

ENGAGING A NEW THEATRE AUDIENCE IN NIGERIA: THE VIRTUAL AUDIENCE

ESEOVWE EMAKUNU, PhD

Department of Creative Arts
Dennis Osadebey University, Asaba
Delta State, Nigeriaeseovwe.emakunu@dou.edu.ngOrchid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9384-8454>**Abstract**

The performing arts, particularly theatre in Nigeria, face a significant challenge in audience engagement, a struggle exacerbated by the global shift towards virtual interactions, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the rise of streaming platforms has introduced a new "virtual audience," necessitating a re-evaluation of traditional engagement strategies. This study explored effective methods for engaging this new virtual audience in Nigerian theatre. The core problem addressed is the declining attendance at traditional stage performances in Nigeria and the imperative for theatre practitioners to adapt to the burgeoning online audience to ensure the continued relevance and appreciation of their art. The study is underpinned by a theoretical framework that merges Philip Auslander's "Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture" and Erika Fischer-Lichte's "The Aesthetic of the Performative." This framework interrogates the concept of "liveness" and audience engagement within a technologically mediated performance context. The study adopted a library and documentation methodology. Data was primarily collected through a review of existing literature, including academic journals, conference papers, and online articles, focusing on virtual reality, live streaming, audience participation, and case studies of theatres adopting virtual models. The findings indicate that virtual platforms offer significant opportunities for Nigerian theatre to overcome geographical barriers, reach a wider global audience, and provide flexible viewing options through replays. It is strongly recommended that Nigerian performing artists embrace the virtual space, mastering the use of streaming technologies and platforms. They should strategically leverage this new audience pool to further the appreciation and reach of their art, adapting their performances to foster meaningful engagement in this evolving digital landscape.

Keywords: Audience, Engaging Theatre, Virtual Theatre, Virtual Audience

Introduction

Throughout history, audience participation has been a crucial part of performances. Not only does it enhance the overall experience, it has also become an integral part of traditional African performances. In African communities, audience members are just as familiar with the oral folktale being told as the storytellers themselves. They can easily step in to replace the narrator and even take on roles in the story. According to Manieson and Mireku-Gyimah, the relationship between performer and audience in African oral performance is two-way and often intertwined. This is because both parties understand and accept their involvement in the performance. In essence, the audience is just as important as the performer in traditional African performances” (2).

Performance is a cultural process of transformation or transportation involving both the performer and the audience becoming co-subject in the performance, a metacommunicative reversal of role as all the participants' experience as a metamorphosis, the subject and object becoming one (Newton, 7). Every performance in the world depends on the audience to make it complete and successful. This is not only true for traditional African oral folktales but for all kinds of performances. Although the artist creates the idea and meaning of a piece of art, it remains unfinished until the audience completes it. As per Teresa Cerratto-Pargman, et al, the audience is necessary for the completion of the whole process, and without them, a performance is not complete (609).

Audience participation in a performance varies across cultures and styles, but it always plays a vital role. Whether it's a ballet, a classical music concert, or a pop music show, audience reactions and participation differ. During a hip-hop or contemporary music performance, it's common to see the audience getting more excited and involved, while during a ballet or classical music concert, the audience tends to remain calm and enjoy the performance, applauding only after it has ended. Despite the differences in experience, both types of performances provide equal enjoyment and entertainment.

Audience participation has always been an integral part of any performance, adding to its liveliness and energy. Not only do they provide the necessary emotional response and reactions, but they also inspire performers to give their best. This mutual emotional engagement is what makes any performance complete. However, with the advent of technology and innovation, a new kind of audience is emerging - the virtual audience. For centuries, technological advancements have touched every aspect of our lives, and performances are no exception. While audiences still need to watch performances, they don't necessarily have to be present at the venue. With the rise of various video streaming platforms, people can now be a part of performances virtually.

Nowadays, virtual performances are becoming an integral part of artistic expression around the world. These performances can take the form of music, art, dance, drama, and more, and are designed to be enjoyed by virtual audiences. In other words, the performances are streamed through internet platforms, rather than being presented only to a live audience in a performance space or auditorium (MDL Beast, 2024). This option presents the audience greater freedom of choice when it comes to watching performances, as they can now enjoy them from the comfort of their own homes. Moreover, it has opened up a new channel of engagement between performers and audiences, which was previously unavailable.

The virtual platforms have made it possible for the audience, no matter where he or she is at the time of the performance, to connect with it, although a level of preparation and concentration would be needed for fully engaging interaction between the performance and the audience. While it might be impossible for a full emotional and psychological engagement and interaction to take place, especially with the encumbrances and possible distractions that the audience might face, they can still enjoy the performance in all its variety.

Although virtual worlds have existed for a while, the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 accelerated their adoption by nearly all industries as people, businesses, and organizations sought ways to connect and engage. Meetings, workplace activities, teachings, and other events moved entirely to virtual platforms. Musicians and performers also turned to streaming platforms to reach their audience, where they would have performed live before. YouTube, Instagram Live, Facebook Live, Zoom, Google Room, and other platforms became popular for performances, with artists using them to launch albums and entertain fans. Nigerian artists like Burna Boy (Damini Ebunoluwa Ogulu), Wizkid (Ago Balogun), Davido (David Adeleke) and Mr. P (Peter Okoye) all performed their album launches via streaming platforms. Tu Face Idibia, Yemi Alade, and Angelique Kidjo, along with many other artists, performed live for their fans through streaming platforms.

The current trend of virtual performances is beneficial for the performing arts, particularly for theatre drama productions. Over the past years, there has been a significant decline in the attendance of stage performances for play productions (Abdinagoro, 94), but the virtual space provides a platform for both commercial and educational play productions to attract new audiences and involve them in the audience community, albeit virtually. This study aims to explore ways of engaging new audience members, highlighting the benefits and drawbacks of the virtual space about theatre audience engagement.

Conceptual Framework

The term "virtual" can be vague, but it plays a crucial role in this discussion. To understand it better, we need to define and contextualize it. The world of performance, both physical and virtual, has existed since the inception of the internet. Virtual theatre, which involves the use of virtual reality technologies in theatrical storytelling, has been around for some time. However, this definition doesn't encompass all aspects of virtual theatre. I would like to add another definition, which refers to theatrical performances done in a physical space but live-streamed through social media and other internet platforms to an audience who can watch from anywhere. This is different from the virtual theatre defined by Joe Geigel and Marla Schwepp, but both use computer/internet technologies.

During the pandemic, music artists used a concept that gained overwhelming success. The concept was virtual concerts. With the release of the Metaverse, comprising Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, a virtual world created by Mark Zuckerberg, virtual theatrical performances have become the future. Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp (owned by Meta) are some of the platforms that can host virtual theatre shows. Makena Rasmussen believes that virtual concerts within the Metaverse are the next step for the music industry. Due to the pandemic,

many artists had to play virtual concerts instead of live on-stage performances in 2020. However, virtual pop stars like HatsuneMiku have been selling out both offline and online concert venues for years. The potential of virtual concerts is untapped and as more people enter the Metaverse, the lines between physical and virtual reality become increasingly blurred.

Makena defines a virtual concert or performance as a "performance in which a virtual avatar's likeness is projected onto a virtual stage within virtual reality, synced to pre-recorded music." This aligns with Joe and Marla's concept of virtual theatre, especially when the Metaverse is the virtual world. The performer and the audience do not need to be in the same physical space. Theatrical performances should adopt this concept of performance-audience relationship, especially if they intend to connect with a global audience.

Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework for this study merges the works of Philip Auslander (*Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*) and Erika Fischer-Lichte (*The Aesthetic of the Performative*) which interrogates the liveness of performance and audience engagement within the framework of a performance. The theoretical framework centers on the transformative impact of technology on performance, particularly the emergence of the "virtual audience." The core premise is that the global shift towards digital platforms, significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, represents a lasting paradigm shift for the performing arts. This framework posits that the internet and streaming technologies have not merely provided an alternative venue but have fundamentally redefined the theatrical space and the nature of audience engagement. It emphasizes that for Nigerian theatre, adapting to this new reality—where the audience is increasingly found in the virtual world—is crucial for continued relevance and artistic appreciation, marking a transition from traditional physical gatherings to a digitally mediated "new normal."

A key component of this framework is the re-conceptualization of audience participation and presence within virtual environments. Drawing on the rich tradition of African performance, where the audience is historically an active co-performer (as highlighted by Sam Ukala's folkist aesthetics and Manieson and Mireku-Gyimah), the framework extends this participatory ethos to the digital realm. It argues that while physical co-presence may be absent, virtual platforms enable new forms of interaction through comment sections, emojis, and GIFs, allowing for the expression of spontaneous emotional responses and collective meaning-making. This aligns with Teresa Cerratto-Pargman's assertion that the audience is essential for the completion of any performance, suggesting that even with mediated interaction, the virtual audience actively contributes to the emergent theatrical event.

Finally, the framework posits technology as a dual-edged catalyst, offering significant advantages while presenting new challenges. On one hand, virtual theatre dramatically enhances accessibility and widens audience reach, breaking geographical barriers and accommodating larger numbers of spectators than traditional venues. It also provides valuable viewer data, enabling more informed artistic and marketing decisions. On the other hand, it acknowledges potential drawbacks such as a perceived "dearth of audience-performer relationship" and a growing "apathy of audience to live in-person performances." Therefore, this framework necessitates that theatre practitioners not only embrace these technologies but also strategically navigate their implications to foster meaningful engagement and ensure the sustained appreciation of theatrical art in a globally connected, digitally-driven world.

Virtual Theatre and Audience Participation

Performances in theatre are carried out for an audience, who play an integral role in the show. Their participation is critical, as their spontaneous appraisals can help or hurt the performer. In some cases, the audience can influence the trajectory of the performance. An overly critical audience can even end a performer's career if they don't have a thick skin.

Theatre can be participatory, where the audience is required to make a remark or judgment, or even decide how the performance ends. Their real-time review during the performance can inspire an artist to produce their best work. Depending on the venue, an audience typically enjoys participating in a performance through applause, expressions of emotions, on-the-spot comments, and other means. Sam Ukala, in his discussion on folkish theatre, suggests that the average African audience interjects during the performance of folktales. In law 2 of the eight laws of aesthetic response as espoused by Sam Ukala, he states that the traditional African audience co-

performs with the storyteller in a folkish performance (Tekena, 29). They sing along with the storyteller, ask questions make comments for clarity, and play roles in the enactment of the story or tale. The audience, which has prior knowledge, interjects in the story as necessary.

Audience participation is not limited to in-person performances where there's a live audience present in a performance space. Virtual audience participation is also possible through live-streaming platforms, where the audience can share their enthusiasm in the comment sections while the performance is ongoing. They can discuss their favorite scenes, express their reactions, be it shock, suspense, disappointment, or applause, comment on the lessons they learned from the performance, and experience all the emotional responses they would have if they were part of the in-person audience.

Although the virtual audience may not be physically present, they experience and express the same emotions as an in-person audience. They share their spontaneous or immediate reactions through the comment section, using words, emojis, stickers, and GIFs to express themselves. This turns the comment section of the live-streaming performance into another type of performance itself. As a result, anyone who scrolls through the section will be highly entertained.

Virtual Performances and Their Advantages for the Performer and Audience

I. Accessibility:

Attending live performances in physical theatre spaces can present several challenges to prospective audience members. Those who are not local to the area may need to arrange accommodation, transportation, meals, and consider potential safety hazards. These obstacles require careful planning and funding. In contrast, virtual theatre offers a significant advantage to both performers and viewers. By eliminating the need for physical attendance, audiences can access performances from anywhere without worrying about these challenges. Paid performances are easily accessible through streaming platforms, as long as audience members purchase tickets and receive the streaming link before the performance date and time. Open-access performances can be accessed by online audiences through the streaming link provided by the production team, enabling them to watch the performance from any location of their choosing.

ii. Wider Audience Reach

Virtual Theatre, which is the live streaming of performances, offers a platform to reach a wider audience. When a performance is planned, especially one that is meant to take place in a defined theatre space with a limited number of admissible audience members, the production team is restricted to the number of audience members the auditorium can accommodate. However, with virtual theatre, the performance can accommodate more audience members and reach a larger audience. You can invite as many people as you want to attend your event. According to Iudona-Romanova Kateryna, "Many theatres have started broadcasting their performances online, attracting a huge audience of viewers from dozens of countries around the world. This significantly expands the audience of specific theatres and has a positive impact on their reputation in the global community." Live streaming your performance makes your content accessible to people who may not have been able to attend your performance otherwise due to geographical or size constraints.

iii. Access to Replay

For the performances that are live-streamed through virtual platforms, those who missed the shows, whether they are ticket holders or non-ticket holders of the performances, can easily access the show at a later date and time and watch them. Even for open-access performances, they can easily go to the used virtual platforms and watch the performances anytime they want. This will not be possible if the performances are exclusively held and accessed in a live theatre, as there will not be the benefits of replay unless the performances are recorded on CD or DVD recorders and distributed to those who want to buy them. Even those who watched the performances when it was live-streamed, could still access them on the virtual streaming platforms any time they felt like watching them.

The benefits of this replay value are quite outstanding for both the online audience and the performer, who has the advantage of gaining monetarily from it.

iv. Access to Viewers Data

In today's world, data and relevant metrics play a crucial role in decision-making processes. Accessing your live-streamed performance viewer data can help you plan for future performances by providing critical information on your audience. This data includes feedback on your performance, audience numbers, engagement levels, general behavior, and demographics. Armed with this information, you can make informed decisions for future performances, tailor your marketing and advertising efforts to target specific demographics and plan more effectively for live streaming or virtual performances. Fortunately, streaming platforms provide performers with easy access to this information, giving them a distinct advantage in the world of live streaming and virtual performances.

Notable Disadvantages of Virtual Theatre

i. The dearth of Audience-Performer Relationship

Virtual theatre performances may have some drawbacks, particularly in African-themed performances that depend on audience participation. Such performances often thrive on the energy and engagement of the audience, which contributes to the overall trajectory of the performance. While some productions may include cast members in the audience to enhance the audience-performer relationship, others require spontaneous and unrehearsed reactions from the audience. If too many would-be audience members opt to attend virtually, the in-person audience may be too small to create a meaningful connection with the performers, potentially weakening the performance. While adaptable and skilled performers may be able to compensate for this, others may struggle to deliver a compelling performance.

ii. Apathy of Audience to Live In-Person Performances

It's common for humans to seek the most convenient, affordable, and stress-free options available to them. Virtual theatre provides exactly that to its audience, making it a cost-effective alternative to in-person performances. While some theatre-goers may still prefer to experience the energy of a live performance, either because they're accustomed to being in a theatre or because it's easily accessible to them, others may opt for the comfort and convenience of viewing performances from elsewhere. This could result in a loss of connection and energy between performers and audience members, which may affect the overall quality of the performance. However, theatre-makers must accept this reality and adapt to it by exploring virtual theatre performances.

Case Study: Comparative Analysis of Nigerian and Western Theatres

Terra Kulture

Terra Kulture is a prominent arts and culture center located in Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria. Established in 2003 by Bolanle Austen-Peters, it serves as a vibrant hub dedicated to promoting the richness and diversity of Nigerian languages, arts, and culture. It's recognized as a major cultural center in Lagos, attracting both local and international visitors, including notable personalities and students from prestigious universities. Terra Kulture encompasses various facilities and activities, including:

Art Gallery that showcases contemporary and traditional Nigerian art, paintings, sculptures, and exhibitions; Terra Arena, a 450-seater, state-of-the-art multipurpose theatre that hosts live performances, stage plays, musicals, comedy shows, and concerts. It's home to award-winning Nigerian productions; Language and Craft School: Offering classes in major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) and craft-making.

Its terra Arena has host many theatrical performances including *Motherland The Musical*, *Trial of Brother Jero*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, *Man Enough*, *Moremi Musical*, as so much more. While these theatrical performances have enjoyed streaming privileges on YouTube, non were livestream to the audience in the comfort of their homes or wherever they are domiciled while the live performances were ongoing. Their presence on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Instagram that offer livestreaming technology has not been utilized to reach audience in the virtual space with live theatrical performances. Although, they have

consistently published recorded performances on their YouTube channel, which they started at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the 19th of April 2020, the recording Fela and the Kalakuta Queen, a musical theatrical performance, was published by them and it attracted over 20,000 viewers. However, Terra Kulture has maintained their in-person live performance that takes place in its Terra Arena.

The Geffen Playhouse:

Partnering with BroadwayHD in 2007, The Geffen Playhouse produced O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. On a budget estimated between \$500,000 and \$3,000,000, the regional off-Broadway theatre, the Geffen Playhouse was able to underwrite this cost substantially using what BroadwayHD co-founder Stewart Lane described as “the co-production model.” The keys to the partnership included production selection, the right theatre, and the right connections between industry professionals.

The performance was captured and livestreamed with six cameras. A back stage crew of about forty people of high quality and there was no need to modify it as it managed the screens as directed by performance-capture legend David Horn. The BroadwayHD crew ultimately filmed one matinee and one evening performance of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, which they livestreamed for the virtual audience who watched the show simultaneously with the in-house audience.

Orlando Shakespeare Theatre

Based in Orlando, Florida, the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre is an educational theatre model that explored the use of livestreaming to engage virtual theatre performances. They have engaged with a number of performances that were livestreamed into classroom and extended this endeavor to counties in Florida and Georgia. They are looking to add Alabama and South Carolina to its lineup.

For Orlando Shakespeare Theatre to embark on livestreaming its performances to theatre audience in the virtual space, while having live audiences in the theatre auditorium, they first of all engage with the playwright and publisher. This is to make sure they have them on the same page so that they can be free from any legal encumbrances. This is why most of the plays the “Shakes” produces are new plays, as they are able to sign livestreaming contracts with the playwright and publishers.

To stream to 53 Florida schools and 47 Georgia schools (nearly 360 classrooms in total), the Shakes employed a local company called Skystorm Productions, a full-service production agency with experience capturing sporting events, competitions, concerts, debates and so on. The set-up was of PBS quality with multiple switching cameras, a satellite outside the theatre building and a live audience in the auditorium. Cameras were positioned to capture the performance but also captured the live audience in order to create a community feel for those watching remotely.

The schools, who already has a streaming screen with WiFi to access the internet, receive the performance link from Shakes and connect to the live performance for their students to watch, either in an auditorium, or their various classroom. With this, the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre is able to reach out to more than double of the audience that would have watched their performances in house. Their performance, *Miss Nelson is Missing* reached about 14,000 students instead of 324 which the Margeson Theatre of Shakes seats.

Required Equipment for Streaming as Enumerated by Switcher Studio Live Stream

To stream a live performance using On The Stage and Switcher Studio, the equipment you'll need may vary, depending on your artistic vision, technical skill level, and budget. We have categorized the general requirements into three different lists or setups that include all the necessary components, to help you choose the most suitable option.

These setups range from the minimum equipment required to stream a performance (Good) to an extended equipment list that provides additional flexibility and a higher-quality result (Better) to a third list that can help make your live stream stand out from others (Best). Each setup builds upon the previous one, but none of them should be considered definitive.

The Best Technology Set-Ups for Virtual Theatre Live Streaming

Micky Small, the Creative Director of Tempe and founder of Femme Powered Production, outlined three set-ups kits/equipment any theatre production that want to explore virtual theatre performances for virtual audience can adopt and adapt for a seamless transmission of the performance to the live audience on the internet. He explored three different kits/equipment, rating them from good to best, describing how the equipment should be set up and how they would perform and for which kind of performance they are suited for. Below is her exposition.

For a smooth and uninterrupted performance, it is highly recommended to use a dedicated, temporary, password-protected, high-speed wireless network connection. The network should consist of a high-speed wireless router/access point that is connected to your local area network (LAN) with a wired ethernet cable. This private wireless network will provide a stable connection that is free from interference from other devices that are not streaming the performance. This will ensure that you get the most out of the available bandwidth.

Kit 1: Good

Equipment list:

- 1 – iOS Device with external power supply
- 1 – Tripod with smartphone adapter

If you want to live-stream your performance, you will need at least two primary components: an iOS device, the Switcher Studio App installed, and connected to an external power supply such as a wall charger or external battery pack, and a tripod. With these components, you will be able to stream your live performance directly through the Stage.

However, it's important to consider your goals before making equipment decisions. This setup may not produce the desired result, as you'll be relying solely on the singular iOS device to capture all the audio and visual elements while controlling the production from the same device.

For a play produced in an intimate space, with a limited cast, and performed without an audience, this kit could create a satisfactory pre-recorded show or live stream. But for a more elaborate production, a more complete set-up would allow you to better translate the nuances of your staged performance to an at-home audience.

Optional Equipment:

An external, directional microphone attached to your iOS device for sound capture. If you don't have an external microphone, you will have to rely on the microphones built into your iOS device. These microphones pick up all the sounds in the room, such as air conditioning, crew/staff conversations, and doors opening and closing. However, a directional microphone is more effective at capturing only the sounds in the direction it is pointed towards.

Kit 2: Better

Equipment List

- 1 - iPad with external power supply
- 1 - Camera 1 - iPhone/iOS device with an external power supply
- 1 - Tripod with a universal smartphone adapter
- 1 - external pre-amp with appropriate cables

Standard theatre amplification components:

- Soundboard
- Area/condenser microphones (as required)
- Additional microphone cables

This set-up and equipment list for Kit 2 builds on the iOS components in Kit 1 and assumes that your show is recorded or streamed live from a performance space where there is no audience or, if there is an audience, the actors are not amplified for their benefit. Additionally, this configuration leverages the sound system and equipment that your organization may already have access to in your performance space.

The iPad is a crucial addition to this setup as it makes use of the Director Mode feature built into the Switcher Studio app. The iPad is used to remotely control the video feed from the iPhone or iOS device used as the primary camera. With Director Mode, the stage manager or director can call the shots on the iPad, which gives them more

physical screen space to work with, and isolates the iOS device being used as the camera. This isolation offers several benefits, including protection of the video feed from errant vibrations or movements by the operator, no need to touch the screen to change settings during the live camera feed, and less chance of the tripod being kicked or jostled by the operator during production.

A major advantage of this configuration is that it allows you to integrate the features of your in-house audio equipment and amplification system with a direct line out from your soundboard. The Switcher Studio toolkit has been specifically designed to cater for this use case. If you frequently use microphones on stage or in the performance area, the audio from these sources can be connected directly to your Director Mode iPad (or any other iOS device) through the soundboard. This ensures that your remote audience enjoys the highest quality audio experience possible.

Depending on your equipment type and configuration, along with the performance space, you may not need additional equipment other than a basic audio cable with a 3.5mm audio jack adapter that can be plugged into your iPad's headphone/microphone port. However, in some instances, you may need to run audio lines from your soundboard's output cables to the same type of pre-amp as in Kit 1, which can then be linked to your iPad. This type of line-in connection to the Switcher Studio app from a house soundboard has the potential to offer the most stable and consistent audio capture for your live or pre-recorded stream.

Kit 3: Best

- 1 - iPad with external power supply
- 1 - Camera 1 - iPhone/iOS Device with an external power supply
- 1 - Tripod with a universal smartphone adapter
- 1 - external pre-amp with appropriate cables

Additional equipment for multiple camera angles:

- Up to 8 additional iPhone/iOS devices with external power supply to act as cameras 2-9
- An equal number of tripods with universal smartphone adapters
- **Theatre Amplification system components:**
 - Primary soundboard
 - Auxiliary soundboard
 - Multiple microphone types: floor/area mics; body mics, instrument mics, etc.
 - Additional microphone cables

This configuration builds upon Kit 2 and utilizes the multi-camera functionality available in the Switcher Studio app. This feature allows for multiple camera angles and close-ups, with smooth transitions between them. It also provides for a more elaborate sound system setup, which may be necessary for productions with an audience present in the performance space, where the performance is amplified for their benefit, or for musical performances that involve a live orchestra. However, this configuration is more complex and may require additional personnel and equipment which your organization may or may not have immediate access to.

Similar to Kit 2, the iPad will be in Director Mode, with the iOS Device Camera 1 set as the primary video source. You can also connect up to eight additional iOS devices to the app in Director Mode to provide a wide range of camera angles or act as backup feeds in case of technical difficulties.

When mixing audio for production, whether it's a large or small musical, you have to take into account two different audiences: one that is present in the performance space, and the other viewing the stream from home. To satisfy both audiences in the best way possible, you need to consider two very different approaches to sound.

The "house mix" is what the audience inside the performance space hears. It is a combination of live sounds from performers and musicians, along with the amplified sound components. The "mix" is how those sounds work together inside the room. Typically, it is achieved using the primary house board operated by a single sound technician. When mixed correctly, the resulting sound is perceived as a seamless blend of different audio sources in proper balance.

However, if you use the line out from Kit 2 described above to take this house mix, the sound feed heard by the audience viewing your streamed performance at home would likely be different - and not necessarily good. This is because they could be missing half or more of what makes the house mix sound cohesive.

During a live performance, a second soundboard is used to optimize the audio that the audience hears online.

This auxiliary soundboard is connected to the primary board and receives several audio feeds that have been grouped logically. An operator positioned at the auxiliary soundboard listens to the performance through headphones and mixes the audio feeds to create the best sound for the streaming audience. The mix generated by the auxiliary soundboard is sent directly to the iPad or to a pre-amp connected to the iPad. In either case, the streamed audio mix that the audience hears is a result of the audio optimized by the auxiliary soundboard.

Engaging the Virtual Audience through Streaming Platforms

Performances that fully embrace virtual reality have been taking place for a couple of decades now. Theatre Critic, Oliver Grau, traces it, impliedly, to the classical times. He infers that:

In many quarters, virtual reality is viewed as a new phenomenon. However, a central argument of this book is that the idea of installing an observer in a hermetically closed-off image space of illusion did not make its first appearance with the technical invention of computer-aided virtual realities. On the contrary, virtual reality forms part of the core of the relationship of humans to images...the idea goes back to at least as far as the classical world, and it now reappears in the immersion strategy of present-day virtual art (4-5).

The use of Virtual Reality in theatre can be traced back to the 1960s when the first head-mounted display (HMD) was used. Ivan Sutherland created the first computer-aided HMD in 1968, which included internal sensors to track the user's head movements. Virtual Reality is a new space that extends the imagination, with three interdependent aspects: immersion, where the user is surrounded by a 3D world, the ability to walk around and choose a point of view, and manipulation, where the user can reach and manipulate the virtual world. The theatrical and performative possibilities of virtual reality leaped forward when Lanier's VPL Research company created a full-body version of the data glove, the DataSuit. This allows multiple users to don suits and headsets and see, talk, and interact within a shared synthetic environment. Virtual reality's possibilities are limitless and are being explored in contemporary times, including the creation of virtual imaging and audiences.

The internet and streaming platforms have created a new virtual audience that streams performances and watches from their comfort, creating their own virtual theatre space. These audiences are not limited to those using virtual reality technology. Therefore, contemporary theatre practitioners, especially those in Africa, must consider this audience when creating their performances. Although African performances tend to be engaging and vibrant, with the audience playing important roles in engaging with the performances in the theatre, African performers must adapt and work with the necessary technology to engage with the limitless pool of virtual audiences in the internet metaverse.

African theatre practitioners are embracing new technologies to reach a wider audience around the world, both virtually and in person. From the management team and artistic director to the artists and designers who collaborate to create the performance, such as light, set, scenic, sound, costume, and make-up designers, everyone involved must seize the opportunity to showcase pan-African performances to a global audience. This can be achieved by exploring stage technology and streaming platforms that can make the performances engaging, especially for virtual audiences.

Streaming technology has become easily accessible nowadays, offering a range of options such as HD scenic designs, LED lighting technology, and professional streaming cameras like the Logitech C922. Digital critic

Sarunas Karbauskas (Cybernews, 2023) has rated this camera as the best one for streaming performances. Furthermore, there are several streaming platforms available, including YouTube, Facebook Live, Instagram Live, IBM Video Streaming, Microsoft Stream, and Switcher Studio Live Stream, among others. All the management team of a theatre needs is to identify the right technology to use for their performance.

Conclusion

In today's digital age, technology has opened up new possibilities for audience interaction. Social media integration allows audiences to share their experiences in real-time, creating a virtual community around live events. Live streaming brings performances to audiences around the world, while interactive experiences like augmented reality and virtual reality offer new ways for audiences to engage with live content. By embracing these technologies, performers can extend the reach of their live performances and create immersive experiences that blur the lines between the physical and digital worlds (MDL Beast, 2024).

Consequence on this, the premise of this study, which hinge its framework on the works of Philip Auslande (Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture) and Erika Fischer-Lichte (The Aesthetic of the Performative) that emphasized the both the flexibility of liveness of a performance, with an emphasis on using digital media and streaming platform to reach audience, and the symbiotic relationship that exists between performers and audience, irrespective of the space, whether virtual or in-person, has elucidated the expediency of theatre practitioners to patronize the digital space in order to engage new and wider audience that may not be within their vicinity of live in-person performance.

The emergence of virtual audiences has provided theatre-makers in Africa and worldwide with a unique opportunity to expand their performance reach beyond conventional theatre spaces. Technology has been instrumental in enhancing the aesthetics and communicative function of performances. As technology continues to advance, the theatre industry finds itself at a crossroads. The internet has transformed the entertainment, commerce, and social interaction landscape, ushering in a wave of innovation. Streaming platforms, smartphones, digital cameras, sound systems, and other scenic technologies are now being leveraged by performers to reach a wider audience. Theatre practitioners must take advantage of these technologies to engage a new and wider audience that is ready to enjoy their artwork from the comfort of their own homes, rather than from a physical theatre.

The beauty of this intersectional mode of performance is that it can be used for any form of theatre as long as the technology, technical knowledge and resource are available. Community theatre/drama, applied theatre/drama and other forms of drama that engages the society in a bid to engender direct change through the performances presented can applied the virtual audience medium, especially when the theatre company of performer is a far from where the primary audience of the performance are domiciled. As long as there are internet services, the logistic can adopt the model of the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre discussed above in their performances.

This study has explored the various advantages that both performers and virtual audiences will enjoy when the virtual audience performance engagement is used by performance to engage theatre goers. Both parties need to take advantage of these benefits that new technologies have brought us to deliver and experience performances that would provide and cater for the entertainment needs of the audience that are scattered all over the world.

Works Cited

- Abdinagoro, Sri. Bramantoro. Factors Influencing the Intention of Attending Theater Performances. *Exploration Study Journal: The Winners*, 18 (2), 2017. 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.21512/tw.v18i2.4170>
- Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. New York Routledge, 1999.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Aesthetic of the Performative*. Translated by Saskya Iris Jain. New York Routledge, 2004.
- Grau, Oliver. *Virtual Arts: From Illusion to Immersion*. MA: MIT Press, 2003.
- KaterynaIudova-Romanova, et al. *Virtual Reality in Contemporary Theatre*. *ACM J. Comput. Cult. Herit.* 15, 4 (Article 75), 2023.
- Makena Rasmussen. *Touring The Musical Metaverse: Virtual Concerts are Here to Stay*. Virtual Humans <https://www.virtualhumans.org/article/touring-the-musical-metaverse-virtual-concerts-are-here-to-stay> Accessed 11th September 2022.
- Manieson, A. A. and Mireku-Gyimah, P. B. *The Changing Audience of the Oral Performance in Africa: The Ghanaian Experience*. In *Journal of Communication and Culture*, Volume 3, Number 3, 2012.
- MDL Beast. Music Industry: The Power of the Crowd: Audience Interaction at Live Performances, 2024. Accessed 4 July, 2025. <https://mdlbeast.com/xp-feed/music-industry/the-power-of-the-crowd-audience-interaction-at-live-performances>
- Newton, Deborah. Performativity and the Performer-Audience Relationship Shifting Perspectives and Collapsing Binaries. *The SOAC Journal of Postgraduate Research*, Vol. 7, 2014.
- Rheingold, Howard. *Virtual Reality*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1991.
- Sandin, Daniel. *Digital Illusion, Virtual Reality and Cinema*. In Clark Dodsworth (ed.) *Digital Illusion*. New York: ACM Press, 1998.
- [Šarūnas Karbauskas](https://cybernews.com/best-cameras/for-streaming/). 7 best cameras for streaming in 2023, September 2023. Accessed 4 July 2025.
- Schweppe, Marla & Geigel, Joe. Live Theater on a Virtual Stage: Incorporating Soft Skills and Teamwork in Computer Graphics Education. *Computer Graphics and Applications, IEEE*. 31, 2011. 85 - 89. 10.1109/MCG.2011.9
- Small, Micky. Livestream Performances: What's the Best Set-Up? <https://intercom.help/on-the-stage/en/articles/5467638-livestream-performances-what-s-the-best-set-up> Accessed 20th November, 2023.
- Tekena, Gaspar Mark. Sam Ukala's Folkist Directorial Aesthetics: The Example of Iredi War. *New Aesthetic Dimensions in African Drama and Theatre: A Festschrift in Honour of Prof. Sam Ukala*.