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Can a Person Kiss a Hologram?
Live Theatre During a Plague in BYU's *Illusionary Tales*

By Tony Gunn and Adam Houghton

On March 12, 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Brigham Young University officially

shut down all in-person activities, which included all shows from the theatre department. Both

a successful production of *Little Shop of Horrors* that was in performances and a brilliantly

physical iteration of *Wendy and Peter Pan,* which had just begun tech rehearsals, were

unceremoniously shut down without notice. Our dynamically inventive marketing team

created posters alerting anyone who entered the arts building that everything was cancelled. It

was disheartening to all to see elegant and bold posters clearly publishing the end of our public

performances—beautiful and terrible in one glance. For weeks that followed, confidence in the

future was at an all-time low. The systems were shaken from their foundations of habitual

practice, but despair quickly turned to hope and innovation. The theatre department adopted

the phrase, "Yes, and…" for the 2020 – 2021 school year. We committed ourselves to accepting

the circumstances we were given and building a new sense of meaning from the experience.

Fall semester 2020, the theatre department embarked upon a seemingly treacherous

endeavor. While two of the productions that semester would be broadcast via Zoom, Technical

Director Travis Coyne proposed that the third production utilize one actor on stage, while the other actors (to support physical distancing) would be holograms projected from remote areas around the building using the "Pepper's Ghost Effect." Thus, in October 2020, *Illusionary Tales*—a program of three newly commissioned ten-minute plays—was broadcast live from the Pardoe theatre on BYU campus. In this essay, we will both document some of the practical lessons learned through the venture--such as the technical findings for making successful holograms and effective remote rehearsal strategies—as well as tease out some of the discoveries that were gained through the endeavor.

Approaches and Methods

All three ghost stories used the holograms in different and disparate ways. The plays included:

1. *Balete Drive,* by Melissa Lailani Larson, which explored the urban legend of the weeping woman, La Llorona, and presented the fate of a character who dared drive the famous Balete Drive at night.

2. *For Such a Time as This,* by James Goldberg, depicted a descendant daughter of the famous rabbi of Prague, who created the legendary Golem, as she hopes to resurrect the creature to fight for the Black Lives Matter movement.

3. *A Tell-Tale Heart,* an adaptation of Poe's short story by Andrew Justvig, revealed a young woman struggling to understand why her sister and a family friend seem to not hear or see her; in the end, she realizes that she is a murder victim.

Rather than feeling constrained by COVID compromises, we aspired with this production to create something closer to traditional theatre-making. We value Lindsay Brandon Hunter's

thoughts as we had "a desire to safeguard the name of theatre for the mediatized product; that is, not to produce an adaptation for the screen but to grant access to a theatrical original, one that is recognized as such and that does not completely relinquish the ontology of theatre in order to be apprehended as a construction of cinema or television."[1] The access we sought to grant was not only for the audience, but also for the production team. We wanted our students and our colleagues to experience a fully mounted traditional theatre production within the confines of our Covid-19 safety protocols. The production attempted to produce, as Brandon Hunter explains, a "translation" of an event rather than an "adaptation" as our production affixed our "affinities, priorities, and expectations"[2] on preserving and transmitting the theatrical event with as much fidelity as possible to an in-theatre experience.

To that end we utilized practices and approaches that mirror prominent media and projection designers in the field. Jared Mezzocchi, in a conversation with Barbara Fuchs, articulated the need to be agile when using digital platforms to maintain the analog form of theatre. For a production of *Russian Troll Farm,* he used the software Isadora and was able to "reverse engineer" Zoom to capture aspects of liveness and storytelling that are largely absent from typical Zoom performances.[3] While these practices made his production more filmic, it also preserved the "dust" of lived spaces, emphasized the liveness of the event, and made each run of the performance unique and completely distinct from the others. Our production also used Isadora to manipulate the holograms' scale and position while which helped maintain the

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[1] Lindsay Brandon Hunter, "'We Are Not Making A Movie': Constituting Theatre in Live Broadcast," *Theatre Topics,* Volume 29, Number 1, March 2019, 17.
[2] Brandon Hunter. "We Are Not Making a Move," 24.
[3] Barbara Fuchs and Jared Mezzocchi, "Reverse-Engineering Zoom with Isadora," HowlRound Theatre Commons, accessed October 25, 2022, https://howlround.com/reverse-engineering-zoom-isadora.

liveness of the theatrical encounter between actors in different locations. In these instances, technology enabled the ontology of theatre, rather than destroying it.

Daniel Fine, in a series of essays on *Howlround,* articulated the need to be thoughtful when integrating technology and media in productions, stating, "the inclusion of media into a production radically changes the meaning and dynamics of performance." He continues "a new language and significance is created when mixing the semiotics of media with live performance."[4] Fine stresses the need for media to serve and enable the telling of stories, rather than just being "cool" for the production. This is exactly what we sought to do in *Illusionary Tales*. Yes, the holograms were indeed, "cool," but the plays themselves were conceived with the Pepper's Ghost apparatus as a central element. The technology was necessary to tell these stories.

We made an additional choice to emphasize theatrical liveness. Rather than performing and recording the production once and then broadcasting it three times, we broadcast it live each night of the run, October 29 – 31, 2020. And we practiced all the traditional rituals of theatre-making—with call times, pre-show assignments, lights up, the run of the performance, lights down, curtain calls, and post-show wrap up. These rituals have inherent meaning for the creators and the audience, and we wished to preserve them.

We were particularly interested to preserve design practices and rituals. We wanted our student scenic designers to design sets and to see them realized. We wanted the students studying lighting to design and hang lights to illuminate the scenes. And we wanted the

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[4] Daniel Fine, "Media Design and Dramaturgy," HowlRound Theatre Commons, accessed October 10, 2022, https://howlround.com/media-design-and-dramaturgy.

costume design students to design, build, and see their designs worn head to toe on the bodies of the actors. We knew at the outset that *Illusionary Tales* would provide design practice opportunities, but we did not know what impact it would have on the other theatre disciplines.

Considering these expected (for designers) and unexpected outcomes (for everyone else), we find Daniel Sack's use of "scripted possibilities" and "unscripted potentialities,"[5] beneficial in outlining our findings from the show. We recognized that the production held the unscripted potentiality of unknown outcomes that could recontextualize a basic understanding of the nature of performance. After all, performers sharing a stage in front of an audience in a traditional way seems crucial within the typical ontology of performance and this project did not obviously promise such connections.

History and Technology

The first major task for the production team was how to project realistic holograms onto a lighted set in the Pardoe theatre. We wanted to create them using the Pepper's Ghost Effect. Apparitions appearing on stage have long been a part of dramatic storytelling. From the Deus ex machina of antiquity to ghosts—such as Hamlet's Father—appearing in the early modern period, productions have presented the otherworldly for as long as stories have been presented on stage. Often credited as the inventor of the apparatus that allows phantasmic images to appear and disappear on stage, John Henry Pepper bought the idea and nascent technology from Henry Dircks in the 1860's, fine-tuned the special effect, and presented the illusion for the first time at Royal Polytechnic Institution on December 24, 1862 to great acclaim

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[5] Daniel Sack, *After Live. Possibility, Potentiality, and the Future of Performance,* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2015).

and applause.[6] Lamont and Steinmeyer explain that the effect, "used a large sheet of transparent glass, fixed in place at a slight angle pointed downward. The glass was invisible to the audience but could reflect the image of a ghost that was concealed beneath the stage. The reflected ghost was then superimposed on the actors and the scenery on the stage."[7] So, performers beneath the stage appeared onstage in a ghostly, transparent form.[8] The corporeal and the specter could interact seamlessly.

Technical Findings

For *Illusionary Tales*, Technical Directors Travis Coyne and Mark Ohran worked with Design/Tech Professor Michael Kraczek to replicate a traditional Pepper's ghost illusion using the latest technology. This production was a deep practice of research and development.

Lighting: One of the challenges was controlling the light so that the holograms would not be overwhelmed by the stage lighting. Kraczek explained, "...we were controlling the light where we were filming the actors, we were controlling the light on stage where we were projecting the holograms, and if you got the light too high on stage, or if the light was too low where we were filming, we couldn't get enough of an image on stage."[9] Essentially, we kept the light levels low in both spaces to avoid highlighting the floor. Kraczek continues, "the amount of light that ended up on the stage deck made an impact. And then the same thing...where we were filming. If there was a lot of light on the floor surface where we were filming, we would

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[6] Jim Steinmeyer. *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible and Learned to Disappear*. New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 2006. 25 – 30.

[7] Peter Lamont and Jim Steinmeyer. *The Secret History of Magic the True Story of the Deceptive Art*. NY, NY: Tarcher Perigee, 2018. 190

[8] The most famous usage of this classic pepper's ghost effect is undoubtably in the ballroom scene in Disney's Haunted Mansion ride.

[9] Travis Coyne, Mark Ohran, and Mike Kraczek. Interviewed by Adam Houghton and Tony Gunn. April 14, 2022.

start to pick up the floor surface in the hologram."[10] Mentoring student lighting designers through this set of challenges was exactly the kind of *scripted possibility* we hoped this production would provide.

Cameras: Because we were filming in conditions of low light, controlling light included capturing as much light as possible with the cameras. The technology team hoped that the effect could be carried out using cheaper cameras that could, in theory, easily be shipped across the country so that performers could set it up on their own and broadcast themselves in as holograms in potential future productions. What they found, however, was that in order for the hologram to be clear and opaque, the camera had to have sufficient sensors to be able to deal with lower light levels, and therefore, had to be of a higher quality. This was an *unscripted potentiality* of the process. A Cannon "prosumer" model worked well for this project. They also noted that, while the GoPro of 2020 of did not have the needed functionality, recent upgrades might do the trick. Top-tier industry cameras, such as the Red brand, would not be necessary.

Latency: Because all the actors were physically in the building broadcasting from different areas, all connections were hard wired (with fiber-optic cable) into the interface and no Wi-Fi connections were used. Even with this luxury, there was still a bit of lag in both the broadcast images and sound. Kraczek noted, "We timed the latency, we had about a half a second of video latency, we had about nine milliseconds of sound latency."[11] With more time and money, we could have reduced the latency, but those techniques and tools would have moved the production further away from liveness and closer to a filmmaking process. Coyne

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[10] Travis Coyne, Mark Ohran, and Mike Kraczek. Interviewed by Adam Houghton and Tony Gunn. April 14, 2022.
[11] Travis Coyne, Mark Ohran, and Mike Kraczek. Interviewed by Adam Houghton and Tony Gunn. April 14, 2022.

commented, "We had talked about just potentially videotaping the actors--the remote actors--getting them in the can, and then we could just plug them in at the right moments. But we steered away from that because that was outside of the scope of what we were trying to do."[12] This comment illustrates the tension we felt in doing a live theatre performance, rather than a film. Had it been a film, we would have controlled the broadcast fully and eliminated latency completely, but then we would have been manipulating the live communication back and forth. Thus, we accepted latency, as Mezzocchi might characterize it, as the "dust" of liveness and valued this *scripted possibility* as an attribute of live performance.

Software and Equipment: The team deployed two different software systems to simplify the work. They used Vectorworks to map out projector placement and the aforementioned Isadora to manipulate the camera feed to match the size and scale of the actors. Thus, the hologram characters appeared to stand naturally on the same stage as the actor in the theatre. They placed Rose Brand Nebula Nets ("darknet" projection fabric) both in front of and behind the playing space, so that there could be two projections, one downstage and one upstage, which could run simultaneously if needed. They used a 20K projector for the back image and two 7K projectors, doubled up, for the front screen.

Structuring Learning: The technical team also benefited from turning the production into a class, giving student designers and technicians on the project dedicated time and space to collaborate with faculty and staff mentors. The entire team could meet twice each week to grapple with both the *scripted possibilities* and *unscripted potentialities.* This time in the theatre

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[12] Travis Coyne, Mark Ohran, and Mike Kraczek. Interviewed by Adam Houghton and Tony Gunn. April 14, 2022.

enabled them to forge best practices on how design components would interface with broadcast elements. Our colleagues emphasized that the workshopping time was crucial to their success.

From the outset, *Illusionary Tales* was primarily a proof-of-concept endeavor. We used the production to test the feasibility of using Pepper's Ghost holograms in a live performance. Because of the *scripted possible* challenges--and to a greater extent--any *unscripted potential* challenges we shaped our expectations to value process over product. However, we as directors can state without hesitation that the holograms were an enormous technical success. Projecting hologram characters onto a lighted stage to act with live actors was completely realized and greatly exceeded our expectations for this project given our time constraints.

Remote Rehearsals

Like most theatre groups, we held rehearsals remotely to stay within the Covid-19 safety protocols. Additionally, we knew the actors would play together from different spaces during the actual performances; thus, rehearsing remotely addressed this *scripted possible* challenge. Auditions, call backs, and all rehearsals (prior to technical rehearsals) were all held on Zoom meetings, with the actors connecting in from their own homes. Else Buckley, one of the student actors who played a hologram character said, "That was probably the most disparate from my previous experiences and the most jarring, probably the most uncomfortable was the fact that rehearsals were in my own home. It was a challenge having to bring that space both physically and mentally—right into my own house."[13] Another actor, Malin Glade, added, "During the

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[13] Else Buckley. Interviewed by Adam Houghton, October 3, 2022.

rehearsal process, when we would be (rehearsing) the car crash, I would just be in my dorm

room on Zoom. I would feel so awkward screaming at the top of my lungs, but you know, you

do what you've got to."[14] Traditional theatrical rehearsal processes take place in designated

spaces, where actors are safe to experiment with choices that express a full range of human

emotion. It was awkward at times for the actors to play vibrant emotions in spaces that house

regular daily life activities. Thus, the performers all needed a sense of good will as they

barricaded themselves in their bedrooms and offices, trying to find a place for playing a

character while the real world happened around them in adjacent rooms.

We tried to preserve the rituals of rehearsal, purposefully being traditional in scheduling

rehearsal times, accomplishing table work, and focusing on character analysis and action

choices. Creating staging presented obvious *scripted possible* challenges that we solved by

asking the actors to approximate the scenic design within their homes. They each set up a table

and chairs and designated other furniture as a kitchen counter or a steam radiator. These

improvised set-ups largely approximated the actual set from the director's perspective, much

like viewing a scene in a stereoscope. None of the actors could see this combined image, but it

is worth noting that actors also cannot see the full stage picture in an in-person staging

rehearsal. An *unscripted potentiality* was that the actors tended to seek communication

connection throughout the rehearsals by addressing each other and looking toward their

respective Zoom screens. While this impulse was helpful for their communication, it ultimately

would not work during performance because the holograms and the actor on stage would need

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[14] Malin Glade. Interviewed by Tony Gunn. October 21, 2022.

to appear to look toward and see each other. They could not act their roles while always looking at monitors.

To prepare our actors for a time when they would be on stage, during later Zoom rehearsals we established several focus points so that actors' on-screen images would appear to look at one another while directors gave feedback through their stereoscope imagination. In Zoom, the actors set the points with landmarks in their homes, and when in the theatre we marked focus points with spike tape for the hologram actors. Buckley described, "I was always just looking at blank walls and doing my best to hear how my scene partners were delivering their lines and trying my best to respond genuinely as if I actually could see them, which obviously, I could not."[15] We regularly discussed how the actors were learning basic skills for acting in green screen settings.

For *A Tell-Tale Heart,* director David Morgan took an extra step to help him and his cast imagine what the actualized staging would look like. Morgan wanted the actor who would play on the set, opposite the hologram characters, to know where the holograms were in the space from moment to moment. They placed two dressmaking forms in the room where that actor rehearsed, and student Stage Manager, Katie Arnold, moved the dress forms through the holograms' blocking. Arnold recalled, "And so, the actors are in their homes, on Zoom, doing the blocking all separately, and then in the room [with the actor who would play on stage] I am there moving these dress forms to mimic the blocking, which was wholly bizarre." She continued, "Unlike a traditional theatre process we had much less of an idea of how it was

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[15] Else Buckley. Interview by Adam Houghton. Seattle, WA, October 3, 2022.

going to actually look when we reached the technical process…we really didn't have any idea of

if it was going to work, or what it would look like…there was a lot more trust in technology than

I think I was used to."[16] Developing trust between cast, crew, and director is regularly part of

rehearsal processes, but in this instance the major role of technology required that we build

greater trust. We all saw this as part of a technical *scripted possibility*, and therefore we

mentored the students to work with good will toward all aspects. When we moved into the

theatre, our good will and trust were rewarded as we saw the beginnings of the hologram

realization.

Rehearsing in the Theatre

We worked with the actors to preserve the traditional sense of trajectory in rehearsals,

preparing for a smooth transition to the theatre—this was a *scripted possibility.* We managed

to master the vital aspects of character action, tempo, and essential movement while on Zoom,

and the performers nimbly adapted that work when we moved into the stage and video studio.

Actors on the stage, much to our relief, could see and react to the holograms in the space. The

hologram actors were provided with a monitor to orient themselves, but the device could not

be moved, so often actors had to trust in their positioning from rehearsals as they could not see

the monitor based on their blocking and position in the studio. Once we established their focal

points, the performance took on a satisfying form in which the actors, trusting the process, had

the confidence to play based on positioning and repetition.

During technical rehearsals it became clear that we needed to define the difference

between a *projection* and a *hologram*. Obviously, these concepts share several attributes, but

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[16] Katie Arnold. Interviewed by Tony Gunn. October 21, 2022.

our creative team stumbled into an *unscripted potentiality* of confusion of terms. This question arose when Adam Houghton, director on *For Such a Time as This,* described some segments that would use close-up images of the Golem, a hologram character. The Golem's shape would appear first in a close up, so that the audience could interpret it as a landscape of sorts. Then the actor would move and it would become clear that the image was of a humanoid body. It became clear that the scale of an image determined whether we considered it a projection or a hologram (with holograms being human scale). Our technical and design colleagues asked Houghton to create a storyboard of the concept, which aided this collaboration immensely (Figure 1). Confusion and consternation turned into quick collaboration and easy understanding. One important takeaway from this endeavor is that the use of storyboards can clarify complex technical processes to the point where discussion is no longer needed.

This is not to say that the transition to the theatre was seamless and without frustration. One sequence, a simulated and stylized car crash mentioned previous that was staged in *Balete Drive*, proved especially difficult to execute via Zoom because it featured a brilliant soundscape and specific choreography; however, we found that Zoom is not an effective application for syncing sound and movement. Once the production moved into technical rehearsals, we shifted attention away from the actor's performance to the various technical concerns. It was intensely difficult for director Tony Gunn to refine the nuances of the car crash with actor Malin Glade, while the entire crew of dozens of people were intent on perfecting multiple other technical elements. While the car crash sequence went off well in performance—largely due to Glade's perseverance and attention to detail—we would have benefitted from more time in the space to focus on performance. Glade explained got used to the process by focusing on the

"technical" and "mechanical" moments of choreography, but then she could connect

"emotionally" to her character once the actions were set.[17] As mentioned earlier, we knew at

the outset that *Illusionary Tales* would have heavy technical demands, but the overall

imbalance of time in technical rehearsals was an *unscripted potentiality*.

Performances: Near Encounters and Seeming Connections

The broadcast performances featured effectively realized Pepper's Ghost holograms

interacting with live actors. The performances were the product of significant technical

research and development combined with remote and traditional rehearsal practices. For the

authors, the most profound moments in the plays were when the hologram characters came

into close proximity with the corporeal characters or material objects on the stage.

Can a person kiss a hologram? In *Balete Drive,* the chilling uses of the hologram

technology came with the appearance of the ghost, La Llorona, but an interaction early in the

play provided a challenging test for the performers. Two characters, Felix and Carolina, flirt

before saying goodbye for the evening in front of Carolina's car. A brief pause in conversation

provides an opportunity for an almost kiss between the two characters—a moment discovered

in rehearsal and not indicated in the script. Felix, played by Hunter Aro, seems to take courage,

and lean in for a kiss while Carolina, played by Malin Glade, waits with anticipation before Felix

inevitably loses courage and backs away (Figure 2). For this encounter to work, Glade, who was

acting on stage, needed to hold her ground and let Aro, who was a hologram, come as close as

possible before he changed his mind, only taking a step back after he broke "eye contact." This

was challenging for Glade because the character's desire to be kissed was in conflict with her

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[17] Malin Glade. Interviewed by Tony Gunn. October 21, 2022.

charge as an actress to avoid letting the hologram image seep on to her, which could potentially spoil the illusion. One performance Glade was overly cautious as she, ever so slightly, retreated as Aro inched closer, inadvertently revealing that her character was dubious about a kiss, but in reality, showing cautiousness in the actress towards the hologram apparatus. However, the other nights her body language clearly showed that her character welcomed the affection and stood still while he approached. Another *unscripted potential challenge for performers*—to convey character while being cognizant of technical limitations—illustrates how the production deepened Glade's and Aro's understanding of the nature of performance.

Performances were broadcast live each night and they were simultaneously recorded for our archive. Because the performance was thoroughly documented via the recording, there was the opportunity for actors to receive feedback in the form of playback, much in the same way as in film, and make needed adjustments. We chose not to use this practice, again because we sought to preserve the ontology of theatre-making for our students. Glade showed agility with her performance, became accustomed to working with the hologram, and came to trust the interactions with Aro. The near kiss had all the romantic energy that the story needed, and it was compounded with the interesting energy of proximity between hologram and living body.

Can a person touch a hologram? In *For Such a Time as This*, a young woman who has abandoned her Hasidic upbringing argues with her father's ghost about the pain she felt leaving the family tradition. As the argument builds, Mordecai, played by Else Buckley in hologram, weeps and turns his back on his apostate daughter, Hadassah, played by Sage Patchin. The divide between father and daughter was amplified by the divide between hologram and live

actor. Buckley described how the challenge of playing a hologram character helped develop aspects of the character relationships. "Even though it was difficult, it felt kind of appropriate. We were, in terms of our character relationships, an estranged father and daughter, working and struggling so hard to connect. Even when you're looking at someone in real life, you have to hope that you are responding appropriately to the way that they are behaving and the way that they're feeling. So, the actual performance, with its obstacles and difficulties, was simply building on the issues that the characters were already facing."[18] Our department commissioned the plays to feature ghosts, so we knew there would be interactions between living and dead characters. What was an *unscripted potentiality* was how the hologram technology would enhance the actors' experience of playing ghosts.

In response to Mordecai's sorrow, Hadassah reaches out to touch him, hoping to comfort him (figure 3), but of course, she cannot make physical contact and she subsequently retreats from him. In this tender gesture, Patchin showed both the longing for a daughter to connect with and comfort her deceased father, but also exemplified the desire for physical contact and proximity that were keenly felt by many at the time. In October of 2020, Covid-19 vaccines were still months away. While the social protocol of the time dictated that people not share spaces for fear of infection—a fact reflected by the spacing restrictions of the production—the desire to be around others was strong and growing in our community, especially among our students. Hadassah's reach and desire for contact expressed a desire far beyond just a character in the play.

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[18] Else Buckley Interview by Adam Houghton. Seattle, WA, October 3, 2022.

Can a hologram touch the set and props? Another noteworthy moment in the production when the hologram met the physical world in a satisfying way occurred in *A Tale-Tell Heart*. The hologram characters Annabelle and Henry, played by actors Juniper Taylor and Daniel Summerstay, appeared to occupy furniture and manipulate objects that were a part of the set. When Henry entered and exited the room, he appeared to open and close a real door on the set. Annabelle appeared to sit on a chair that was on the stage. And Henry touched a framed photograph that dressed the set (figure 4). The production team committed themselves to ensure that the holograms interacted with the physical objects in convincing and believable ways. For example, for Annabelle to sit on a chair, they needed to align her hologram perfectly with it and scale the hologram naturally. In the studio, Juniper sat on a black chair that the team lit carefully so it was invisible to the audience. Students gained appreciation for how precise this work needed to be and was exactly the kind of *scripted possibility* we hoped.

We found these interactions between holograms and the live actors and physical objects most compelling. Of course, interactions that would take merely moments in shared space—an almost kiss, a missed comforting touch, performers sitting on a chair—became complex endeavors requiring exactness on the part of the actors and precision on the part of the technicians. We all marveled at the seeming magic that the production deployed; however, we also looked forward to a time when staging a simple interaction could be accomplished with more ease.

If there's no audience, can you hear its applause? The final moments we would like to tease out from the production are the curtain calls that occurred after each short play. Having a curtain call may seem a minor concern, but we were committed to fidelity to the ontology of

theatre. How can an absent audience applaud? One of the odd effects caused by eliminating

the audience while also trying to include--even magnify--the conventions of the theatre, was

the obvious absence of applause. As Lindsay Brandon Hunter points out about the NT Live and

RSC Live productions she examined, the production teams were "careful to include the

conventions that open and conclude a production: the moments that the lights come down and

the audience quiets, and the bringing up of the stage lights and the applause thar follows the

end of the play."[19] *Illusionary Tales* began with all the conventions that every BYU Theatre

production begins, the lights faded out and the stage lights came up to reveal the action. At the

end of each short play, the casts appeared standing in a line for a simple curtain call. And

because we had no audience present in the theatre, we made a choice to play an audio

recording of an applauding audience while the casts bowed. This felt odd to us as members of

the team. Because we knew the sound was a recording, we felt like we were faking something

that should be real—like we were playing a laugh track during a sit-com while the viewers at

home barely crack a smile. We considered, and tried out in rehearsal, broadcasting the curtain

call without the recorded applause; the result also felt wrong. It gave the illusion that there was

an audience sitting in the theatre withholding its applause for some reason. For us, this was a

choice between two odd outcomes, one a "fake," and the other a "cold shoulder to the cast

and crew" at the end of all their work. We chose to play the recorded applause. After we

viewed the broadcast with people who were not part of the production team, it was clear that

the recorded applause was the best choice. The production practiced theatre's ontology from

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[19] Brandon Hunter. "We Are Not Making a Move," 23.

the opening lights up, through performing the plays, and it needed the recording to support the ontology at the end.

Further Realized Possibilities and Discovered Potentialities

This theatrical dexterity showcased by performers and technicians confirmed the *scripted possibilities* and revealed *unscripted potentialities* within the performance. During tech rehearsals, it became clear that we could present a reasonable facsimile of a traditional theatrical experience and broadcast it to an audience live, which was a hoped-for outcome. Yet, there were two unexpected discoveries made through the endeavor. The first was that the hologram effect when viewed through a monitor appeared with greater clarity and opacity than it did for those seated in the theatre. We had never considered, or even appreciated, that a theatrical event could be better enjoyed by someone streaming the performance online. This echoes Brandon Hunter's experience listening to how clearly and effortlessly the actors' speech could be heard in the NT Live broadcast of *The Kitchen*.[20] The live broadcast was superior to the in-person viewing experience thanks to the attributes of the technology. The opacity of the *Illusionary Tales* broadcast is an example of how the digital translation prioritized the production team's desires. We wanted the hologram characters to appear to be solid. Our goal was that the audience would not be able to distinguish between the actor on stage and the holograms. Opacity certainly helped that effort.

The second unexpected outcome was how much meaning came from some traditional theatre-making practices. There was palatable excitement among everyone as the known

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[20] Brandon Hunter. "We Are Not Making a Move," 22.

rhythms and nuances that accompany a production were felt and enjoyed once again. Else

Buckley described that even though everyone was at safe distances from each other, being in

the theatre and its adjacent spaces improved the experience. Buckley said, "There was that kind

of pre-show cast connection and tension where we can talk about what we're hoping for and

what we're nervous about, and just the little things scattered across our minds as we prepare

for the performance that you just can't do in a Zoom conference call."[21] This was the kind of

meaning we expected the students to experience. However, we did not expect the *unscripted*

potential outcome that the dreaded tech week, usually a bane for any cast and crew, was met

with a sort of glee. One stage manager, Katie Arnold, in encouraging everyone to take care of

themselves, revealed that she typically got sick during tech week, but this information came,

not with a grimace of frustration, but rather with a hint of nostalgia. She later clarified that she

missed the "shared experience where everyone feels kind of crummy," and that, like a family,

everyone experienced the weariness together.[22] She was not alone. The entire company

seemed to enjoy and appreciate the long hours that wore them down because they were

making a show again together. That allure of theatre—of fancy artifice under filtered light, of

stories of meaning and menace, of a durational break from the everyday to see heightened

emotion and action—is brought about by painstaking labor by production staff, and it is clear

from this experience that the process was enjoyable and comforting, for the cast and crew.

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[21] Else Buckley. Interviewed by Adam Houghton. Seattle, WA, October 3, 2022.
[22] Katie Arnold. Interviewed by Tony Gunn. October 21, 2022.

Conclusion

The demands of the fall 2020 Covid-19 safety protocols presented a problem that theatre artists needed to solve, and technology enabled sharing and broadcasting productions all over the world. However, these safety protocols and broadcast technology often denied theatre artists of meaningful rituals and collaborations that traditionally create productions. BYU Theatre created *Illusionary Tales*, a production that refreshed a 19th Century theatrical apparatus (Pepper's Ghost) with contemporary technology and preserved the ontology of theatre for the company of creators and the audience. Although the digital aspects of the production were necessary, we worked to ensure that they did not drastically change the dynamics of liveness in interaction and relationships. Because we were taking up methods and an apparatus that were new to everyone, this was a practice of going into the unknown. In this essay, we outlined our discoveries regarding how we manipulated technology and shifted rehearsals; we also shared how coping with the pandemic magnified the profound meaning that theatre-making rituals hold for our students and colleagues. Ultimately, the most satisfying result of this process has been the joyful experience for our students and audiences during a time that felt so unsettling—that is a beautiful gift of theatre.

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Figure 1: Storyboards used to define Golem segments.

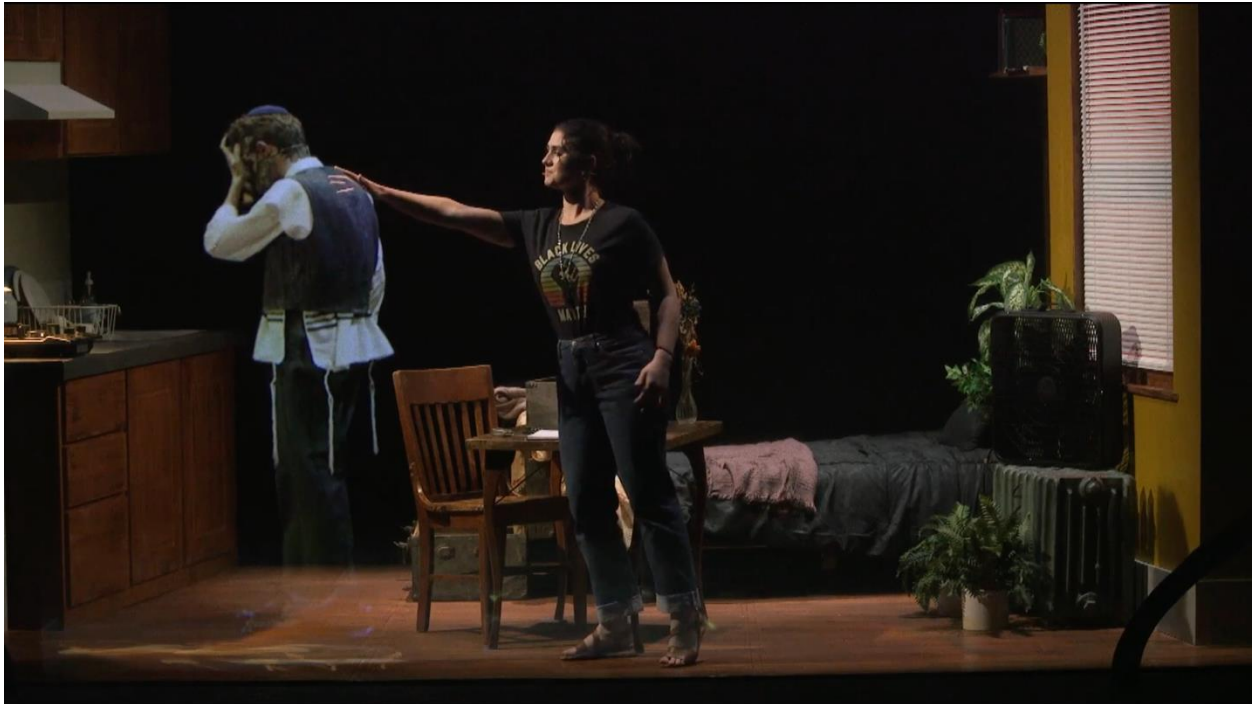Figure 2: Felix (Hunter Aro) gathers courage to kiss Carolina (Malin Glade).

Figure 3: Hadassah (Sage Patchin) reaches to comfort Mordecai (Else Buckley).

Figure 4: Henry (Daniel Summerstay) observes a picture on the mantle while conversing with Annabelle (Juniper Taylor) seated on the right. Eliza (Ondine Morgan) sits on the floor, ignored by the other characters for reasons unknown.

Video Clips:

<u>Illusionary Tales;: Balete Drive Clip</u>

Illusionary Tales: For Such A Time As This Clip

Illusionary Tales: A Tell-Tale Heart Clip

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