CONTEMPORARY SCENOGRAPHY

A NEW JOURNAL AND A PROJECT

I immediately accepted the proposal to assume the position of artistic director of this new journal not because it appeared to be merely a new type of publication, miscellaneous or otherwise, on Theatre in general, but to be able to open up a forum of discussion, a fresh space dedicated to all those practitioners, the artists, the technicians, the researchers and the aficionados of Theatre who now wish to signally make a point, but by way of a "meeting point" on the general state of our Performing Arts.

This entails again bringing the "language" to the forefront, combined with possible techniques and new technologies; a concious "language", and always that of a conveyor of poetics.

In fact, I have the impression that a truly critical platform has for some time been lacking in Italy, one that aids the spread of knowledge and encourages dialogue between professionals and their creative projects, from planning to production, while on the other hand provides practitioners with the awareness of being part of an organic framework of experience.

To talk of Scenography in the contemporary sense is to talk of Direction.

The theatre professional is often isolated; the distribution network is at times flawed while reaching a vast audience is a rather complex operation; the transmission of theatrical experience which is part of our contemporaneity is often limited to a sole review.

This does not facilitate the contrast between authors and performers, nor does it succeed in quashing the defect of mediocracy to which the market has had to succumb, resulting in ever more commercially accepted productions geared towards box office receipts, at a time when a universal cry is to be heard for a revivification of the strength of our culture and for the vitality of our Theatre.

This journal, as a platform for dialogue, has an opportunity to become the "journal of theatre professionals".

My specific interest lies in that of Musical Theatre, in the conviction that this is the place where there is ample scope for invention, innovation and research into new forms of language.

At this point I'd like to define my personal goals as artistic dirercor: I invite dialogue, to produce contributions and to present projects from innovative directors and authors who in my opinion are moving in new and stimulating directions in contemporary theatre, both in Italy and abroad, in order to create a landscape of ideas, and to provide readers with the opportunity to become familiar with poetic and dramatic thought of that which they have seen and can yet see at the theatre.

There will also be editorial space dedicated to young directors, scenographers and other authors.

And to sum up, all this emerges as a fundamental tool destined for students and whoever desires to embrace the art of theatre: the construction of a critical repertoire of contemporary theatre production in order to engage with more authority and passion the Scenic Arts.

Henning Brockhaus

Stage Design: visual or project?

by Daniele Paolin

The notion that every division between science, technique and art is absolutely superfluous has for centuries prejudiced culture and vocational training. In the case of stagecraft, this uncertainty is even more ingrained. The habitual separation between Stagecraft and Stage Design now seems to have increasingly blurred and hazy boundaries in contemporary theatre, when still extant. This division could perhaps have made sense when, to paraphrase Luciano Damiani, the scenographer and author of sketches was the "provider of images" which then became scenery by the hands of skilled craftsmen (painters, carpenters, sculptors, technicians, etc.) who were responsible for developing and constructing the sets, making them three dimensional and operative for the area of the stage.

Contemporary stage design, by contrast, always seems more inclined towards processes that become integrated, guided by a dramaturgical, poetic, expressive and aesthetic scheme, the only true aim to which to aspire. Such integration incorporates knowledge bases in fields increasingly diversified and specialistic, driven by both formal and functional needs in a continuous interaction. One therefore sees perpetual scenographic inventions proliferate, extraordinary prototypes that would often represent by themselves the fulfilment of dreams that the scenographer has harboured right throughout history, but only twentieth-century technology has enabled him to make possible. One of these inventions is undoubtedly the so-called "flexible stage floor" invented by the scenographer, Luciano Damiani.

Why a flexible stage floor?

THE THEATRE TODAY:
EXPERIMENTATION AND INNOVATION

by Isabella M. Vesco

Theatre has always provided the fertile ground for contaminations: throughout history there has been a tendency to experiment by employing the technologies of the time. Both theatre and film production design, as in all art forms, are in fact closely tied to the prevailing culture and thus, precisely for this reason, a laboratory for experimentation and innovation.

Treatises on theatre apparatus written by Serlio and Sabbatini long ago emphasized how the relationship between art and technical innovation is certainly nothing new: in every period the technology of its age has been applied: from periaktoi to all other types of Greek stage machinery, to the fifteenth-century intermezzi of Brunelleschi, Vasari and their peers, to Baroque devices, right up to the most sophisticated technologies of our time.

STUDIO FOR ELECTRONIC THEATRE

STUDIO FOR ELECTRONIC THEATRE WAS ESTABLISHED IN SERBIA IN 2007.

THE FOUNDING MEMBERS OF SET WERE ALEKSANDAR DJERIC, FAHRUDIN NUNO SALIHBEGOVIC, TATJANA LJUJIC (*Academica Gruppo, Belgrado*), MATTHIAS OOSTRIK (*Cyber Theatre Amsterdam*), AND BORIS BUTORAC (*PVC-T Novi Sad*).

SET IS AN EVER-GROWING NETWORK, AND ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS WHO SHARE ITS VISION OF THE UNITY OF ART AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY ARE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN JOINT PROJECTS. IN 2012, STUDIO FOR ELECTRONIC THEATRE BECAME A RESEARCH INSTITUTE AFFILIATED WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH WHERE IT RUNS THE SETLAB. SET IS SUPPORTED BY GRE (GREENWICH RESEARCH AND ENTERPRISE), UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH.

WORLD STAGE DESIGN 2013 COMES TO THE UK
FOR A FESTIVAL OF INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE
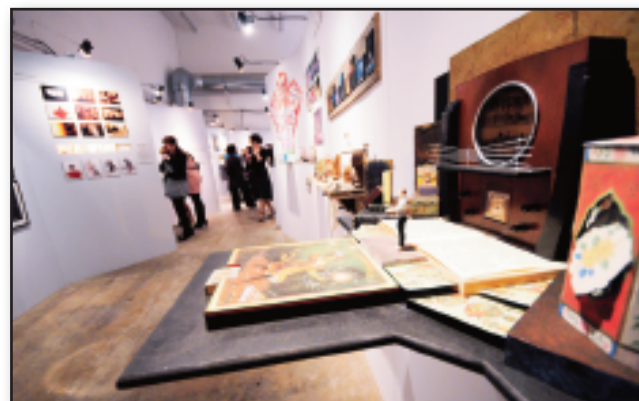
WORLD STAGE DESIGN 2013 (WSD2013) IS A CELEBRATION OF INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE DESIGN FROM THE WORLD OF THEATRE, OPERA AND DANCE WHICH WILL TAKE PLACE IN CARDIFF, UK BETWEEN 5/15 SEPTEMBER 2013, HOSTED BY THE *ROYAL WELSH COLLEGE OF MUSIC & DRAMA*. WORLD STAGE DESIGN TAKES PLACE EVERY FOUR YEARS. BEGINNING IN TORONTO IN 2005 THE EVENT THEN TRAVELLED TO SEOUL IN 2009. IN 2013 CARDIFF WILL PLAY HOST TO THIS DIVERSE FESTIVAL WHICH DRAWS HUNDREDS OF VISITORS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE.

THE THEATRE TODAY:
EXPERIMENTATION AND INNOVATION

In Renaissance scenography we find experiments primarily based on the use of perspective according to the Vitruvian concept; what is more, in Angelo Polizzano's Orfeo, staged by Leonardo da Vinci in 1506, a complex mechanism was employed that enabled the central hill to be opened or closed thus allowing for the appearance of the Underworld. These examples, among many, are evidence of an initial break with naturalism and classicism; the machine becomes a character, a performer in motion, the set and mechanical ingenuity in continuous transformation both appear on the stage.

In the 20th century the history of theatre was confronted with the theme of technology on a dual front: on one side we find directors and scenographers that believe and work in the new methods while on the other side traditionalists persist in the notion that technology is the enemy of tradition. So-called traditional theatre has its history and should not be demonized, however, one cannot deny that technology is altering our perception of space and time. Often one orientation does not exclude the other: scenery designed using advanced systems of virtual reality can also incorporate more traditional tools and methods.

In twentieth-century theatre, with Adolphe Appia, Gordon Craig and Vsevolod Èmil'evic Meyerhold, and the avant-garde in general, with all their differences and various trends, we arrive at a plastic and kinetic form of theatre, one which is above all against the representation of a realistic environment.

But the theatre of the nineteen-twenties was at the forefront in opening the way to experimentation in the years to follow. In Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre (1929-1930) Meyerhold states: "we who build theatre that has to compete with cinema, we say: let us fully achieve our goal of 'cinematized' theatre, let us realize on the stage the techniques of the screen (not just in the sense of hanging a screen above the stage), give us the opportunity to occupy the stage equipped with new technologies, according to the demands we impose on the theatre-goer today, and we will create shows that will attract as many spectators as the cinema". As we can see, the idea of 'total theatre' is not a recent phenomenon: the theme of the study of relationships and coexistence of diverse media in a theatre production is a subject examined in the same period by the German director, Erwin Piscator. Piscator, a socially committed director, had sensed that the use of technology onstage served to guarantee both an increase in audiences and their greater involvement, so mythicizing the competition with cinema; technology primarily allowed him to better express his political ideology, irrespective of the text to be staged. The backdrop for Piscator has a wealth of cinematographic images, with three distinct objectives (didactic, narrative and dramatic film).

This reorganization of the stage area led Walter Gropius to plan for Piscator the Total Theatre (1927) as a theatrical machine with revolving platforms, with three stages and mobile screens on which to project films and slides, screens that encompass the stalls, involving the audience in total participation.

Gropius in fact sustained that the aim of this type of theatre (never put into practice) was "to draw the spectator into the centre of the scene, making him spatially a part of the arena of action so it would no longer be possible to remain detached and on this side of the house curtain".

Of course one must not overlook Futurist experimentation: one example being Igor Stravinsky's Feu d'artifice of 1917, for which Giacomo Balla produced an abstract set design, foregoing the human presence of the actor and the dancer in favour of a bizarre construction of abstract forms lit either against the light or by refraction by projectors fitted with chromatic lights.

One of the 'oldest', most popular techniques is the use of film projection: basically, there has been an attempt to move away from the elementary projection onto a flat screen because this now seems a simplistic solution in that it harks back to a history of classic set design featuring a series of two-dimensional backdrops. In fact, with the sole use of video as a substitute for scenic architecture the effect was unremarkable; video should be an integral part of the production and not an add-on element or be a substitute, so it shouldn't take the place of scenic architecture but should interrelate with it.

The tendency has thus been to transform a flat image into a three-dimensional image, changing the standard two-dimensional screen for a spherical screen, a transparent screen or multi-screen...

A new expressive language determined by a contamination between the theatre space and video images has an interesting precedence in productions designed by the Czech scenographer, Josef Svoboda. One of his first experiments in 'luminous' scenography dates back to 1943, for the staging of Bloudenì (Pilgrimage): on seven hyperboloids covered in tulle, the lighting created the illusion of a cave of stalactites. The projections came into play during the scene changes: through a panoply of lights and slides the actors made their entrances together with their images. Following this experience the Czech scenographer realized he had to develop a deeper knowledge of technology as closely linked to his creative work, though being constantly vigilant, he argued, to not confuse the two terms: technology and mechanism. "Modern theatre is entitled to new technologies just as modern homes have a right to elevators, washing machines and mechanical dryers." Svoboda had got together a multidisciplinary team, comprising three architects, a mechanical engineer, an optical engineer and experts in electroacoustics and chemicals; almost a return to the artist-engineer of the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

Substituting or an integration with the scenic architecture with just a screen with moving images does not automatically constitute the opening towards a new expressive dimension for theatre; in some cases there is a risk of flattening the latter on a model adapted for television. In fact it's about – as Balzola wrote – "theatricalizing video rather than 'televisizing' theatre".

For this reason I now feel it is useful to recollect the work of Josef Svoboda, who I personally consider to be the world's most expressive exponent in design for the performing arts and who knew how to develop the most interesting innovations, even before the advent of digital technology, in theatre in the second half of the twentieth century as from the teachings of the masters of the avant-garde.
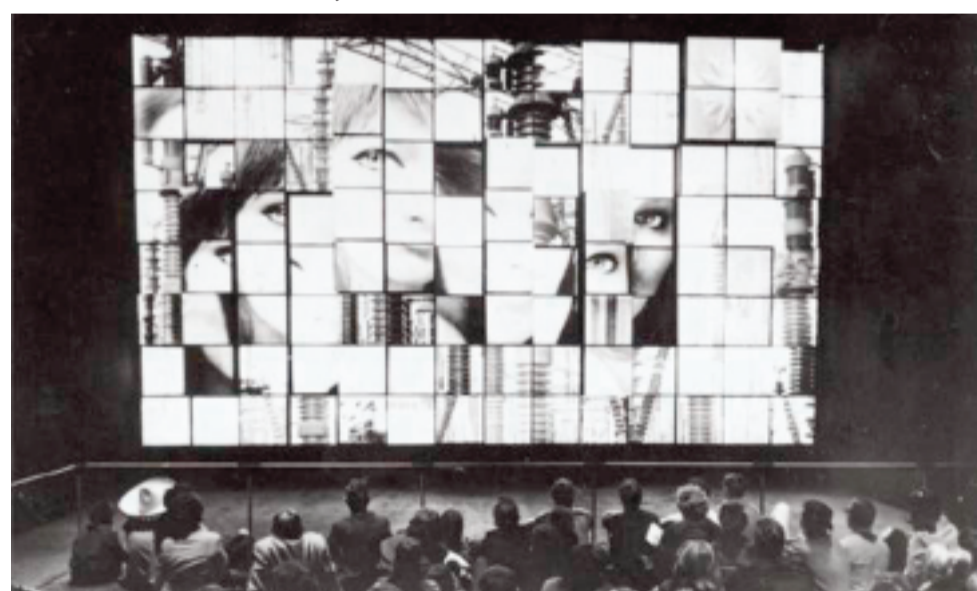
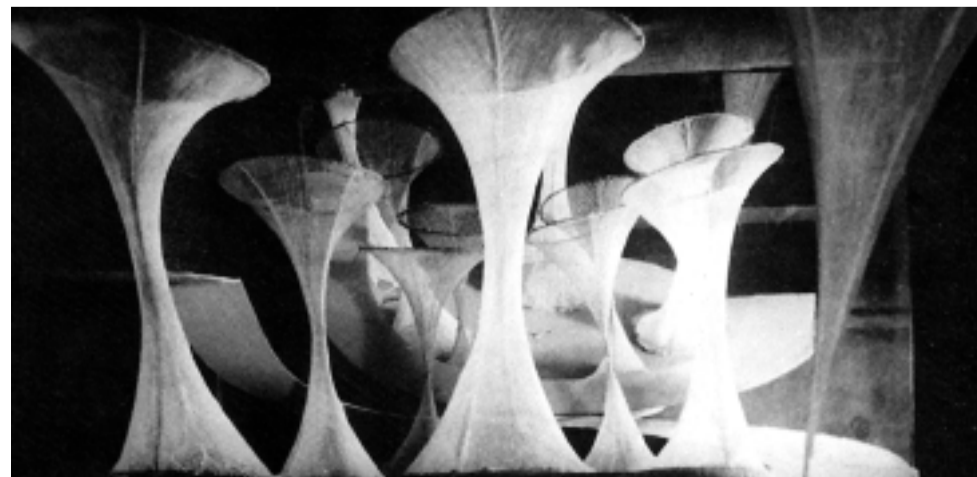*The "camera astratta", Kassel, "Documenta 8"1987. Studio Azzurro*

Metapolis, 2000. Zaha Hadid.

Silent Collisions, 2003. Thom Mayne.

Polyécran, Bruxelles1958. Josef Svoboda – Emil Radok.

Josef Svoboda, Bloudenì, n.r.

Creator of a revolutionary combination of lighting, film and music, Svoboda influenced developments in contemporary multimedia theatre with his productions created together with director Alfréd Radok. Svoboda is actually much more than a simple scenographer, he is a tireless experimentor of expressive languages and his vision of theatre is total and all encompassing: visual arts, architecture, photography, cinema, in addition to physics, chemistry, optical science, even the newest laser technologies.

In practical terms he is a continuator of the concept of total art in which diverse disciplines cross-fertilize in a unicum (Wagner previously had the same objectives). The relationship between theatre and technology (particularly with today's multimedia technologies) becomes markedly close and constant in the second half of the twentieth century following a series of twentiethcentury avant-garde experiments.

The manifold expressive possibilities offered by new technologies intrigue and engage personalities open to experimentation and working in a number of diverse fields, from art to photography and architecture.

Bruce Nauman, Lucio Fontana, Vito Acconci, Dan Graham and Zaha Hadid all spring to mind, among others.

The use of technology enables theatre to modernize its own language and appeal to a younger audience, one less entrenched in tradition. New generations accept and are open to experimentation in a technological climate, contamination and cross-fertilization between art forms.

If Svoboda, at the 1958 Expo in Brussels, launched multiprojection (the polyécran), today, there is experimentation in the evanescent effect of the image: projection onto a double layer of tulle with the physical performer placed in the middle or materials that maintain a "memory of form", and even on elements that are natural and gaseous, such as vaporized water.

For Svoboda, the intensifying of his own research into the sphere of linguistic contamination between theatre and means of visual production was an aesthetic choice which found its most sophisticated application in the *Intolleranza* production.

"There practically does not exist a theatre professional that has not in some way tested the relationship between film language and theatre language, or who has not in one way or another analyzed the relation between two instruments that are both equally and diversely dynamic.

The limit of the innate physicalness of the screen seemingly does not amount to an appreciable stumbling block; if anything, it is an engaging challenge". Theatre should not submit to technology but should know how to harness it; what particularly interests us is not the use of technology per se in theatre but the effects that it is capable of producing: a look at the theatre of Robert Lepage clarifies this point.

In fact, he experiments with a sophisticated montage of visuals through slides, video, mirrors and affirms that "it is not theatre that is mechanized, but it is the machine that is dramatized". Lepage, performer, film and theatre director, creator of multimedia sets, succeeds in combining traditional theatre (for example, shadow play) with the newest, most advanced forms of technology.

His productions are defined by Ms. Monteverdi as a "triumph of ancient mechané and techne. [...]

This artist's modernist inventions reckon witha moving scenography, a stage machinery that conjures up both simplicity and properties while the intervention onstage of a discreet technology comprised of lighting and video, ultimately freed from the obligation to amaze, visually carries (and supports) the entire show".

The use of technology is emblematic in Les sept branches de la rivière Ota: the set is structured like a traditional Japanese house, long and low, opaque and transparent; modifying the rectangular wall of the house reveals very different places, both in time and space (an American loft, a Japanese restaurant, a house in Amsterdam, a concentration camp...). Through the use of flash-back onstage Lepage projects a life spanning half a century, successfully creating an 'intarsia' effect between the video-projected image and the body of the performer.

It is therefore clear that for us contemporary theatre cannot and should not be a theatre of fiction, it has to be a form of theatre whereby the relationship between art and technology, between technological innovation and expressive invention, between research and vocational training is deeply distinctive; a form of theatre where there is both a certain break with the tradition of frontal vision and, consequently, a multiplication of sightlines of view and performance spaces.

In the case of *Viaggio a Reims*, staged by Luca Ronconi

in 1985 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, the filming onto a large screen and two smaller screens positioned in three different external locations becomes the distinguishing element of the theatre production.

The external sites (the piazza, the gallery and the San Fedele church) are used both for the incoronation and the King's entrance into the theatre thus creating a connection between the interior and the exterior, especially in the 'galop finale' of the procession in Piazza Scala that promptly bursts into theatre.

The same thing occurs in the production of Luigi Nono's Intolleranza 1960, staged in Boston in 1965. In this production Svoboda experiments with an advanced system of projections, which enabled the audience not only to simultaneously view what was happening both within and outside the theatre, just as Ronconi's production did, but also to see itself projected onto the screen onstage, in positive and negative images, something which raised public protest, which in itself was also filmed and screened. In this case, too, the technological effect becomes an integral part of the drama.

In Italy, theatre professionals now increasingly turn their attention to the electronic image. The director, Giorgio Barberio Corsetti belongs to the 'multimedia generation' and is successful in creating a circularity between the two expressive dimensions: video and theatre. Both Fabio Massimo Iaquone and the Milanese theatre group Studio Azzurro have collaborated with him. The latter experiments with ways of integrating the drama onstage with video imaging, inventing a duality of vision, which Andrea Balzola, defines as the "doppia scena".

Both develop an interlacing of virtual space and the physical body, "from the direct interaction in real-time between the body of the performer and the virtual space of the video – writes Balzola – it not only adds a new dimension to live performance but is also a fresh audiovisual experience for the spectator".

The use of a cluster of monitors that multiply the image was used back in 1984, by the Studio Azzurro Group: in a video environment Il nuotatore (va troppo spesso a Heidelberg), synchronized with twenty-four monitors and twelve video programs, a swimmer is seen swimming across each single display of the cluster of monitors.

For the videotheatre production of La camera astratta, Studio Azzurro and Barberio Corsetti meet each other in the experimental use of two means of expression on a dual front: the former focusing on video, the latter on theatre. La camera astratta is considered by some to be the benchmark of video theatre performance in Italy. While the actors perform on the stage, filmed by thirteen telecameras, the twenty monitors create a space where everything is magnified, the dimensions and the characters are multiplied. This theatrical experience is based on the continuous oscillation of seven actors who, onstage, are seen to pass in and out of the monitors. A dual set was constructed, one part visible and the other concealed from the audience: monitors were installed in the set visible to the public while numerous telecameras were installed in the part that was hidden from view.

Studio Azzurro spent their first decade of research chiefly on the integration of the electronic image with the performance space; for theatre, though employing the most advanced technologies, the authors design spectacular installations inhabited by actors, dancers and musicians.

Iaquone, creator of the Digital Versatile Theater (dvt) concept, also creates sets based on the use of cutting-edge technology, restructuring the performance space with a new vision of theatre as a virtual realm. This is how he explains his work: "I project images both on the set and the entire space using special optical systems, creating several layers: what appears to be a single image is in fact a series of images with different timings, the layers interact to perfection, they are pictures that each have a single visible perception.

Each part is resolved 'for and in' the projection that rests on elements of the set".

The articulation of the narrative language generated through the succession of images also finds fertile terrain in dance: a bold technological and multimedia set-up, for example, is at the core of all Frédéric Flamand's productions. The Belgian choreographer uses the blue screen process to put into effect the play between real/virtual, which allows for the insertion of the dancers real bodies into the images of a city or vice versa, to project the urban elements of the city onto the costumes worn by the dancers. The same method was

used and elaborated on by Jean Nouvel to play on the interaction between the scenic space and the mediascaped space both for the Universal Exposition in Hannover in 2000 and for the staging of Body/Work/Leisure. "Textures, transparencies, reflections, filters, translucent walls, moiré effects create – in close synergy with the choreography and thanks to moveable flats, modular lighting, strategically placed mirrors and video – the resonance of the image, its multiplication, its fade sequences. [...] While on a number of screens photographs featuring the world of work [...] or tourism or shopping are projected, the bodies of the dancers filmed against a blue screen are captured in freeze frame and their profiles are then generated in a cluster of multiple declinations."

In conclusion I would like to make clear that this text is not intended to favour experimental theatre to the exclusion of traditional theatre, just as it does not want to show preference for improvised experimentalism when the presumed renewal of the scenic language becomes too invasive, rather, it wants to affirm that today the projections, the laser beams, the monitors, and so on, are, if correctly used, fundamental in the creation of a new scenic language.

The years of research carried out in visual arts and in theatre by the Milanese group Studio Azzurro demonstrates that "[...] the experimentation of new relationships between the performative, imaginary and public body, [...] is not limited to using the visual dimension in a scenographic way, but it creates a new dramaturgy of interactivity, immersive and synesthetic, that embraces and cross-fertilizes in an original way that is fluid, and not artificial, the field of multimedia visual arts with those of the scenic arts and with those of the great ethical- social themes of our technological age".

"Theatre and new technologies confronted" was the core theme of a series of meetings and debates focusing on the forms and languages of contemporary theatre, which took place in 2007 in Genoa.

The promoter, Andrea Liberovici maintains that "technology with respect to theatre is like a viper: in order to avoid being bitten it needs to incorporate it in some way, we need to find an antidote; on the other hand, the mask in Greek theatre was the first form of technology".

With this observation I certainly do not wish to affirm that the more an advanced technology is used, the better the theatre production; technology requires a deal of technical mastery in its implementation, as Paolo Rosa wrote: "if you think you can exercise control over it, you undervalue its potentiality, it could easily control you".

Back in 1939, Brecht posed the question "how can the man of this century, at present enslaved and ignorant, yet hungry for freedom and knowledge, the embattled, heroic man, [...], capable of transforming the world in this great and terrible century of ours, how can this man have a form of theatre that helps him to master himself and the world he lives in?".

At a distance of over sixty years, no longer harbouring the illusion that man can master the world, we at least have to ask ourselves if and how new media are effectively changing theatre.

M. Isabella Vesco
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