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THE DIGITAL MUSE AND THE EMPTY SPACE: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN THEATRE ARTS

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of theatre arts and artificial intelligence, investigating the transformative potential and inherent challenges presented by this emerging technological paradigm. As AI systems become increasingly sophisticated in natural language processing, computer vision, and creative generation, they are beginning to influence the foundational elements of theatrical creation and performance. Using Peter Brook's Empty Space Theory and Joseph Schumpeter's Theory of Technological Emergence, this paper examines the prospects of the application of AI across the theatrical process, including its role as a tool for playwrights in generating and developing text, as a scenographic partner in creating dynamic and responsive visual environments, and as an on-stage performer, raising fundamental questions about presence, agency, and the definition of acting. Concurrently, the paper critically analyses the significant challenges that arise from this integration. These challenges encompass the philosophical debate over algorithmic authorship and creativity, the practical concerns of technical reliability and the erosion of liveness, the potential for embedded biases in AI models to perpetuate harmful stereotypes, and the socioeconomic impact on theatre practitioners. The paper concludes by arguing that the successful and ethical integration of AI into theatre will depend not on a binary choice between human and machine, but on a deliberate and critically informed process of collaboration, where AI serves as a catalyst for new forms of artistic expression while the primacy of human intention, empathy, and embodied presence remains the core of the theatrical event.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Theatre, Performance, Digital Humanities, Scenography, Human-Computer Interaction

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Introduction

Theatre has always been a matter of balance between space, presence, and imagination. In his book *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook describes theatre as "the moment when 'a man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged'" (9). To put it simply, the art of theatre is defined by the presence of a performer in a given space with the active presence of an audience to witness the performance. The "empty space" in Brook's definition represents immediacy, embodiment, and shared experience. Brook defines four types of theatre: "deadly," "holy," "rough," and "immediate," stating that the last type is the one that brings out the true essence of theatre and cannot be without presence and immediate engagement (Brook, 19-32).

Furthermore, developments in artificial intelligence (AI) technologies are bringing about change in creative processes as well. In the context of theatre, AI technology is used not only as a medium of text production but also as a means of enhancing improvisation and making decisions regarding dramaturgy. According to Zhen Ren, AI technology is able to create narrative structures in stage productions, but AI-produced texts might lack human emotionality and cultural specificity (27-32). In the view of Sora Kang and Joonhwan Lee note that AI technology might contribute to creative freedom on stage through AI-generated theatrical language processing (4-8). In an interdisciplinary study titled “Artificial Intelligence in Theatre: A Review of Developments, Challenges, and Research Opportunities” (Zhang Jingying, Jingru Zhang, and Syahrul Fithri Musa, 112-18), also point out difficulties associated with the use of artificial intelligence technology, such as the complications related to embodied performances, ethics of representation, and human-machine interactions.

Despite increasing attention being paid to the topic, there is still a lack of systematic analysis of how artificial intelligence works within the context of theatre’s ontological premises, especially those related to live performance, relationality between audience and performers, and creativity emphasised by Brook. While much of the existing literature focuses on practical implementation of technology, not enough has been done to consider the effect of AI on the theatre experience itself.

Aim

This study examines the prospects of the applications of artificial intelligence across the theatrical process, with a focus on its capacity to enhance creativity and reconfigure artistic practice while maintaining the human-centred principles of theatre.

Objectives

i. Evaluate AI as an aid to the playwright in the production and evolution of the text through narrative, characters, and language.
ii. Examine AI as a scenographic co-partner in creating visually immersive spaces through interaction with performers and audience.

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iii. Assess AI as a performance artist in regard to embodiment, presence, and audience reception within theatrical experiences.

Research Questions

1. How effective is AI as an aid to the playwright in the production and evolution of text through narrative, characters and language?
2. How useful is AI to the scenographer as a co-partner in the creation of visually immersive spaces through interaction with audience and performer?
3. What are the challenges of integrating AI play as a performance artist with regards to embodiment, presence, and audience reception within the theatrical experience?

Research Methodology

The paper utilises a qualitative research methodology that draws from theory, literature analysis, and a case discussion. Peter Brooks *The Empty Space* operates as a theoretical framework that helps interpret how the use of AI technology has affected fundamental aspects of theatre like presence, liveness, and creativity based on the idea put forward by Brook regarding theatre being an embodied practice. This involved a systematic review of literature through peer-reviewed journals and interdisciplinary sources on the application of AI in theatre to unearth common themes and challenges associated with AI in playwriting, scenography, and performance.

Scope of the Study

This study addresses the issues related to the impact of AI from the point of view of artistic and theoretical approaches, focusing on AI as a facilitator in playwriting, the role of AI in scenography, dynamic and responsive visual spaces created by AI, and the involvement of AI as a performer on stage. The study prioritises peer-reviewed scholarly sources and places the discussion of technologies within the framework of theatre theory based on Brook's theory. The study does not give practical focus on how one could use particular technologies in the context of theatre arts (technical instructions on how to program a computer system are beyond its scope) or discusses technologies irrelevant to the field at hand (ticket selling software, automatic lights or automated scenographic generation). Through exploring AI as both a tool for creativity and a collaborator, the study aims to show how one could use AI in theatres in ways consistent with the ideas of Brook's empty space. Theatre remains an art form defined by human intention, empathy, and bodily presence despite the emergence of novel artistic means.

Literature Review

Empirically, there are lots of academic studies that look at the use of AI in the creative process of playwriting, especially in the areas of creating scripts, characters, and narratives. According to Zhen Ren, the technology is no longer viewed as merely providing technical support but rather it is considered a "substantive creative force" in theatre production (27). Through the use of machine learning and natural language processing, AI algorithms are able to analyse large numbers of

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dramatic texts and identify similarities in the structure of the drama texts, dialogues, and thematic patterns. Therefore, AI is able to develop scripts that could help in creating new tales, but the curating process is left to humans. Still, as Ren warns, the scripts produced by AI do not include emotions and cultural specifics that play an important role in storytelling (28). The latter can be done only by human artists because of their social context and practical experience.

This view is also shared by Abhimanyu U. B., who states that through Natural Language Processing (NLP) powered AI techniques, "coherent and contextually relevant text" is produced that helps playwrights brainstorm ideas and write plays (132). Software like GPT-3, ScriptBook, and DeepStory examines narrative and character arcs as well as dialogues, emphasising that AI functions as a helpful tool in creative writing but not as an independent playwright. Moreover, Abhimanyu also touches upon the problem of predictability of results due to using previously existing databases (133). Besides, he stresses the potential issue of plagiarism and calls for human supervision of playwriting powered by AI. It can be said that AI acts as a supplementary tool to help playwrights develop their plays, which is in line with the purpose of the present study.

In addition, AI has been used as a scenographic collaborator that contributes to the process of developing the visual design and the soundscape. According to Ren, AI can assist in creating virtual sets, lighting effects, and other visuals, thus enriching the viewer's experience (27). With the help of analysis of big data, AI proposes unique ideas for the design, which would never be developed in a traditional human way. Moreover, AI may be used for real-time changes, depending on the response of the viewers to the performance (Ren, 28). However, AI lacks the ability of interpretation and context, which is essential for scenography design.

Abhimanyu investigates AI in directing, scenography, and theatrical process, mentioning some applications like Stagecraft and Scriptation, which help in analysing the script and offering three-dimensional and technical arrangements (136). This technology helps directors' experiment with the blocking, lighting, and sound designs and discover the options that might have been inaccessible without its application (Abhimanyu, 134-136). Furthermore, Artificial Intelligence can control the actors' performances and manipulate technical aspects of performance in a live situation creating an interactive theatrical experience for audiences. At the same time, Abhimanyu mentions that overusing AI can result in loss of human interpretative independence, which is crucial (136). Overall, AI significantly enhances scenographic practice but must remain subordinate to human artistic vision.

AI performances onstage are considered to be among the most controversial issues in modern theatre. Ren discusses experimental practices in which artificial intelligence creates dialogue live or interacts with human actors, thus making the performance unpredictable (28). On the contrary, Teampău challenges the nature of artificial intelligence as an innovator in the field of theatre. The author makes a comparison between robotic performances and "actroids" and human-made puppets and claims that artificial intelligence might represent the innovation only from the point of view of spectators (108, 111). Additionally, Teampău raises ontological questions about theatre without humans: if there are no human performers in theatre, can it still be called theatre? (105).

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Abhimanyu further examines the potential of artificial intelligence in the process of acting rehearsal, choreography, and interactions in real time where AI analyses the voice, face, and body movements of actors and provides feedback in order to improve their performance (134). Moreover, AI also creates emotional expression through robots in performances, which shows the hybrid nature of artificial intelligence in theatres, where human actors are supported rather than replaced (Abhimanyu, 131, 137). However, AI cannot demonstrate intuition or spontaneity, thus proving its dependence on human actors. Thus, AI functions as both a performance-enhancing tool and an experimental performer, while its limitations highlight the continued centrality of human embodiment.

The use of AI in facilitating audience engagement creates a new form of theatrical liveness. Audience reaction analysis tools, which could include facial recognition or response such as applause, would alter the performance, leading to unique and adaptive narrative telling. Such performances break the convention of a predetermined show. Nonetheless, issues of authenticity, spontaneity, and ethical usage of data collected may arise (Abhimanyu 138). Hence, AI becomes a means of both creation and mediating audience experiences.

AI alters conventional understanding of authorship, where creative agency shifts from people alone to people in conjunction with machines. According to Ren, AI scripts emerge out of collaboration between human beings and the machine used (28). Similarly, Teampău argues that the creative process is characterised by collaboration among many agents but collective creativity does not always guarantee better results (107-108). AI, therefore, acts as a co-creator rather than as an independent creator.

The use of AI creates ethical and philosophical issues related to authenticity, the displacement of artists, and copyright. According to Ren, there may be problems related to the possible loss of artistic authenticity and the displacement of humans (27). Teampău wonders if theatre will still be the same without human actors (105). Abhimanyu discusses industrial considerations such as changes in qualifications, jobs, and risks to existing jobs, with a focus on using AI technology responsibly and ethically (135, 139). Therefore, why most scholars are enthusiastic about the use of AI, others are concerned with ethical and human issues that may arise from the integration AI into theatre practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study is built upon two interrelated theories – Peter Brook's notion of "Empty Space" and the theory of Technological Emergence. This theoretical approach allows for the critical examination of the use of artificial intelligence technologies in theatre through the prism of playwriting, stage design, and acting. At the same time, this theoretical framework enables an analysis of the impact of AI on the evolution of theatre practice, as well as an assessment of whether it changes its core features.

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Peter Brook's "Empty Space" Theory

The study is premised on Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*. The idea about theatre proposed by Peter Brook is simplistic but deep, as theatre essentially exists because of people's involvement in it. He states that: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (11). In this case, the notion of theatre is defined by the live, embodied, and interactive performance of the artist in relation to the audience, as opposed to technological advancements, mediatised performances, and visual displays. Moreover, Brook describes different types of theatre, namely, "Deadly Theatre," which is mechanical and repetitive, and "Immediate Theatre," which is lively and spontaneous (Peter Brook 43–47). In light of AI integration, Brook's perspective can be used as a standard to determine whether AI either strengthens or weakens the very idea of theatricality. For example, AI-created scripts or shows can easily become "Deadly Theatre" due to their mechanical nature and lack of emotion. At the same time, AI-driven technologies may facilitate "Immediate Theatre" due to enhanced interactivity and engagement.

Equally important is the issue of Brook's focus on the presence of humans, which brings up a series of philosophical queries regarding the position of AI as a performing entity in the play. Given that theatre, as an art form, presupposes the presence of a human being watched by another human being, the involvement of AI would seem to contradict the concept of performance. As such, Brook's theory proves highly useful in addressing the study's objectives in evaluating AI as a performer in theatre, as it offers a benchmark against which the genuineness of performances could be assessed.

Theory of Technological Emergence

Another theoretical perspective which is adopted in this study is that of technological emergence, which concerns technological and artistic systems. The theory denotes new forms emerging due to interactions between many elements in a certain system(s). Technological Emergence as a formal theory lacks a single universally accepted originator. However, Burmaoglu Serhat et.al. (102) credits Joseph Schumpeter in his foundational works as evolving the concept into a theory. According to David Chalmers, emergence is the occurrence of a qualitatively different phenomenon "at some level of complexity" (244). Likewise, Noam Chomsky states that emergence implies "structures emerging when the systems become more complex" (62). Radu Teampău uses the idea of emergence in relation to performing arts in his discussion of theatre. Thus, he argues that theatre performance itself might be viewed as an emergent phenomenon which occurs due to the interactions between diverse creative entities, including AI technology.

The use of AI technology in theatre creates additional complexities that may lead to novel ways of telling stories, acting out scenes, and interacting with the audience. There could be examples of such emergence that would be impossible to occur in theatre without AI. Teampău, further notes that not all instances of innovation contribute to emergent properties in theatre. Some examples of developments may only create non-functional emergence, which means that there is

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novelty created without changing the fundamental structure of theatre (111). Therefore, such innovations should not be blindly assumed to have transformed the way theatre operates.

Regarding the current study, the theory of emergence allows for analysing whether the use of AI in theatre is a revolution in itself or just another step in developing the art form further. Additionally, it contributes to understanding how AI works as a scenographic collaborator and an actor in theatre performances by considering the possibilities of creating new types of collaboration between humans and machines. In the context of the present paper, the interconnection between the Brook's "Empty Space" theory and emergence theory is considered to be an ideal ground for conducting the research. The reason behind such assumptions can be explained by Brook's theory which stresses on the important role played by human elements like presence, liveness, and human interaction within the art of theatre. In addition to that, the theory of emergence allows explaining the appearance of new forms of theatre due to technologies and the integration of artificial intelligence into it.

Discussion

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in theatre arts is seen as revolutionary, in terms of the changes it brings to the concepts of playwrighting, scenography, and performing. In the light of current literature, the following paragraphs critically discuss the use of AI in writing plays, creating scenography, and performing on stage, linking the discussion to the concept of theatre outlined in *The Empty Space.*

AI as a Tool for Playwrights: Narrative Structure and Language Generation

AI technology has proved to be an invaluable resource for the creation of theatrical scripts, especially when it comes to structuring stories and generating language. Such AI systems as those based on GPT algorithms have been known to analyse large volumes of dramatic literature to uncover any patterns in the structure and language of dramatic plots, characters, and dialogues. It is through such analysis that they can develop storylines that follow certain structural guidelines and stylistic principles. As Ren writes, "AI is able to analyse massive amounts of plays, scripts, and theatrical pieces to uncover patterns, structures, and themes, which may be utilized in developing new storylines and arcs" (27). Thus, the role of AI in creating theatrical texts is to provide playwrights with multitude of options.

Similarly, Abhimanyu observes that Natural Language Processing (NLP) allows AI systems to generate "coherent and contextually relevant text," thus providing a means to facilitate brainstorming and the development of scripts (132). With the aid of such AI programs, the playwright can overcome his or her blocks, experiment with dialogue, and try non-standard ways of constructing a storyline. Yet, in spite of the benefits offered, the scripts produced by AI fail to embody emotionality and cultural specifics. According to Ren, AI is unable to duplicate the complexity and nuance of human experiences that is inherent to good playwriting (28). The same idea was voiced by Abhimanyu, who pointed out that the texts generated by AI are "formulaic and predictable" owing to the use of data available online (133). From the standpoint of Peter Brook,

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the matter in question raises serious concerns as to the viability of theatre. The notion of immediacy and presence introduced by Brook implies that any theatrical expression has to be created and expressed by humans only.

AI as a Scenographic Partner: Dynamic and Responsive Environments

In addition to generating text, it can be argued that artificial intelligence also holds tremendous potential as a collaborator in the world of scenography, allowing for the design of responsive stages. AI technologies, through machine learning and computer vision applications, could create virtual sets, manipulate sound and lighting elements, and even modify these components based on their immediate needs during the actual production process. According to Ren, AI is capable of creating "virtual sets and visual effects to increase the entire sensory experience of the viewers" (27). Through the incorporation of such tools into their work, scenographers gain the ability to explore complicated compositions that cannot be created traditionally.

According to Abhimanyu, AI allows for greater adaptability to changes in the performance environment, since the stage can react to the behaviour of performers and spectators (134). This adds a new layer of interactivity to performances, which is in line with the emergence theory proposed by David Chalmers. It refers to a situation when complex interactions lead to the emergence of new properties (244). Thus, the application of AI in scenography might help create unique theatre productions that could not be created by humans only. Nevertheless, the integration of AI into scenography also brings up some critical issues. According to Teampău, technological innovations do not ensure artistic development, as there might appear cases of non-functional emergence in AI theatre (111). In other words, even though innovative AI technologies help achieve complicated visuals on the stage, it does not mean that they are necessary for the performance as such. Additionally, the dependence of theatre practitioners on AI could undermine the role played by the scenographer since scenography is also about interpretation. As Brook rightly observes, the theatre ought not to focus more on spectacle than interaction with human beings (11). For this reason, there is need to use AI in support of the performative nature of theatre.

AI as an On-Stage Performer: Embodiment, Presence, and Audience Perception

One of the most disputable aspects of applying AI to theatre involves using artificial intelligence in live performance as a character. In the context of performance, embodiment is the understanding that acting is not a purely mental or psychological process, but that it is rooted in the actor's physical, sensory, and physiological experience. It is an act that moves beyond simply using the body as a tool to express the mind, it is instead a positing an integrated "bodymind" act where cognitive and emotional processes are generated, expressed, and understood through the body's interaction with the environment. The question of how embodied AI is and whether audiences perceive it as a live actor appears as a crucial one for experimental projects in contemporary theatre. Ren states that AI technology might engage in performance by contributing dialogue lines or engaging in communication with human performers (28). One of the examples of incorporating AI-generated elements into theatre performance includes such shows as AI: Can

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a Robot Write a Play? serve to illustrate how AI-generated content can become a part of live theatre.

Nonetheless, there is controversy surrounding the nature of these innovations. According to Teampău, the employment of artificial intelligence performers might not signal an unprecedented change in practice. Instead, he likens their function to that of puppets and considers their revolutionary potential to be superficial at best (108). Additionally, he wonders whether a play can be defined as theatre if the human performer is substituted by a mechanical counterpart. This discussion bears a striking resemblance to Brook's idea of theatre as a human-centric art form. The existence of a live performer whose unpredictability and ability to express emotions enrich the act is critical.

From the point of view of spectators, the involvement of artificial intelligence into the art of performing presents an ambivalent issue. Some people may appreciate such performances due to their uniqueness and novelty; however, for others, such shows might seem artificial. This is because, according to the ideas presented by Henri Bergson, the imitative nature of machines makes them seem artificial since they are something that is attached to the living as if it is a shell covering something alive (26). However, AI performers can still play an important role within theatre since they broaden the sphere of performance and interaction.

In general, the investigation of the role of artificial intelligence in the art of performing presents a complicated relationship between innovations and traditional elements. The latter one can be discussed in regard to its application as an instrument for the development of plays and scenes. On one hand, artificial intelligence makes authors create stories; however, at the same time, it lacks the ability to express emotions, making it imperfect.

This confirms that the concept of AI can never be seen as something that will take away human creativity, but it needs to be viewed in the context of being a partner for enhancing the art of theatre. As per the opinions of Brook, it is the connection that humans establish between themselves that forms the true nature of theatre.

Conclusion

Involvement of artificial intelligence in theatrical practice is not only seen as an introduction of new technology but also as a change in approach to the interpretation of creativity, performance, and audience engagement. This investigation was meant to assess the role of AI from three different perspectives as a writing aid, as a scenography participant, and as a performance artist. According to the results of the study, the involvement of AI can be beneficial provided that it is used properly within the context of theatre's inherent humanness. Thus, in the case of using AI as a playwright's aid, the technology has proven to be a valuable resource when it comes to idea generation and experimentations since the algorithms enable the user to analyse huge amounts of data and build up logical stories. Nevertheless, the results have proved the fact that the use of AI cannot provide for an equal level of creativity and emotional appeal as in the case of humans, thus making AI more appropriate as a partner in the work than an independent creator.

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AI has been instrumental in opening up the possibilities for creative scenography that allow for greater immersion and adaptability, and, through these factors, greater aesthetic value of the performed scene or play. However, the discussion above has shown that the advancement of technology is not necessarily synonymous with artistic progress. It is crucial to emphasise the role of human interpretation and intentions in creating scenographic solutions to make sure the visual innovation adds something valuable to the overall artistic experience.

The usage of AI as a performer is the most complicated part of utilising this technology for theatrics. In fact, such a possibility challenges some traditional views on theatre, performance, and the very act of being on-stage as one that requires a certain level of human involvement. As the case of the humanoid robot from Estonia demonstrates, artificial intelligence cannot be a substitute for a live performer since there is no human consciousness behind it and, therefore, there is nothing genuinely creative or emotional in such a performance. However, if AI performers work together with humans, then there is room for creativity. Overall, this study reveals the significance of finding harmony between progress in technology and creativity of man. Artificial Intelligence can be perceived neither as an alternative to the artist nor as something that competes with the artist's skills. On the contrary, it is to become the means of amplifying those skills and opening new opportunities for the artist.

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