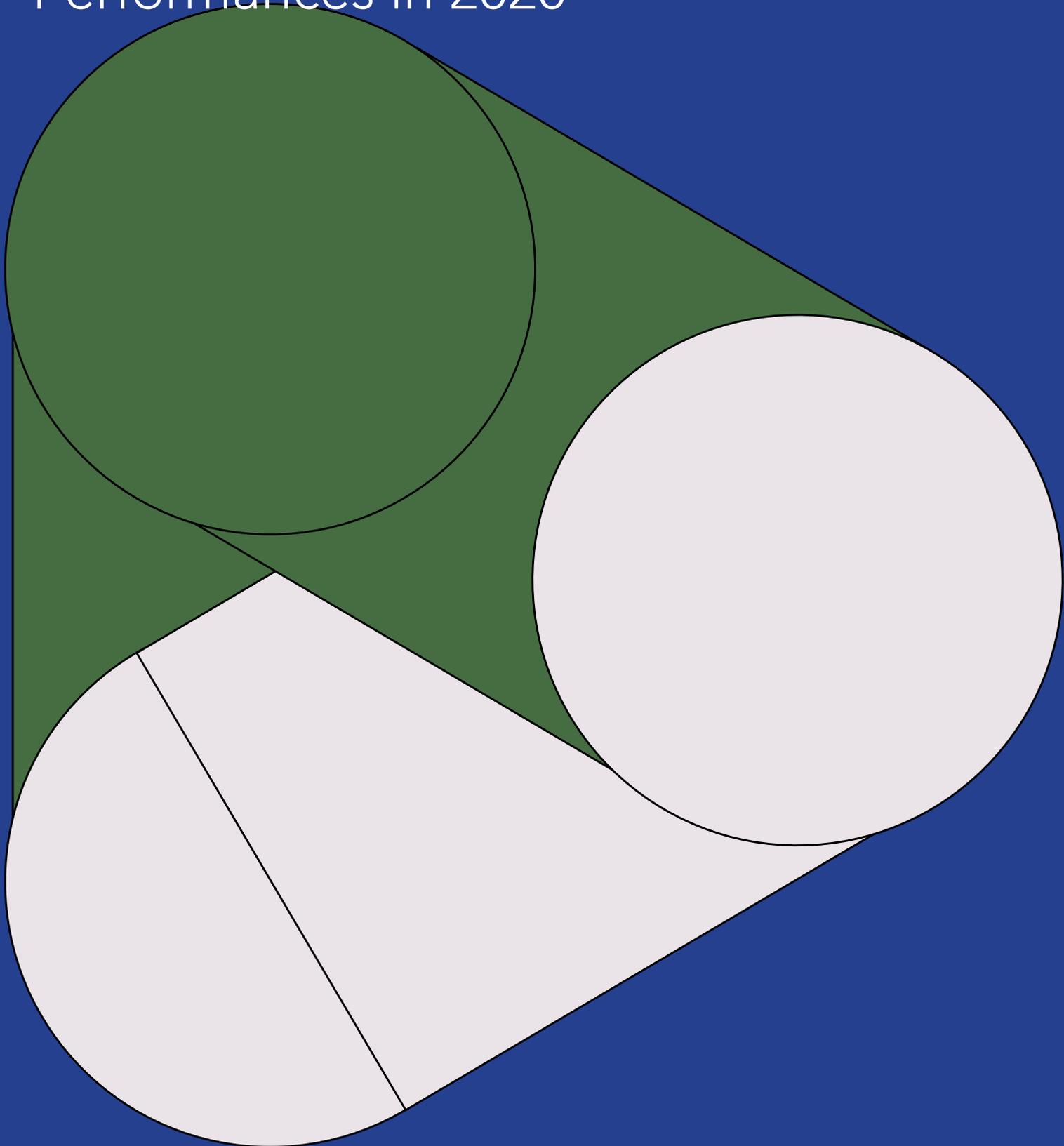


An Accidental Practice of Decentring  
An Overview of Online  
Performances in 2020

by Yan Pat-to



## Introduction

As the story goes, there were times in the past when humans seemed to live a worry-free existence. The last surge of collective joy goes back to the early 1990s: After the end of the Cold War and the fall of Berlin Wall, the world's crises appeared to have subsided. That is, if one turned a blind eye to the Kosovo War that followed. Then came the unstoppable waves of globalisation in the new millennium. It was not until the global pandemic struck in 2020 that we heeded the wakeup call: Crises can come knocking on our doors at any time, and they can be deadly.

As early as the 1980s, German sociologist Ulrich Beck reminded us that our society is filled with risks. Beck's concept of the risk society refers to a specific type of society that is characterised by: 1) the widespread logic of increasing artificially created uncertainty; 2) the current societal systems and structures being transferred into new forms that include more complexity, contingency, and fracture.

The impact of the global pandemic on the theatre has surpassed our imaginations. The uniqueness of the theatre lies in the audience's sense of being present, yet the virus has hindered us from being present in the theatre. Theatres worldwide have been suffering, and even the National Theatre in the UK resorted to layoffs at one point.

During the pandemic, Hong Kong's theatre has embarked on different experiments in search of new paths. This article focuses on productions from 2020. At the end of my discussion, I will draw on Jacques Derrida's theory of the deconstruction of the centre as a vantage point from which to ponder the potential and limitations of new forms of theatre.

## New Forms of Theatre in the Pandemic Age

In 2020, there were close to 150 Hong Kong theatre works presented online. Given the large number of these works, one may analyse them using different frameworks. For instance, critic Felix Chan categorises online performances based on their funding models.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will categorise different performances in terms of their art forms and modes of presentation: livestream performances, pre-recorded performances, performances on online platforms, and theatre-generated mediums (artistic mediums generated from the theatre). This focus lends a fitting perspective to the discussion of online performances, as I seek to examine possibilities for new forms of theatre in this article.

### 1. Livestream Performances

A key characteristic of the livestream performance is that the performers and the audience are situated in different places, while audience members watch the performance online in their own spaces.<sup>2</sup> Livestream performances can be divided into official performances and staged readings.

In an age in which livestreaming is a part of everyday life, it may seem like a simple task to livestream a performance. However, there are many technical aspects to consider, such as the internet speed at the venue, the number of video cameras in use, and the camera brands and models. Careful arrangements must be made to take these issues into account, or the livestream quality will be adversely affected. Take the physical theatre *O* by the City Contemporary Dance Company (CCDC) as an example: A large number of video cameras was

1 Felix Chan. "An Examination of Online Performances in Reflection of Whether Cultural Democracy Is Possible in Hong Kong", *Critique in the Front Line*, International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong), 23 February 2021. <https://www.iatc.com.hk/doc/106521>

2 This definition excludes works where the performer and the audience are situated in different spaces in the same venue, such as a performance where the performer and the audience are in different locations in the same building. These works are not included in the discussion in this article.

used to film the open rehearsal, and the livestream was complemented with excerpts of a pre-recorded outdoor performance. This approach helped to offset certain technical difficulties. The open rehearsal was held on 30 April 2020. While the pandemic situation was still tense at the time, the regulations regarding outdoor filming were relatively relaxed in Hong Kong. The arrangements by the CCDC demonstrated the creators' flexibility.

There were also different kinds of attempts at theatrical presentation at the Along the Edge Arts Festival, such as *Tesserismeron* by the Centre for Community Cultural Development. Subtitled "Self-quarantine in a Hong Kong Hotel", the show featured several artists performing in a hotel. It was a response to the anxieties of our times where quarantine was envisaged an everyday reality, and it reflected the creative team's sensitive observations of the times.

The rerun of *May 35th* (Gengzi Edition) by Stage 64 was moved online because of the pandemic. It was an opportunity for the work to reach a wider audience, since the first theatre run sold out quickly. This highlights one of the strengths of online platforms. Another notable work was *Ordinary Living*, created and performed by SunFool (Lau Ming-hang), with live music by Lee Chi-man. It was a novel attempt that combined SunFool's pop-up book theatre and livestream theatre performance.

The second kind of livestream performance is staged reading. With staged readings, there is ample flexibility in terms of the amount of the script that is performed. Therefore, it is easier and less costly to present staged readings during the pandemic.

PROJECT ROUNDABOUT launched the staged reading series, “See You Soon”. As stated in the introduction to the series, “in view of the difficulties our industry peers are facing... [we] decided to respond with immediate actions” and “do something for the industry”. A total of 178 theatre practitioners were invited to take part in the series, performing in 12 staged readings.<sup>3</sup> The significance of the “See You Soon” online staged readings went far beyond that of a performance series. PROJECT ROUNDABOUT demonstrated profound ambitions and a sense of responsibility towards the theatre industry.

A number of Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) grant recipients including Pants Theatre Production and POP Theatre, and theatre groups funded by the Home Affairs Bureau such as Hong Kong Repertory Theatre and Chung Ying Theatre Company, also produced online staged readings. When the pandemic eased, some local theatres resumed in-person performances and provided livestreaming as a viewing option for audiences. They included Cinematic Theatre, Zuni Icosahedron, SunFool, Theatre Ronin, and ÉLAN Lost Child Project



Promotional images: (left) *Tesserismeron*, and “See You Soon” — Photo sources: Centre for Community Cultural Development’s Facebook Page, PROJECT ROUNDABOUT’s website

HK. This was proof of Hong Kong theatre practitioners' proactive attitude towards change, and the local audience's craving for live performances during the pandemic.

## 2. Pre-recorded Performances

The pre-recorded performance is another popular mode of presentation among producers, as it minimises technical issues that may arise during livestreaming. As is commonly understood, the pre-recorded performance involves pre-recording a performance (non-present, non-instantaneous) and broadcasting it (at which time it will happen in the present moment for the viewer) at a later time. The quality of the recording is the only issue that the producers need to consider. Under the framework of the pre-recorded performance, there are local groups that have strived for breakthroughs in their theatrical expressions. I will mention a few examples here.

The Edward Lam Dance Theatre teamed up with Freespace, West Kowloon Cultural District, to produce *An Invitation: On Empty Theatre*. Thirty performers were invited to join the unrehearsed performance, where they expressed their thoughts and feelings about theatre, the city, their lives and our times in front of an empty auditorium in The Box at Freespace. The curatorial vision of this video project (pre-recorded performance) captured the spirit of our times, as an empty performing venue was a powerful metaphor for social isolation during the pandemic.

Hong Kong Repertory Theatre posed an open call for submissions for stories about the pandemic. The short texts were five to ten minutes in length, which were subsequently produced as online staged readings and performed by the theatre group. In a similar vein, the Class 7A Drama Group launched the "Before and After Twenty-twenty – a One-sheet Spoiler" One-page Script Creation Project. The group invited different authors to compose

texts, and produced their works as pre-recorded performances. In times of pandemic, these two projects stimulated the making of creative works and offered timely support to the industry.



Promotional images: (left) Hong Kong Repertory Theatre's Open Call for Creative Writing — Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, and Class 7A Drama Group's One-page Script Creation Project — Photo source: 7A Drama Group's Facebook Page

### 3. Performances on Online Platforms

The work from home model has been adopted in Hong Kong as a result of the pandemic (even though it has been popular in Europe and the US for a long time). It has encouraged people to use software platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams for holding meetings and working online. Even as the pandemic has eased, these software platforms have become a part of our daily life.

During the first few months of the pandemic, there were already a few local theatre works presented on online platforms. If we go by Peter Brook's definition of theatre, performances on online platforms are defined as theatre works—the performer and the audience are situated in the same space (a virtual space in this context, where the performer is aware of being watched by an audience). What is noteworthy is that different creators have taken diverse approaches even when using the same online platforms.

The first performance on an online platform in Hong Kong was *Table for Two*, which was written, directed and performed by Jennifer Lam. Through an online platform, Lam invited one audience member at a time to have a conversation with her at a virtual restaurant. Each conversation lasted 30 minutes. From April to August 2020, one hundred conversations were held. With its simple and powerful format, *Table for Two* served as an opening for the theatre maker and her audience to keep each other company. With the world wrestling with closed borders and isolation during the pandemic, *Table for Two* revealed new possibilities for human connections.

Another performance on an online platform was *How to present the love life of Hong Kong people to Aliens in the time of Pandemic* by Reframe Theatre and Felixism Creation. I was the playwright and director of this production. It was an adaptation from a similarly titled work of mine (minus the words "in the time of Pandemic") from 2018. As the work was a performance lecture, it was more easily adapted for the online performance format. An interesting aspect of this performance was that it allowed audience members to respond in real time in the chat box. Some of the audience members also shared their personal experiences. Taiwanese visual

artist Chiu Chih-hua, who performed on livestream as a part of the live performance of the original production, also took part in the online performance from overseas.

Felixism Creation curated another performance, *Seven Stupid Catslaves: a play for Hong Kong*. The script was adapted from *Seven Jewish Children* by Caryl Churchill. The most interesting moment of the performance was when the creator invited audience members who were cat parents to point their cameras at their cats. A group photo of cats appeared on the software platform, which made an amusing scene.



Promotional images: (from left to right) *Table for Two*, *Seven Stupid Catslaves*, and *See You Zoom* — Photo sources: Riceball Association’s Facebook Page, Felixism Creation’s website, art-mate.net

The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) School of Drama produced several performances on online platforms in 2020. Director Estella Wong teamed up with her former and then-current students to create the mini-ethnodrama *See You Zoom*. On the software platform, audience members could catch glimpses of the actors' homes, while the four actors talked about their lives during the pandemic. The creator divided audience members into groups using breakout rooms, and then everyone gathered for a group discussion at the end. It was an apt example of debriefing, which is frequently used in theatre in education. During the performance, the actors' sharing and their interactions with the audience offered a respite from the state of isolation during the pandemic.

*Pornography* is a HKAPA production directed by Janice Poon and adapted from the theatre play by British playwright Simon Stephens. The original script consists of seven scenes that are set against the backdrop of the 7 July 2005 London bombings. In Poon's adaptation, the setting has been transposed to an unknown city of the future. The live performance was presented in seven episodes, which were broadcast on the online platform Google Meet over seven evenings. It created a sense of watching a TV drama series for the audience.

At the peak of the pandemic, the HKAPA's School of Drama and the Hong Kong Dramatists launched an open call for creative proposals, which helped to stimulate artistic creation and provide support to industry practitioners. They also invited several directors to produce the proposed works for the *Before Christmas – "Quarantine Can't Stop Our Creativity"* online performance. As several programmes were featured in the performance, the creators were invited to discuss the works during the intervals. It was a valuable opportunity for the creators and the audience to engage in creative exchange, while utilising the key feature of the online platform.

The aforementioned Along the Edge Arts Festival also drew on the strengths of online platforms in a variety of productions spanning drama, poetry, and documentary. They included *Love in the Time of Corona*, *Adulting*, *On the Fringe*, *Transgression*, *Dating with Anne Frank*, and *My Soul Searching Creation*. In *Open A Room* by Miu Law and Cally Yu, different artists were invited to share a conversation with the audience in a virtual space, calling the distance between the real and the virtual into question.

While online platforms remain a relatively new medium, creators need to devote more time and effort to examining the technical aspects and refining their use of these platforms. Meanwhile, online platforms present a wider range of possibilities for creative artists to explore.



Promotional images: (left) *The Phenomenon of Man: Revolver 2021* — Photo: YC Kwan Photo courtesy: On & On Theatre Workshop, and *Nice To Hear From You* — Photo source: Broadcasting channel of *Nice To Hear From You* on Spotify

#### 4. Theatre-generated Mediums

With the large number of performances cancelled due to the pandemic, creators and producers produced various generative works in different mediums based on their original works. These new creations were all distinctive in their own ways.

In addition to visual mediums (which include the three types of online performances mentioned above), there were creators who sought to explore audio mediums in a new light. On & On Theatre Workshop reproduced *The Phenomenon of Man: Revolver 2021* as a five-episode audio drama, in a bid to explore different possibilities regarding adapting text for a strictly audio medium. These kinds of experiments have been rare in Hong Kong in recent years. No.1 Gloucester Road, a group formed by the HKAPA's School of Drama alumni, adapted *Nice To Hear From You*, a theatre play from Taiwan, into an audio drama with alumnus Colin Chan and then-current student Kwok Sug-ying in the lead roles. It also represented a quest for change during the pandemic.

The Tai Kwun Performing Arts Season: SPOTLIGHT, which was originally scheduled for September 2020, was postponed to April-May 2021 due to the pandemic. In light of this, Tai Kwun commissioned each of the participating groups to produce a 30-minute online programme. One of the performances was the livestream online rehearsal of Joseph Lee's *Unfolding Images: We Are Spectacles(s)*. Yat Po Singers produced a delightful video of song-and-dance scenes for *This Victoria Has No Secrets...For Now*. Reframe Theatre and Felixism Creation presented *A Poem in Jail (in progress) – Happy Together Till the Next Century Comes*, a work merging audio drama and video. The video was shot as a 360-degree, one-shot film. As the playwright and director of this work, I believed this filming technique is closest to theatrical representation.

## Towards Decentred Performance Modes

In the pre-pandemic era, most of us believed seeing a theatre work meant going to a performance space where we experienced a work together with the actors and the audience (or on our own). By this point of my article, the reader may have come to question this definition. To an extent, it has been contested by the four aforementioned production modes.

Philosopher Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction may offer us some insights. In his reading of classic philosophical texts, Derrida explores the essential differences between text structure and Western metaphysics. Or perhaps Derrida unearths the inconsistencies and contradictions in these classical texts that bring us to these concepts: There is no centre to the structure as it is a non-constant. The text has no fixed meaning. Binary oppositions are invalid.

Scholar Yang Dachun once made a vivid analogy: Derrida is like someone who has a hammer in his hand. Walking around inside a building (a classic text), he slams the hammer into the walls to see which one is unstable. He then knocks down the wall with the hammer, which destabilises the structure of the building.

From a deconstructive point of view, "what is a theatre performance" is a building that is being deconstructed. In times of pandemic, Hong Kong theatre practitioners have been slamming their hammers into the walls inside this building. The newly created works have departed from the centre that is the "traditional definition of theatre". Among the four aforementioned performance modes, pre-recorded performance is the closest to the centre, followed by livestream performance, and performance on an online platform. Theatre-generated mediums are the farthest from the centre. The pandemic has opened up new opportunities for creators to reimagine theatre and embark on a wider variety of experiments.

There is a question that I am curious about: When theatre practitioners act out their ideas and break down existing frameworks, will others (including those who watch online performances, and those who do not) stick to the centre that is the “traditional definition of theatre” and reject these performance modes that break with the norm? Deconstructionism is manifested in constant and perilous movement. When the theatres reopen after the pandemic subsides—when the venues no longer face the risk of sudden closure—will these online performance modes be sidelined (that is, will the centre triumph again)? Or will online performances remain an option for theatre making? If online performances prevail, they will definitely have a positive impact on our reconceiving and enriching of the definition of theatre. However, it will only come to pass on one condition: If we are willing to let go of the “traditional definition of theatre” both in our mindsets and our actions (such as funding mechanisms and audience preferences).

## Conclusion

Peter Drucker, a widely influential thinker on the topic of management, said that change comes from the outside rather than the inside. The pandemic has shaken our world to its core, but it has also propelled theatre makers to look for new paths. If we view it in a positive light, this crisis has stimulated our imaginations, as we tap into new territories by putting our ideas into action. How will the seeds of online performances grow in the future? I look forward to seeing their development.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

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is active in Hong Kong and German theatre. He is the artistic director of Reframe Theatre, the house author of Germany's Nationaltheater Mannheim (2021-2022), and an elected council member and the chairman of the Committee of Literary Arts of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council.

His play in English, *A Concise History of Future China*, was selected by the 2016 Berliner Festspiele Theatertreffen Stückemarkt as one of the five theatre works they presented. He was the first ethnic Chinese playwright to receive this accolade. His play in Cantonese, *White Blaze of the Morning*, was awarded Best Play in the 8th Hong Kong Theatre Libre. His recent works include: *A Poem in Jail*, featured in the Tai Kwun Performing Arts Season: SPOTLIGHT; *Happily Ever After Nuclear Explosion*, featured in the Tai Kwun Theatre Season; *Goldfish of Berlin*, and *Lingering in Time* and *Stream of Consciousness*, an immersive theatre series at Fringe Club Hong Kong.

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