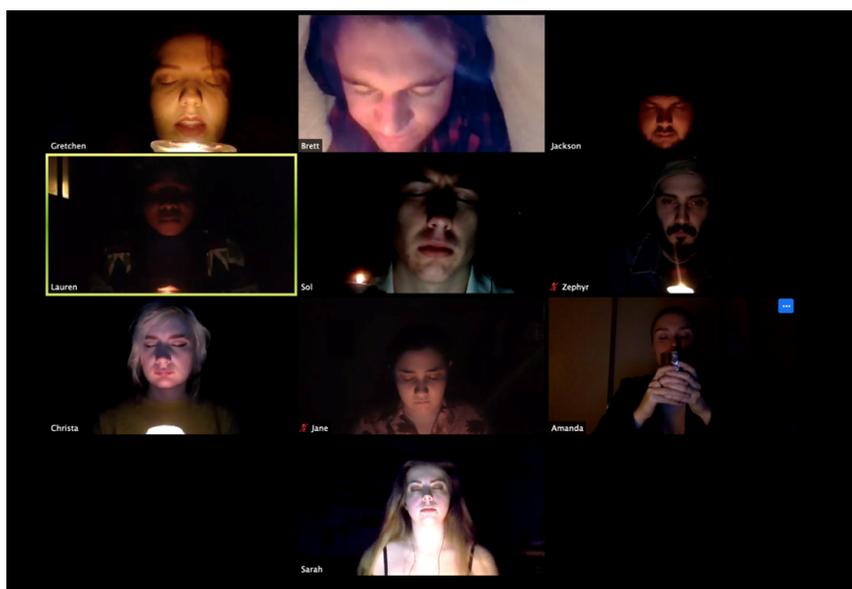


Figure 1: *Seeing Horrors 2* Zoom performance. Image by Dominique Sweeney

Firstly, I will discuss *Seeing Horrors 2*, and how we managed the online Zoom production. This was a new concept that was unfamiliar to both students and teachers, but this didn't hinder the process at all; in fact, it was an exciting opportunity to come together and look at all the positive aspects of performing using the platform. We were all in the same boat, and what made it exceptional was that all students basically had to attend rehearsals, even if they were sick because online you can't escape if you're stuck at home in front of your computer, no matter what city or what state; all are required to attend the sessions.

The other benefit of working in the Zoom platform was working with our design students. One designer took on Stage Management role with the additional roles of Production Manager, camera mixer, lighting and costume designer. At the commencement of the project, four designers were assigned, however, two withdrew due to the uncertainty of working in a Zoom environment. Those remaining students, instead created hypothetical stage related design projects while our Stage Manager and sound designer became critical to the online live Zoom production. As well as calling the show and mixing the screen view for the audience the stage manager held together a cast spread literally over thousands of kilometres.

During rehearsals we explored how it was possible to have two worlds in the Zoom environment. The play has a pivotal "BOOM" moment during a séance where the play shifts into the world of tortured Gemma, a comatose teenager on life support.

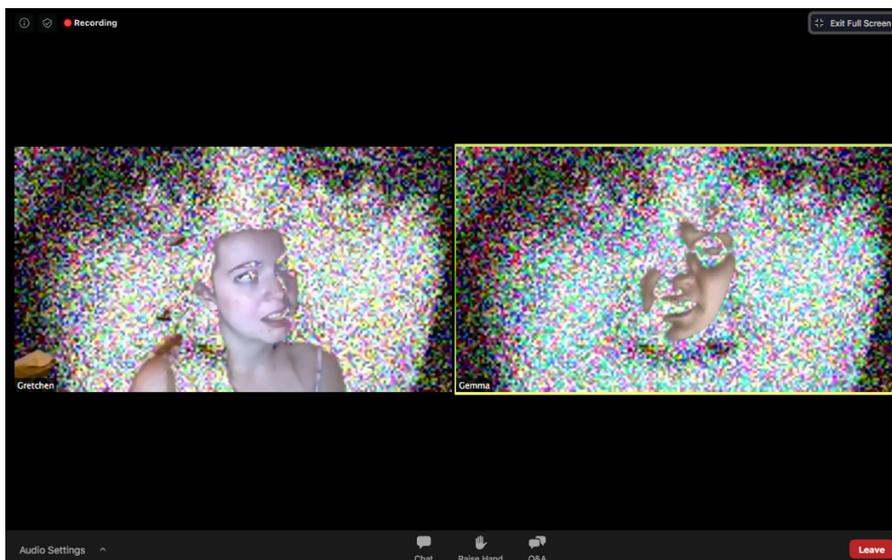


Figure 2: *Seeing Horrors 2* Zoom performance. Image by Dominique Sweeney

ZOOM ENVIRONMENT

Zoom is essentially a mid-shot to close up screen environment. What is the difference between pinning a character (making one image stay dominant) using gallery (all characters in a gallery) and active speaker view (the one image dependant on who is speaking- not quite in sync)? Our task was to explore how to use this limited environment to its maximum potential. Each session students would share the latest gimmick they found with backgrounds and how to play within the environment with lighting and distance from the camera. How could we use greater depth in the image? Some students didn't have computers that could manage virtual backgrounds and so we worked with their limitations. We posted a microphone to another student. As well as the stage manager a sound student managed the variety of microphones, composition of soundscape and integration of the sound track with live effects. The final effect made the audience feel as though they were participating in a live Zoom meeting; however the show was highly rehearsed down to the second.



Figure 3: *Seeing Horrors 2* Zoom performance. Image by Dominique Sweeney

DISLOCATION IN ZOOM

The benefits of unity through Zoom are evident in bringing people together across the globe to share instant communication. There is also the separation and sense of helplessness in this

environment. It is exhausting to rehearse on screen for hours for eyes and body. It was also most keenly felt by a student living in Port Macquarie who for some reason had internet connection difficulties that let him drop out of Zoom regularly. His lag was often more out of sync than the rest of the cast. The main problem with Zoom is that it is impossible to have chorus work with multiple characters in unison. The lag means online performances with people singing or dancing in unison don't work. The clips that show chorus or bands playing together have been edited in post-production to create the illusion of synced image and sound. If live unison is required it has to accommodate the lag.

Like jetlag, the tiredness brought on through constantly rehearsing in front of a screen in a virtual world is exhausting and a major consideration in presenting this medium as compulsory subject delivery. Zoom can provide a means of production, but it is no replacement for live theatre. When education economies are developing the commercial opportunities of online subject provision it fact remains evident that live performance provides a vitality and connection with an audience that can never be replaced with a screen or virtual image. How can we extend and develop this live connection into the future in Wagga Wagga?

COUNTRY

We aim to follow direction from the Wiradjuri Language program whose andragogy uses five principles to guide their program. Identity, Relationships, Actions, Focus and Transformation are the foundations of Wiradjuri learning. Through these principles each person learns to respect and understand how to live in Yindymarra: the Wiradjuri way to tread lightly, go slowly and respect country.

We're currently herded into a management change culture and so our resistance to this dysfunctional and disempowering process is to follow Wiradjuri foundations. In the Foundations we work with transformation encouraging constant identities as the basis for relationships. That's what the Wiradjuri Foundations is all about. There's a constant that you go with and learn to understand deeply which provides your identity and the basis for all relationships that you need to develop. That's the connexion to country and we follow that and we listen to the elders in guidance with that. We are working very strongly in that process

so that the Foundations are the base and no matter what else is going on that is constant. Acting is about transformation but you have to understand who and where you are and where you're going first before you can tell your and other peoples' stories.

ROBERT LEWIS: TRAINING FOR ZOOM

If one positive aspect has come out of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown is how various institutions throughout Australia have quickly negotiated their way around providing students a worthwhile training, rehearsal and performance experience via multiple online platforms like Zoom. Directors and teachers have been thrust into this unfamiliar way of working with no clear guidelines or templates to work with, therefore, in some instances, creating new aesthetics that have never been seen before. This new aesthetic is characterised by a form of voyeuristic unpremeditated intimacy, unapologetic low-tech approach to theatre making. In fact, perhaps the term 'theatre' is not really appropriate in this situation, nor is 'film' or 'television'; it is a completely new form of screen-based performance aesthetic which is currently in development throughout the world. As we refine, define and develop this new form, we can perhaps see a new category of performance emerging in the near future.

Although students at Charles Sturt University's acting and performance program have embraced this kind of innovative way of working, entering online rehearsal spaces and preparing for performances which potentially can reach a far wider audience than just their local theatre venue, the question lies within the most appropriate form of training for these student actors. Actor training has long considered questions of immediacy, connection and embodiment. Actors are primed to investigate and practice what it means to train and perform in various physical locations and for multiple live and screen-based platforms including conventional theatre spaces, site-specific locations, film and television, and more recently Motion Capture, Virtual Reality and 360 Film. Although training in these areas have developed and have become part of the convention in training institutions, we are yet to see a formalised system or approach for online performances for various platforms such as YouTube, Facebook or Zoom.

Monologues can be workshopped via Zoom as this is a dialogue between the actor and teacher, with the teacher essentially guiding the actor via the online space without, however, the immediacy and embodied learning. This method can prove to be quite successful in terms

of specific text work and skills for self-taping. The gap lies in the ability to connect with other actors in a given scene. During the lockdown period, an exercise was practiced via Zoom with two graduates of the Charles Sturt Acting and Performance Program, Jhi Rayner and Sally Jackson, to examine how a detailed process exploring psychological and physical actions can be executed online. The work directly comes from the exercises developed by Yat Malmgren who essentially fused the Laban Movement System (physical) with the Stanislavski Method (psychological). This was created to enhance the fusion between the physical and psychological to create a more visceral experience. It needs to be stressed that only a fragment of Laban's and Stanislavski's work is relevant to this study and to the overall method created by Malmgren and that there is no ultimate system of fusing the psychological and physical aspects of the performer, just diverse ways to achieve the same goal.

PROCESS

The text which was used was an extract from Anton Chekhov's Uncle Vanya. The text, which is an eleven line dialogue between Helena and Astroff appears halfway through Act IV from Helena's line: 'I am going away' to Helena's monologue which begins 'How comical you are!'. The actors were not asked to memorise the text completely, just be familiar with it enough so that they could raise their eyes off the page from time to time. Prior to the online exercise, the actors were asked to separate each (i.e., punctuation point to punctuation point) line with a slash in between. For example, a section of text would look quite fragmented and disjointed, however, this is very important to separate specific thoughts within the dialogue: "I have not forgotten. / I am going at once. / [A pause] / Were you frightened? / Was it so terrible?" It was also important to separate the 'pause' as well, as this moment of silence is loaded with psychological and physical actions as well which can be just as important as the dialogue itself.

When the dialogue was dissected punctuation by punctuation point, the actors were asked to add a physical and psychological action. The selection of psychological actions were taken from 'Actions: The actors' thesaurus' (Caldarone & Lloyd-Williams 2004) and the physical actions were acquired from the eight Action Drives from the Laban Movement System: Press, Punch, Wring, Dab, Float, Glide, Slash and Flick. It is understood that these Action Drives

FEEDBACK

The overall aim of the exercise was to examine how this method, which traditionally executed for the stage and conventional screen practices, and highly physical and interactive, could be rehearsed online via various platforms such as Zoom when there are absolutely no physical contact and physical proximity. Some questions asked to the actors were: What worked well in the process using this medium; What didn't work in this process using this medium; What was lacking; What new insights did you discover during this process that couldn't be found in a face-to-face process; What was more effective: the physical or psychological actions – was this transference clear via the online space?

Immediately after the exercise and subsequent scene performance, the actors were asked to provide any general feedback in the first instance. Sally Jackson commented on the lack of physical opportunities, stating:

there are a few times there where I wanted to get up and move, but I wasn't comfortable enough with the script yet to start moving and then come back and find my spot...there were quite a few times where I wanted to pull away. And I was like, how do you do that within zoom context...do I get up to leave or do I just lean back and get further away from the camera to show that disengagement (S Jackson 2020, pers. comm., 17 November).

I think this observation is extremely valid considering that there are obvious space limitations in the Zoom environment. Not too dissimilar to stage context, movement and spatial awareness is negotiated between the performers and the director or instructor, so with more time given to the rehearsal process, these issues can be resolved. Being aware of personal, immediate space that the actors are in, and the framework that actors are using (in this instance, the computer screen and camera), it is important to include physical awareness exercises similar to what would be implemented in stage and conventional screen contexts. Jhi Rayner agreed and followed up by stating that it was a 'really interesting point, like what is it to really manipulate that space within this little box that we've got here' reinforcing the fact that spatial awareness exercises are needed overall in this context.

When asked ‘what worked well’, Jackson stated that:

you really pay attention to what the other person is doing because they're not just there. You've got to really pay attention to what is their reaction...your eyes are kind of like a million places at once...but it's making you pay more attention to the things that you do need to be focusing on (S Jackson 2020, pers. comm., 17 November).

Rayner, on the other hand, mentioned the self-controlling ability and directorial nature of the actor during the process:

We're all our own cinematographers are we like we're all kind of in charge of our own world and how that scene. I had to work harder to establish that kind of relationship. So that means physical work is three times as hard having to push that boundary (J Rayner 2020, pers. comm., 17 November).

Rather than the director or cinematographer controlling the frame, in a sense Rayner was referring to the actor themselves determining the frame and the images and expressions that have been captured on the computer's camera; the eyeline, the profiles, head and body positioning and also vocal delivery. When asked what new insights that they discovered in the process that couldn't be found in a in a face to face, theatrical or conventional screen context, Jackson stated that she:

found [herself] because of the restriction of where [she] could look and that [she] found [herself] focusing a lot more on Jhi's delivery of the lines in terms of time...[She'd] be focused on his physical delivery more than his vocals. So for [her, that] was a big one, listening to his tone and then ‘bam’, to respond to that (S Jackson 2020, pers. comm., 17 November).

This statement confirms that vocal delivery and tone is crucial, as the in-person physical aspect is not present.

Finally, when asked what was more effective working in this space in terms of psychological or physical actions, Rayner stated ‘it was the physical’, however, it was a different aspect for Jackson as:

[she] used to think psychological, but just for some reason, [she thought] it was because it was mainly auditory for [her] (S Jackson 2020, pers. comm., 17 November).

In addition to the auditory aspect, for Jackson, the physical aspects were clear despite the physical distance and limited range of movement. For Jackson:

the physical actions actually came across clear and [she] felt more connection to the physical actions being applied to the text than [she] did the psychological and [she thought] it has to do with tonal shift (S Jackson 2020, pers. comm., 17 November).

To conclude the session, Rayner made a statement about the size of the performance energy he noticed while performing for this medium. He mentioned that:

in TV work, [directors and teachers, according to Rayner] always tell you that less is best. It's all about the subtext...but in terms of an acting perspective on the zoom call [he] found the opposite to be the way to go (J Rayner 2020, pers. comm., 17 November).

Overall, the psychological and physical actions exercise for dramatic text inspired by the work of Yat Malmgren was a success, to a certain degree. It was interesting to note that different aspects of the work resonated with different actors, for example, Jackson being more acute in terms of the auditory aspect and being affected by the overall vocal quality of the other actor. Rayner, on the other hand, felt that the psychological aspects were stronger as there was no in-person physicality to engage with, just the vocal and psychological actions conveyed through the computer screen.

Jackson’s comment regarding physical restrictions calls for more in-depth investigations regarding kinaesthetic awareness of personal space (i.e., the environment from which the actor is filming from), whether or not engaging in some more deeper Laban Movement

System Efforts such as space, weight, time and flow, may allow the actor to find more physical freedom, while also being aware of the specific frame the computer screen provides. In relation to the screen and camera itself, it would be interesting to take Rayner's comment regarding the actor having more ownership in terms of determining the frame, in a sense, being their own cinematographer, if the director/teacher allows this.

Online actor training for platforms such as Zoom is an extremely new and somewhat foreign phenomenon. Actor training for film and television contexts may not be suitable for this platform, therefore it is important to look at what Zoom offers that other screen media doesn't. Although psychological and physical actions, coupled with embodied practice is essential in any form of actor training, it should be noted that these should be explored with an understanding that actual physical connection cannot be possible for this medium.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, and demonstrated throughout this years' practice and research into actor training and performance via the Zoom platform, we have discussed and discovered several key factors. There are constraints in terms of personal and institutional technological applications, for example, students who have little or no internet access. This can hinder the rehearsal, performance and training process as they would be dropping in and out of the 'room', affecting the flow of the moment and disadvantage not only them, but the entire cohort. This is also an indication of the divide between households that have sufficient and insufficient internet connection.

The next factor concerns the technical crew of the production. The traditional roles and responsibilities of a Stage Manager and theatre technicians must be revisited and revised, as these obviously will be different in the Zoom platform as opposed to live stage performances. The Stage Manager for *Seeing Horrors 2* had to learn new ways of working without relying on a traditional template, conventional training, or text book on how to manage a production for the online space. The Stage Manager in this context also needed to be a vision switcher, organise some special effects, call the show online and deal with many technical and interpersonal issues online without the ability to speak or negotiate with anyone in person.

The actual performance text is also a significant factor. Theatrical plays can successfully be adapted for a Zoom platform, however, if it has previously been written for the stage, some

textual adaptations and creative license must be implemented to effectively suit the medium. This would mean that there would be limitations on what productions can be successfully performed via Zoom. Some theatrical or screen texts, however, do not suit the platform, but this would give light to new material to suit the medium. For this to successfully take place, the new work must be aware of the following limitations and restrictions: The lack of physical contact and the inability to have physical interpersonal connections; Stage directions (or screen/framework actions) must be relevant to the screen/frame, as subtle physical actions may be difficult to see; Language is extremely important, as more emphasis may be placed on the words rather than bold physical actions.

Training in this medium is just as important as the text and the performance itself. Traditional stage and screen actor training methods and approaches can be adapted to fit the Zoom context, however, teachers and actors must be aware of their frame, their limitations, their connection to the other actor and their own personal environment. It is also important to note that there are some exercises that rely on embodied learning and physical connection between actors in a particular space. This cannot be achieved, therefore exercises need to be heavily adapted to suit the medium. Psychological and physical action exercises, like the one mentioned in this paper, for example, can be a successful way to bridge the gap between the actors and the online space that connects them.

Physical and psychological actions can be communicated successfully if the actors are open and willing to embrace the method in this medium. Some actors may find the psychological aspect of actor training more pertinent, while others may find that their vocal and listening skills are more heightened. Like any other performance training method or approach, every actor will respond differently to the exercises that are conducted. Some may benefit from the online training, while others will not. So far, there is no succinct, successful training method that suits everyone, and it is a matter of trial and error to see what is more successful in the Zoom space. Some actors may find the self-dictatorial aspect of Zoom performance noteworthy, that is, adjusting the computer camera to capture certain aspects of their face, body or space (in conjunction with the director).

In essence, Zoom performance and training can empower actors, writers and directors to generate their own aesthetic. The technology has created a new grammar, and now as artists,

we need to write the narrative moving forward. Online performance and training is not a specific form to be mastered at this point in time; it must be seen as a multiplicative device. It is capable of generating a new culture and aesthetic, not merely replacing traditional forms of stage and screen performance and training practices.

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