Chapter 11
Blended Reality Performance

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ABSTRACT
This chapter focuses on the integration of live performance that blends virtual (avatars animated live in Second Life) and physical performers. To start with the author will briefly look at some of the ways practitioners have integrated and played with new technologies in performance. Following this a number of case studies that have explored this blending of the physical and the virtual will be examined. This will then be followed by a discussion about the nature of this type of performance both from the point of view of physical performers and those performing with avatars.

INTRODUCTION
An avatar is a representation of a human operator in the online world, specifically in the sense I am using the word here, within a three-dimensional virtual world. The use of an avatar by an operator enables a person to move from being a detached observer of a space to become present within it, to participate and interact with objects and others within that space, and to be perceived by them. Using an avatar within these worlds enables the two realities, the physical and the virtual, to become mixed together, as the person operating the avatar can cross over the dividing line (i.e. the screen) between the two worlds. This space is sometimes referred to as liminal, in that it has the same dividing role as the limen, the edge of the stage that separates the performers and the audience in the theatre.

Maeva Veerapen describes how she relates to her avatar Ninoo Nansen in a number of different ways: “Ninoo is an object for me but also possesses subjective qualities when she functions as a prosthesis, (or) phantom limb…” (Maeva Veerapen, 2011 p.98). After the initial acclimatisation to the virtual world her avatar has at times become akin to a physical extension, in the same way that a tennis player might use a tennis racket, or it might also make her physically feel or sense as I did with the kick. Writing about her experiences when performing in Telematic Dreaming (1992), Susan Kozel describes similar feelings “Great care and concentration was required to make intricate web patterns with the finger of a stranger, or to cause one fleshy finger to meet up with one video finger... The occasions when the movement worked well felt very much like good contact improvisation: a hypnotic feeling of not knowing what is com-
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ing next but letting the strong flow of movement carry you onward. When the movement moved through us in this way, based on openness and trust, the distinction between which bodies were real and which were virtual became irrelevant.” (Kozel, S 2007 p.93-4) She also describes how when somebody elbowed her in the stomach she instinctively doubled over and on another occasion felt “little electric shocks pass through my body” (p.97) in response to a caress. On the occasion however when she was deliberately and violently attacked by two men she was able to mentally step back in an act of “self-preservation—a primordial reaction in a sophisticated technological context.”

The work I am discussing in this chapter is about the use of avatars in a virtual world for performance, simultaneously performing with physical people in the physical world. I will also look at the historical precedents for mixing realities in theatre and film, as it is these technological devices that I have particularly focused on in performances. I also cover how the liminal space between reality and fiction/performer and audience is a constant theme in art and performance and one which constantly fascinates audiences and creators. As a practitioner I have been drawn to this area for exploration.

This blending of the real and the virtual could be seen as a form of telepresence, often, though not always, the performers animating the avatars could be completely remote, distance-wise from the physical action, but even when they are physically located in the same space the blended performance is mediated through a third combined space, usually a projection screen. Indeed, where there is a sense of connectedness or embodiment between a person and an avatar, any foray into a virtual world could be seen as telepresence.

“Telepresence as a term was first used by Marvin Minsky in 1980 to describe the experience of the operator of remotely located devices. ... the term telepresence has since been adopted (and continuously redefined) by many researchers concerned with the experience of interacting remotely”(Kuksa and Childs, 2014). I use it as a term to describe the act of feeling present at a remote location via some form of technological mediation or feeling or sensing the presence of others by the same means. This could be as commonplace as a telephone or Skype conversation through to more complicated, bespoke, set ups in galleries or theatres.

Since 2006 I have been actively exploring the possibilities of performing with avatars both in virtual and mediated spaces. I am using the term “mediated” here to refer to spaces that rely on some form of technology, more often than not a video camera, as the intermediary between the performer and the audience. I was first drawn to this when watching my daughter playing an early version of ‘The Sims’ video game and wondering whether it would be possible to perform Look Back in Anger (Osborne, 1956) on it. I mentioned this to a colleague at work who suggested I look at Second Life as a potential platform for doing this.

I have spent a considerable amount of time exploring Second Life, learning not just the practicalities of controlling an avatar, but also building and scripting. I also came to feel part of a community or communities, whether that be as an actor with Metaverse Shakespeare Company, MSC, (formerly known as the Second Life Shakespeare Company, SLSC) and Avatar Repertory Theater, ART as an audience member at countless theatre, dance and cabaret performances or at art galleries or recreated historical sites through to online teaching at Danish Visions, (a group in Second Life that offers free classes on various building, scripting and design techniques). As both an actor and educator, both real and virtual, I feel it is vital to really know and understand your medium even if only a tiny percentage of that knowledge and understanding is visible in the work that is created.

The examples that I will be looking at ultimately aim to blend or mesh the two, with the technology being an enabler rather than the point of interest, though in this journey a number of the examples have been about exploring what
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